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An American Word for War

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AN AMERICAN WORD FOR WAR

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

David Modesto Wirth

May 2011

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

AN AMERICAN WORD FOR WAR

by

David Modesto Wirth

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2011

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ABSTRACT

AN AMERICAN WORD FOR WAR

by David Modesto Wirth

Jesse is in his early twenties and stuck in Salinas, California. He works at Lenscrafters, making glasses, making decent money and he is comfortable. The novel opens when Jesse's high school friend, Ben, is visiting from Los Angeles, where he is a screenwriter. The two go to a party for another old acquaintance, Ian, who has just returned from a tour in Iraq. Their encounter with Ian sets the rest of the novel in motion. They are exposed to something big in the world (the machinery of a war that up to that point had been nothing more than words in magazines and pictures in newspapers). The two, who feel unaccomplished, decide that they want to do big things—important things. They decide to combat crime in Salinas, to become vigilantes, like Marvel Comics' *The Punisher*. They decide to do this despite the fact that neither of them can think of a time that he has seen or met a real criminal.

Jesse's paternal grandparents are from Spain, and their story is told from a limited third-person perspective. This part of the novel is about the experiences of Jesse's grandparents during the Spanish Civil War, about being Nationalists behind Republican lines, and about being on the wrong side of a war. Parallels are drawn between Franco's war in Spain and the American war in Iraq.

Ultimately, this novel is a coming-of-age story that explores themes of alienation, disenfranchisement, helplessness, and perspective.

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For my Aunt Eileen and my mom and my dad, and everyone who read and supported.

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Introduction

In *An American Word for War*, I use postmodern narrative techniques to create a world that readers will find both accessible and unsettling, and this seemingly contradictory perspective will allow the events of the novel to be seen through various perspectives.

Jesse and Ben have a world view similar to that of many of Denis Johnson's characters. Like Fuckhead in *Jesus' Son* and the Houston brothers in *Tree of Smoke*, my novel's protagonists have a vague awareness that they are in over their heads and that things are usually not right, but they have no idea how to do anything about it. An example of this perspective can be seen at the beginning of *Tree of Smoke*, when James Houston, Jr., is looking for boars to hunt but instead winds up killing a monkey, and "he felt as if everything was all his fault, and with no one around to know about it, he let himself cry like a child. He was eighteen years old" (*Tree of Smoke* 5). This serves as a metaphor for Houston's larger situation: he is in Vietnam hoping for youthful excitement, but he winds up participating in tragedy.

I am also influenced by Johnson's ability to place beautiful images in grim and dark places and allowing the context to transform those images wholly. This can be seen in the story, "Car Crash," when the narrator describes a woman who learns her husband died in a car wreck: "Down the hall came the wife. She was glorious, burning. She didn't know yet that her husband was dead. We knew. That's what gave her such power over us. The doctor took her into a room with a desk at the end of the hall, and from

under the closed door a slab of brilliance radiated as if, by some stupendous process, diamonds were being incinerated in there” (*Jesus*’ 11). Here, the brilliant light imagery contrasts with the dark happenings. Johnson’s ability to make the conventional unconventional via word choice, sentence structure and contrast has also found its way into my writing, as has his use of ambiguous imagery. An example of this ambiguity can be seen in the story, “Dirty Wedding,” where he writes that “a few people stood around trashcans with flames leaping up out of them and that sort of thing, mumbling and singing” (*Jesus*’ 99). The sentence is structured so that it is unclear whether the trashcans had flames leaping out of them, or if the men standing around the cans had (metaphorical) flames leaping out of them, or, likely enough, both.

Unlike Johnson, who seems to have contempt for the people about whom he writes, I like my characters and view them with a sentimentality bordering on that of Michael Chabon. Even when his characters are behaving poorly, Chabon writes them sympathetically. He gives them fragility, and he uses metaphor to convey it, as when, in *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, Sammy Clay is having his first encounter with Kavalier and is not being at all friendly. Kavalier mentions that Clay’s mother said Clay was an artist, and Chabon writes, “for an instant Sammy cupped the tiny flame this secondhand compliment lit within him. Then he blew it out. ‘She was talking through her hat,’ he said” (Chabon 8). This juxtaposition of soft and harsh moments is a technique I try to emulate in order to make unsympathetic characters sympathetic.

A similar love of characters can be seen in Sherman Alexie’s writing, but where Chabon’s stories are about adventure, Alexie tends to write tragedy and uses humor to

alternately soften and heighten the tragedy. This can be seen in the story, “What You Pawn I Will Redeem,” during an exchange with a group of homeless Aleutian Indians:

On the wharf, those three Aleut men still waited on the wooden bench.

‘Have you seen your ship? I asked.

‘Seen a lot of ships,’ the elder Aleut said. ‘But not our ship.’

I sat on the bench with them. We sat in silence for a long time. I wondered whether we would fossilize if we sat there long enough.

I thought about my grandmother. I’d never seen her dance in her regalia. More than anything, I wished I’d seen her dance at a powwow.

‘Do you know any songs?’ I asked the Aleuts.

‘I know all of Hank Williams,’ the elder Aleut said.

‘How about Indian songs?’

‘Hank Williams is Indian.’

‘How about sacred songs?’

‘Hank Williams is sacred.’

Alexie is able to find beauty and redemption in grief, something I try to include in my writing.

When plot has to progress for the sake of plot, and I do not have a new way to convey action or thought or a new commentary to make, I use simple, economical sentences in the style of Raymond Carver. This allows me to move quickly. Prose of this variety can be seen at the beginning of the story, “A Serious Talk.” “He’d come on Christmas day to visit his wife and children. Vera had warned him beforehand. She’d told him the score. She’d said he had to be out by six o’clock because her friend and his children were coming for dinner” (Carver 105). The situation has to be set, and Carver uses language that is simple and direct to do so. Like Carver, I try to cut words until there are no words left to cut.

On the other end of the sentence-level spectrum in Salman Rushdie, whose kinetic style can change perspective, tense and voice all within a few lines. While my writing is not much like his, I do appreciate his playfulness. The ability to toy with language is why I like to use the limited past-tense first-person perspective. Writing in this mode allows a seamless flow from internal to external observations and from past to present observation. The first-person allows a clear use of voice, while the past tense gives the narrator knowledge that the he, as the protagonist, may not have.

Like Junot Diaz, I try to maintain a constant awareness of voice and perspective. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the heavily-voiced third person narrator is eventually revealed to be Yunior, the first-person narrator of many of Diaz's short stories. Yunior is a minor character in the novel, but the decision to have him narrate is important. It reveals that, even when given in the third person, narration reveals perspective. This is a natural extension of the Nietzschean ideas explored in Cormac McCarthy's novels (particularly *The Crossing*, with its themes of ideology, place, and material reality) that there is no objective truth, just reality as presented and created by people. My novel will be told by people, even when in the historical third-person mode, and their perspectives will create the reality presented on the page.

Diaz's book is also important to my writing because it opens the doors of literary fiction to genres that are usually ignored. His use of Star Trek and Tolkien by way of metaphor and simile includes the previously excluded and gives me permission to do the same when I use comic book characters like *The Punisher* as a starting point for my story. I was also inspired by Diaz's choice of setting. *Oscar Wao* is an American

immigrant story, but most of it takes place in the Dominican Republic. This contrasts with the conventional American immigrant story, which has the United States as its focal point. Diaz has shifted the center of his novel, much as I will do in mine. Where his immigrant tale takes place in the immigrant's country of origin, my war story will take place far from any battles.

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I

1.

Eventually we got to where we were parked out in front of Luis Amador's house and I switched off the ignition and the lights so that me and Ben were only lit by the streetlamps outside and our skin looked coated in egg yolk because of how dim the lights were.

Look at these, said Ben.

He was in the passenger seat and he was holding something dark in each hand. These little balls in each hand, and then he brought his hands up and shook them around and the balls came unrolled and they were ski masks, the kind you pull down over your face with holes for your eyes and your mouth. He'd been showing me things like this all the time lately. In a couple of hours it would be Molotov cocktails.

Outside there were toys and broken cars scattered across the lawns up and down the street. That was something I wasn't used to then. Earlier when it was still light out there were people all over the sidewalks. Always people where you could see them on that side of town. If I had to walk like that I'd never go anywhere, but these people didn't act like there was anything strange about it. Right then though it was late, and we couldn't see anyone except for me and for Ben and most of the houses had dark windows.

Amador's house was still lit up inside, so we were going to have to wait.

We're going to wear those? I said.

Ben held one of the masks out to me. It hung off his fingers.

That's why I brought them.

This is ridiculous.

This was your idea.

I didn't mean it seriously. Who does this?

It looks like we're going to do this.

We'd been saying these same things to each other for a while at that point.

A few years before that, after we finished all our high school classes and did the thing with the gowns and the caps, Ben had moved to Los Angeles. This was before the rest of us were even thinking about jobs in places outside the mall or getting sad because college was all shuttered to us. We weren't thinking about any of that yet. Ben told us for months that his plan was to leave Salinas, and none of us believed it until he was piling clothes into his suitcase. He was my best friend, and the only way for me to tell he was serious was the way his closet kept getting emptier and emptier over the course of an hour.

For weeks after he got to LA all Ben did was send me pictures of the sky. The sunsets in Los Angeles burn the sky to pieces. He had nothing to say about the city itself. Nothing about the people, or the movies. None of what I expected, and I didn't ask, because if he wanted to tell me he would. If he wanted to hear my opinion on things he'd know all about how moving to LA with nothing at all was a stupid idea. He'd never even written a feature-length script, and he thought that living six hours away from everything he grew up with was going to give him the tools he needed to write something worth money. Like the simple fact of his motion south meant he was doing something.

Here's another reason I never asked: I figured Ben was down there waiting tables and trying to wait on the right tables, and he wasn't telling me anything because that's a pretty pathetic story. So for weeks it was just picture messages sent to my phone so I could see the LA sky at sunset, with everything over the city bruising red and yellow and orange, those kinds of colors where when you see them they seem like the only colors worth seeing, and he'd write things under them like wish you were here to see this, or these sunsets down here are fucking amazing, or all of this color because we can't make our machines stop ruining things, by which he meant the sunsets were like they were because of the cars. All of this was a couple years before things started working out for Ben, and I never asked him what it was like at the beginning, before he started talking about people he was meeting at parties and improv workshops. Not that Ben was an actor or anything, but in Los Angeles, according to Ben, you go where the actors are. Either that or if you can't act you find another way to stumble into a mucky-muck. Nowadays, lately, Ben's doing OK. He's not making money yet, but he's doing OK, which I guess is why he finally came back to visit last year.

He didn't give me any notice that he was coming, which says something about what happened between us since he'd moved. We were still good friends, but it was mostly text message and email and so on. I mean we lost all the actual talking until he finally came back to visit.

Even with that, people still asked me what was going on with Ben, and I still told them he was down in LA, that he was making it, more or less, that screenwriting is a good business if you can get into it, but hard to get into, and that he was getting into it.

The fact that people still asked me about Ben made me feel like I was still a point of reference in his life.

I was at my mom's house, which was also where I lived, when Ben called me. Like I said, I hardly heard from him anymore. This was the first call in months. He had a girlfriend in Los Angeles now, and she was beautiful. He sent me a link to an internet picture of her, I think so I could see what a babe she was, and I masturbated to it.

The conversation was loaded with all sorts of things that neither of us said. The subtext was this: it was me wanting to know why he took so long to come visit. I have no clue what his subtext was, just that it was there, because of his voice, which made all the words sound different than they did before.

I knew it was him when the phone was still ringing, because my telephone tells me who is calling me, and then I answered and the conversation was so short. He was in town. Yes he was in town man. He's got news. He's picking me up. Still at my mom's?

We hung up when I wasn't done talking to him yet. I had the phone in my hands, and they looked giant around it.

You can go to the beach in Monterey, but unless you're ready for it you'll be gone before much time passes. Unless you're ready for it Monterey and Seaside and Marina, all the little coastal towns around here, they've got the saddest beaches in the world. The ocean throws itself against the sand like a shot at suicide because everything's gray from the cold, on most days, but if you look at it right it's not like that at all. It's just this

different kind of beautiful, and the cold sometimes works if you're bringing a girl with you, because then you can bring a blanket, it makes too much sense for anyone to argue with, so it's there in the trunk of the car, and sometimes you can wind up under blankets on the beach, which is always a good thing, especially when the ocean is out there, gray and beautiful with those millions of lives hiding under the water moving at each other and pulling away, back and forth and back and forth. That's what you do if you're there with a lady, or what you try to do.

The sand at the Del Monte Beach is coarse and white, and it's usually cold. Ben and I sat on the dunes above the water. Behind us were more dunes, then the road, and stacks of houses with glass walls, where if you lived there you could see the entire ocean from your living room.

We were smoking cigarettes, which Ben had brought with him from his mom's car. Women in tight running clothes jogged near the waterline. There were families out there with their kids and dogs.

I just want two weeks where I don't have to think about work, said Ben. We were both smoking his mother's cigarettes, and by this point in the conversation they were halfway gone. I didn't tap my ash because this was one of maybe a dozen cigarettes I'd ever smoked and I wanted to see how long the end would get. It stayed together pretty well, even with the papers all burned away from it.

Ben said he wanted me to know it was nothing personal that he didn't call in advance to say that he was coming into town. He didn't tell anyone—not even his mom. He didn't want a big deal to be made about it.

I miss the beaches up here, he said.

Seriously?

Yeah. The beaches in southern California are a bunch of nothing. You've seen them.

On TV.

That's what they're like. Everything's yellow and skin-colored. The beach up here feels like you're outdoors, you know?

I was pretty sure Ben couldn't hear himself. My ash was coming along really nicely now—it was almost to the filter. We talked about some other things. Ben told me about a few scripts he'd written that were making the rounds—just indies now, no money really, but that's how you get your foot in the door, you know? I put the cigarette to my face and pulled smoke into my mouth. I held it there, and then drew little bits of it into my lungs until it hurt, and then I blew everything out.

You should've told me you were coming man, I said. We could've planned something.

No need for plans, Jesse. I'm on vacation. I just want to relax. We should come back here and have a bonfire tonight.

He gestured with his cigarette at a pile of burned wood near us. There were black spots scattered along the beach, near the dunes.

Women were running along the water. There were families with their dogs. One of the running ladies was wearing tight sweat pants and a shirt that let you see the outline of her perfectly, and she was running down the beach like that, with her hair bouncing

behind her head, and that's the sort of thing I'd mention to Ben and then she ran past a little girl walking on the beach by herself, on where the sand was wet. She was wearing a red summer dress with white dots stamped across it, had dark hair. She started through a tangle of kelp and tripped on it, caught herself and kept toddling along. There were bows in her hair and her shoes were shiny and black, in addition to the rest of her appearance.

Check that out. Ben pointed at the little girl, but I was already watching her. Is anybody watching her? said Ben.

She couldn't have been older than three or four, but none of the adults near her moved in a way that showed responsibility for the little girl. She just moved down the beach with her hair blowing all around her face and everybody moved in straight lines around her. The Del Monte Beach attracts a lot of joggers.

This was my cue to do something, because I know all about the devastating things that can happen when people don't look out for the people around them. I said something like that to Ben, only I phrased it more like hey we should do something.

For a while she toddled across the wet sand, unattended, except by us, and anyone else who might have been watching. Her body was too big for her legs, the way that kids are. She stooped over the sand and brought up a wet handful, threw it so it rainbowed through the air. It trailed bits of sand and landed back on the beach, melted back into the rest of the beach until it was a sloppy lump and then a wave washed over it, crept up to the girl's toes, and then the wave drew back into the ocean and the lump was gone.

What do you think we should do? said Ben.

I don't know. Something. Ask where her parents are.

So we should head down there?

I used my finger to tap the ash off my cigarette. It broke off and went to the sand, and then I mashed my cigarette into the sand next to it, and then there were two waves, one right after the other. The first wave was smaller. It chased all the joggers and families and so on up the beach, and dogs also, they either got wet or got out of the way, and parents held their kids back, and the wave poured itself onto the beach and the little girl stood there on the sand and the water got up around her until she was in the ocean halfway up her body.

For a moment she stood red-faced and wailing, frozen in toddler rage. Her eyes were pressed shut with her mouth going to dynamite beneath them, and she stood like that in the water, with her dress pooling red around her waist.

The water receded and now she was in water to her knees, and now it was sucking in eddies around her ankles and now the second wave came and this water was huge and pale and like the wings of something pure and it swept her off her feet, and now there was movement from the people on the beach. There were stutter-steps in her direction, oh Gods, but then that wave was gone and the little girl was out there, in the ocean.

Jesus Christ, said Ben. We were both standing now. We could see her dress out on the water, empty of weight and blooming color all around her. It wasn't that far away. Other people were acting similar to us.

There was a hero near the water-line, taking off his shirt. It came over his head and his chest was pale and scribbled with dark hair, and then the shirt was on the sand and he started to pull at his shoes, and then another wave, and she was on this one too. It

threw itself onto the beach and the little girl rolled onto the beach with it, and it pulled back into the sea and left her on the sand like a warm length of kelp, or driftwood.

People converged on the little girl, on the spot where she lay. The hero picked up his shirt from the sand, and his shoes, and ran forward, holding his clothes to the flat of his chest.

Jesus Christ, said Ben.

I had my cell phone in my hand now.

Who are you calling? said Ben.

The police.

Why?

That girl almost drowned.

What are the police going to do?

I don't know. Help.

I think she's OK, said Ben. I had no idea why this conversation was taking place.

I think I'm going to call anyway. How do you even know she's OK?

She's OK man. Just look at her.

There was a crowd of people around her now, in jogging tights and beach wear. It was hard to see her for the crowd.

Quit stressing man, said Ben. She's not drowned.

He pulled on his cigarette and it flared orange. Smoke fell from Ben's mouth in ribbons, turning in the air like ribbons, and then it disappeared.

Listen up, he said. You hear that?

I heard wind and seagulls. I heard people.

Hear what?

She's crying man. That means she's not drowned. She's breathing.

Now I heard something there that might have been her crying, or somebody crying, or other things. The crowd on the beach shuffled and murmured in a spectacular fashion. They spun like electrons and it was hard to know what was happening down below us.

2.

We left when the ambulances and police showed up, just watched the crowd until then, never saw the girl again. We drove home on highway one, between the ocean and houses, which were all built with the idea of propping up windows that could see past the highway and into the parts of the world where there the ocean was. We were in my car, with the tape player running, wearing out my second copy of In Utero.

Why does it stink in here? said Ben.

It was raining last week. I spilled some milk in the trunk last year and I guess it never came out, so when it rains my car stinks.

Your car stinks.

I know.

We didn't do anything but sing along for a couple minutes, until the song ended.

I don't know about that bonfire. I mean, now, after that, said Ben.

We don't have to do it tonight. I told him about how Ian Galvez got home last month, and how people I knew said there was a party at his sister's house that night, to celebrate, now that he could celebrate.

The next day, after the party was over and everything else, I called the police station in Monterey, to ask about the little girl, but they told me they couldn't talk about that.

3.

I was with Ian at the Marines recruitment office when he signed all the papers that eventually ended with this welcome-home party.

Ian was a hero from day one. I didn't know him like I knew Ben, or as long. Ben was my friend since the fifth grade, when we used to pretend we were in movies and attack at each another with fake handguns and laser swords. Ian didn't come around until middle school.

The school was brand-new, and right at the edge of town, where they were building new houses to make growth. This worked for us because all the empty lots and house skeletons were places we could take our bikes through. One lot was the place where a pipe came out of the ground and spilled water onto it. There were reeds and small plants growing all around the water, and a hundred yards off there was a road that led to nothing but the insides of houses. I don't know where the water came from. I don't know about natural water in any part of Salinas. It all comes out of pipes and plastic bottles.

For two weeks we called it the frog pond, even though it was just a few inches deep and a couple feet in any direction. Two weeks because they started to build in the area and put a fence between us and the pipe, but before they did that there were frogs hopping around in the plants and in the puddle. They were all tiny little things. You could fit them under quarters. When I think about it now, as an adult, there may have been something wrong with them, like maybe the water was poisoned or something, but at the time we didn't think anything about it. All we did was play with them, meaning we tried to pull them to pieces so we could see what guts look like.

This was all science. That was the embarrassing part. We weren't crazies who liked to kill animals—we were just science geeks. We couldn't tell anyone about it because of that.

We would throw them to the ground to make them dead, so they wouldn't feel anything, but even then it was hard to get their legs off of them. We'd pull and the skin would come off like a sock unspooling and underneath would be more skin.

Hey Ben, I said one time. Back then he had big long arms and legs, and little tiny eyes, but not anymore, proportionally. He was holding one of the dead frogs in his hands. He had its little feet in between the fingers of each hand and was pulling on them, like a wishbone.

What's up Jesse?

What if we use, like, a pencil?

What are you talking about?

To open them up, like stab them and then use the pencil like a scalpel or something.

He stopped pulling at the feet. The trouble with tugging at their legs, or any part of them, was that they were slippery from the water on them.

I guess that's a good idea. Do you have a pencil?

Of course.

I squatted on the ground with my backpack in front of me. Inside was a pencil case, which I popped open. Inside it was full of pencils.

Most of the leads are dull, I said.

I think that might be OK. Do you want to use this frog?

He held it out to me.

I think you should do it, I said.

It was your idea.

I think you should do it.

We tossed the dead frog into the reeds and wiped our hands on our pants and rode home.

A couple days before construction crews put the chain link out there Ian found us by the frog pond. We didn't know who he was then. He was just some kid with short hair and a white t-shirt who was taller than I was and shorter than Ben. Before I knew even that about him he was using his bike to cut circles in the dirt lot by the pond. He kicked up clouds of dust that lifted and settled back down. We watched that and then he

rode over to where we were standing. I had a dead frog in one hand and I put it in my coat pocket so he couldn't see it.

He stood with his legs on either side of his bike, with dust coloring his shoes, and he asked what we were doing.

Dissecting frogs, said Ben.

That's gross, he said.

But it's for science.

I hit Ben on the shoulder. Shut up man, I said.

What do you do with loyalty when you don't have a clue the size of the world? It's all paper and glass back then.

I don't know man, said Ian. That's still gross.

And he left. We didn't go back, because of several kinds of embarrassment. The number of frogs Ian saved by reminding us of normal was probably in the dozens.

Later we were at the recruiter's office, after I'd told the guy behind the desk that the plan for my life involved a lot of not signing up for the marines, and not being a marine, and other similar punk rock things. This was after Ian got closer to me and Ben and some other people, because obviously the thing with the frogs wasn't enough for friends, all on its own.

There was a horizontal bar set up in the recruiter's office—the sort of thing guys use to prove things about themselves—and Ian was talking to the man with crew cut, who it turned out was way more friendly than I expected, and I was using my arms to pull myself up so I could touch my chin to the bar. I could do this fifteen times and as much

as twenty if I wanted my arms to hurt the next morning. This was more than most people could do, and I was proud that I could do it. Most people who eat and smoke and drink like I did don't exercise, but I did, at least in part because of what I did with the rest of my time.

There was a small sofa and a coffee table in there too, near the door to the office, and magazines on the table. Lisa was sitting down with a magazine propped on the immensity of her belly.

Come talk to me Jesse, she said.

I was on my ninth pull-up, then my tenth. I couldn't answer because I was holding my teeth all pressed together. Then my eleventh.

I'm bored, she said. You can do pull-ups later.

Something I didn't say yet is that a lot of why I exercised was the parts later when it let me do things in front of people, even though back then that was the only reason I knew about. At that time it was a hundred percent of why I ran in the mornings and did all the rest of it, even though I hated it and even though there was a lot more to it than that, that was one-hundred percent.

Ian was sitting across the desk from the recruiter guy, who didn't take my rejection like anything bad at all. He smiled through the whole thing and said let him know if I changed my mind, and now he was over there with Ian and they were both laughing at something the recruiter said. They were yukking it up.

I stopped at twenty pull-ups, and I sat next down next to Lisa, feeling water run through my arms all warm and heavy.

All of this was too much. I didn't understand how anyone I knew, anyone I was friends with could have a baby inside of her, or more importantly how she and Ian could make a wedding together. There so many other places I wanted to be than in the one where Lisa Blakely had something growing inside of her and everyone was OK with it. I looked over my shoulder at Ian and Sergeant or Lieutenant or whatever Whatever. The Marine recruiter was grinning all over his face so his mouth looked like it was all spotlights. His teeth were perfect inside there.

Ian played football every fall, and a bunch of summers too. They made him sign a paper that said he wouldn't put any drugs inside of him, but contracts and duress and all that, and when it wasn't the football season he hung out with us sometimes. His coach was a very manly person. His arms had lots of room inside of them, and I never saw him with his shirt off but they say you can see every one of his muscles.

Another punk rock moment that I had was when Ian's coach, Mr. Geiger, told me to do pushups. Our PE class was supposed to run in circles around the gym, and I didn't want to, so I walked, and when I wouldn't run Mr. Geiger said you run or you're doing pushups, and I told him I wasn't doing either thing. I told him I wasn't one of his football players. I know all about how juvenile the end of the story sounds.

Mr. Geiger was a former soldier. His office by the locker room had posters with uniformed faces on them and words like Marines: Tough and Proud of It, and things you've heard before like few and proud. There were other posters—mostly the army, which is where Geiger did all his America defending, but the ones with Marines on them were where Ian felt all of it. Those posters and also stories Geiger told. I heard them too,

sometimes, even though Geiger wasn't exactly telling them to me. I could hear everything. Geiger ran around the desert in uniform for two years and Geiger told us he was part of a concerted effort to save the world from a man with a mustache and the voice of Adolf Hitler coming out his mouth.

Worst thing we did was not kill that asshole, said Geiger. Or at least chop him at the knees, something. That guy's still over there. I'll tell you what—the CIA needs to sneak a priest into his room and exorcise the Hitler out of him, wave a cross over his face and take the devil out.

Crazy things like this came out of Geiger's mouth all the time. Finally he would say that we should have done anything other than the nothing that we did.

Football players crowded in his office and listened to this, and I heard some of it too. I don't know how many of those people are into God, but the Hitler talk really got them going.

Geiger was over there for years, but I guess the fighting, the part with him, was days.

Went in there with a tank and blew the shit out of some Arabs, he said. You're looking at a guy with thirteen confirmed kills.

We always wanted to know how the kills happened.

They rolled into town in a tank, blew the shit out of some tanks. Boom, boom, boom—you never saw fireworks like Geiger saw that day. It was kind of pretty—you'd press a button and this square nothing building would open and up and bloom like a giant flower in the desert. They were populating a desert with flowers is what they were doing.

When it's that hot, when you can feel the air pressing on your body like wool or something, when being outside makes you claustrophobic and everything sticks to everything else, then all you want to see is something nice to look at, and if you could make it yourself, why wouldn't you? Who wouldn't do that?

At some point Geiger jumped out of his tank and was running between buildings, shooting. He was clearing the second floor of a building and came up on this one son of a bitch—guy was leaning out a window, about to drop a whole box of grenades on some of the boys. Geiger knew everything was almost over by this point—knew that the assault was doing what it was supposed to do, that everything from there on out was just clean-up, just keeping delusional psychos from martyring themselves for Allah or some such ridiculousness. He would've fought the guy hand-to-hand, knife-to-knife, just for the thrill of one more fight, but for the poor soldiers down below. The pins weren't pulled yet, and it wasn't too late, and he didn't want to risk any American lives for something as small as personal excitement, so he used his rifle to shoot the son of a bitch right through the body, three times, so that the insides of his chest ended up all over the wall and the floor. Guy fell to the floor and poured fountains of blood everywhere. Geiger saw all of that man's blood, he said, all of it, and that was all the proof that he needed that God was true. Over to the window he ran then, through what was left of that dead Arab, looked out. He saw a bunch of his fellow countrymen walking down the street, completely unexploded.

Ian ate this stuff up, and when Lisa got pregnant there was nothing else for him to do.

4.

If it weren't for my fear of The Man I'd sign up right away. It's a job where they take care of you. Career, cash, benefits for life. You see these old pictures from World War II and the Civil War, where people who look young to me, younger than me, were captains and leading battles and things. You retire when you're forty. They let you buy a house for a dollar down if you've been in the military. It's all so big—you're doing big things, maybe even important. Ian spent years over there. There's no way for me to know if any of it was good, but the whole time he was there I worked at Lenscrafters, made glasses for people who got charged too much for their glasses. That's what I know about.

5.

Lisa put the magazine down and had her hands on her stomach, which was so big it may as well have been naked. I could see all of it. There was a dimple at the top where her bellybutton poked through the thin fabric of her maternity wear. I'd seen pregnant bellies before—I knew the stretch marks and the redness and everything that was covering her right then, under the material. When my mother was pregnant with my sister she would pull her shirts up, walk around with Kelly inside and in front of her, showing red and swollen and warm, all lit up from inside, so I knew what was going on under Lisa's clothes, but I couldn't get OK with the fact that it was happening to Lisa, to Ian. There was a beautiful little fetus inside of there.

I didn't know this was going to take so long, I said.

Lisa moved her hands so they traveled all over her stomach.

Yeah, me neither, she said. I don't know why this has to be so hard.

Jesse! This was from the recruiter, Lieutenant Marine. He was talking to me so I looked over my shoulder.

Jesse, why don't you come sit over here?

There was an empty chair next to the one with Ian in it. I got up and sat in it. Behind the recruiter were posters of flags and people standing with their backs straight.

Lieutenant Marine was still smiling a thousand watts. I don't know if they pick recruiters based on looks but this man was something beautiful. He had this jaw line and cheekbones and blue eyes that so that it was a hard time picturing him behind a gun or getting sad because it was cold and his family was far away. He was putting his cheekbones to use for America, and that face was all I ever wanted in my face, and he told me, Look. I know you're not into the whole military thing. You've made that clear.

He leaned forward a little and there was no squeak from any chairs anywhere near us.

And I respect that. Being a Marine is not for everyone. Am I right Ian?

You are right about that sir.

Is it for everybody?

There are lots of people who do not belong in the Marines sir.

This was a new kind of talking for Ian.

So I get it, said Lieutenant Marine, but do me a favor and just take some pamphlets. I've been talking to Ian and he thinks you might like it if you give it a chance.

He pushed some pamphlets across the desk at me. They were all bold print and firm gazes.

Just take a look at these. You don't even have to talk to me. There's phone numbers in there if you change your mind.

I put my hand on the pamphlets.

You looked pretty good up there. He gestured at the pull-up bar.

Thanks, I said.

How many pull-ups you can do?

I think twenty.

That's pretty good.

We left that place, and Ian helped Lisa along, one arm around her shoulders and he was holding her hand. We were walking to the car, across the parking lot. She was waddling from side to side, like you see pregnant ladies do sometimes. I get that it's a joy to have children, but there's a lot in there that seems out of hand.

We're doing laser tag next month, said Ian.

I told him that that was cool, and he said I could come if I wanted. He said a bunch of recruits and their friends were going to be there, asked if I'd ever played laser tag with fifty people.

No, I said. You ever?

No. But I hear it's awesome.

We were getting to the car now. Ian walked Lisa to the passenger side and watched her get in there. I was waiting by the trunk, because all this helplessness made me uncomfortable. She pulled the door shut.

I think you're going to have fun at laser tag, if you come, said Ian. I think you're going to want to join after you see all the stuff I get. Did you know there's a military grocery store where everything's super cheap?

I told him I didn't know that. I got in the car and we went to Ian's house, and him and me and Lisa played videogames and Ian and I drank beer until we were asleep.

6.

My parents get most of what they own at those stores where everything is cheap if you buy a thousand of it. Their kitchen is big and empty. It's the kind that has a counter running through the middle of it, with cutting boards and large spoons dangled over your head, but every time you open the fridge or a cabinet you wind up sorting through giant boxes and cans, styrofoam trays covered with more meat than I could eat in four days. It makes everything else seem small, sorting through my parents food, looking to feed myself. Only three people live in our house but we've got food to feed an army.

The day after the incident with the girl at the beach and then later Ian's party my dad was down in the kitchen with his breakfast on a plate and he was looking out the window, using his fingers to hold a piece of bacon. He was a teacher and didn't work on the weekends.

I walked past the breakfast table and over to the fridge. There was hardly any space inside that wasn't food and also there was a carton of orange juice in the door, and I was feeling sick from the beer last night and still trying to figure out how I felt about everything else last night and a quart of orange juice seemed like it could fix things for a while.

Your mom's down at the hospital, said my dad, but he didn't need to say it. We had a breakfast nook in our house, and what that meant was that the kitchen tile went beyond the kitchen area and there was a table there where we ate breakfast next to several windows that let all sorts of light onto our meals.

She'd like it if you went by later, he said, saw your grandpa.

I told him I had band practice later, which I did. And he didn't argue with it, even though I knew it was all he wanted to do, because this had all happened before. Granddad had been in the hospital for months now, for no reason that any doctor could tell us, and my parents and my sister and I had all these conversations about it and now when we got to the difficult parts we just didn't talk, and there was a lot of times where it was the sort of quiet you get when someone's crying over something embarrassing, only nobody cried. We just sat there and hated it. It was just breakfast. We were just eating cereal.

That went on for a bit. I poured orange juice into a glass and stood at the counter drinking it. Outside the window there was a hummingbird with its thousand moving wings, and then it sat on a branch, which is something you almost don't see. They're some funny-looking birds when they're like that. Everything's too big and too small at

the same time, like a little golf ball with a needles sticking out of it. The thing looked like it should have lost its balance, fallen off the branch to the ground, maybe broken something, because the way it looked when it wasn't flying was like it had to be breaking something, and then it lifted off the branch with its wings going again and it flew away.

What're you doing today Dad?

I don't know. Watch the Stanford game. Go see your granddad. Do you want to maybe get dinner later?

I've got band practice. Next time.

7.

We tried to have band practice five days a week, because that's what it took to be a real band, and the only way to be a real band, the kind people pay attention to, is to act like you only need to want it badly enough and then it would happen. We had band practice the day of Ian's party, and after practice I picked Ben up at his mom's house.

Ian's sister was letting Ian and his family stay at her house until they got on their feet. That's what I'd heard. I hadn't talked to Ian in years, since right after he finished boot camp. They'd let him come home for a little bit before they deployed him, and we hung out and it was like before except he had zero fat anywhere on him and he stood like there were sticks running up and down the lengths of his clothes. You don't think about posture until you see somebody that does it amazingly. A little bit later they put him on a plane that landed in Iraq, and I'm pretty sure soldiers get leave time and so on, but this party was going to be the first I saw of him in years. What I'm getting at, I guess, is that

he probably had the opportunity to visit us, or at least to call us, but he didn't, and this wasn't something Ben and I discussed on the way over to Ian's sister's house. In the end I guess that it's all the same, that people change, and that remembering old times was always going to be fun.

It was nighttime when we got there. We were a couple of hours late, or as much as late means anything when it comes to a party that doesn't have dinner at it. Ian's sister lived in a squat one-story house in the older part of north Salinas. The street was lined with cars all up and down, and we wound up parking almost two blocks away. We got out, walked to the house. The light in all the windows was yellow, and it pulsed with what might have been going on inside. Like I said, Ian played football in high school, and spent time with the stoners, and other various groups of people. People liked him, so it wasn't hard to get a group together for him. We stopped in front of the door, because we could hear all the people inside and it unnerved us for a second.

Do we know anybody in there? asked Ben.

You mean besides Ian?

Yeah.

I don't know—probably. He knew all the people we knew back then.

Should we have brought beer?

Probably.

We went inside without knocking and the noise we heard from outside, all the voices and the music, got louder, and so we could understand things better, and I closed the door behind us. It was all faces and bodies and right next to the door Courtney Avila,

standing with a drink in her hand and talking to somebody I never knew with his hair cut very short.

I said hi, but only because she saw me see her, and there was nothing else to do with it. Courtney had eyes like they were filled with arcing lights, and behind her she was something great to look at too. There was so much of her. Now we had a relationship where we pretended we barely knew each other. It was because of how our relationship was before, because for three weeks we went on dates with each other, and because there were two times when we had sex on her bed.

I wish it didn't matter because it shouldn't but when a girl tells you she gets sores inside herself you can't just ignore it, can't just pretend that that doesn't matter, even if it shouldn't. I get cold sores and they're a whole lot of nothing. They hurt a little but mostly not and then they're gone, and they say the kind from sex are even more nothing, so much that sometimes you can't even tell that they're there they're so small.

I thought Courtney was a great sort of lady, in the way that you have to know somebody for just weeks to understand.

After we had sex the first time I heard her making noise in the bathroom and I asked her through the door if she was OK and she said yes, and then I lay back in bed and she kept on with the noise, with the bathroom light lying flat at the bottom of the door.

I was naked with the covers bunched up around me, at my sides, and I knew that she was crying. There was a switch on the wall that dimmed the lights and mirrors all around like people have in their rooms sometimes. It was me and then me and then me, all on the bed, reflected, but only in parts because the light was bad and I could only see

parts. This was the part where someone who cared about her would insist on knowing what was happening in the bathroom, or not, depending on what would make Courtney the most comfortable. All I wanted was to make her comfortable but I didn't know how and so I didn't do anything at all, and eventually she came out of the bathroom with her face all wet and she told me all about it, and she said she was sorry, and that that was why she'd insisted on a condom how could she not insist on a condom you know, and wasn't I glad now?

I read about this on the internet and it says these sores can be so small that you can't see them or feel them, but if you get them no one will ever touch you again.

We had sex one more time after that, after I took her out for noodles and red sauce. I haven't said it yet but Courtney was beautiful and funny. She made me laugh like no other girl ever has. I was terrified of what was happening and I couldn't finish. Halfway through the sex, this second time, I had to stop because things weren't working properly. She kissed me on the face and said it was OK, and I lay on my back and she lay against me.

She was running her fingers over my chest, so I could only just feel them. I knew that I wasn't going to see her anymore, and it wasn't anything about her except what she could make other people think of me, but the moment right then, with her head on my shoulder and her heart beating like it filled up everything inside her body, that was maybe the nicest thing I'd felt in more than I could remember, and I pretended that I loved her deeply through all of it, and I did things like kiss the hair on top of her head, and trace lines across her back with my hand.

She was somewhere else the rest of Ian's party. It's been years and Courtney still looks the same. Ben stopped to talk to her when we walked through the door because he knew her just the same as I did from way back when, just the same as everybody did, but I knew things about her and about us that ruined everything else and I didn't see her again for the rest of the party.

While Ben talked to Courtney and the guy with the short hair I moved into the kitchen. This was where the beer was, and lots of faces I knew standing around the beer.

What's up Jesse?

Hey what have you been doing how's life how's the girl? Etc. I heard about the band. Etc.

Eventually Ben came in and was a part of this too. Nothing we said was valuable at all, except that when you get enough people who sort of know each other together long enough, and with enough beer, all together you can sometimes make something that's close to emotion, maybe for a second, and we stood in the kitchen with that keg and we tried for almost an hour and I didn't know anything else until Ian came up.

Where is that guy?

No one had seen him, none of us at any rate, not all night. Someone had to pee, and it turned out every one of us had to pee. The bathroom was locked and the hallway around it was clogged with people and the group of us moved to the backyard, where there was more people and a beautiful wooden fence running all around it, and we lined up at the fence and let everything wet onto it, working with the wind to stay dry, working with each other to keep private.

People went their own ways once they got empty, and it was only me and Ben in the back yard, with all the other dozens. The party was a giant party. The yard had concrete in the middle, with grass and bushes along the sides, and the wall with our pee all along it.

Ben thought we should try to find Ian. I don't know how we were there for almost two hours without seeing him, when he was the only reason we were there in the first place, and I was glad Ben said something. I didn't know most of those people well, even if they were fun for a few minutes. Bradley was one of the guys who circled the keg in the kitchen with us earlier, and he came back into the patio then, with a brown-haired girl I didn't know. He had his hand on her back and I guess that sort of interaction's something I could look have looked for at the party but right then all the women there seemed untouchable, like they belonged in a different world where only beautiful women were allowed, and at that minute right then I felt terrible about everything that had happened with Courtney, and if it weren't for the years that it had been I might have tried to find her but even then there wouldn't be anything to say except I'm sorry, which I wasn't even sure I was. Not sorry for what I did, but sorry for how everything turned out, I guess, and then Ben pulled on my arm.

Let's go find Ian.

The house wasn't big, and even with the people moving around and filling all the space it was easy to see he wasn't in the kitchen or in the living room. We wound up working our way through the hallway, which was always short and filled with people about to wet their pants, and when we thought all those eyes were looking in other

directions pushed open the doors to bedrooms and in one there was nothing and in another two people were trying to get some good out of a giant glass pipe, working it with their mouths and a lighter. Finally we found Ian and Lisa in another room with their little girls, who were each of them asleep in the big queen-sized bed that was also in that room. Lisa was sitting on the bed next to them. She was using one hand to rub the back of the smaller one and used her other to wave at us.

Jesse! Ben! Ian said on seeing us. Come in, come in. Close the door.

We did that. He came up and hugged each of us. He was nineteen when I saw him before, and now he was probably twenty-two, twenty-three, and I looked at everything on his face after the hugs and it was hard to tell what I was looking at, because everything was the same except for some parts that I couldn't quite figure out. I don't know what makes us old. The picture on my driver's license doesn't look anything like me and I only took that a couple years ago. When I get twenty-five I think I might die.

What's going on gentlemen? he said. It's been years.

The truths that this man knew could fill a phone book.

Things were changing for Ian, Ian told us. He was going to be working in the car-sales business, at the auto mall near the highway. This was because his sister knew someone who ran one of the dealerships. It was a high-paying job, if you could do it. How had we been?

What was it like over there? asked Ben. In Iraq?

Hot. Boring. Glad to be back.

Did you kill anybody? I asked. This was to pass the time that I asked.

A couple I guess. I don't know.

Outside the room the party was running the same as it had all night. The smell of pot was passing through the wall. Ian's little girls were asleep on the bed.

Why are you in here man? I asked

What are you talking about?

This is your party and you're holed up inside of a bedroom.

I don't know man. Small talk always seemed kind of awful to me, and that's all it is. People leaving the same ideas all over the place, in different groups.

So you happy to be home? said Ben.

Yeah, I guess. You want to see something?

We said yeah. Ian undid his belt and dropped his pants to his feet. He turned and pulled his boxer shorts to the side. All across the back of his leg and butt and disappearing under the folds of shirt was skin that looked all stretched out like bubblegum—pale and pulled out in lines and silvery whorls, like blown glass.

Jesus man. What happened?

Some gas fell on me and there were sparks or something. Bullets ricocheting or something. I don't know. Bad guys shooting. Or maybe the guy next to me just lit his cigarette. No one knows. Fact is I got some gasoline spilled on me and that soaked through my pants and then got fire on it. Sucked pretty bad. But now I guess the scar's pretty mean-looking.

I wanted to ask him if the fire spread to his crotch and if they could fix it if it did. In places the lines almost looked like a giant fingerprint, and in others they just looked all messed up. I pulled away from that and looked at Ian and said I'm sorry man.

That was all I said, but what do you do with that?

8.

Sometimes at the mall there's people all dressed up in tall shoes and buttons on their clothes, like it's Friday night and they're buying drinks at a bar or a club somewhere, except for the strollers they're pushing. I don't know if they see where they're walking when they're like that. Sometimes I feel bad for laughing though, because why am I going to deny them any of that, if they like it? I don't dress up to go anywhere.

I work in the mall at an eyeglass store and I see these people all the time. I see a lot of the same faces. People at my work don't quit much because the pay's a dollar over minimum wage, and every year the company pays for one pair of free glasses. Mine would have cost six-hundred dollars if I'd used money to get them. I went to the store in San Jose to pick them, because that's where they've got the most expensive frames. There's fancy names everywhere inside that store. It's in a mall with valet parking, which is completely bizarre. It took me a few visits before I knew what it was all about, with the strange little podium at the mouth of one particular parking garage, and even after I got it all I knew was that the podium said something like I shouldn't take my car

near there, because it's embarrassing to get in a situation where you're expected to spend money you're not ready to spend.

My eyes were tired and I was at work with my glasses on my head, and there was no one in the store. That was because of the Christmas Shopping Season. Nobody bought glasses for Christmas and the store emptied out for a month. The mall had rules for its stores though, and one of the rules was you've got to keep Christmas Holiday Hours, which was great, because it meant I got paid to do almost nothing, and depending on who was in charge my shift, I could read magazines, and even when I couldn't read I could look at the pretty women walking past our store front.

I had band practice after work and I thought about that during most of my shift, even when I was making glasses, which happened four times that day.

9.

Ben had asked me to skip practice. There are exciting things all over the place, he said, and none of them are happening in Andrew's spare bedroom. I told him man I'm sorry but the band is important to me—why is that hard to understand? I've broken up with girls over the band. This was all very passionate and a little bit ridiculous.

What about that guitar player? he wanted to know. I saw pictures on the website. It's like you said about her being a babe and all.

Her being a babe was the point, if you asked Andrew about it. Andrew sang in the band and he looked at everything with the way it is relative to where he wants to end

up. He spangled his world with opportunities and purpose—everywhere he looked was precision jewelry. I was lucky to be in his band.

What about her? I said.

Any chance she lets me kiss her? said Ben.

I don't know, I said.

I guess this is where I should say that I used to really be into Shannon, that I used to think about her whenever I was driving and other times when I wasn't distracted, but a couple things happened so that now I was only into her a little bit, mostly when I got distracted, I guess.

The plan for today, as made up by Ben, was that he was going to give me a ride to and from practice, under the pretense that we were maximizing our hang-out time. It would give him a chance to meet Shannon.

Is it too obvious that I didn't want his plan to work out? It's not because I wanted Shannon for myself, or not only. There was a lot more to it than that. Really the entire plan was all sorts of messed up. Things like this always are.

I went home from work and changed into other clothes and then called Ben, told him that now was as good a time to pick me up as any.

10.

It was getting to be nighttime outside when we left my house. Andrew has crazy neighbors that don't care if we practice late. All of them live off of Sanborn, which is a big long road right at the edge between what's called East Salinas and what's called

North Salinas, but the street itself is in East Salinas. You can tell from the way that all the buildings are the same brown color, and people walk on the sidewalks out in public.

It was getting dark, and if you set your eyes so you were looking at the distance you could see stoplights stacked on each other all the way down until they were so small you couldn't see them anymore.

We were at an intersection, waiting for the light to change, and a car pulled up next to us, ancient and sputtering, but with wheels that were flashing in the dying sunlight. Primer gray body and wheels that shone like the eyes of some foreign god.

I don't get that, said Ben. His eyes were on the road, and the stoplight up above us.

What?

That car. Why are you going to put two-thousand-dollar wheels on a thousand-dollar car?

Why not?

Because they could have a three-thousand-dollar car.

That'd still be a shitty car.

The light changed, the other car turned left and was gone.

Those were nice wheels, I said.

I don't get it.

We drove until we pulled up in front of Andrew's house. I could already hear Shannon and Diego warming up, through the car door. Drums will cut through anything, which is why I say Andrew's neighbors were crazy, because it was getting late already.

Shannon was running through chords in a random way, all up and down. She used the palm of her hand to mute the strings, over by the bridge, in order to make them sound heavy. I knew this from the sound in the car. I didn't want to go to practice anymore.

Let's go somewhere, I said to Ben.

Other than your rehearsal?

Yeah.

I thought rehearsal was important.

It is.

All right, let's go somewhere.

I called Andrew's phone and it rang until his voicemail picked up. I expected that because he never knew his phone was ringing during practice. I left a message, said I wouldn't make it.

Ben suggested we go to Chinatown and look at the prostitutes. This was something we'd done since we learned to drive, but looking at prostitutes was only what we called it, because we never knew if they were prostitutes or not. The story went that there were hookers and drug dealers in Chinatown, which is really just two blocks of empty buildings painted gaudy red and green, but all we ever saw there were people who looked like they wouldn't have the energy for sex. Most of them sat their with their hands falling open and filthy blankets pooled at their feet. They stood like that in groups, up and down the street, and next to buildings. We never saw what we thought we'd see, but always went back, always bored, always let's lock the doors and roll down Soledad Street. We'll look at the hookers. It'll be funny.

It's easy to not see Chinatown if you don't know to look for it. It's by the train tracks, which make it seem like somewhere in Salinas there's still a use for trains. I hear them sometimes, at night, their whistles. Soledad Street's only a block over from Main Street, but there's some sort of blanket over it so you'd never know it was there. The streets that connect it to everything else are tiny—the closest thing to alleys in Salinas. There's a barbershop for black people on Main Street, windows mirrored and mysterious, and if you turn there and then turn again you're in Chinatown. There's a nightclub with pink neon, and a bar, and I can't imagine what kind of people would go to either place. There's also a soup kitchen, and I know that because sometimes at Thanksgiving I decide to get in line with all the other Thanksgiving volunteers and work a breakfast shift, before lunch at home. The main strip is Soledad Street, which is where the soup kitchen is. There are other buildings, and empty lots, but I don't think those are owned by anybody. In the daytime all of this is painted in bright colors.

Even with all this, Soledad St. was a small place. Like I said said, it would be really easy to miss if you didn't know about it already.

We locked the car doors, because of common sense.

I once spoke to a lady, while working at the soup kitchen as part of a project for my sociology class. She was an old Hispanic woman, and when I say old I mean maybe in her fifties, although it's always hard to tell with these sorts of people. I mean that all her physical traits looked like they maybe took fifty years to get that way, except for her hair, which was huge and long and black and with gray streaks that had arranged themselves in a sophisticated way, like this woman read books, maybe. Her hair was

most of the way down her back, and it was her best feature, but one time after serving breakfast for everybody, and after everybody had eaten, I was leaving the building. They keep the doors locked at all times, except for the hour when food is served, and I had to have a man named John come with me when I left, so he could lock the door behind me. John was the closest I could see to someone in charge, and he was a really nice guy, but he knew how things were. I guess it's fair to mention that the place was owned by a Franciscan order, and I haven't met a lot of those people but every one that I've come across has a smile that you wouldn't doubt.

The woman with the hair was sitting on a crate outside, the kind that you store milk in, or records, but she was using it for a chair. She called me over.

Hey Jesse, man, what's going on? she said with her eyes all big like they were.

I had my notebook in my hand at this time, because I was recording the homeless culture for my class. I was getting up early every day to make this happen. I'd been doing it for a week and a half, serving breakfast before school. I hadn't written a word yet because I still had no idea what I was looking at, but I carried a notebook because you never knew.

John told me you want to ask people questions, she said.

Yeah. Yeah, sure.

I hadn't talked to John about it, but he knew what I was doing. He was looking out for me I guess.

Ask me questions, she said. It sounded like there was lots of saliva sopping around inside her mouth when she talked, and I can't stress enough how beautiful her hair really was, even oily like it was.

She gave me her name and all that sort of information. She said she was 42. I asked her about her goals, and after some confusion she told me she'd like to be a doctor one day.

Really? I said.

Yeah. Why not?

I wrote all of this down. If it weren't for the way she sat when she said things I'd think she was messing with me. Maybe the doctor thing was just something she said to people, or believed.

It had been a couple years since the sociology class. I don't remember any of what I wrote down or the grade I got, or even much about serving the food. Just the lady I guess. Ben and I rolled down Soledad Street. One of the empty lots had been turned into a peace garden, which is what the lady in the newspaper had called it. She was a student at CSUMB and as part of her big final project she made this garden happen, which she said was kind of an accomplishment, especially for someone not even out of college. She said that about herself, and I guess it's true. It had flowers and herbs and things, and benches made out of recycled paper or plastic or something, but all the plants were still young and thin so that even during the day it only looked a lot like an empty lot with some benches and a fence around it. At night it looked like nothing at all.

We were out looking for prostitutes, like I said, so we could look at them, but I don't know what we were really looking for, meaning we didn't really know what one would look like. We were looking for tight skirts and legs, I think, more than anyone with a given job. We were ready to say hey baby and then drive off quickly if we saw any of this.

There's an empty lot next to Dorothy's Kitchen, and pushed up against its walls were lumps and masses, people with their belongings, clustering at the base of the wall like a colony of mushrooms.

See anything yet? said Ben.

I don't know what I'm looking at, I said.

Are you looking at hookers?

Maybe. It's too dark to see any of them right.

We kept driving and passed a couple other buildings. There was a man sitting on the curb with a guitar on his knees and a beard wrapped around the bottom of his face, and we drove past him.

At the end of the block there were a couple of people walking towards the train tracks, across the field that was between the sidewalk and the train tracks. It was hard to see much about them because of the way the streetlights past them silhouetted their bodies. It was night and they were thirty, forty feet from us. Ben slowed to a stop and pressed a button on his door to roll down my window.

Hey, what are you doing? I said, because he was rolling down my window.

Nothing, he said. He tapped the horn, looked at the people in the field. They kept walking and he pressed the horn again, longer this time, and this time the people stopped and turned. As they turned their silhouettes showed backpacks and then the backpacks disappeared and they were facing us. One had long hair and short hair on the other.

Ben leaned across me and called out the window to them: Hey!

There was some movement from the people—I asked Ben what he was doing.

Nothing. You'll see. Hey, he called out again. Come here, he said.

What's up, came a voice from somewhere out there. It belonged to a man.

Nothing, said Ben. I just want to ask you a question.

More movement from the people out there and they took a couple steps towards us. They were maybe fifteen feet away now.

Can we just leave? I asked Ben.

He unbuckled his seatbelt and crawled over the center console so his body was across mine and his face was at my window.

Do you guys know where we can get a blowjob? he said. The couple stood there, looked at us. No? Well then fuck you, yelled Ben out the window, and he sat back in his seat.

What are you doing? I said. Let's go, I said. The bigger of the two silhouettes was moving towards us now and I could see him better now. He had long hair and muscles and was almost definitely Mexican or Hispanic at least. Almost for sure.

Ben was buckling his seat belt.

Drive, I said. Forget the seatbelt.

Were you talking to me? said the guy with the muscles.

Yeah, yelled Ben out the window. His belt clicked shut. Fuck you.

I pressed the button in my door and my window started to rise shut.

What the fuck are you doing? I said. Let's go. Let's go. What are you doing? I was talking like this, and my window closing and the guy approaching the whole time, with Ben buckling his seatbelt. Now the guy had a gun in his hand and Ben pressed the gas and we were moving down the street.

I looked through the window behind us and the Mexican guy stood there silhouetted in the middle of the road like a badass in some movie and then there were gunshots and the rear windshield cracked but didn't shatter.

Drive I told him, and there was a small round hole in the rear window and the air in the car got kind of clear, like it does after rain. Ben swore. We turned a corner and the Mexican was gone.

There was a red light at John Street and we stopped for it. Ben twisted around in his seat, looked behind with the seatbelt pulling at his shoulder.

That asshole shot a hole in my window.

Yeah well maybe if you weren't being an asshole first, I said.

But he had gun. He shot my window.

The light changed to green but no one was behind us and we stayed where we were. Here's something ridiculous: We'd been shot at with a gun and the next thing Ben said was he's got to get the window fixed before his mom sees it.

Can I keep it at your place? he said. We were sitting there stopped at a green light with his car's engine idling under us and except for that it was nothing like we'd just been shot at.

Yeah. Yeah, sure. Just park it down the block. I don't need my mom seeing any bullet holes either.

Someone pulled up behind us but the light was red again by now. I wondered where the bullet had gone—definitely not out of the car, not through any of the windows, unless it was through my open window, if the bullet didn't fly straight. I'd look later. The car behind us was one of those tall ones with the headlights positioned so they're always looking like high beams in your eyes. I looked back and said something about this to Ben, and then the light changed to green again and Ben drove fast, leaving the headlights behind us. I watched them get small and then we turned onto another street.

The next street was empty, and I looked behind us again at all the nothing back there. I couldn't get over what just happened. With the hole on one side of it the window looked like someone had kissed it with incredible force.

11.

Ben decided he wanted to call the police. We'd found where the bullet went by this point, but not the bullet. There was a second hole we were looking at. You could see it from the rear of the car, on the back of the center console. The angle seemed wrong to

me, but there it was. We were sitting in the back seat, trying to decide what we would do about that when Ben pulled out his cell phone. My phone said it had two messages on it, both from Andrew, and I didn't listen to either of them yet.

Who are you calling?

The police.

Why are you calling the police?

Because crime, man. When do you think you're supposed to call the cops?

What are you going to tell them? It was the homeless-looking Mexican guy in Chinatown? That you thought he might have been a prostitute?

Yeah. Why not?

Because your description doesn't much narrow the search.

He said he was going to call anyway, and that he didn't realize the shooter had been Mexican, and I said I wasn't too sure about that myself, I guessed.

The police told Ben they'd send a car to Chinatown and asked if he wanted a call-back if they didn't find anything. There was wind outside the car while he was on the phone and some of it was catching on the hole in the glass, making a loopy sound, like a warble. We had the dome light on, and without it we wouldn't have found the second hole. It was small enough, with tears at the edges. We could probably cover it with a sticker or even a band-aid. The interior was beige and unless you noticed it you wouldn't probably see a band-aid. Once Ben was off the phone I told him that and he thought it was a dumb idea. First thing someone would do when they saw a band-aid would be take it off. There's no good reason for a band-aid stuck inside a car.

But he liked the idea of a sticker. This was his mom's back-up car, and she almost never drove it. He could pass off a band sticker or something easier than a band-aid. Self-expression and so on.

But, he said, the window's still kind of fucked.

II

1.

I was at the Vet's Hall in Santa Cruz, watching some bands play in the basement, when I met Andrew. We were both wearing Minor Threat shirts, which was enough. That and the fact that we were pressed together, up front, along with dozens or hundreds of other people, covered in sweat that belonged to everybody in the room. Between bands we talked about Minor Threat and other bands. We were standing up front and waiting for The Nerve Agents to set up their amplifiers and drums and so on, and we talked about our own bands. He sang in his and I played bass in mine. It was amazing we hadn't met yet, what with both of us going to shows and both being from Salinas. We were yelling to be heard over the music being played on the PA.

Shannon had come to the show with me. She was at the side of the stage, using her camera to get pictures of everything. She always took great photos. She's got one blown up on her wall where the flashbulb lit up the inside of Davey Havok's mouth, so he's singing into the mike and you can see the lines in the roof of his mouth, all black and white. Shannon caught weird stuff like that all the time.

All the music gear got set up and people clapped and yelled and then the Nerve Agents picked up their instruments. They moved a lot on stage when they played, maybe more than the crowd. One side to the other. They were local, from the Bay Area, and they went away on their first tour a normal band and came back vibrating and shaking like the aftermath of some chemical process. They swung mike stands around and knocked people's heads with guitar necks and Chuck Taylors. They hurt themselves. There was no stage at the Vet's Hall basement, just a step, and I got a knee in the face and nearly bit a hole through my lip. I was singing along with blood in my mouth.

After the show I cleaned up in the bathroom, then went outside and sat on the curb by the parking lot. I was waiting for Shannon to come out and poking my tongue at the hole in my lip, amazed at how much it didn't hurt. I wiped my hand at it, ran my finger between my lip and teeth and came up with blood. It would heal within a week, as deep as it was. Wounds in the mouth heal quickly, but for now I was just wondering at the hole inside of my face. I'd never been injured like this.

Sooner or later Shannon came out of the building. She said she'd gotten some gnarly pictures of me with blood all over my lips. She wanted to know if I was OK.

We looked at the pictures in her camera—arms and legs and hair, all of it swinging through the air, all of our ears ringing as we looked. It amazed me that this sort of thing could happen in a city and only three hundred people would be there to see it.

Shannon and I walked down the street to a gas station where we bought orange juice and drank it outside and then I saw Andrew with his Minor Threat shirt and a couple of other people there too, while I was outside with Shannon drinking orange juice.

His hair was all matted down with sweat, same with his friends. We looked like a bunch of people who crawled from a swimming pool, and we were buying things at a gas station.

Andrew came out with an icee and a box of twenty-four beers. This was impressive at the time, because Shannon and I were nineteen. Sometime about when he put the beer in his car he saw me and asked me if I wanted to go to the beach. He called me Minor Threat, because of my shirt. If I'd thought of it first I guess I might have called him Minor Threat.

Hey Minor Threat, he said. We're going to kick it at the beach. We're going to make a fire and drink beer and stuff. You want to come? It's going to be tight.

He said it was OK if I didn't drink beer, because of a bunch of their boys didn't either. He talked like this, using words like my boys and kick it, which sounded like a weird way to talk. I looked at Shannon and she said let's do it and we did.

We followed Andrew's taillights as close as we could. We knew the beach he was talking about but it was night and if we lost him we'd wind up going from fire to fire out there looking for the one with Andrew and a bunch of strangers in it.

At night Santa Cruz gets all lit up like a hot dog stand. Everywhere you look there's cheap food and people and expensive food and pink and yellow lights telling you all about it. You can't help but drive with your windows rolled down. Shannon wanted to know what I knew about this guy, his friends.

Nothing, I said.

She was looking out the window during this conversation, with her hair getting blown around by the wind from outside. Jesus I could look at that forever, the sort of thing that makes your chest bones feel like they'll never be enough to keep it all inside.

You're sure they're not going to rape me? she said. I'm not looking to get raped over here.

Pretty sure, I said. He seems cool.

Yeah—you guys seemed to hit it off at the show.

He likes a lot of good bands.

It was nice to be part of something where that was enough. The parking for the beach was on a cliff that looked over the ocean, so that we had to walk down the road a bit to get to the actual beach. We got out of the car and I walked to the railing. Bonfires flickered in the dark below us like holes in the sky, like I was at the edge of the sky. Shannon came and stood next to me. Andrew had parked a few spots down and his friends in other places. They were horsing around, making noise, but down below all this was miles of invisible ocean. I lived half an hour from the beach and came out here what?—once a month? Maybe less. Behind everything else, behind even the ocean, I could hear the roller coasters at the boardwalk, somewhere up the beach from us.

We don't come here enough, I said.

Yeah, said Shannon, I don't know why.

Let's go Minor Threat. We're going.

Shannon and I followed Ben and his friends down the hill, trailing behind, because we didn't really know anyone. On the beach it was different. We stood in the

dark and watched them set down wood and paper, throw matches at the thing until it caught. There were eight or nine of us. We sat down and watched the flames, the wood pop and the sparks ladder into the sky. With the fire lit and our eyes adjusted for light we couldn't see anything outside our circle of light, except for the light from other fires out there in the dark.

We started in a circle but moved into a horseshoe once we figured out which way the smoke was blowing. Andrew handed beers all around. There were other people there, and they had names, but I don't remember any of them now, except this kid in camouflage-print shorts and with freckles all over his face and arms, because at one point in the night he started jumping over the fire, just to show that he could, with flames coming up around his shoes and legs each time. We drank beer that made us feel like that might have been the best time we'd ever had with strangers. There was a guitar later, and somebody whose face I don't remember played songs we all knew, by bands only we knew. We sang together—every verse like a chorus and every chorus sung like there was no bottom to our lungs. The guitar got passed around, and at some point we decided to start a band and conquer the world. At some point there was a second case of beer, and the speed of things changed, and when we left the beach we were all full of beer from head to bladder. Shannon and I slept in the car, with the seats reclined.

2.

I woke up hung over at some time after dark was gone, when morning was first starting. I tried to go back to sleep but there's only so much of that you can do in the

front seat of a car, and the walls of my mouth had an awful taste on them. I opened the door and rolled out of the car, closed it softly so the sound of it wouldn't wake Shannon. There were trees down the road and I peed on one, but it took a while to get started because I was outside and anyone who walked by would know what I was doing. I had to stand there for a while with everything out in the cold for a while before I could get it started.

I came back to the car and looked in the window and Shannon was in the passenger seat with her head rolled to one side and her arms crossed. The ocean was still running its noise out past where I could see, but everything else was quiet. I walked over to the edge of the cliff. The beach was empty and flat, except for some morning birds and the charcoal smudges of a dozen burned-out fires.

My phone said it was five-thirty in the morning. My stomach was something I wanted to ignore.

I went back to the car but I wasn't going to be able to sleep. There was my backpack in the trunk, so I went and got that and opened it. There were papers and CDs and so on inside. I got a pen and a notebook and wrote that I went for a walk and that she should call if she wakes up and I folded the cover back so that my note was on top and left that on the driver's seat. Again I was careful when closing the door and trunk, using both hands and pressing until I heard the latch click.

There was nothing on the streets. Just cold air and gray light all over everything. I stayed parallel to the beach and heard the water until there too many houses. For the most part these were really nice buildings, even though some were small. After a few

blocks I wanted to sit down because I was hung over and my stomach was getting hard to ignore. Water would have been good too. I sat down on the sidewalk and waited.

After that for a while, I started back for the car. Shannon was awake when I got there.

I didn't want to wake you, I said, sitting in the seat next to her.

Thanks, she said. She felt like crap, she said. We that decided breakfast might fix it.

3.

Later on—it was a couple of weeks at least, long enough that I'd mostly forgotten about him—Andrew called me up. He said he was having some people over to his place for beer. He wanted to know if I wanted to come, me and Shannon.

This was on a Saturday afternoon. I was just leaving for my job at the mall. I worked at a videogame store, which is possibly the best job I've ever done.

The store was tiny but game boxes stretched color from the floor to the ceiling, and it was always full of moms wanting to know about the violence.

It was all violence, I wanted to tell them. Everything your kid will ever see is violence at some point, but I didn't say anything like that. These parents came in wanting this stuff hidden from their kids until the age was right.

I showed them the games with blood and then pointed them in other directions.

Shannon came in a lot because she didn't have much to do when I was at work. At the time there was a lot that she didn't know, and the day Andrew called she was picking through a clearance basket full of the used games, finding nothing that she liked.

It was a Saturday and outside the door to the store, in the mall, people were all over the place. Carl's Jr. was across the way from us, and it was full of people and hamburgers.

I told her Andrew wanted to hang out that night, reminded her who he was.

That's the guy we were going to start a band with but who never called, right? she said.

We were drinking. Who knows what he meant?

Yeah, I get that.

Our band, the one we had before the band with Andrew, was a mess. Our drummer used his car and took off to San Luis Obispo, said he was going to stay with some friends and drink beer and smoke drugs for a couple of weeks, since his mom told him he had to get a job in a month. This was his last great adventure before growing up. He believed every word he said and told us these things from a telephone in San Luis Obispo.

It was much as though he didn't care about us. Now I can say that the band was worthless from its birth, but at the time it was what I carried around in the largest, most used parts of my brain.

So do you want to go? I asked Shannon.

There was this game in the clearance pile where you're a hero from World War II. This is one of the ones with blood. It looked great and played that way. Shannon asked me about it and I told her it was fun for a few hours, and it was cheap so buy it.

The store let its employees take the games home so we could play them and learn about them so we could tell customers. There was a big shrink-wrapping machine in the back so we could case the games back up and put them out like they'd never been touched. We also used the machine to wrap each other's lunch sandwiches and favorite pens.

With all that access I had I didn't play near as many videogames as I should have.

4.

Andrew lived in South Salinas, near the junior college. It was the kind of neighborhood where you couldn't really be sure what you were going to get.

You got there by going under the railroad tracks, near Chinatown, and then after the tracks there was the Steinbeck Center, where they had a giant tapestry of John Steinbeck's face hanging in a giant window, lit up at night so he looked spectral and astonishing. Past that a ways and on another street there was the college, and this whole neighborhood you never knew what you were getting. There were Victorian mansions across the street from homes that were nearly shacks, where people hung their laundry on lines out front. This was an absurd way to build a neighborhood, and by Central Park, a few blocks away, there was a more traditional neighborhood where most people were poor and most of the houses were rented.

This was before Andrew rented the house on Sanborn. Andrew's lived in a small building in the back of his parents' place. He met us out front and we had to walk through a fence and past the real house, and then we were in some sort of backyard with a tree and a swing, and a covered barbecue against the fence, and the little shack where Andrew lived.

Next door to the main house there was a front porch and minorities talking to each other in loud voices about things I didn't understand, and I was embarrassed by how much this mattered to me.

Inside, Andrew's house was a kitchen with most everything yellow and a small bathroom with room for two people to stand, if one stood in the shower, and another room with a bed and a couch and a TV. Nirvana records were playing through the speakers at volume that made it hard to hear, and over the course of the evening this music made holes of various sizes in the wall I'd built between myself and myself at fifteen. Televised music has wrecked a number of wonderful things for me.

There was a guy inside named Patrick. He was sitting on the couch the whole time we were there, watching videos that we couldn't hear because of the music, and then I said something that insulted him, only I'm not sure if it's what I said that he disagreed with or the part where I insulted him, and then he thought we were going to be fighting. I was also sitting on the couch at this point, next to him, which is where the conversation took place.

It started with me saying that *Fight Club* and *Office Space* and *American Beauty* (these are just movies—that's all they were) were really all about the exact same thing, even though they seemed so different.

Andrew's friend Patrick didn't think so.

No way, he said. That's stupid, he said.

No seriously, listen.

And then more Patrick telling me how it wasn't true, that sort of thing.

There'd been a lot of beer going around by this point, and it was just the four of us: me and Shannon and Andrew and this guy Patrick, and Shannon and Andrew were outside smoking, so now it was just two of us in the bedroom with the music going loud and us screaming at each other because of the volume, but also because we were angry now.

I told him fuck you, because we'd been drinking a lot of beer, and then he said he wanted to fight me. This had nothing to do with the relationship between some movies in 1999, or whatever it was we were talking about.

Again, beer and so on.

I'd never been in a fight, but I was pretty sure I could handle this one, because this Patrick was so small. He was someone I thought I could beat in a fight, and since he started it, since he was the one screaming about a fight, I felt justified in wanting to pound his eyes from his head.

Outside the shack Shannon and Andrew were kissing on the ground by the tree swing, which I guess wasn't entirely unexpected. The short fellow and I agreed to go out

front, by the street so as to not bother them. I don't know if they saw us or if they were too occupied with the skin in their hands. I was full of rage at this point, despite the thought we were putting into not bothering them.

There was a stick on the ground out front and I picked it up, I think before Patrick even saw it there.

I don't know that he hit me even once. The stick was a big one so I could keep my distance. The neighbors on the porch seemed excited about the whole thing, and once I landed something the rest was easy.

Patrick lost his teeth, two of them, and while he was laying on the ground, before he left, I picked them up off the ground and put them in my pocket. I kept those things until the roots were withered and dead and no dentist would ever do them any good. At the time it was the worst thing I'd ever done to anyone, and I've regretted parts of it ever since.

A few weeks later I looked at the teeth sitting in the corner of one of my desk drawers and felt bad. I asked Andrew where Patrick lived and I put his useless teeth in an envelope and left them in front of the door to his apartment, rang the doorbell, ran away.

For now I waved the branch around, sure that this would do the trick.

When I went back inside Shannon and Andrew were curled on the couch together, fetally. I don't think they were watching the television.

Where'd Patrick go? yelled Andrew, when he saw me.

We had fight, I said.

What?

I had to beat him up, I said. He wanted to fight me.

Andrew couldn't believe he'd missed this. He squirmed out from behind Shannon, which made her awake.

Where is he?

I don't know. I think he went home.

Is he OK to drive?

He looked OK until he turned the corner but I didn't see after that.

We went outside and Andrew and Shannon smoked cigarettes until they were gone. I guess they didn't have that many to start. There was a naked light bulb sticking out of the side of the shack, and this was how we saw each other.

The world looked like it was painted by someone who couldn't see right. We were out there, them smoking.

Andrew didn't seem very concerned about the fight. I asked him who Patrick was.

A friend of a friend. I thought it'd be cool to see how things went. He's never been here before—I guess I didn't know he was an asshole.

He turned and gave Shannon an enormous kiss, the kind where she hangs off his arm like she's made of rags and he has his way with her mouth. Both held their cigarettes out during this. I would have walked out front but I didn't trust the neighbors so I went back into Andrew's home.

5.

Later on we were driving on back roads, looking for ghosts. It was at night and they say that if you go out on Old Stage Road or San Juan Grade in the right places, in places next to trees and out in fields, you'll see people that died there. A friend of mine once stopped to help some people with a broken down car. Their car was on the side of Old Stage with the hood up and fields all around it. They got in his headlights and waved their arms over their heads until he stopped. They reached in his window and tried to open his doors, but he's a fast thinker and they only got his case of CDs, which he still complains about, whenever he wants to hear a song they got away with.

I was out there with Shannon and Andrew. The three of us had started playing music together just recently, but we didn't have a drummer yet. The music was mostly coming from Shannon at that point, since she played guitar. She would figure out the order for the notes and chords, and I would follow along on my bass guitar.

Andrew was embarrassed to do anything until we had a drummer, because he said his part was all screaming, and that sounded dumb without a drummer with it. I'd never played music like that, and I was driving us around now, looking at the sides of the road caught in the headlights. It was all back roads and we could tell where the city was from the light it through into the air above it, past the fields.

We hadn't seen anything except for trees. There was a possum we hit. It ran out in front of our car and it would've made it except it got scared of what was coming at it and turned back at the last minute, and the car really crunched it down. In one spot next to some trees there was a white cross with some pictures and flowers on the ground next to it. We stopped to look at that.

There were pictures of a little Mexican girl and someone who from how he held her in some of the pictures was probably her dad. The pictures and cross, the flowers, they were next to a ditch on the side of the road, and it was easy to see what had happened.

We got back in and drove more. Andrew was telling jokes and making Shannon laugh.

How many northern Californians does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Hella.

Laughter.

More like that.

I'd never hit an animal before but I felt OK about it because it was the possum's fault. If it had just kept going in one direction it would've gotten out of the way, but instead it ran back. Eventually Andrew leaned forward from the back seat and said pull over.

I stopped in the middle of the road, because were out in the country and that meant no reason to pull to the shoulder.

I just want to look at the stars, said Andrew, and he got out and closed the door and then stood, leaning against the car. We could see his back through the window.

Hey Shannon, I said. She had her hand on the door.

Yeah?

Do you think it's weird that we haven't met or heard about any of his friends?

You mean except for everybody at the beach?

Yeah but that was months ago. I mean, that guy Patrick too, but Andrew told us that guy wasn't even his friend. What kind of person doesn't have friends except for people he just met?

What are you talking about?

You don't think it's weird?

Not really.

I let it go, because the last thing I needed was her getting the wrong idea about what I thought about her and Andrew.

We got out and wondered at the number of stars spilled over our heads, and then after a while we went back to Salinas.

I left everybody at their houses. At home there was my granddad in the living room, sitting in a recliner, watching television with all the lights on.

Everything he ever says is in Spanish, which made it very hard between us. I would only ever catch most of what he said at any time or a little bit less than that.

My parents brought him over here from Spain when I was in middle school, because his friends were all dying from being old, leaving behind piles of canes and walkers, old hats, sweaters.

Hola hola, he said when I came in, only in Spanish. Jesus, he called me.

Hola Abuelito I said, and I went up the stairs before more could be said by either of us, because whenever we said more than that I'd lose the thread of what he was saying after a minute or two and then I'd have to sit and listen for ten minutes, in and out, with

no idea what the connecting thread was. I understood plenty, it was just the continuity that I'd lose.

6.

The mountains in Castellon de la Plana are all different colors. This hasn't changed since Jose Maria Giron was a tiny little kid, since he first remembers seeing them all giant and everywhere all around him. They lay out there, sitting on top of the rest all gray and green and red, seemingly with no order to it. They were just breaks in the sky, places where it stopped.

There were rabbits out there, hares and birds, foxes. There were birds out there you've never heard of—birds like royalty that would tear mice to bloody little pieces, and when weekends came Jose would sometimes go with his dad and watch him shoot bullets at them. Later on he did the shooting too, and it was a sport.

The rojos started killing people at some point, which is how all of this started. A nun in Alicante, related to Jose's aunt one way or the other, she was raped, and then men used a big ham knife to cut her breasts away from the rest of her. A friend from school was visiting family in Fanzara and eating a sandwich when he heard a commotion of noise coming from outside. This was towards the end of the sandwich, and Jose's friend pushed what was left into his mouth and ran outside to see Father Rodil pulled from the church in his underwear, robes left inside and his veiny legs shiny and yellow in the sun.

A crowd of men moved him by force until Father Rodil was in the plaza, and there they asked him to stand still, and he did, with nothing but his underwear on his

body, standing like something that should be silhouetted in the sun, and then they pointed a gun and let a bullet into the back of his head so that blood ran over his eyes and his cheeks like candle wax, and he fell. Jose's friend said the priest's head made a tremendous noise when it hit the ground.

These stories made twelve-year-old Jose's brain flop around in his head. The idea that this could happen to a priest, that someone would do that to a priest. He wondered at the kind of people who had no fear about the size of themselves.

Later, when people like these asked Jose Maria to move to Castellon with all of his family and friends, everyone he knew, he was terrified. He had no idea what people might do.

Some fifty years later Castellon is where Jesse was going to be born, you know.

From Andalusia there were stories of entire families hung and bled from their ankles, driven off cliffs, all for their possessions.

There's old castles and towers all over the hills in Valencia. They're covered in holes. Jose's dad told him they were Roman outposts, places you would stand on to see the Mediterranean, watch for boats with guns and bad people. Now they were all ruined and animals made homes in them.

Before the rojos started rampaging his world, Jose's dad ran a bakery, and Jose's uncle was in the military. His uncle hadn't been around in months, but he used to be around all the time and during his training he learned all sorts of ways to keep the outdoors from killing you, and he taught a lot of that to Jose's dad. Jose's dad had a vest

made of leather with leather loops all around it for rifle bullets, and he put this on in the morning one morning and came and woke Jose.

It was summertime and already sweat was coming from everywhere.

Let's go, said his dad. We're leaving soon.

In his sleep Jose had rolled to a corner of the bed where sun from the morning couldn't get to.

Where are we going? he said. His mouth was all muddy from eight or ten hours of quiet.

I told you. Let's go—we're leaving soon.

There were green hills all around Oroponda. In the middle of town there was a big hill with a broken castle on top, and all around that were houses with white walls and orange and brown tiles on top of them. They were all pressed together so that from the outside one home was hard to tell from the other. Streets wound all through everything. Everything was either uphill or downhill.

Jose's mother brought breakfast, and handed his dad cuts of meat and dairy in folded paper, also a bar of bread. It was the weekend.

They left the house and walked to the top of the hill so that they were next to the castle and could see everything below them. Trees with oranges were down there, for miles. Jose's dad carried a walking stick in one hand and he had a bag over his shoulder with the food and other things in it. It was early and there were still clouds in the east. The sun burned inside them like a brass penny all molten and wet.

There was a building on a mountain past all the orchards, sticking up out of the trees like a giant thumb. It was a monastery, which Jose knew because he'd asked about it a lot of times.

His dad pointed at it.

What do you think about checking out the monastery? his dad said.

They went to the monastery and once they got there Jose was tired and he ate food and drank water and they could see more of the town than he'd ever seen before.

7.

The ayuntamiento was figuring things out for a while.

Finally they came to the house while Jose and family were eating dinner. This was at night, long dark, and it was Jose's parents and Jose and his grandpa eating pork a la plancha and salad and the door knocked and Jose's dad got up to answer. They'd known something like this might happen, and Pedro Puig on the other side wasn't all surprise. Still, when Jose's dad opened the door, something inside of Jose started to spin circles in a way that he didn't understand.

Pedro didn't look at Jose's dad. He looked past him at Jose's mother.

Pardon ma'am. I'm sorry to interrupt your meal, he said. There was a big knife in his belt. It smells delicious, said Pedro. We just need to ask your husband some questions.

And then Pedro and some people who were with him, and Jose's dad, they all left and the door was shut.

Jose ate his pork and spit olive pits into his hand. No one spoke except for the shake in his mother's legs. The silence spread to the corners of the room and crept up to the ceiling.

8.

There was another girl I went out with once—we went out a few times. I'm terrible at this. I think about it a lot. Success doesn't have much to do with the situation.

This girl was a girl I met at school, in the same class where I met Shannon. The classroom was this big studio space with little pedestals of fruit, or with folded cloth and pitchers on top. We'd put paint onto canvasses in the shape of these things, or this naked woman the professor put out there for us. We'd do this all from different angles and at one point I wound up with Melanie setting her easel up next to mine, by coincidence I think. Shannon was in a different part of the room, but we could all see each other.

This was after the part of the class with the nude model, which was absolutely necessary, because I can't imagine the fumbling with my mouth that would happen if I was painting a real naked lady next to Melanie doing the same.

She was a pretty girl, and she once told me she liked how I painted things.

I got to school one day and there were crowds of people on the central lawn, making requests through megaphones and on signs they held over their heads. It was all really exciting. They were all collected like bees on the lawn. In class I asked Melanie if she saw that. I'd decided I would ask her out by the end of the conversation.

Yeah. Bunch of hippies, she said.

That day we were freestyling the art, drawing from our heads. On her canvas she had the letter A written a dozen different ways in black paint.

I don't know, I said. I think it's kind of cool.

She said, Don't get me wrong. It's not terrible or anything. I guess I'm OK with changing the name of the school. I just don't think anyone who can change anything is anywhere near that lawn is all.

So what should they do?

I don't know. Write some letters. I don't think you can do anything, sometimes.

Do you want to go out this weekend? I mean get some coffee or a beer or something.

She was still painting her art when I said this, and then she stopped.

Yeah. I'd like that, she said. Saturday work for you?

Two semesters later, way after nothing happened from the lawn protest, I took a history class, and a teacher who was still filled with something large and intoxicating explained that Hartnell Community College should be called Caesar Chavez Community College. I felt really strongly about it all that semester, and wish very badly that I still did.

Melanie wrote her number on a paper I haven't seen in years.

That Saturday we went to a motorcycle bar in Monterey where they didn't check your age, even though I think Melanie herself might have been old enough for that to not matter.

Those were the kinds of places I tried to take women back then. It was a way to get beer into myself and then pool to cover it up—I would say we were there for pool when really it was a way for me to avoid freezing up. Let me tell you how much beer I drank as a way to get my hand moved to the small of a lady's back. I don't even know where to begin with that.

Inside the bar were all sorts of people I would never talk to, and right away the date was messed up by the fact that Melanie had gotten the wrong idea about things. I should have changed the plan, taken her somewhere else when I picked her up, but she was wearing this shimmering silver get-up, the sort of thing you would wear to a club where the drinks are ten dollars and the people are wearing beauty all over themselves, down to the shine of their shoes, and with that dress on her I was having trouble making plans of any sort, and pretty soon we were in a room with a pool table people with leather jackets and cuffed jeans and these people who I don't think even really existed outside the bar, except for her and me.

I put quarters in the table and she said she'd have a cranberry juice with vodka in it. She would set up the balls.

The bartender looked at me with his face all sideways when I ordered for her. He had these big plastic glasses on, the kind with a bar over the nose, for reinforced strength. They looked like it didn't matter what they looked like.

We don't have cranberry juice, he said. The shelves behind him mostly held nothing at all. There were several bottles of booze, and no taps, a small fridge. I'd been

here before and knew all of this. The mirror said Budweiser in big red script. I asked what he did have, that could go with vodka.

I should have taken her to the beach, but it was too cold for that right now, and the kinds of places I thought she might like worried me. Have I told you about the men at this bar? I've talked to some of them, and they all slump over on their chairs and stools, fleshy and jacketed, bent over parentheses all lined up at the bar. I was no good at conversation with those kinds of people.

As I've said, I mostly went there because there was beer and a pool table.

I went back to Melanie empty-handed, and embarrassed, even though the bartender had offered to serve the vodka with a bottle of orange juice.

Jesus man—what I wouldn't have given for someone thin and frail to throttle, and then the will to do nothing. Jesus what I wouldn't have given for some place where everybody was laid naked to everybody else.

This place is lame, I tried to say. I think what came out was very close to this.

What are you talking about? she said. She'd put shiny stuff all over her face and chest, and it made it look like her smile was everywhere on her. It had a wonderful way with her looks.

They don't have cranberry juice, I said again. Let's go somewhere else.

No that's OK, we don't have to leave. I'll drink whatever.

But I'd already decided we were going to leave, and I insisted, and we went to a restaurant nearby that served pizza. We sat in a booth cushioned in vinyl and waited for our pizza, and we drank sodas.

What's the weirdest first date you've ever been on? she asked me, with those sodas in between us, and it's not rational I know and I knew because that's small talk but I took that as a comment on the first date we were making right then and my face got all warm with blood in it. You need to understand that this was a chain restaurant with pizza smell all around us and a baby crying inside of it, and at this point she was looking like a model out of a catalog. She said her weirdest first date had been a trip to a shooting range in Watsonville, where this guy showed her how to load a handgun, and then how to shoot it so she could at least hit the edges of the paper target.

It was actually pretty awesome, she said, except for the end when he kept talking about how I was going to need a lot of practice before I could shoot like him. He shot the face out of his target and I was all over the edges of the paper.

I'd never seen a gun in the flesh. There was more of this sort of thing for the next half an hour, and I drank soda fast.

I stopped attending my art class over this date, if you can believe it, even with all the kindness from Melanie. I didn't know how to respond.

It wasn't bad though, because later I was using the library to read at a table, and Shannon saw me, and she said you're that guy from art class, aren't you? Only you don't go anymore, and I had stickers on my notebook with band names she knew and pretty soon we were friends.

Ben, years later, had that hole in the back of his car, in the window. Some time later he messed up his face trying to retrieve some stolen property of ours, and now we

were sitting on top of Fremont Peak plotting out various vigilante acts that we would be doing.

I don't get it, Ben said. His face had a big jagged scar under one eye, where his head had broken open at the cheekbone. It was milked over and terrible because aspiring-screenwriter-slash-waiters don't have any easy way to get help from a hospital, even if the amount of blood makes a hospital look crucial.

This was also the first day I'd seen him like this, with it all scarred over and filled in. He'd been in Los Angeles a long time, long enough for me to quit the band and settle for not what I wanted to be, but now he was back. We were parked in the parking lot at Fremont Peak, next to a drop-off. We were parked next to a car where I was pretty sure sex was happening, though it was hard to tell with that car's windows clouded up like they were.

Out in front of us, past where the parking lot stopped, you could see everything below—Salinas and the fields surrounding it, past that, other towns too small to identify. Eventually there was the ocean, at that time of day a shining ribbon just where the sky stopped.

Ben kept running words from his mouth. He said he didn't understand why he was back in Salinas again, how we'd spent every bit of time we'd known wanting to be somewhere else, to leave town and go somewhere else, and here he was sitting next to me, on the hood of his car that he bought in Los Angeles, where so much hadn't happened yet, moved back to Salinas.

And I'm not trying to be dramatic or anything, he said. I just don't understand why nothing else works. I mean I'm back here because I decided to come back—nothing's forcing me. I just don't understand what happened to make coming back seem like a reasonable use of my life.

We sat there above all those tiny cities. Ben was smoking a cigarette and there was nothing his conversation needed that I could add, that I could think of. We had six beers in the trunk but decided that was a bad idea on the way up, when the road kept going back and forth next to miles of empty air.

Pretty soon the sun would fall to where we couldn't see it anymore, and everything was turning blue and black, gray. The car next to us was moving a little, from the sex inside—teenage sex, because no one else would bother to drive this far for that sort of thing. Ben had a cigarette in his mouth and every time he pulled on it the end flared bright enough to make the space around it black from the contrast. There were dark spots in the glowing ash where nothing was left to burn. You could see these if you looked closely.

This was all being discussed because Ben wanted to sell scripts to movie people, and the only people who wanted his scripts had no money. Ben had never met any people who wore suits to their movie jobs, and apparently those are the ones he needed, who knew how to turn what he did into a job.

Why did you park here? I said.

What are you talking about?

Next to them. I gestured with my head at the other car, several feet from us.

I didn't know what they were doing in there, he said. Besides, even if I knew I think it's funny.

Yeah, I guess so.

Ben finished his cigarette and lit another one.

The government has top secret hi-tech weaponry, he said now. They have a sound cannon. You heard of that?

No, I haven't.

They point it at you and it blasts some super-concentrated frequency at you and liquefies your insides. It's crazy shit.

Do you know where to get one?

I was asking ridiculous questions because what we were doing, or going to do, this vigilante thing, was ridiculous all on its own.

No way. We're going to have to use regular weaponry for this.

Ben had a friend in San Jose who had a gun, or knew a store to get one cheap, because the one in Salinas was expensive in a way that would have made everything impossible for us. I'd gone there on my own, before Ben decided to come back to town, back when Andrew was telling me to just forget about it, before he got all excited and encouraging, and always not wanting to participate because except for the band, which I pretty much hated now, he wasn't good for anything.

Everybody who worked in that place wore country-style jeans and button-down shirts. They all had mustache styles on their faces. They must have spent hours cleaning things because it was like being in the cleanest department store in America. There were

racks loaded with the kind of clothes I suppose hunters wear. The heads of killed boars and deers all on the walls.

I almost walked right out, but this was the only place that sold guns. There used to be a place on South Main with bars on the windows and employees who wore holsters by their hips, but that place closed.

The guns in the new place were waiting for someone who would take care of them properly, and I didn't have the means to do that.

We need to figure out how to make grenades, said Ben.

Seriously?

Hell yeah. You've read The Punisher. That dude always has grenades in his pockets. Always gets out of shit because he's loaded down with explosives.

Yeah but he's taking down the mob and helicopters and stuff. Do you know what a grenade would do in town?

I think it would blow things up.

When you get to the top of Fremont Peak there's an empty flagpole and a little plaque next to it. If you stand on the plaque that's the highest spot in the entire county.

III

1.

They told my granddad that he had cancer, but I guess it was the best kind of cancer, because they said it wasn't really anything to worry too much about, as far as these things go. There were little spots of melanoma all across his nose and cheekbones, and except for some facial scarring there wasn't much to worry about, he was told. Beyond the fact that every case of cancer is serious, they said.

They took him for the surgery one day while I was at work, making glasses for people. It was summertime, and the store was busy that day. I made dozens of glasses. Everything was done by machines. I just moved things around and pushed buttons, and they give me a lab coat to do this. Sometimes the sales associates asked me to come out and explain things to the customers, because of my coat, and the customers would call me doctor, even though that was nothing like what I did. There were times when I didn't correct the mistake, because it was easier that way.

When I got home from work everything was a mess. My mom was balling up tissue paper and letting it pile on the kitchen table. It was one of two times that I'd ever seen her cry. The other time I was eight years old and she'd been making fun of me because I was throwing a tantrum over something, and since she was laughing at my absolute rage I told her I hated her and for a couple of seconds I meant it completely. She started bawling and my dad pulled me into the next room and asked what was the matter with me, did I really hate my mother and if not why would I say something like that. This time, when I got home, my dad was on the phone in the kitchen.

I didn't know where to go for information. I went to my mom and put my hand on her shoulder, thinking about what I would do if my grandpa was dead, because he was

nowhere around that I could see. My mom leaned her cheek against my hand and then turned and hugged me. She was sitting so her face pressed into my chest. Nearby my dad hung up the phone and came over to us, put his hand on my mom's back.

I just got off the phone with your sister, he said. Your grandpa stopped breathing a little while ago but Bernice was here—thank God she was here—and she did CPR until the ambulance got here.

He said Bernice had ridden to the hospital with Granddad, that that was her on the phone and that Granddad is doing OK, all things considered. They were about to head out themselves. All of this had just happened. I'd just missed it.

But what happened? I said.

He stopped breathing. We don't know why.

Both the hospitals in Salinas are places you'll get lost in. During all the waiting with my grandpa, all the hours spent there, I can't tell you how many elevators I've ridden up and down in, all going nowhere. There seem to be entire wings of the hospital dedicated to posted signs and moving people in white clothes.

I once saw a man in blue sitting at the edge of a gurney or moving table of some sort, right there in the hallway, completely unattended. His skin was all pebbled and yellow and close to his bones so that he looked awful, and that might have just been the hospital, but he did ask me for help, asked if I knew where he could find a nurse.

I don't know where anybody is here, I said.

My grandpa was in a room with a curtain around his bed. In the same room there was another curtain with Spanish coming from behind. We stepped through my grandpa's curtain. He was laying there with his hair up in the air and in tangles. His eyes were closed and his mouth hung open with air going in and out. My sister was in a chair next to him, holding his hand. My mom sat on the other side of him and took the other hand and my dad and I stood at the foot of the bed, waiting for something to happen, or for some information.

They said they'll be around soon, said Bernice. They think he had a bad reaction to the painkillers. They're not really sure.

He was laying there with his cheeks stretched out and a pale blue sheet pulled up to his armpits, his arms pulled over to either side so my family could hold his hands. Something about the situation made him look small. His hair was too big for his head.

Eventually my dad found a seat from somewhere in the hospital. He brought it in and offered it to me. I said no. My feet began to hurt, and eventually a nurse or a doctor or somebody like that came by and talked to my parents about the situation, which was this: My granddad had a bad reaction to the painkillers. His body didn't metabolize the medication properly, and we just needed to wait for it to run through his system. He would be fine, most likely. We would be giving it some time, seeing.

2.

You drive around your town for a while and then you run out of things to do, like when Ben and I decided we would go to Ian's new job, to see what it was like there before Ben had to go back home to Los Angeles, to make money doing what he loved.

The auto mall was right off the highway and it was a bunch of glass-and-plastic-looking buildings and cars parked everywhere. We got there but neither of us remembered which dealership was the one that had hired Ian.

We drove in circles for a while, just looking at all the colors of the cars sitting like candy in the sun. Those things were shiny, I'm telling you. My own car was used, with 75,000 miles on it, and that odometer was the fuse to my life. When this car busted I was going to have to buy a new one—my parents said this was it. When this car busted I was going to have to have thousands of dollars in my pocket, or a job that would let me commit to something like that. This car was as much a rope around my neck as the next one, even if it's hard to see it that way now.

Maybe we should stop at one of these places and ask, I said.

I was just going to say that, said Ben.

So me and Ben stopped at the next dealership, where they sold cars that were a lot like all the other cars. They didn't know who Ian was. There was a little blond lady behind counter with curls around her ears and we asked her if a guy named Ian worked there, and she wanted to know Ian who but neither of us could remember. I remembered that it was something Hispanic-sounding, but I didn't feel comfortable saying that out loud. She said it was just as well, that no one named Ian worked there anyway.

We tried this at several places, and no one anywhere in all those stores was named Ian, until we finally found one place where Ian worked.

We didn't even have to ask when we found him. He was just out there in the cars, pacing with his hands behind his back. He was wearing a shirt and tie and fancy-looking pants that went with that. We weren't sure where to park so we just pulled up next to him, between the rows of for sale automobiles. All these cars looked like someone had gone over them with lip gloss.

Hey Ian, I said out of my window. I was driving this time, because Ben's mom's car was at a place getting its window replaced. Ben just kept telling his mom the car was parked at my house for various reasons, and it was just the spare car so she didn't ask for more detail.

Ian walked up and put his hands on the door leaned in and looked at Ben.

Hey guys what's up? he said.

Not too much, I said. Just came to see what's going on with the new job. Those are some nice clothes you're wearing.

Well this is it, he said. He moved his arm in a way that indicated the cars and the building behind him.

You making a lot of money?

Not yet, but everybody tells me it picks up on the weekend. You guys want to see something awesome?

We said we did, and he pointed us to some empty space near the building where we could park my car.

I parked and we went inside. There was a counter, a lot like the ones we'd seen at the other dealerships. Behind it was a big-faced man with an electronic piece stuck in his ear that he was talking to. They had the air-conditioning on so that it was a little bit cold. We followed Ian over to a car they had parked on the floor in there. Eventually I was planning on inviting Ian to see my band play at Brian's house that weekend, but the chance hadn't come up yet.

The car was parked in the middle of a big black circle they had printed on the floor. The metal was painted blue and bent into shape in a way I knew would make other people, people who knew about these things, go short of breath with how much they wanted it. I didn't know about cars and usually relied on the way other people reacted to know how I should feel. Eventually I guess you stop thinking about that and everyone else's reactions just are your reactions.

This is a nice car, said Ben.

Seriously, I said.

It was low to the ground, and the tires were big and fat, like they were made out of enormous felt pen.

V8, said Ian. He said some other things that involved numbers and words that I didn't follow.

Can we drive it? asked Ben. He was running his fingers along the seam between the front door and the rest of the car.

Nah, not this one, said Ian.

Come on, said Ben. Why not? I'll bet you could drive it.

Yeah. If I really wanted to I probably could.

So let's do it.

I think it'll be fun, I said.

Hold on, said Ian. Just give me a second.

He left us there standing next to the car. Inside it was all black leather and oversized parts.

I'll tell you what, said Ben. If we came in here looking to buy we could drive it.

Probably, I said.

I think he should let us drive it.

Maybe, I said. But he doesn't want to so whatever.

I'm going to ask him about Iraq.

Today? I don't think he's going to want to talk about it. He didn't seem into it at the party.

No kidding, said Ben. I'll work on him though.

Two nights before that Ben had asked me to pick him up from his mom's and then he asked me to take him to the store. He came out with beer and we drank in front of my house. I wanted to hang out inside but he said he wasn't comfortable drinking in the same house my mom was in, not while she was there, and so we went outside and sat on the curb.

I crushed my cans and every time I saw headlights I set my drink in the gutter behind my foot, to hide it, but Ben didn't care about the cars. He had his empties all lined up on the curb next to him, shining silver in the light from whoever was driving by,

which was not police, every time so far. He was complaining about Los Angeles, and the way things work there.

He went to film school, which is what he called it, although I think the name of the major is something different, when you take classes at CSU Monterey Bay. He wrote some scripts, participated in making some student films, etc.

There was a graduation party and everyone with their plans graduated from school, and he went to Los Angeles, and so did some of the people he went to school with, and this kid Oscar wound up at some of the right parties, and decided he was a producer, and he'd been working on getting Ben's scripts turned into movies but nothing was happening, except for talk and requests to change things, which Ben said was a terrible, terrible process, and something he went through all the time.

I've been there three years, he said. Do you know what would happen if people like me left Los Angeles? If all the people who just wish they were in the movies but aren't left? The whole city would disappear. It would shrink to the size of Salinas.

A pair of headlights turned the corner at us, spinning in the night. Once they passed we saw the car behind them and it wasn't a cop. I opened a beer.

You need to relax about the cops dude, said Ben. Your mom lives in a nice neighborhood—they're not going to come through here unless someone calls them.

What if someone calls them because we're out here drinking?

Nobody cares what we're doing.

Eventually Ian came from whatever backroom he went to.

I was going to ask my boss if we could take her for a spin, he said. He gestured at the car, and he said, but I'm on day four here and changed my mind. I'll tell you what though. There's a Mustang out there with our names on it. Come back in an hour and pretend you're someone else and we'll take that out for a drive.

Then he told us some words that described how awesome the Mustang was, and then we left to go somewhere else for an hour.

3.

We crossed the highway to the mall, where we stayed on the Sears side, because that was the side my work wasn't. We ate fast-food sandwiches while we were there, the kind where you can watch them put it together behind glass sneeze-guards. One day I'd like to sneeze all over one of those, not cover my mouth or anything, because that's what the glass is there for. I'd streak it with my saliva and then look through the streaks to watch the little guy behind the counter put lettuce and olives and preportioned cold cuts onto my selection of bread.

We were eating in the food court, like this with our sandwiches in our hands, with our sandwiches poking out of wrapping paper. Both our meals were covered in more lettuce than you would think seems reasonable.

We did that for a couple of minutes, ate, without saying anything. The mall was always full of beautiful women but the setting ruined every one of us there. I'd like to see all these people somewhere else—outside on north main, or in the trees outside of Santa Cruz, somewhere where we could talk as though we'd all found it ourselves.

The sandwich was delicious in the back of my throat but I finally found a moment to stop eating. The food was still half there though, in my hands.

I don't think you should ask Ian about Iraq, I said.

Ben chewed for a few moments before answering.

No? he said. Why not?

He didn't seem into it the other day, at all.

Yeah. You said that earlier. But his wife and kids were there. I'll bet he has some good stories.

Yeah maybe.

Besides, if I'm going to write this movie I need some first-hand information. Nothing says crappy writer like getting the details wrong.

We finished our sandwiches and talked about the coming weekend. My band was playing at our friend Brian's house. Brian lived in a house in the middle of some fields just south of town. We agreed it was going to be a lot of fun. There were going to be a couple of touring bands that Ben hadn't heard before, and I told him about what they sounded like and he said he didn't understand how I could listen to some of that stuff. He didn't like that the singers all screamed, but it didn't bother him when this happened in my band. He only said the second part after I gave him a hard time, on account of my band being screamy. All the while we ate our sandwiches until there was only the paper left, and then we wadded this into little balls and got up.

You'd never know it but a sandwich from the mall can be ordered and eaten in less than fifteen minutes. The whole meal, start to end. We crossed the parking lot to the Target and looked at everything. Target has little miniature worlds inside it.

We were walking down the aisles, where tiny brown-skinned children have their entire lives eaten up and consumed and described in texts that always begin with made-in. We were in the home section, looking at smokeless indoor grills, for no reason at all.

Should we get some clothes? said Ben.

I don't need clothes. Do you need clothes?

I don't know. Just that Ian said to show up as someone else.

I don't think he meant we need disguises, I said. I think he just meant to split for an hour and then come back so we'd seem like we weren't the people who were just talking to him and socializing like we're friends, so it wouldn't seem like he's goofing off when he takes us out in the Mustang.

This made a lot of sense to Ben, but he already had the idea of new clothes in his head so we looked at clothes. When we left he had a bag of two shirts and a pair of pants, all in recent styles. This hour of killing time was a lot like most other time that I've spent.

It was getting to be three when we headed back to the dealership.

4.

I can't tell you how nice the drive to Ian's work was, though. It hadn't rained in months, or since I could remember lately, but the air was all clean like it is after some

rain, so the mountains on the horizon looked like they were right in front of you. The sun flashed like it was coming through a mason jar, just beautiful like that. This was only for a few minutes, during the drive to Ian's work, and then it was gone, but neither of us said anything about it, because it's not the sort of thing you can talk about to most people.

5.

When I was in high school we used to hear about a male strip show at the Rodeo Inn, where men would take off their clothes until they were just muscles and bow ties. I was probably fourteen at the time, so it stayed a rumor, like the one about the drive-in theater on the east side, with no way to confirm it one way or the other. Later they say it got shut down by the city for one reason or another, but because of hearing about the Rodeo Inn show there were some years in the nineties that I hoped a strip club with ladies might open somewhere nearby, or might already be open, slightly hidden by an innocuous exterior, like they said it was with the male review at the Rodeo Inn. There were nights when I couldn't sleep and drove around, sixteen and dreaming, looking for flashing lights and naked ladies out there.

Years later I went to a burlesque show in Marina, but it was all tawdry, like a balloon with half its helium run out, drooping on its line. The show took place during a month of Thursdays, in a bar with signs about its wonderful barbecue. I remember that. The lights made everything hard to see and except for one all the jokes were awful. I could've used a little more light to see things in there—some of those girls might have been what I needed to see then, even with the terrible jokes.

6.

When we got to the dealership there was an argument about who would sit where. We settled it with hand games and my rock over Ben's scissors. He sat in the back seat, where he crunched up so he looked like a crab waving its arms in the air whenever he wanted to move. Ian got in and so did I and we left.

We took the car out on the highway almost straight away.

We're going to open her up, said Ian, and I could tell by how much of his teeth I saw that this was thrilling for him. I remembered that the job was still new for him, and being surrounded by all those fancy cars. Ben waggled around in the back, trying to see out the windows, and the car accelerated. We passed traffic on all sides of us—the highway was an enormous ship docked at the edge of the sky.

I opened my window a crack and listened to air pour through until Ben asked me to close it. There were torn papers blowing through the grass on either side of the road, yellow and soft with their used upedness.

We passed a bunch of cows and hills and were getting into Prunedale.

What do you think? said Ben.

The car didn't make any sound while we did all this. It was just the country moving past and other cars getting bigger and then smaller at different speeds. It seemed like there should have been more noise than there was—it felt like explosions on a TV with the sound switched off, and everything smelling like leather.

This thing is awesome, said Ben from the back of the car. You should let me drive for a minute.

No, said Ian, we've got to head back. We're going to turn around up here.

He downshifted and pretty soon we were getting off the highway near the shopping center in Prunedale.

What about you? said Ian. What do you think about it?

It's pretty sweet, I said. You sure you don't want to let one of us drive home? I'll take it easy, I promise, I said, and I guess I didn't really care about driving the car too much.

Ian got back on the highway towards Salinas, and drove us all the way until just north of town. Along the way Ben spoke up.

Hey so seriously, he said, what was it like in Iraq?

It kind of sucked man, said Ian.

Like, how?

Like it's fucking hot and I didn't get to see my family.

For a second we were just driving.

But I need details, said Ben. I'm writing a movie.

You're making a movie? What do you want to know?

You said you killed a couple people.

I guess, yeah.

Tell me about it.

I don't know. Sometimes there'd be shooting from a window or something and we'd shoot back and then the other shooting stopped. I don't know what I did.

I interrupted here, because I didn't want to hear any of this.

What if we take a couple of minutes and go on Espinoza? I said.

Espinoza Road is just north of town. You can see the auto mall exit from there.

Why? said Ian.

I want to see how she handles some curves, the car I mean.

Espinoza cuts through a bunch of fields with artichokes and lettuce and so on. There's some enormous houses too, and Mexican people all through the fields pulling vegetables from the ground

We turned onto Espinoza and passed the little vegetable stand on the side of the road.

We've got to do this fast, said Ian. He said he had to get back to work soon, that test drives are supposed to be quick, especially when no one's buying, and then he just drove, but not high-speed like he said he would. We were creeping along—you could see individual artichokes inside their plants we were moving so slowly.

What's up? said Ben. Let's open her up and then get back to your work.

Ian drove for a little without answering. I've thought about that little bit where he wasn't talking a lot, and I'm pretty sure I know what was going on inside, even though at the time I had no idea. The whole situation seemed foreign, and Ian answered finally, and he said he's got to get back to work soon.

He said, I'm twenty-five years old and my looks are all falling out the top of my head. I'm starting to think that's all there was to me, just my hair. I lose sleep over it. But I mean, what does it matter, right? I'm married. It's never going to matter what I look like again.

He said all of this with us sitting there in this excellent car, creeping alongside all these plants sticking up out of the ground, these artichokes sitting like turtles waiting to drop into the sea. I don't know where any of his words were coming from. It had been years since this kind of conversation with him even seemed like a possibility.

It's always going to be me and Lisa and the kids, he said, and Lisa's gotten past caring what I look like. I know I don't care what she looks like. Mostly I mean. I mean, she's a babe, but I don't think I'm any happier than I would be if she wasn't. There's a lot of men out there married to homely women who don't know a thing about it. Who wouldn't care if they did. But it bugs the shit out of me what's happening. I'm losing big chunks of myself and they're never coming back. I'm picking this stuff out of my hairbrush at home. All I can do is run it down the sink, or leave it on the floor for Lisa to sweep up.

We passed fields on either side and some buildings. There were people bent over out there with their hands in the dirt and Ian slowed the car a little more.

I need to get back to work, he said. They're going to start wondering if I'm gone too long, he said.

He did a U-turn in the road and we all leaned to the outside edge of the circle he made with the car.

Now that we were situated so we were heading back to the highway Ian asked if we wanted to see how fast we could get her. It was one of those moments where a small subject-change was really a huge one, and I said yeah let's do it and Ben said something along the same lines.

I rolled the window down for this, and Ben didn't say a word and that Mustang flew through the air. We felt it all over us. The plants on either side of us blurred into big rubber-band stretches of green and then that blurred too until it was all green on both sides, and wind, and then some animal came out into the road, I don't know what kind and even Ian had no idea, just enough idea to swerve, and the car left the road because of the way he turned the wheel. He could never tell me the size of what it was we were avoiding.

The airbags burst into us and I felt Ben tossed into the back of my seat, at the end of his seatbelts, which he'd been holding out for slack. We were really bouncing around. All of this because our bodies hadn't figured out that the car was stopped.

Later we would be told we were lucky. Lucky that there was no ditch at the side of the road, that it was just a small drop-off, just enough to deploy the airbags and toss us around a bit, that we weren't going any faster, that the animal hadn't appeared moments later when we'd likely be going ninety or a hundred, instead of fifty.

I would have guessed we were going a-hundred-and-twenty but Ian said they were right about the speed limit. He didn't get a chance to get her up to where she could've been. I'm thinking the animal had to be small, because a deer or something big like that would have been obvious. We'd know if it was a deer.

7.

The bike was a stupid thing at the top of a hill and Margarita didn't see anything about it that was too wonderful except for the fact that Paco had been riding it around for weeks and didn't want to give her the experience of riding it herself.

Margarita was Jesse's grandmother and Paco was her brother. Paco was older by a couple of years and they were both around ten or twelve or something like that. The bike was crazy, with no brakes. This was all sorts of problems because where they lived didn't have any flat parts.

You could see the whole town from the main road it was so small. All of Fanzara in one shot draped over the side of a hill like a blanket unrolled. That's how small everything was—you could see it all at once.

The bike was at the top of a street, next to where people took their clothes for washing. There was a concrete pool of shallow water, where Paco was splashing around, trying to get the heat off him, getting his clothes dirty and not watching any part of his bike.

The sun was all over everything that day, and the water looked like a place Margarita wanted to put her hands and her feet and her face. She'd roll around in it if she could get away with it, but Antonio was coming home today. He was their cousin and he'd been sent to fight the nationalists out west. Earlier in the year some men had shown up wearing sharp hats and pistols and they'd taken people to go fight and Antonio was one of them. You have to understand that this was before anyone knew anything. People

would have taken action sooner if they knew about what was going on. It's hard to know what's what when information has to crawl its way out from the cities. People heard things but they were awful and hard to believe, even with how much they got repeated. It didn't matter anyway, really, because of how far away everything seemed.

Antonio was coming home today and Margarita was already wearing her nice dress, and Paco was wearing nice clothes too and should know better than getting water on himself and dirty water at that but there he was, not watching his bike, so Margarita crept up and got on the bike and put her feet on the pedals and rode. She turned down the hill with her feet on the pedals and buildings were on either side of her and she didn't look back because she'd already done it. Paco was yelling things.

She didn't have to pedal with everything downhill from her. So much of the town was downhill from where she rode. Her dress was yellow and it had white spots on it, and it blew enormously behind her as she rode. She felt like a banner through the streets, and beautiful.

It wasn't long before she discovered the situation with the brakes, meaning that they weren't there. At the bottom of the street there was a house, with its side big and white and flat, and she needed to slow down if she was going to move around it. The angles wouldn't work if she didn't slow down.

She pushed backwards on the pedals but they just spun on the sprocket. She put her feet on the ground on either side of the bike, listened to them scrape against the dirt of the street, kick up rocks against her calves. She thought about her shoes and saw she

wasn't slowing down much at all. The wall of that house was almost all she could see it was so big.

She turned the front of the bike and lay down so that her whole body was on the ground, and she slid her entire body along the dirt. She could feel the skin peeling off her legs. Her elbows hurt and then she and the bike and the wall all three collided. The bike was bent now, and she was bleeding and hurt, and she lay crying in all the brokenness. The inside of her mouth was dried out with dust so that she felt thirsty while she cried.

8.

Jesus, I said. I'd crawled from the wrecked Mustang, looked back at the broken front, the windshield, the pair of deflated airbags like giant condoms on the dash. Ben and Ian were still in there. Jesus, I said again, and then I said it again because it wasn't doing me any good. It's amazing how many times you can say Jesus, or fuck, or whatever you say when things are messed up, before it gets things moving again.

The dirt I was crouching over was dark and there was a bottlecap pressed into it by my feet, round-side up and all the patterns worn from it. Jesus. Ben was scrabbling around inside the car now.

Hey, can I get some help here? he said. He was still pressed into the backseat with all his limbs sticking out. I fucked up my shoulder I think, he said.

I stood up and went to the wreck. Ian was still in his seat. His eyes were open, turned in the direction of the spider-webbed windshield. He was breathing loudly, panting.

You OK Ian?

Yeah, I think so, he said at the windshield. My door won't open. He turned his head and there were red marks on it. Are you OK?

Yeah.

You sure? he said. Your nose?

I found blood coming out of my nose now. There was some on my deflated airbag inside the car. Yeah, I said. I'm OK.

I pulled the handle that made my seat fall forward, so that Ben could get out. He stuck his hands out into the space that left open and I tried to use them to help draw him out but then he pulled back.

What's up? said Ian. He was sitting forward now.

My shoulder hurts, said Ben.

You want to wait until we get an ambulance or somebody out here? I said.

No way do you know what they charge for those things? Just give a minute and I'll get out of here on my own.

What he said there didn't wind up happening. He sat back and breathed hard, with the car wrecked all around him. Ian unbuckled his seat belt and crawled over the passenger seat and tumbled onto the dirt next to me. He was still dressed for work and he was getting dirt all over his nice clothes. He stood up and we both talked to Ben, asked him how we could get him from the car.

Just give me a minute, he said.

Here came a car and it drove past. This happened a few times while were taking care of ourselves, but I imagine one or more called for help because later on an ambulance showed up along with a couple of police in their car. By the time they showed up Ben was out of the Mustang, but for now he just sat back there.

Is there anything we can do? I asked him.

I don't know, he said. This just sucks. I can't get out.

The way the back seat of that car was, you needed some forward momentum to get out—you needed to pull yourself up before you could get out, but later it turned out Ben had a broken collar bone and so he couldn't do that.

Ian was pacing now. What all this meant had just occurred to him.

I think I'm fucked guys, he said, with his feet moving circles around me and the car. I think I'm fucked.

Like I said, Ian had only been at his job a week, maybe less.

Maybe not, I said. I mean, you can't be the first person who's ever gotten in an accident during a test drive.

This didn't stop him from moving around. He went on a little bit about the guy who got him the job, and about how he had no business going as fast as he was on a back road during a test drive, and on.

Ben was in the back seat for all of this and finally he said, Hey Jesse, and I said what. Ian was leaning on the back of the car now.

I think, said Ben, I think I can kind of slide out, on my butt. Will you give me hand?

He made that work. He put his feet out of the car door and slid forward off the seat so he bumped down to the floor of the car, and then he sat there for a minute with his ass on the floor and his legs dangling out, and then he scooted over the lip of door opening and stood up.

Done, he said. It was like Houdini with that escape.

I think I busted my shoulder, said Ben. I pressed around with my hands on his shoulder and the problem didn't seem to be his shoulder until I got to where his collar bone was and he told me to stop what I was doing.

The car looked fine if you ignored everything from the windshield forward, where things looked crumpled.

Ian was on his phone with his work when the cars with the spinning lights on them showed up.

Two policemen came out of the cop car and asked us questions. We swerved to avoid a possum or something, was how we put it and the cop wrote it up, and a little while later we were all squeezed into the cab of a tow truck, shoulder to shoulder.

The man who drove it had a crazy look, like I think most of these people do. There was white hair everywhere on him, and mostly out of his head and face. There were rings on all his fingers, like he was using his hands to sell rings to people.

Where to?

Ian told him. The whole way to the car store he was giving this guy directions. We didn't get a chance to talk to each other about the accident because of all the directions he was giving.

The sun was setting over the fields, and the atmosphere did something to it, flattening it out so that it looked like the edge of some brilliant coin lying on the horizon, and all around it there were clouds drifting like families of whales and the songs that they make in the ocean.

IV

1.

Quitting the band felt good, even though it hurt me a little that I couldn't get it done on my own. It took Ben moving back from LA and being at my house most days. Most of what I liked about the band was gone for months before that. It would have been nice for me to be able to leave when it didn't seem like the only thing that could possibly make sense.

But Ben was coming over all the time now, like back in school. It took more than a week for me to get used to the big open scar on his face. It looked a seam on him had split open and been filled with plaster or sealant. For a while it was all I could look at, and I think he noticed because sometimes he'd just stop whatever sentence he was saying until I moved my eyes from it to somewhere else.

The last time I'd seen him before he moved back was at the airport, a couple days after he'd busted his face open. I was dropping him off at the curb and there was thread sticking out in little bristles under his eye from where they'd stitched him shut. He was

going to write a script for that Iraq movie, even though Ian didn't give much to work with, he said. It was going to be something political, and now it was a year and a half later and the the stitches were gone and he was back in Salinas and after about a week I hardly noticed the stuff under his eye. We also had a plan. Now I was waiting for him to come over.

He knocked on the door and I looked through the peephole and there he was, standing inside the little glass tube in my door.

Ben had a notebook and a pen with him, ready to treat this like it was serious. We sat at the kitchen table and he set his materials down. There was no one else in the house, so we could speak openly.

My dad was at work teaching math to people who failed it the first time and my mom was visiting at the nursing home.

Ben opened his notebook and showed me the schematics he'd drawn in there. There was a picture in blue ink of a bomb made of a bottle and fire. Little men with axes for eyes. Airplanes dropping bombs.

What is all that? I asked him.

I was just getting amped about all this, he said.

You're making it feel silly.

Fuck man, he said, I'm sorry. Next time I'll bring over some oil paintings or something.

An oil painting of a molotov cocktail would probably not seem silly.

He paged through several pages of these drawings until he was at a blank page.

So what are we going to do? he said. His pen was uncapped and ready to put ink all over the page.

I don't know, I said. This was your idea.

All right—well we're going to get criminals, right?

That's the plan.

He wrote GET GANGSTERS across the top of the page.

That was our starting point.

2.

Diego answered a flyer is how we found him. We printed up fifty of them and wound up posting three—one each at the two guitar stores in Salinas and one at a record store in Santa Cruz. The other forty-seven sat in one of my desk drawers for months before I threw them in the garbage.

The flyer said we needed a drummer, must rock. It listed bands we liked and hoped to get compared to.

Diego smoked drugs most days, which was something I hadn't done much of since high school. His bedroom was covered in rugs and furniture filled with stuffing, and the whole band was in and out of there, even though my relationship with pot isn't what I want from it. I don't get the whole philosophy part. My friends had things opened up. They'd tear through houses made out of their thinking and then burn everything to cinders, but all it made for me was good feelings. I've never had a new idea in my life, but fill me with marijuana and I'll cry over songs on the radio.

I got over it, eventually, but lately I'd been thinking all sorts of negativity about Andrew. I wanted to know to know the things he said to Shannon. This was especially true when we were sitting in Diego's bedroom with our eyes full of red, usually after the smoke was disappeared. I couldn't understand what made Andrew work for Shannon. I'd lay on the floor and spin at the feel of the drugs in my back and shoulders, and be filled to my fingertips with wonder at why Shannon couldn't love us both.

Diego decided to make an issue of it one time after practice. This was when the band was still terrible, before we'd figured out what was going on between our instruments.

He was sitting behind his drums and I still had my bass strapped in front of me. Andrew and Shannon were off somewhere in the house with food in the kitchen or something, grabbing at each other. Diego said they could help themselves to whatever was in the kitchen.

You need to figure out what you're going to do, said Diego, sitting there behind all his drums.

What are you talking about?

I mean with Shannon. You need to figure that situation out.

I was still all plugged in and I touched one the strings on my bass guitar, pressed down on it and let go so it rang out through the speaker in my amplifier. The note made Diego's snare drum rattle until it stopped rattling.

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

Then maybe you should look at her a little less, said Diego. I'm just saying that because with how much you look at her it looks like you're into her, so maybe a little less of that.

Yeah. Yeah, for sure.

Diego started to tap out a rhythm on his drums, all light so that it stayed quiet. I watched the sticks move and tap move and tap for two or three measures and then he stopped and looked at me.

Cause look man, Jesse, I'm not trying to take any sides or anything here. I just don't want the band getting fucked up or anything.

Yeah, for sure.

We practiced at Diego's parents' house back then, before Andrew's place on Sanborn. There was foam all over the walls and the window to keep the sound from getting out of the house, but it only kind of worked. Everything inside was hot from our sweat from when we played, and I took my bass off of my body and set it against my amp. I went and stood in the hall, out where the air didn't feel so thick, so I could feel like I wasn't wrapped up for just a second.

The worst part of it was how worn out the situation was. It was nothing that hadn't filled a million televisions or spilled all over pages since pages got invented. I was knotted up over this and it wasn't even new. I was just dawdling along, filling in blanks that had always been there. There was an immense uselessness about it.

Diego came out of the practice room and the sweat-air bulged from the room with him.

Want to smoke?

Sure.

We found Andrew and Shannon in the kitchen, eating sandwiches and with sodas in front of them.

Shannon was complaining to Andrew about her fingers when we got there. She said she wasn't used to practicing this long and they weren't callused yet. Her one finger on her left hand had actually cut open in a small way, she said. She held all this out for Andrew to see, palms up, and then she saw us in the door to the kitchen.

But you know all about it, right Jesse? she said to me. I'd had to stop practice a couple of times to go get band-aids because my fingers were getting these long white blisters on them, from sliding around the bass strings, which were big and fat. Since we'd started practicing with Diego we'd decided to put the band at the front of all our priorities, and this was our second serious practice.

Next to Andrew's soda was a mug of tea—for his throat, he said. There's lemon and honey in it too, he said. But we're sounding really good. Just the difference from last week to this week. A couple more songs, and then get them tight and we'll be ready to play shows.

Andrew knew how to do this. He'd played us his old band's demo, and they did things on there that Andrew had to explain to me, so that I could understand why they sounded like a real band, and not like a bunch of kids messing around. I'd been wasting my time for years, it turns out, and now I was getting used to the whole screaming thing,

the way he sang. All I wanted to do was perform in front of people, hear them sing along to something I helped to make.

Diego was standing at the sliding glass door over by the table, blowing smoke into the patio.

Andrew was right there in the middle of all of us. The lights were turned on over our heads even though it was daytime and the windows were all flung open from their curtains. His face made me want to meet his parents, meet his mom, because she had to be something to look at. I wanted to meet the female version of his face and kiss it, because the way his face bones were shaped was all television.

There was all this circuitry at work—it was wired together like this. I had nothing to do with any of it, you know?

3.

Diego practiced barefoot on his drum pedals, and half the time we went anywhere it was in flip-flops, in a way that was embarrassing for me. We'd go to restaurants and sit in booths and he'd pull his bare feet up onto the seat next to him, right near where all the food was. This was while he was eating so he usually had French fries or something similar in his hands. He was also a slender guy. He took his shirt off whenever we practiced and he'd wind up with little streams of sweat running down the bones of his chest, where there was no hair either.

I admired the way he hit the drums. There was no nuance to it. He just hit them and they made their sounds, one after the other.

After Shannon and Andrew finished their sandwiches and their sodas and Andrew's tea, they left Diego's house and practice was over.

I'll call you later, Shannon said to me before they left. The normal rhythm of things hadn't changed. We still looked at our school books together and memorized the insides together.

Diego and I went to his room and smoked out of a pipe and then sat down and played games on his television. We sat holding the controllers and moving the people on the screen, shooting at the things we were supposed to shoot at, but mostly we just hung out and talked.

So what are you going to do? said Diego. We were sitting on the couch and cables ran from our hands to the machine under the TV.

I don't know man.

Are you going to quit the band? I've got to be honest with you—the way you look I'd quit the band.

What do I look like?

Like you spend a lot of your time watching the girl you like kiss another guy.

I wasn't even really into her like that until they started kissing at each other, I said, and sometimes lies make things easier than anything the truth could do.

It works out that way sometimes man. I used to hang out with this kid and anytime I told him I was into a girl he'd suddenly be all over her. People said he was just fucking with me but I don't think that's it. I've been there. You know someone else is into a lady and that makes her more like someone you want to be with. It's like anything

else in the world. Who gives a shit about anything unless other people are impressed by it, you know?

So you don't think it's real?

What?

Me wanting Shannon.

It's as real as the crappy feeling you've got from not being with her.

So what do I do?

I don't know. Don't quit the band though. I'm having a good time with it. I never told you about that kid? The one that kept chasing the girls I liked?

I don't think so. No.

He ended up losing a finger, in an accident. I only heard about it—we weren't friends anymore, but I guess he was cleaning the chain on his dirt bike or trying to fix it or something, and the bike started randomly, like a freak occurrence, and it chewed up the top of his middle finger. Now he walks around with his hand always all fisted up so you can't see the missing part unless you're looking for it. I've seen him like that at parties, even though we're not talking to each other.

On the TV screen I was rolling over everything, and it got so I forgot the rest of the house was there. We talked about other things. Music and food and movies and these sorts of things, with our fingers moving all over the place.

There was a point during this that we heard the sound of the electric garage door opening and then closing, then a man and a woman talking out there. I got worried about the sound of my voice, that it was too loud, and then I didn't enjoy the game so much,

and didn't feel like I could talk, and I said I was going to leave because of that, and then I left.

4.

Memorial Hospital has a cafeteria downstairs, but its food areas always seemed to be closed up—the trays sat empty and the register turned off, no one anywhere, but there was a machine that sold coffee drinks into little cups and another that sold bags of snacks, like potato chips.

The walls were done in that same endless white as everything else. White so that we'd know that no sort of bacteria or infection could live in this place full of both. I was afraid to lean against the walls because I might leave dirt on them.

This is where we went on vacations from my granddad's hospital room. We did all types of talking down here and we'd suck coffee from those cups. For a while it was the only other place for us to go. There were steel tables and napkin dispensers and two of those no-dry soap machines.

We spent as much time down there as we could without feeling awful about it, or without feeling like we were giving up on something. The doctors called the disease my grandpa had a failure to thrive, which meant that he was old and they didn't know why he wasn't up and hobbling about.

It was like scientists talking about instinct in animals—we don't understand an activity and so we put words on it that mean we can forget about the reason. My grandpa

lay in bed all day everyday and refused to talk to his family because: he had failure to thrive, which as far as I could tell meant absolutely nothing.

When the disease began, I was at the hospital every day. I was in the room when the doctor, who none of us have seen since, said that all the tests came back OK, that it was just a bad reaction to something, that he'd get better. I was also there two weeks later, when we had the curtains drawn to let sunlight in, to try to get granddad to maybe open his eyes, because we knew he could do it. A nurse came in and my mom pulled her aside and I followed.

My granddad had been in there for two weeks now. The people who came in and out, plugging him in and out of machines, making him more or less of a science fiction monster depending on the clipboard, they told us they couldn't explain it. This was when the failure to thrive thing first was mentioned.

The nurse didn't acknowledge that I was there. It was just her and my mom.

Sometimes, with the older ones, they just forget how to hold on to things, said the nurse, in her toothpaste-colored scrubs, her eyes coming open like great fishnets, real sympathy tumbling out for the first time in I don't know how many days, and it was right then that I wanted to sleep with her, to feel the way she felt in my hands, and then I felt awful about it, because she was just a woman feeling something for our terrible situation, and I wanted to see her naked because of it.

What does that mean? my mom asked her. What do we do?

We just have to wait. I'll see about getting anti-depressants or something.

We stood around his bed for days, my parents and me, my sister when she got off of work. Touching his hands, resting our fingers on the sheet where it covered his feet, trying to maintain a connection.

He would look out at us from under his eyelids, pretend to be asleep and we'd catch him looking sometimes, because he wasn't really sleeping. They would bring him pills in tiny paper cups.

Why do you keep putting these in me? he would say. Just let me die, he would say, because there were times when he didn't pretend to sleep, or didn't really sleep. He'd wake up and we'd talk to each other and he wouldn't believe things we'd tell him.

Just let me die. Stop feeding me.

But you're not dying. If we stopped you'd just get hungry.

And then we were in the hallway outside of the room, talking to this other nurse, who had just given him pills.

This isn't working, said my mom to the nurse.

I'm not sure what you're talking about—let me go talk to the doctor.

She left and we went back into the room. Later she came back and said they were going to try to get him to another part of the hospital, where they dealt with mental issues, but they had to wait until there was room.

5.

For the first half dozen years that I lived there weren't too many words expected out of me, and my grandpa and I went places together, mostly when I would visit Spain, because this was before he moved out to California with us.

We were at the beach one time and we'd brought lunch. There was wind blowing in from the sea at the time. It was a terrible day for the beach, but there we were with our sandwiches on our blanket, trying not to break our teeth on the sand in our food. The waves made big shapes in front of us while we ate.

I was nine and he was asking me questions about the girls at school and I was embarrassed so it was mostly just him talking and laughing. It wasn't mean though. He had big adult hands and eventually he pointed them at the ocean and then was telling me about the fishing boats and all the hundreds of kinds of fish that they found out there. He said we'd go to the fish market that afternoon and he'd show me.

There was a bee on the lip of my soda can, with its wings all pushed around by the wind. I picked up my soda and held it in front of my face, in order to get a better look at the bee. My granddad told me to leave it alone, and I insisted and he said OK but he was going to stand over here, and he got up and walked a few feet away and watched me from there.

I looked at the bee and the way its abdomen almost throbbed and the little hooks on its legs that kept it from blowing away. I blew at it, to make it get off my soda, and that didn't get rid of it so I brushed at it with my fingers and pretty soon it put its stinger

into me and I was crying. Granddad came back from where he was standing and scraped the stinger out with his thumbnail and bought me a popsicle at the bar down the street.

Later that day we walked past the beach again and the wind was still coming in off the sea, and thin veils of sand blew across the beach, snaking towards us across the ground, like sideways-moving smoke.

I've got more memories about these things than I've any right to, given that it was maybe two summers, in the middle of a bunch of others, and then I got to talking and people expected things of me and all that got messed up.

6.

Ben had all these secret friends for a while. Not secret in the sense that I didn't know they existed, but secret in that he never brought me around them. Sometimes I would hear about Saturday nights with them, and crazy drugs that I didn't even want to try, but I wanted to be there to see it. I was at a house once, with Ben and Diego and some other people I'd only met that night, and I went to the bathroom to let go of some fluids and when I came out the house was empty, all caught in time like Pompeii, only without the statue people. The driveway was still full of cars though, and I was afraid to go checking doors inside the house, so I sat and I watched television, and then I fell asleep doing that. I woke up when everybody came into the living room and watched TV with me.

Years later Diego told me that they all went into a bedroom to burn up some crank on aluminum foil. It took me a minute to remember the time he was talking about, but now that I know that I remember so many details of it.

Ben had friends like these, like Diego's, and Andrew's, that I never met before, and I always wanted to meet them, you know? Later, once we got through the business with the notebook and the drawings of bombs, Ben and I talked about the serious, concrete things we could do.

Ben was really worked up about this. He'd done research, read newspaper articles about the way these gangs were put together, how they were built. People from outside of Salinas especially loved to read that stuff. They ate it up.

I once met this guy I wanted to punch, even though I don't do that sort of thing. We met far away, in Sacramento. My band was playing a show up there and it was kind of a crazy occurrence, because here I was three hours away from Salinas, three-and-a-half from Monterey, and this dude serving us dinner at a hamburger restaurant said he was from Monterey. He'd heard us talking about Salinas, and crazy about him here in Sacramento putting our money into a cash register and him raised in Monterey, all of us being so far from home. And then he said some things about how dangerous Salinas was, and how he wouldn't want to live there, and the whole coincidence was wasted, right there out of his mouth, but here I was with Ben talking to him about how to save the city from all this danger.

I don't know what we're supposed to do with this information, I said to Ben. He had photocopies of newspapers spread out on the table, next to his notebook.

It's good to know though, he said. It's like recon, you know? Know your enemy?

Maybe we should figure out what we're going to do when we find the enemy, I said.

We decided we needed to get a gun if we were going to do anything. That was the first thing we were going to do. We couldn't think of any scenario where a gun might not be a good thing to have available.

At this stage we were mostly running on guesses and what we knew. I hadn't seen anything like a gang member since high school, and they mostly disappeared from there. All these kids I knew in middle school a few years later just stopped being at school. By the time I graduated all I knew was the space they left behind.

The city did things like anti-gang taskforces and programs that grabbed our young people before the gangs did, and now Ben and I were going to go to San Jose, to Ben's secret friends, so we could help the effort. Ben knew this guy up there who used to pull out his gun to show people at parties.

I'd get the fuck out of the room when he did that, said Ben. The gun always came out after everyone was wasted. I don't know how nobody ever got shot.

Why does he have a gun?

No reason that I can figure out, except his dad was in the Marines and gave him like three of them.

He's got three guns?

I don't know. That's what he said. I only ever saw the one at parties.

Ben left, and I guess called who he needed to call and we left later, when it was getting to be dark.

7.

There's these long stretches of highway on the way between Salinas and San Jose where all you see is the cars on the road, and pretty soon you get to feeling boxed in by them, like you're traveling in this little room made of other people's cars. Sometimes you get to the top of a hill at night and then they're all spread out below you for miles, tail-lights strung out red from hill to hill like it's Christmas. Sometimes I drive through that and feel like I'm not actually on my way anywhere, but pretty soon Ben and I got to San Jose. Brandon, the guy with the gun, lived downtown, where he rented part of an old Victorian. It was split into units, and I think someone probably gutted the building's insides at some point, because there's no way the walls were set up like that for a house where one family lived by themselves.

His apartment was upstairs. There was a staircase in the back that took us to this door, and the door opened on a long hallway that ran all the way to the other side of the house, where there was a little round window. There were doors off of the hallway and Brandon lived in the first door.

Ben knocked on the door. There was some noise on the other side, and then we heard the sound of feet, and Brandon opened the door. He had a big face with half of it taken up by his smile, and his hair was dark and combed backwards with something wet keeping its shape.

Dudes, Ben, come in, he said, and we went inside the apartment.

Brandon and Ben hugged, and talked about it being too long, years, since they'd seen each other. Did Ben know there was a baby now, and yeah Ben had heard.

Sit down, said Brandon. I'm going to get beer for us.

He went into the kitchen which was right next to the living room. By the front door there were some narrow stairs that ended at another door. I thought that if I had to live there I might have been crushed by the small floors, the permanence all over everything. Glossy posters hung on the walls, advertising movies and music. Fans ran their blades in there like someone had forgotten it was night, and cold. These were on the ceiling and next to the couch.

Brandon came back from the kitchen and put a beer in my hand.

Candace'll be right down, he said. He left the room again and came back with a kitchen chair, a metal one, and he set this across from the couch, to one side.

He sat down and turned to Brandon.

Dude, so glad you finally came up. How long's it been?

Years. I've been in LA.

Brandon was drinking his beer now and I went to do the same but he'd forgotten to uncap mine. I tried to open it but it wasn't the kind you can open with you hand.

Working on the dreams, ey? said Brandon, and right around then the baby in the next room started screaming. Brandon rolled his eyes.

Hold on guys—I'm going to go help Candace with the kid. I'll be right back.

He left, went up the stairs, and the crying got louder when he opened the door and then quieter when the door shut behind him.

I totally forgot he had a kid, said Ben.

This sucks man, I said. Are we going to be here a long time?

Upstairs there was still all sorts of wailing, but nothing serious—just the kind that babies make when they want food or sleep, or to be cleaned. We were holding these beers in front of us and not drinking them. Mine was still shut.

I don't know, said Ben.

Does he know we want to borrow his gun?

Nah. I just told him we were going to come by and hang out.

So we're going to be here a long time.

I can't just call a guy for the first time in like three years and tell him I want something.

He forgot to open my beer, I said. I held it out so Ben could see and I said, I'm going to go get a bottle opener. I shook my sealed beer a little, so he could see.

Over in the kitchen I turned the light switch and everything flickered white and then lit up. He had one of those old refrigerators with the round corners and next to that there were handles for cabinets, and a little yellow table with one chair next to it. The whole thing seemed to exist fifty years too late for itself.

I started pulling things open, looking through spatulas and silverware. There was a drawer with nothing but washers in it, probably a hundred of them.

You find it yet? called Ben, from the next room, while I did this searching.

Not yet, I said.

I ran out of things that looked like drawers. The cabinets had boxes of food in them and cans and then I looked at the refrigerator, which had postcards magneted to it, and one of the magnets was a bottle opener.

It was holding a photograph in place, of Brandon and a woman I assumed was Candace. There was no baby in the photo, which could have meant several things about what was pictured.

They were at a park, or some place with lots of plants in it, because there were all these stems and leaves around them so you couldn't see anything in the photo except for green and Brandon and Candace. She was short with red bangs and black hair and a body like one of those fertility idols that are all round and beautiful. She had her arms around Brandon, with all sorts of happy on her face.

I pulled the photo off the fridge and set it on the counter. I used the magnet bottle opener to open my beer and watched the foam bubble up and I sucked it from the lip of the bottle before it could spill over. There was still that baby noise from upstairs. It still sounded the same, and in the living room it was just Ben, and all the same conversation options we'd exhausted on the ride up.

I opened the refrigerator and looked inside. There was more beer. There was milk and cheese, an orange-colored plastic bag with carrots inside. I closed it, and then I looked on top, where people keep bread, and there was a gun on top of the refrigerator, flat-black and sitting on a film of dust.

I took the gun down from the fridge and held it so the bullet-shooting-side was pointed at the floor. There were all sorts of levers and switches—I didn't know what any of these did, except for the trigger, because that was the important part. I didn't hear the baby anymore—its screaming was the sound of traffic at that point.

Hey Ben, I said. Come here.

I heard him get up, and then he was at the door to the kitchen.

Jesus, he said. Where's that from?

It was on the refrigerator. Is this it?

This one's different—I don't know anything about it.

Is the safety on? There's a safety, right?

How should I know?

We looked at the gun for a minute there. I had it in both hands now, laid across them like a piece of jewelry. It looked old. The barrel was thinner than I would have expected. The crying upstairs got louder and there was the baby again, inside our brains, and then it got quiet and there were feet thudding on the stairs that we could hear.

Ben disappeared into the living room. I heard him tell someone that I was just opening my beer, that I'd be right out. He said we should probably get going soon. While he said this I pushed the gun into my pocket, so that it was pointed at my shoes, but that made a big gun-shaped bulk at the front of my jeans. I took it out and put it in my waistband, at the small of my back, like they do in the movies. I went into the living room with the gun at my back, holding the beer and the bottle opener out in front of me, something to show.

It was Candace that came downstairs, looking like she did in the picture, except without the dark color on her eyelids, or around her lips. She was wearing a sweatshirt that hung loose around her body, and her hair was pulled back so all you could really see of it was the top where it was black, and the bangs, which were orange and bright and huge. There was a baby upstairs that came out of her, and was going to live here with no idea how small everything around it was. I don't know how the people here didn't see it. She was smiling at me and I had this gun in the back of my pants.

I'm sorry, she said. Brandon didn't remember your name. I said hi to Ben.

She held out her hand.

Jesse. I'm Ben's friend. We shook hands.

Yeah, yeah, she said. I just wanted to say hi. Tanya's been really fussy lately. Brandon's almost got her to sleep—he'll be right down.

The baby was still crying up there. We could hear it through the walls and it sounded it would never end, the way these things usually sound, I guess.

Ben said we should get going, that we'd come back another time. It looked like they had their hands a little full right then. We'd get in touch soon.

No really, Ben said, when Candace got all polite and wanting to visit even though visiting was obviously not at the top of her list, not right then.

We'd get in touch soon, and Candace said all right, said we should all hang out sometime soon.

Outside the building we were walking down the driveway.

That was weird, said Ben. He was walking with his fingers on one of his ears, scratching at it. I heard he had kid, he said, but I totally didn't expect to see an entire family in there.

I didn't tell Ben about the gun right then, because I knew that he wanted to get a gun from Brandon, but I'm pretty sure he didn't think about stealing it, or wasn't sure anyway. The house we were just in, I didn't know anything about any of the people in it, or what they were like to Ben, what they were to him.

Let's go get a drink or something, said Ben.

Yeah, I didn't drive all the way to San Jose just to leave after ten minutes.

8.

Some months after Antonio first went away with the army Margarita's Tio Daniel was tied up with ropes and put in the back of a wagon. Men had broken into his house in the middle of the night and pulled him out of his sleep and left him in the bed of a wagon with some other people also with the ends of their arms and legs wrapped in rope so they couldn't move. There were five or six of them back there with rags in their mouths. They were being watched by a man who sat on a bench there with a rifle across his lap. He was there to make sure there was no funny business from the tied up men. They lay twitching like dying fish, and the man on the bench, he was hard to see in the night but he

was looking at them from over his moustache, sucking on the end of a cigarette and blowing smoke all over everywhere.

This wasn't a good time for Tio Daniel. He was young with a pretty face, and they'd hit him while they tied him up, so that he'd stop fighting. Now the side of his face was opened up on the floor of the wagon, and the way he was laying hurt. He was pressed into the boards. There were little rocks bouncing around between the men, from the bumps in the road. They were moving.

The kidnapping was a surprise, but Daniel knew what it was all about, because he was active in town. He talked to people at their houses, and he knew what was being done to churches and so on. He was watching out his window like everyone else when they took Father Rodil into the plaza all but naked and filled his head with bullets. He didn't understand that at all, until someone explained the politics to him, but how could he put anything like politics in front of killing an old priest? So here he was now with his face rolling around with stones and these other people, who he knew, who were his neighbors, and the man with the pipe, he was a neighbor too, Javier Ciscar, and Jesus it was just politics why did they kill a goddamned priest? and then if they were people who would kill a priest, who had never hurt anyone in his life, what were they going to do with a wagonload of tied up men?

They were passing through the plaza now, where the shooting had been. The air was warm, but there was a breeze running through it, and there were cricket legs whistling all around them. Daniel shifted around inside the ropes and tried to find a way

to get out of them. He did this slowly. His feet first, and then his hands, and there were knots and tightnesses all over him. It burned at the worst spots.

There was no way to get out, and this made his blood running through him feel charged, like someone had poured electric current through a hole in his veins, and then he closed his eyes and started to talk to God. He began with the church prayers.

One, two, three, four of them and with those done it was just him and God and he was asking for small things, like time to see his son and that sort of thing.

It was during this talking to God that the ropes just fell off him. They were there, touching him close, and then a moment later he could feel where they had been, and they were loose. He sat up, because it surprised him.

Oye! This was Javier, still sitting on the box. He told Margarita's uncle to lay down and pointed the gun at him. Margarita's uncle lay back down. He could hear the horses' hooves thumping on the road now. He hadn't noticed that before.

Javier stood up in the back of the wagon now and wobbled on his legs and then bent to his knee to keep balance. There was that gun in his hand, which was kind of held out, also for balance. He tossed his cigarette out the wagon and waddled over to the front end of the wagon, through their tied up bodies. His feet were next to Daniel's face.

Stop, said Javier to the driver, who was up over their heads where they couldn't see him. Stop the wagon—I need to check something. Javier was barefoot. His broken toenails were right next to Daniel's face, and it seemed ridiculous for someone with no shoes to be keeping men captive with a gun. Or backwards anyway, if not ridiculous. Daniel didn't understand what could have happened to make this possible.

The thud of the horses slowed down and stopped. A man Daniel couldn't see asked what was going on and Javier said he thought some of the ropes needed tightening. He handed the gun up front and he stooped over Daniel and felt the ropes with the tips of his fingers.

This one is loose, he said, pointing and at Daniel. He tied the knots shut again, so they were tight again. First the hands. Then the feet.

He got the gun back and the prisoners were lined up again in the back of the cart, with old Javier sitting on that crate.

Daniel had his eyes open now—there were buildings on either side of the cart, white and flat and moving past as they moved downhill. There were stars against the black, in between the roofs, a lot of stars, like salt across the sky, and he thought about this while he prayed. He started by asking God if it was God that had loosened the ropes, because how else would that happen, and then Daniel started from the beginning again—our father and hail Mary and so on with the words you learn from your parents, and then he got back to the conversational part. He had his eyes closed now. That happened at some point during the prayer. There was a lot of repetition, because really there are only so many ways to ask God for the same thing. God please let me get through this and if not please help my family and if that was you with the ropes please help me one more time and please let me get through this and if not and so on and then the cart hit a bump and he opened his eyes.

There was the thud thud thud of the horses' feet on the on the road. They were moving downhill, and Daniel could hear rocks and pebbles skittering along with them,

ticking against each other like neurons in the human brain. There was all this movement when he opened his eyes, and all he could do was hear it. He couldn't tell the difference between three crickets and a thousand.

He knew they were at the edge of town when the buildings disappeared.

There was nowhere to go out there, and everything above them was stars, stars, stars—galaxies of stars spinning up there, and he shut his eyes again. He said prayers again, only now they were just running in the background, somewhere with the horse hooves, because he was really thinking about the feeling of a gun killing him. He was thinking about him dragged out onto the road, kicked over to a ditch somewhere. He was thinking about the priest and all his blood in the air, and Daniel didn't want to think about any of this so he started to mumble to God out loud, around the rag in his mouth.

Our father, he mumbled to himself. He closed his eyes. Hail Mary, also. Glory be. The wagon slowed and then stopped and Daniel's prayers were only in his head again, and running in the background. He opened his eyes, and sat up as well as he could with the knots on his body. The tied-up men around him did the same. He knew all of them. They were all neighbors.

Two men appeared next to the bed of the wagon. One held a rifle a rifle and the other a pistol, and he knew them too. These were all men he knew, and Javier had his gun pointed at Daniel and the rest of the prisoners.

The two new men, one of which Daniel figured had been driving the wagon, grabbed at some legs and pulled them towards the end of the wagon. The man who those legs were attached to was named Pablo. He used to go hunting with Daniel's cousin, and

Pablo twisted around and flopped in the bed of the truck until the man with the rifle hit hit him head with the back of the gun. It made a crack and Pablo stopped moving.

They pulled him off the wagon and let his body fall onto the ground where it thumped. They dragged him by the feet across the dirt, towards the side of the road. Daniel scooted up so he could see over the edge of the wagon, and now Pablo was kicking his legs at the men until they dropped his feet. The one with the rifle hit him again, and this time the crack was like the bursting of a balloon and everything Pablo was doing stopped altogether. He lay bent in the dirt road.

The man with the pistol leaned his head down so it was close to Pablo's.

Esta muerto? said the man with the rifle.

No se, said the man with the pistol.

Como que no sabes? Respira?

The man with the pistol put his index finger under Pablo's nose, as though he was trying to suppress a sneeze for Pablo.

No se. Creo que no.

Nos aseguramos de que esta hecho?

Si. Si, claro. Hazlo.

The one man stood back and the man with the rifle leveled it at Pablo's head and there were more cracks in the air when he shot the dead man's head.

There was no blood, but it would be hard to see because of the night. Daniel closed his eyes and the echo of the shot was still floating in the air like radio static.

He scooted back down. He closed his eyes, because at that point there was nothing worth looking at anyway—nothing that was happening had any basis in anything he knew. People at in town were going to be sad about what just took place, because they knew Pablo, and even in this non-reality that was happening there was an urge in Daniel to flop his tied-up body over to Pablo and get on top of the wounds and stop the blood with the sheer weight of his body.

Pablo was just an acquaintance, but Daniel wanted to wrap the man up like a baby and carry him to a place where people could cry, but that would have made no sense either, so he pressed his eyelids together until they hurt. There was no prayer this time. As soon as his eyes shut on themselves the ropes on his body loosed up and fell away completely.

There was Javier waving his gun around just a few feet away, but Javier was mostly watching the mess on the road. Daniel slumped down and kept his arms and legs pressed together in a simulation of captivity and pretended he had no hope for life. He listened to the two men return from the side of the road and dead Pablo.

Without watching he listened to another man get dragged from the car, and more struggle, and after seconds, two gunshots. There was some moving around Daniel now, from the others in the wagon. A moment passed. Then another, and then Margarita's uncle stood up, shedding rope on all sides. The men with guns all looked at him.

He hurled his body at Javier on his box, and both tumbled from the back of the cart onto the ground.

This all happened quickly, and Daniel didn't look to see what else was happening anywhere. It was just him, and Javier, and then the stone he used to hit Javier's head once, and then he got up and ran.

There were orange trees in an orchard at the side of the road, and he ran through these and through mud that he could feel sucking at his feet. There was a gunshot and he turned his head and couldn't see anything much in the night. One or two more and he kept running, and all he could hear was the breath inside his head, and then there was another gunshot breaking through that, and this time when he turned his head he saw a woman running alongside him, draped in blue cloaks and with skin that was luminous and brilliant and pulsing with light. She ran without sweat, or breathing, without looking at him.

She matched his pace perfectly through the mud and the dark. Her legs stretched from beneath her robes as she ran, lean and pale, like they were carved from long pieces of soap, and seeing all this filled him up, and he knew he was safe.

Eventually he got to the river and jumped in, and the beautiful woman disappeared.

V

1.

Ian disappeared into the dealership and we waited outside with the tow truck driver, who wouldn't unhitch the Mustang until someone gave him money or credit card

numbers. Ben and I walked over to my car, where it was parked by the doors to the dealership.

We got in the car and closed the door.

Do you want to smoke? said Ben.

No.

Yeah. Me neither. Between getting shot at the other day and now the Mustang getting wrecked I don't think I want to get near another car.

We laughed, because the only way to do anything is in a car.

Nothing was happening that we could see. The tow truck driver was sitting in the cab of his truck. He seemed to be a really patient. I could see him in my mirrors, in a reverse image of himself, and he was looking at something outside his window and he was tapping his fingers on the top of his steering wheel. His rings looked like computer keys bouncing up and down.

Ben wanted to talk about his movie, so I listened to that. He was frustrated with that part of his life, the one where he wrote movies for people who would probably never see them. He didn't have the words to say it right, but I knew exactly what he was talking about. It's amazing the size of what can become worthless from no one watching. He was going to write this Iraq movie, he said, even if Ian didn't want to tell him anything about it.

I've got little indie-type scripts written, he said, lots of them. I mean, I write those because they say you should write scripts that you can make into movies for cheap or almost nothing, so they can get made, but then no one wants to make mine anyway.

The next one's going to be big. Explosions and heroes and all that. Do you want to go inside? Let's see what's going on with Ian.

I don't know man. It's late. They're closed. The doors are probably locked.

Let's just wait for him to come out.

Should we leave? said Ben.

I don't want to just bail.

We're not doing any good out here. We're just sitting here.

It was dark out then except for the lights at the dealership, so everything was lit up like a cruise boat. Ben was right. Ian could get in touch later. We could talk about things. I had band practice in an hour.

I'm going to call and let him know we're leaving, I said.

What if he's still talking to his boss?

I'll leave a message. What if we pay for the tow truck? Do you think it'd help?

Help who?

Ian.

Maybe. I don't know. I wish he hadn't wrecked the car.

I called Ian's phone when his voice came on and said to leave a message I told him we were going to get dinner, to call us.

Months later, months and months, more than a year, actually, Ben and I had a conversation. We were sitting on top of a mountain and discussing plans to weaponize ourselves and fight crime. Ben was home permanently at this point. At this point LA and the people in it were all burned up and blown away. He couldn't understand any of

it, why he came back at all—even if it didn't work out with the movies, why he would come back to Salinas, where he had always hated the places around him.

I didn't have much to say to him about it because all his talk about wasting his life in Salinas was just making me think about the time around the dealership, those few weeks when he visited and he was excited about what he could do with his Iraq movie. What he could do with paper and some ideas about Ian's life.

We didn't get dinner, even though I'd told Ian that that was why we were leaving, when I talked to his phone.

I've got to get to practice, I told Ben. You want me to take you to your mom's house?

Yeah.

I imagine he said this because there was nowhere else to go. We had friends but most of them had moved away at one point or another. There are places to live that are cheaper than Salinas, and most of who we knew went there. Ben's pretty much the only friend in our circle who even started college. Him and Ian, but I don't know how much Ian qualifies as in our circle. He hung out when we were using drugs on ourselves, and for a little bit afterwards. He was good company then, but otherwise wasn't much for talking to us, except for hellos and that sort of thing. God damn if he couldn't make us laugh though. He'd come over and we'd fill our eyes with marijuana and then we'd laugh with him for hours, like we were giant church bells that didn't know how to stop telling people about ourselves.

There are plenty of books and movies out there, places that tell you about high school, that try to explain the unfairness and the beauty of it, but none of these places have a word to say about Ian Galvez and my friends. It was just this thing we did a couple times a month.

I dropped Ben off at his mom's place and drove to practice. We had a show on Saturday. We were almost ready for it.

2.

We drove around downtown San Jose and I couldn't get comfortable because of the gun I'd stuck in my pants. If you want to ask why I wasn't freaking out about it—the gun pressed against the back of me, with all those mysterious switches on it—I couldn't tell you exactly. Something about finding it inside a kitchen, where you usually find bread on your fridge, and all the action after that. I guess if I was going to shoot myself in the ass, it already would have happened, but God damn if it wasn't uncomfortable. I still needed to tell Ben about the gun.

We were trying to find some bars somewhere. Ben had run through his phone and called the people he knew in San Jose that he thought were worth some company, and some of them were supposed to be meeting us later, more strangers.

Hey Ben, I said.

He grunted without looking at me. He had his window down and one hand was on the steering wheel and the other one was sticking out the window, held out at the end of his arm, so his palm was getting knocked around by the air. He watched that while he

drove and there were all these yellow sodium lights at the tops of poles on either side of us, all the way down the road, and he grunted, what? and watched his hand hanging out of the car.

Hey Ben, I said again, I took the gun, Brandon's gun.

I don't know if he wasn't listening or didn't believe me or what, because he just kept on with his hand out there. He turned his wrist so the edge of his palm was cutting through the air and then he turned it again so his hand would catch on the air. He hadn't really said much, except to talk on his phone, since we left Brandon's apartment. He got moody sometimes.

We got to a light, and I guess Ben was watching after all because he slowed down, and then he pulled his hand inside the car and held the wheel until we were stopped in front of the red light.

Have you been to The Caravan? he asked me.

Where? I said

The Caravan. It's a bar we're going to.

Look, Ben, seriously, the gun. Look—

I stiffened my legs up and picked my butt up off the seat, with the seatbelt pushing down on me. I reached around to pull out the gun and did something because there was a crack that cleared the air of every other sound in the world, and my ears started singing one pitch over the quiet that got left behind.

Jesus what the fuck man? said Ben. What hell was that?

He was all bunched against his door. We were still stopped but the wheel was hanging loose in front of him.

I didn't feel anything, which I thought might be good. It burned a little where the gun had been pressed, but I thought that being shot would have felt different.

I don't know man, I said. I think I shot myself. I had the gun out in front of me now.

Why do you have that?

It was a good question. This was only a few minutes after we'd left Brandon's house. Fifteen minutes before I hadn't even known the gun existed, not this one, not on the refrigerator.

The light was hanging green out there over the intersection now. A car honked behind us.

I don't know, I said. I just took it. We left Brandon's house kind of fast.

You shot yourself?

I don't know. I think I might have.

Ben let off the brake and turned onto another street. There were houses around.

Where do you want to go?

I'm not sure, I said, because injuries involving your ass are embarrassing to talk about in loud voices.

Are you bleeding?

I don't know, I said. I was holding the gun in both hands again, pointing it towards the windshield.

Can you check? Like, with your hand?

I leaned forward and set the gun on the floor of the car, between my feet. We were deep in some neighborhood now, and there wasn't much for streetlights. Ben pulled over.

I twisted around a little and reached my hand into my pants. There was sweat, or maybe it was blood, and a spot where it stung when I touched. I pulled my hand out and held it in front of me, then brought it closer because of the dark. I was almost touching my face with the palm of my hand, and then everything lit up because Ben turned on the dome light.

Blood? he said.

No. Just sweat, I guess.

What happened?

I don't know. I was just taking the gun out to show you and then it went off.

He wanted to know where the bullet went, and after some moving around we found a small hole, ringed in dark, in the seat where I had been sitting. Later I found similar holes in my pants and my underwear.

Did it go through the seat? said Ben. I mean, did it go out of the car? Do you think it hit anything in my engine or anything?

We decided to get out and look under the car.

Do you have a flashlight?

No.

We got under the car and lay on our backs and lit up the space above our faces with cell phones. We figured about where the underside of the seat would be, but looking at the underside of a car is like looking at a pile of spaghetti, and we had no idea where there might be a hole, or what it might be behind.

We sat on the curb for minute, thinking. I could hear traffic from a couple blocks over, but there was nothing happening here except for this gun in the car.

We can't give it back, said Ben.

Do you think he'll know it was us?

He will if we give it back.

I mean if we don't.

We decided to keep the gun, and maybe never call Brandon again. After all, we said, sitting on the curb next to Ben's car, we need weapons if we're going to fight gangs, right? We had grand ideas about what was going to happen in our lives.

Later we drank beer at a bar with a couple of Ben's friends who didn't have much to say to me, and then after those two went home, Ben and I went to this taqueria by the university, where we ate bland food covered in delicious orange hot sauce. We looked at the college kids eating their food, and listened to them talk about the bars they'd just been to. We found the place just by driving by it. From outside it was all lit up. There were people sitting on the steps, standing out front. This place was in an actual house—the entire first floor. Everything else on the block was shut up for the night.

3.

In the car on the way home Ben asked me how my granddad was doing. The question came out of nowhere—neither of us had said anything for at least ten minutes. I think he brought it up because we were out of anything else to talk about.

I don't know man, I said. I guess the same.

So no idea when he's coming home?

Four months before this my granddad had gone from the hospital to a nursing home, where they were going to teach him how to walk again, since his legs stopped working right from three months in bed. I went with my mom to look at these places. We were excited at the time, because it seemed like progress. Something was changing. We were going to have an entire new staff of people, and maybe help from them. I imagined these people with faces like great big pies, because they would be helping us.

There are four nursing homes in Salinas and I went with my mom to look at two of them. Both places had artwork everywhere, the kind that school kids make. There were construction-paper lady bugs and pipe-cleaner flowers everywhere, and both of the homes smelled like urine in most places. Wheelchairs were everywhere, with people in them, looking at food or puzzle pieces on a tray in their lap. I didn't want to but all I could think of was brainless jellyfish drifting through the halls.

My parents finally chose a place I didn't tour. There were flowers outside, and the bushes in front were deep with green. Down the street there was the cemetery where they keep John Steinbeck's body.

The front doors of the place were all glass and if you turned right after walking in you would be where the really committed old folks were, the ones who were never going to go home. Sometimes during the day you would hear loud rackets from that part of the home, but Granddad was just here to relearn the way his legs work, and he was in another part of the home.

We still don't know when he's coming home, I said to Ben. My granddad still didn't believe us about things. He refused to look at the calendar we'd hung in his room because he thought he'd been in the hospital for years. He wouldn't acknowledge the crawl on CNN. He made his accusations using words in Spanish, and it took a little while to realize what he was saying about us.

Ben thought it sucked that we didn't know when Granddad was coming home.

After the Mexican place we'd bought bottles of beer and walked onto the college campus, where it was dark. We sat on a bench and drank beer for a while, so that by the time we left for home it was late, and there weren't many people on the highway with us.

There's a stretch south of Gilroy where everything looks the same. Like everything past your headlights is just dark, like you're driving in a hole. This is about half an hour from home.

Ben started to talk about how things were going to turn out for us with this vigilante thing, how we were going to wind up on the news, or at least they were going to talk about us on the news, because we couldn't reveal ourselves, because doing the police's job for them is illegal.

The things we talked about while driving were some of the most ridiculous things you've heard. The moon followed us all the way to Salinas, leaving hills and fields behind it.

4.

Andrew had a barbecue to celebrate moving into his new place on Sanborn. This was going to be our practice space from now on, which was going to be better than Diego's place because his parents always complained if we practiced when they were home. The band was doing well. There was a coffee shop downtown where we'd played a few times, and people we knew said that they liked us.

The food was going to be at one, but we had to go there early to help with a wasp's nest in the back yard. Andrew said he didn't know anything about it when he moved in. He toured the house and looked at all the rooms and even got his face close to the carpet to see how it smelled and he didn't see any wasps anywhere, but then he moved in and there were little black and yellow wasp bodies flying all over his back yard and one of those big paper-looking nests wedged like a bladder between one of the walls and the bottom of his roof.

It was a little after ten in the morning when I got there. He had this big barbecue grill out back, one of the square-looking deals that run on propane. There were grills on two levels and another burner on the side, for coffee or a pot of beans, I'm guessing. When I got there Shannon was already there and so was Diego. They were all sitting on the couch in Andrew's new living room waiting for me.

I don't know why they waited for me, because when we got to the back yard Andrew was making a big show of things but really it was just a pitcher of gasoline that someone had to throw at where wasps lived.

The four of us stood out on the lawn looking up at the nest. There was a yellow jacket crawling across the surface of the thing, looking like colored glass. Its wings started and then it was in the air, shining.

Now that I was watching I saw other wasps doing the same thing, floating through the air with their legs hanging beneath them.

So what's the plan? said Shannon.

Andrew said we were going to throw gasoline at the nest, to kill the wasps' home.

That's a terrible idea, said Diego. I'm waiting inside.

He went inside. Andrew was standing there with the pitcher in both hands, and I didn't see where the rest of us were necessary to the operation.

Andrew said he didn't really need us to do anything, just to watch and hang out. We were all out there in the sun with our faces up at that wasp nest, standing on grass that was all matted and dead in places. I must have missed a message somewhere along the line because I thought we were supposed to be there early to help him get rid of the nest.

We don't really need to be here for this, do we? I said.

You guys will help me pull the nest down once the wasps are gone, he said.

That's the plan we're going to use. You guys ready? He had the pitcher in front of him, between his hands. The gas was huge in my nose and behind my nose. Yellow jackets floated around us like pollen. I was hungry.

Andrew brought the pitcher down between knees and then brought it up quickly, and all the liquid came out. For a second the gasoline looked like a giant amoeba, frozen and trembling in the air, and then it broke itself on the wall of the house.

Most of it was on the side of the house, where there was no nest. The dark spot spidered out though, and long wet arms splattered across the lump of paper where all these wasps lived. They were everywhere then. They tumbled from the nest and soon it was hard to see any one of them because they were just a mass of bugs then.

Andrew said we should run and he did that towards the house, still holding the empty pitcher in front of him, and Shannon followed after him, and I'd never seen anything like this, with all the wasps all moving together like that, like great writhing strand of DNA, so I stood and I watched for just a second, and then I ran too, and that was about when I started to get hurt from being stung.

I'd been stung by honeybees. There were honeybees all over the place when I was a kid. A honeybee tears itself apart when it stings you so it only stings you once. I got to the door and into the kitchen. Andrew and Shannon were waiting there for me and they closed the door after me. I was stung all over. There were little clusters of welts, two and three at a place, on my neck and my wrist, on the back of my arm. There was pain in my cheek.

Andrew pulled out a chair at the kitchen table.

Sit down, he said.

I leaned against the wall. There were red spots on my arms, bigger than quarters.

You look terrible, said Andrew. I think you might be allergic.

Can you be allergic to wasp stings?

I think so.

The kitchen had a window to the back yard, and the bugs were still turning through the air. The places where I got stung were really spinning with the pain now.

I need to sit down, I said.

Andrew pointed at the chair he'd pulled out and I sat down.

How do you feel? said Shannon. Are you OK?

They were all standing there looking at me, first Andrew and Shannon and then Diego from behind them. I didn't see it before, but Diego's hair was wet, like he'd just stepped out of the shower right before coming here.

I'm OK, I said. It hurts a lot.

Shannon knelt down next to my seat and grabbed my hand, turned it so she could see. She knelt there like that for a minute, like she was trying to fix me with her eyeballs.

What are we supposed to do for him? said Diego. He was a couple of steps closer now. How do you cure that?

I didn't answer any of the questions.

I think you just have to wait, said Andrew. Unless his throat swells up or something I think we just wait for it to stop.

We didn't know that any wasps came in with me, but it must have happened like that.

What happened is I got stung again, on the back of the neck, with all of them stooped around me looking these other places on me. I jumped up out of my chair, with

all sorts of cussing from my mouth, and when I did that I knocked Shannon under her chin with my knee, so that she bit her lip, and now I was stung all over and she was bleeding from her face. There was a wasp flying around the kitchen during this.

Shannon fell back on her butt on the linoleum, and Andrew helped her up, and then we all ran away from the kitchen until we were in Andrew's bedroom with the door shut behind us.

Andrew was crouched in front of the bed, where Shannon was sitting with her lip in her fingers. Diego was standing at the door, with his ear to the door, listening for bees, I guess. The room was mostly empty. There was the bed, and a dresser with no drawers in it yet. There was a stack of boxes in a corner. Above to the dresser there was a mirror, and there was me in the mirror marked all over in red. There was a welt on my face, and when I turned my head so that I was looking at just that side of my face, I looked awful, and if it was permanent I would have had to relearn how to look at myself in mirrors.

5.

Like I said, there was a whole bunch of time where I didn't know anything about Andrew, really. Shannon didn't want to talk about him, even after the sex happened between us, during that little bit of time where it seemed like we were doing something real together, or at least with similar ideas. Mostly I just knew that Andrew was an asshole I guess. People loved him. Maybe none of that's getting through here, and maybe that's because I'm the person explaining things and I seemed like the only person he'd ever met who thought that his flakiness and so on was more important than his

ability to make people laugh. But for a long time that was it in the what-I-knew-about-him book: people liked him and I mostly didn't, when I thought about him at any length of time. Because of the wasps we couldn't have the barbecue outside.

The swarm calmed down after a while, and Andrew managed to swat the one that got inside with a magazine until it stopped waving its legs around, but the wreckage they could do to our lunch meant no one was volunteering to start up the barbecue grill.

Gabby showed up around noon. She drove out from Santa Cruz and was Andrew's friend from before he knew us, and she insisted she'd met us at the bonfire, that first night, that she'd been at the Nerve Agents show too. She told me about it when Andrew introduced us, said we didn't need to be introduced because that had already happened. She was really pressing the issue—saying we hugged goodbye and all sorts of other crazy things that I don't remember at all. She was giving me this description of events and then Andrew introduced Shannon and Gabby didn't say anything but nice to meet you, and then the same with Diego.

We cooked in the kitchen, using a couple of frying pans on separate burners instead of the barbecue grill. Andrew had these deep-dish trays made out of pink glass where he had steaks poking up out of sauce and little triangles of garlic. There were also some sausages full of cheese.

Eventually we were in the living room with the TV on and these plates of food on the tops of our legs. The sausages were cold but we didn't mind because these were steaks that bled in your mouth and they were delicious from the sauce soaked into them. Andrew held his beer up and said he was stoked to not live with his parents anymore.

I was listening to people at this part, mostly. There was the sound of meat getting chewed in my ears, and behind that there was all the rest of them. Shannon and Gabby were talking about music, about maybe getting a side-project together, because Gabby played bass and wanted to be in a band. There was baseball on the screen, and Diego told Andrew to change it, because jocks and punk rock and everything happening on that television was not OK with him. Sometimes Diego sounded like he was looking for something that wasn't necessarily there. It's frustrating to hear.

You should turn it off, I said, or change it. Diego's right. Those are the dudes that used to make fun of us when we were kids.

This guy Jeff Maple used to sit behind me in high school and put things in my hair. Everybody loved him, except for me and some other people. Now he plays for the Cincinnati Reds and he's pretty good from what I hear and everybody loves him even more now.

All of this even though I secretly could spend entire afternoons watching baseball, hour after hour of it, match-up after match-up.

Put on the Xbox, I said, and then we played videogames for a while, the girls too, once they finished talking about the band. Later we drank beer, and then we got in a car and bought more, and came back and put that in us too.

It was around this time that the house became something wonderful. It wasn't dark yet, not a time when people drink, usually, so it was just the five of us at a party all on our own. Not like a Saturday night when you're one of dozens or hundreds or thousands of homes where people are drinking and touching each other, and challenging

each other to arm-wrestling matches. We were there on a Thursday afternoon, shut up in this house with the sun pouring through open windows so you could see every piece of dust floating drifting through the room, every color on all our faces, all of us full with beer in our heads so we could feel it where our blood ran to our fingers and at the ends of our feet. This was the only place in all of Salinas where this was happening.

Later Andrew and Shannon were locked up inside Andrew's room, probably with their mouths on each other, and I was playing video games with Diego and Gabby, and Gabby was pressed on the couch between one of my legs and one of Diego's legs and all of it together made me feel like I was going to bust open. If my hands weren't full with playing the game I would have wrapped people up in my arms.

Outside you could see cars driving past the windows, dented and worn out and if you ask me probably going places I couldn't deal with. It's hard to understand, for me, how people can live out here and know it's the best they'll ever do. I'd fall apart if I had to be in a house, in this neighborhood, without some kind of afterwards to look forward to, but I didn't think about any of this when I was on the couch there, with all the paper plates and half-gone food on the coffee table in front of us.

6.

After falling into the building off her bike, Margarita wound up at home. A man from the neighborhood carried her there, and left the bike at the bottom of the hill. Paco got it later, but it was wrecked. There was nothing you could do for it. He tried to repair

it anyway and wound up with a halting thing that wouldn't move enough to balance on. He carried it around with him for a while, trying to make something of it.

At home they were covering Margarita in iodine, marking her wounds in brown. There was nothing broken, but there were great sheets of skin that came off against the rocks and pebbles on the road.

Meanwhile her cousin Antonio was back from the front. He had a week to spend at home, and people in the family were running around trying to make home better than it had ever been.

Later there was a big pan of rice with rabbit and snails in it, all saffroned. People ate straight out of the cooking dish with wooden spoons.

This went on for most of a week, and by the end of it Margarita's skin was scabbed over, the iodine turned a dull orange where it still colored her. Earlier, Paco had cornered her and yelled at her for what she did to his bicycle, but when it came time to hit her he didn't. He only told her she should think about his bike when those scabs start falling off of her.

The day that Antonio was going to leave back for the fighting was summer. Both his parents were dead, and so Margarita's parents raised him since he was six, like he was Margarita's brother, almost. So when it was time for him to leave he talked to Margarita's dad like he was his dad. They hugged each other kissed each other's cheeks. There was wind that day and it carried dust all over the place. If it weren't for the wind, the heat would have been terrible.

Tio Vicente, said Antonio. He said this is the last time he was going to see them.

There was a horse waiting for him on the road, and he was going to walk down there in a minute. There was Margarita and a few other people from the family there too.

He said, They send us out there, to the front, without guns. They tell we can pick up rifles or anything else if we find them on the ground, from dead people, but they don't have enough guns for everybody.

And you fight like this?

I try not to let the nationalists see me. I don't have a gun.

They're sending you to fight without guns or explosives or anything?

Yes.

You'll get killed. You can't go back.

They'll know though. They know I'm here, visiting. If I don't come back they'll come get me, or get you.

But this wasn't a problem for them, because these guys were smart.

7.

I had a bunch of managers while I worked at the mall. Two at the videogame store and four at the glasses place.

The people who ran these places were in and out. It was temporary for all of us, except for the ones who were going to be there until they died. Eventually those people were going to get left all by themselves with nothing around them. These people were the scary ones, but also the ones that made my life seem better than something, because I wasn't them.

There were great long stretches of my life where nothing happened worth telling to anyone.

8.

This guy Chris had a house south of Salinas, in the middle of a bunch of fields. For miles around him it was just dirt on the ground and nothing else, so no neighbors to complain about noise, or amplified music.

I didn't even know if I really wanted Ian to come to the show. There were going to be a lot of people there. The band was doing well around where we lived, and with us on a flyer Chris could cram a hundred and fifty people into his living room, and out there in those empty fields it felt like so much more than that. We could fog up his windows so you'd have no idea what was happening on the other side. It was going to be a good show but I worried that Ian might come with his wife, or alone, and I worried that that might ruin all of it for me. I wouldn't even know how to talk to him anymore.

There are days when I want to shave all the hair off my head, so people will look at me and say what a dramatic change I've made. I never do it. I have a big face, and need my hair to balance the look of my head. I once ran a number two clipper all over the top of my head and spent weeks embarrassed about it.

I got to practice and let myself in, because there was too much noise for them to hear me knocking if I knocked.

My band was in the practice room going over songs. Andrew was sweatier than Diego or Shannon, because of the long-sleeve shirt he wore, to cover up where he'd lost

his hand last year. The shirt was stuck to him from the sweat and his hair was down on his forehead and ears, and none of them looked up when I came in, until they finished the song and then they looked at me.

Hey, you're here, said Shannon, because she knew I had to be there for the band to have a bass guitar. There was all this other stuff in there too, but she didn't say any of it.

We practiced, and we played the songs in the exact way we were supposed to. We were running equations in there, and wound up sopping wet from it.

9.

Eventually Granddad started to move around some, and they figured out some pills that might help him. He stopped pretending to be asleep when we were in the room, and then he wanted to see what was on the television, and his legs weren't any good anymore. There was a lot of this for months.

There was this thing we did where someone would volunteer to go to the cafeteria to buy coffee for everyone else. This was usually me or my dad, and this time it was both of us. My mom and my sister were with my grandpa. Everyone was hoping for good things now. We were excited. Granddad was sitting up. This was my third visit in that week. We going downstairs to get coffee because we wanted coffee, nothing else.

Dad grabbed a cup from the cup dispenser and put it in the machine next to the little spout where the coffee comes out. He put his money in the machine and the

machine poured coffee. He repeated this with the cups and the money until we had four coffees, because granddad didn't want coffee but the rest of us did.

We decided to sit for a minute in the cafeteria. We left the lids off the coffee to let it cool, and we sat with the cups between us making steam at the ceiling.

Granddad's hospital room upstairs still worked at our insides when we were in it, even though things were getting better now.

How's the band? said my dad.

We're doing OK.

It had been months, years, longer than I knew how to say, since my dad had said anything to me other than about Granddad or Mom.

Still practicing a lot?

Yeah.

One of the cups was steaming less the others. Probably the first drink that got poured. Everything coming off that one died out a few inches above the coffee. We'd forgotten to label which coffee was what flavor too. I remembered that now. We all ordered different things here.

Is mom going to get better now?

What do you mean?

Mom had this idea of grief that involved more hopelessness than I could ever fathom for myself. She seemed to run on the pity in our situation, like if that disappeared, if all of sudden there was nothing sad in our lives, then she wouldn't know how to move her feet or lift her head.

My mom has these little tiny feet that don't seem heavy enough to do anything like carry her around the world. Everything she did was superhuman compared to those feet of hers, and for all the talk from my dad about watching out for her and visiting my grandpa and the rest of it, all my dad ever had to say about how to actually do the watching out was nothing.

I mean is she going to stop with the way she's been?

We've all been upset Jesse.

Yeah. Do you know which one of these is mine?

He looked at them, all these circles of coffee, and he didn't know either.

We forgot to label them, he said, and he smiled, because maybe it was a tiny bit funny, compared to everything else, and I realized that I thought so too, and I was aware of that but that didn't do me any good so I didn't smile or acknowledge anything that might have been a moment between us, because if I was going to find a hole to pour myself into, somewhere away from what was happening upstairs, I was going to find it in a place where there was only room for me.

Well I guess we should get these upstairs, I said. I went over to the table with the napkins and plastic spoons and such and I got four lids and covered the coffees.

We went up to the room again, carrying a cup of coffee in each of our hands.

When we got there my granddad was sitting up, lifting himself out of bed, with nurses on either side of him, with his arms under him like legs that would never support anything. He was trying to put himself into a wheelchair, so he could move around, and

these strangers were trying to help him with that, trying to do their jobs, and he trembled, looked yellow and broken and fragile, like he would crack open and the luminous parts of him would come leaking out.

10.

There are stores all over San Francisco, which is the main reason I wind up there, when I do. There's museums and pretty buildings too, but when you get home from those places you don't have anything to keep, so I'm usually more interested in the stores.

One street in particular is really famous for the kinds of people on it, and you can walk up and down it and eat food from everywhere you've ever heard of, and way at one end of it there's a street you cross and then a tunnel, and when you come out of the tunnel you're at the park. There are big fields of grass and people all over the place.

I don't want to judge people on their looks, but I don't know what kind of person would have a home and then go sleep at the park, so I think a lot of the people out there were homeless, with their heads on their backpacks or their arms.

This is where Ben drove me. He said that people there sold drugs. We were practicing being vigilantes but he didn't tell me about this until we got there. Until we got there it was just a trip to the city to make a day disappear.

By that time Brandon had called and left a message where he didn't say anything about the gun that I'd stolen from his kitchen.

The last time I'd been around pot was almost a year before. I was at the library back home and there were men in the bathroom. I opened the door to the bathroom and it was one of those bathrooms with just one toilet, so for a second it was just me and that toilet and these two men talking to each other. One of them was in a wheelchair and was wearing sunglasses, and I don't remember what the other one looked like, just that they weren't doing anything but talking, and they kept talking like I hadn't just walked into the bathroom. They were just hanging out. No one was going to the bathroom or anything like that, and the whole room smelled like pot.

Sorry, I said, and I pulled the door shut. Later I was sitting at one of the search computers, ignoring the way my urine burned, and wishing I was high, even though it had been weeks since I'd said I wasn't going to smoke pot anymore, and now we were over at Golden Gate Park looking for drug dealers and I wondered if maybe I'd be able to smell them like that, like that one time, because that would make our detective work a lot easier.

You wouldn't believe the sun from that day. None of these people had ever looked that good in their lives. The clouds were like foam in the sky and it was blue wherever there wasn't clouds. With the sunlight and people's clothes there was color everywhere.

So we picked a place on the grass and sat there looking at all of this. We were rehearsing. We got the gun back to Salinas and the what-next was that we had to find criminals, only we'd never done that before, and we wanted to practice first, and Ben said there was always drug dealers at the park at the end of Haight. I had the gun in a pocket

inside my coat. I could feel it against my chest. I'd been to San Francisco a thousand times and never been to this part before. I don't know what Ben did to find it, but I was usually in other parts, watching bands play music or something like that, buying records.

I used to go to the shows and see bands play for small rooms, in front of a few hundred people. That used to be the only thing I wanted—to play in front of a hundred people. This guy Andrew Champion used to sing for a band and they'd sell out venues—little punk clubs and Grange halls, that sort of thing. There were hundreds of us who had enormous holes filled by that band and almost no one else noticed, and now Screw 32 broke up years ago and now Andrew Champion is just an old guy in a backpack standing in the corner at shows, looking happy but who knows, right? and he's so short now that I'm an adult, really the size of someone who in another life might work out a lot and be aggressive with people, and I've got no idea how to get myself back to where I was when I wanted his life, because that was the last ambition I ever had that didn't seem absolutely hopeless, and now I was sitting at the park looking for criminals and his lifestyle seemed like such a pathetic kind of success. Musicians who'd achieved things I dreamed about were old now and doing nothing that seemed worth anything.

There were all sorts of things I would have had to say about that at some point in the past. Not so much now.

We were trying to see if anyone was selling drugs so we'd try to listen to conversations but we could never make out the words, not without being obvious about it. We couldn't tell if there was anything like drugs involved in the conversation. After a

while I got to where I looked at their hands when they talked, but I never saw anything other than fingers and hair, dirt.

So how do you know people here sell drugs? I said.

I don't know. You can just tell, said Ben.

Can you tell me who it is doing the sales so I know who to watch?

I don't know, he said. Just keep an eye out.

We did that for a while, kept our eyes out while we sat there on the lawn with the trees off to the side of us. I felt very incognito.

What are we going to do if we see something? I said.

Stop them, I guess. That's what vigilantes do. They stop crime.

I don't know man. I don't think what they're doing is that bad.

What are you talking about?

I mean selling drugs. I don't think it's something I'm really committed to stopping.

There was a big pause here. This was my fault. The drive up here was almost two hours and I didn't think of this until just now. Or it was Ben's fault for not telling me earlier.

Well, I said, maybe if we wait until they're selling to a kid or something.

Someone who looks like he shouldn't be doing drugs. Then we'll stop everything.

But I'd already killed what was left of the plan, after seeing nothing for so long. We watched nothing for another ten minutes and then Ben said he wanted to eat, so we found our car and we found a place to eat.

VI

1.

On the night that Ben got his face cut open, before he got it cut open, we played the show at Chris's house in the country. The whole thing with Ben actually happened while we were loading our gear into Andrew's house, at the end of the night.

We pulled up to Andrew's house and Andrew was already parked out front, with the back of the van hanging open and all our gear inside. The show had been good, as far as shows went. There'd been people falling out of the doors and windows at Chris's house when we first showed up. You could see the house from the highway—it was the only thing out there, and it was all yellow from the inside, showing in squares through the windows. There were cars parked up and down the road to the house. You could see these too from the highway, and I always wondered what people thought, the ones who weren't stopping for the show, who just drove past on the highway and noticed dozens of cars parked out in the middle of nowhere. A party, I guess.

Jesus this place was important to me.

I rode with Ben. Shannon, Diego and Andrew rode with Andrew and all the drums and amplifiers. Diego loaded the van every time. He knew where everything went so that it would fit in one trip, even though at the start it always looked like it was going to be impossible.

The show was already started when we got to the house. Low notes were pouring out the openings in the building. Ben and I parked at the end of a row of cars and got out

and walked down the road to where Andrew had parked the van, right next to where everyone was, right next to the back door to the place. People with sweat on them kept coming outside and going back inside.

This was a benefit show we were playing. Someone had cancer and there were like eight bands all playing at Chris's house to raise money. The show was free but they were taking collections. Andrew told me all about this.

I knew people there, mostly by their faces. People said hi to me as I walked past. This kid Phoenix came up to me and said what's up Jesse. I introduced him and Ben, and he told me he was stoked to see us play, and wanted to know if we were playing some particular songs from our demo CD. I was trying to make this conversation work but I kept running out of things to say, and pretty soon Phoenix was inside again, watching this band whose name and music I can't remember. Andrew and Diego were hanging out by the van with a couple of kids. All of this was lit up by the porch light. I don't know where Shannon got off to right then.

I'm impressed, said Ben, after Phoenix left. That was a fan. Like, a genuine fan. You've got fans Jesse.

It's not like that, I said. They just like the band.

Our backs were to the house now and our eyes adjusted to the night. There were some stars I could see, even with the light from the house. Really there wasn't much out there at all, except for the house and all of us. Across the highway I seemed to remember buildings—barns and that sort of thing. I wasn't sure.

Ben hadn't seen us play before. All of the band stuff started after he was in Los Angeles.

I'm excited to see you guys play, he said. I feel like I know a rock star.

It's mostly Andrew's thing, I said.

No way man—you're in the band too.

Yeah but he books all the shows and everything. He's the one that talks to people.

We played last out of all the bands, and I don't know if that's because we were good or because we had a pretty lady in the band or because having a one-handed singer makes people notice your band, but when we set up our gear we almost couldn't move from the room being so full. I had my bass strapped onto my body and I couldn't stretch my arms out in any direction without touching somebody. There were so many bodies piled into Brian's living room, and the ones up front were looking at us. People in the back were having conversations.

Are you guys ready? said Diego from behind his drums, and then he clicked his sticks together four times and we started making noise, and we started moving around a little and so did everyone in the room, and pretty soon it was loud and people were crowded around us, in a circle around Andrew, red faced and sweaty and mouthing words, and I couldn't hear anything except the music we were playing and I couldn't feel anything except the heat from all these bodies.

At one point I accidentally knocked this kid in the head with the top of my instrument during a song we played. He bled all down his face from it and kept on singing along, trying to get close to Andrew's microphone.

Chris had replaced all the lights in the room with red and blue bulbs. We were making all sorts of noise, filling the room with ourselves. There's a name for what was happening, but I've never been able to figure it out, something that describes the way it gets once you've figured things out. By the end of our set I was playing with my eyes closed, so I couldn't see Andrew, or Shannon, or Diego, or anyone in there with me. I was turning in circles like some sort of firecracker or spinning noisemaker, all paper and gaudy color.

We finished and someone turned on a light that wasn't covered in red or blue. There was blood on my tuning pegs, and pretty soon the room was empty, except for Ben and Chris and a few other people. People told me we did a great job.

Ian never showed up, even though I'd given him all the information. I have no idea how much we raised for that cancer person but I like to think it was enough to save everyone that needed saving.

2.

That time I mentioned with Shannon, the one where we had sex and everything seemed different, that was way before the show at Chris's house, right around when we

started getting regular gigs. She and Andrew were split up and I told her all sorts of pretty things I'd noticed about her.

It's not like it was this drawn out event with lots of pain. At the time it was just a thing to do with our mouths. Beginning to end it was a week maybe. There's a lot of details though that I remember about it, and I have no idea whether I need to somehow make them into nothing or instead hold onto them with all my arms until they can't go anywhere.

3.

Andrew had lots of valuable things at his house. It was full of videogames and CDs and so on. There was a crate of records, all sorts of different printings of every song AFI ever put on a record, even the bad ones—every color and every insert, every international release. We would go through those and hope we weren't ruining things with our fingerprints, and I guess him and Diego or him and Shannon or somebody got talking about the records on the way home from the show. So I guess that's why, when they got to Andrew's house, they went inside instead of unloading the gear from the van. They got caught up looking at records, they said.

Me and Ben pulled up behind the van when we got there, and you could see there were people in the house already. The lights were on in the windows, so you knew they were there, but they'd left the back of the van open. When we got there our headlights shone right through the van, like it was hollowed out from our light, all the way to the front so you could see the air freshener hanging like a leaf from the rearview mirror, like

the van was just an empty tube with seats and an amplifier, some cymbals in it. Andrew said it couldn't have been more than a few minutes since they'd left it, five maybe, but however long it was it was long enough for the van to get noticed by someone with a truck, and for that truck to stop in front of Andrew's house, double-parked next to the van, for people to carry things between the two vehicles.

This is the sort of thing you don't expect to happen in real life—the one where you pull up at your friend's house and there's a bunch of guys stealing stuff out of the back of his van, right in front of you.

It's when you see things like that that you blink for a second, with the scene all frozen in your headlights as though headlights can stop motion, like there was something solid about the headlights around these men stealing from us, but I wasn't moving either and the headlights weren't on me at all.

Even with all that time we spent looking at the thieves, probably entire seconds, I still don't remember what most of them looked like. I don't even know how many there were, but it must have been three or four. There's just one face—this Mexican guy with a mustache and wide head. His hair was cut close to his head. His mustache was small on his lip. I guess that's what he looked like mostly just remember the yellowishness in his skin, and the giant features on his face. You could use his eyes for golf balls, if they were out of his face. And then he was moving with the rest of them. It seemed like there should have been a lot of noise, but there wasn't.

The guy with the face was carrying Diego's bass drum when we pulled up, and after that frozen second he dropped the drum and his friends dropped whatever they were carrying and got over to the truck.

It was just feet on pavement, coming through the crack in my window, and I wanted to sit and watch, watch them swarm the truck and move like they were, watch them drive and get small and disappear so it was just me and Ben and the swinging doors of the van, but it was simpler to do what we did. There was one reason to get out of the car right then. Just the one.

The thieves were already on the truck when we got out of my car. They were getting away. There were men on the cab, and one crouched on the bed, the one whose face was too big, he was back there with our things, our instruments and amplifiers. I was looking for a rock, something pathetic like that, but Ben was thinking straight. He had everything worked out and he was running at the truck, which wasn't moving yet. Their doors were flapping open on both sides of the truck until someone inside pulled the driver's side shut so it was just one door then and it looked like the truck was missing a part.

All of this must have happened quickly, because it wasn't more than a dozen feet between my car and the truck, and Ben wasn't there yet when their engine started, and then the truck started to roll with its driver's side door hanging open. I was just watching now, and Ben was chasing after the truck, as if anyone had ever caught a truck on foot before. Soon the truck was far enough down the block that it was hopeless what he was doing, but he kept running after it, down the middle of the street with his feet slapping on

the pavement and then his toe must have caught on something and he fell. The truck was almost gone when he fell, and I ran down the street to catch up and help Ben, if I could, recover from his fall.

I don't know when the last time I'd run was and there was sweat on me under my pants and in my shirt. Ben was sitting up when I got to him, with his hand to his face on one side.

Is your face OK? I said.

Yeah, he said, but his voice was a muffled by the hand on his face.

I helped him stand even though he said he didn't need it, and we walked to the side of the street, where there was a streetlamp.

We got in the circle of light so we could see each other. There was blood at the edge of his palm, where it pressed under his eye. I asked him to move his hand.

It's going to hurt if I move it.

But I need to see what happened.

Why? What are you going to do after you see it?

I had no idea, so we left the streetlight and walked to Andrew's front door, and opened that, and found them there in the living room with the box of records, where they were shocked by everything we told them just happened just outside the door.

In the bathroom we saw that Ben had split his face open. After cleaning it with water there were parts inside the wound that looked white. I took the color to mean that these parts were really far inside him. It was all slick around there.

Diego said that Ben should get stitches, but that was expensive and it was days before he did that.

There was a snare drum in the living room, and Shannon's guitar. The thieves left the speaker for Shannon's amplifier and some cymbals and stands, and Diego's bass drum with a crack in its side. Everything else was gone.

I quit the band the next day, which Ben thought was a good idea. This happened with a call to Andrew on the phone and I said I didn't have the money to spring for new gear, and I was a little burned out anyway, and I didn't say anything about the clear disregard that existed in that band for anything I cared about.

4.

Here's some statistics about crime in Salinas:

A six-year-old kid got killed last year. I don't even know how it happened, except that when it got talked about by the news they said he was in front of his house playing with some toys, and that the people who did it were in a car. It happened in the evening, when the sun got low and started changing colors, and this kid was out in front of his house with his toy soldiers and cars and a soccer ball. He wasn't wearing any shoes, even though his mom told him not to go outside in his bare feet. She wanted her kids to look respectable when they were in public, she said, and people in bare feet never do anything worth bragging about, but there he was outside with no clothes past the ankles, playing with his toys. His feet were powdered with dust.

Up the street there was a car and nobody knows what it looked like. It was a lot like the rest of the neighborhood, until it drove past and that kid had blood all over his outside, and then we heard all about it.

The other stuff is less impressive. Mostly people old enough to be suspected of gang involvement.

5.

All of this is why Ben and I decided to fight crime—that and a bunch of other stuff in our lives, I guess. But before we decided that he came home from Los Angeles and we did a lot of driving around. For a while that's all Ben wanted to do—it was just talking.

I hadn't been to Big Sur since I was a kid. It was one of those places I hated for years because my parents thought it was beautiful and after we went so many times it got so that I wasn't even looking at it anymore. It had been years, but looking at the ocean from up there with Ben made it something different. We found a spot to pull off and then crawled down some rocks until we couldn't see the road from where we were sitting.

We were on a piece of cliff sticking out from a bigger cliff, and most of my eyes were filled up with all that water way down below us. The ocean was far enough down that a fall into it would make us with our bones shifting under the skin like marbles.

This was where Ben first suggested we try to be vigilantes. He'd been complaining everywhere we went, about leaving LA, about giving up on writing, about

going back to school. He couldn't figure out why he was home, even though he made the trip himself.

I guess it's harder to do the other thing, he said.

Yeah, I said, because from up here you could really see the water—the bigness of it. It was all these big ripples, like I was looking at the living skin of the earth, like the water was covering organs and guts, protecting all the important parts. It kept moving, and it was so far down. Above us and behind us I could hear a car crunching on the gravel on the pullout where we'd parked. After that I could hear its motor, and then when its motor stopped. Then doors slamming, voices.

Ben said he was going to go back to school and get a teaching credential and hate his life, just like every teacher he'd ever had. This was something said a lot in the last few days.

Whoever got out of the car was looking at the view. You could hear them getting excited about it, talking about how far they could see.

Do you think there's any whales out there? said one to other.

I don't know, said the woman's voice. You're supposed to watch for their spouts. You can see them easier than the actual whale.

There were hundreds of whales out there, each and every one of them with some fantastically intelligent brain and not a single opposable thumb. All these thinking animals out there just flapping through the water with their useless hands. Ben asked how my granddad was doing.

He's OK, I said. He can mostly walk again. He's coming home soon.

That's good.

You know what's weird, I said.

What?

I love my grandpa, right?

Yeah.

Only thing is, he was a fascist, or he supported Franco, back during the Spanish Civil War. He still does, even though Franco's dead. I grew up not knowing that a gypsy and a gitano were the same thing, you know that? I thought that a gypsy was like a fairy tale person that liked dancing and pots of gold, and that gitano was another way to say shift person. But it turns out they're the same. The only difference between the two words is the language. What do I do with that? That my granddad's maybe kind of racist?

I don't know man, that's tough.

I love him though—I mean, anyway. What do I do with that?

I don't know.

There was more slamming doors and gravel and then I heard the car up above leave.

I've been thinking, said Ben, I mean, there's all this garbage in Salinas, right?

With gangs and stuff.

Yeah.

Why don't we do something about it?

Like what?

Like the Punisher, or Batman or something, only we don't need all sorts of high tech gear because we're just dealing with normal people.

I don't know what you're talking about, I said. We'd talked about bringing some beer with us, but people die at Big Sur. They drive off the cliffs and have to stay dead in their cars until somebody spots the wreck down below, on the rocks.

Those guys who stole your instruments and amplifiers last year. They were nobodies—just some guys in a truck. If we were ready for it we could've stopped them.

So we just wait until someone tries to rob us and we're ready for it this time?

No man—we go find them.

The funny thing is I was looking out at the ocean like that and really I had no idea what all the water looked like. The moving never stops, so this idea I've got of what the ocean looks like is really just a blur, this combination of snapshots in my head, only I don't have access to any single one of them—I could never stop the ocean and tell you what it looks like in one moment—so it's just this big idea of movement and blue and gray, and that's nowhere near enough description to know anything about anything. It's been there my whole life and I have no idea what it really looks like.

I guess that's how we got this big idea, the one where we get weapons and fight crime.

We were so high up above the ocean we couldn't hear the waves. It was just the sound you get from the air inside a sea shell, only this was real. The ocean was splitting open and pouring out its noise at us.

There was another time we went out there at night. The moon was huge over the water, so you could see it shining bright across the swells, a pillar of light until it broke to pieces on the rocks below our feet.

6.

We used to hear about this brothel in Prunedale, a few miles north from Salinas. It was a homemade type of thing—a house where some guys and a few girls were selling ways to get sex. I heard about it at a party where nobody asked any questions, so I never learned about the details. I pictured a place with too much light and a guy in his undershirt and his face with sores taking your money, people inside looking like people you'd know on the street.

Ben and I thought it would have been great if the place was still open, because the things we could do to the people in charge would have made us crime-fighters. It would be legitimate. But the place was closed now, as far as we could tell, if it was ever open, so we were at my house, playing videogames, thinking.

Some nights before, I'd suggested we try looking in Chinatown but there was nothing there. There's a club down the street from the soup kitchen—an actual dance club, where they play Mexican music so loud you can hear it for blocks. Outside the side door there were pallets covered with crates of beer and a truck next to them. We were parked across the street, next to an empty lot, and slumped low in our seats.

That looks like something to steal, said Ben about the beer.

I don't think they'd leave it there if it was going to get stolen, I said. There was a streetlight down the block from us and some of its light was on the beer and the truck. The front of the building had a sign that said Lido's in pink neon, and on the sidewalk under the sign there were men in white pants and cowboy hats.

So we're here to watch over the beer supply? I said.

Ben pulled away from the curb and we drove down Soledad Street, past Dorothy's Kitchen, past the sidewalks with the people on them.

Maybe we should drive to the east side I said. That's where all the gangs are.

I don't know my way around over there, said Ben.

I kind of knew the area around Andrew's house, and that was on the east side, so we drove there.

We drove past his house, and then in circles for a while, with the gun under the passenger seat, behind a brick so it wouldn't slide into view, in case we got pulled over or something. Outside the car there were all sorts of squat houses lurking behind their lawns and sidewalks.

There's way more houses than I thought there'd be, said Ben. I don't get how someone can be poor and have a house. Why aren't these people in apartments?

I'm pretty sure if they're poor they're renting.

They should be saving money.

For what?

There were people out on the streets. It was past ten and we were driving around with our lights on. We saw lots of people. There was a lady pushing a stroller down the sidewalk. Kids on bikes. Men with dark hair.

What's it like out here during the day? said Ben. Other than the big shapes it was hard to see much in our headlights. There were shiny bits of mica in the pavement we were driving on.

I don't know, I said. I only come out here for band practice.

We didn't know who any of these people were. We went home, and then the next night we came out again, and the night after that, and never saw much. We'd go out for twenty minutes at a time, and then we were at my house playing video games. I'd gotten off of work and Ben was already in my room with the controller in his hands. My mom had let him in.

You work a lot, said Ben.

I'm saving money.

I was going to move out of my parents' house soon.

The band didn't stop when I quit—they replaced everything that was missing after the robbery and spent a week-and-a-half playing shows in Washington and Oregon. I tried not to hear anything about what they were doing.

Ben told me he'd gone to the library and looked at old newspapers on those machines that blow up the microfilm. He'd had to learn how to use this giant screen just to read a newspaper, which he thought was ridiculous.

Anyway, he said, a lot of the gang stuff is centered around the same few streets—Nuez and also Patterson, a couple others, I think. We should go down there and check things out.

7.

I wound up kissing Gabby that night at Andrew's barbecue. Her and Diego and me went outside to use a joint. It was starting to get dark now, and the wasps were nowhere we could see. At this point in the evening I didn't miss Shannon at all. The three of us filled ourselves with smoke and then stayed there, on the steps between the kitchen and the backyard.

Diego asked if we wanted to go inside, and we all thought it was a good idea, but the air around us was cold and it felt good. I said in a minute and then I was looking at Gabby, with Diego over there telling a story about something that I wasn't listening to. Eventually Diego stopped talking and by then I had my hand on Gabby's back running up and down it, and later when we were inside we kissed each other in the kitchen.

Later we were in the practice room, with the foam pads all over the walls. We were kissing in there too, on the floor with our heads at the feet of Diego's drums and with all the amplifiers and mike stands sticking up around us.

I told her to wait a minute, and she lay on the carpet looking up at me out of her makeup, which was smeared around her eyes from when we'd been rubbing against each other.

I got up and started moving the equipment—first the amplifiers, one black box at a time, and then the bass drum and the rest of the drums and the guitars and the PA, until everything big in the room was stacked in front of the door, holding it shut against the rest of the house, because there was no lock on the door knob.

She let me take her clothes off in there, with the cymbals and guitars standing silver and gold all around us. She was beautiful like that. She looked like every thought she'd ever had was written on her face and arms and skin in tiny script.

All I ever wanted was for people to let me see under their clothes. And sex is nice but was almost beside the point then, because Gabby was naked and showing herself to me and knowing that someone would show herself to me like that was more valuable to me than anything I could do afterwards.

Gabby and I had sex then, with her moving back and forth underneath me, and then over me. I was moving my arms and around then. I kissed every part of her that I could reach, and except for that I barely knew her, but she was the only person I loved at all, then.

8.

We were laying on the carpet, both bare to it, and Gabby had the side of her face on my chest so it was easy to put my arm around her, like we fit together like that. I'm a nurse, she said. She'd said that earlier too, when we were just talking on the couch. She ran her hands under my face, on my chest, pressed her fingers on my skin. Both of us

had sweat everywhere. She pressed her index and middle finger to my chest, just below my collar bone.

This is where the blood going to your brain passes through. See? I can feel it pulsing.

She pressed over to one side, near my nipple.

Your lungs.

What do you do with that information?

If there's no pulse here that means your lungs aren't getting blood.

And then what?

We'd fix you up.

We kissed a little. There was just one bare bulb in the room, and it wasn't very powerful, so everything looked warm. We kissed a little and I wondered about the muscles in your lips, and what else they might be good for, what you could possibly need them for if you were all by yourself.

After we kissed I asked her where she knew Andrew from.

We went to school together, she said. All of us.

How come I haven't seen you at any of the shows? I said.

I don't know. Andrew always invites me. I'll make it out to one soon.

Tell me something about Andrew, I said, knowing that it probably sounded strange, to say right then.

I don't know. We went to school together and then we finished, she said. For a while he thought he was going to make movies, she said. I think that might be part of

why people got sick of him, along with everything else. He knew these guys—they had a camera and some real expensive lights, the kind you need makeup for, because otherwise they make you look all washed out, and for a while there it was all he talked about, like something he made with his friends was going to make him money or famous or something.

And that didn't happen.

Of course not, but he had an amazing and beautiful wife.

That he was married is something that would have never occurred to me, not on a normal planet, and I said something like that to Gabby, like, he was married?

Yeah, she said, they knew each other from high school—high school sweethearts and all of that. She was a babe. She was skinny in the clackety-clack way that we pretend we don't like to see but it's really all we want. They lived together and were married and all that, and I was over at their place all the time. They had a house in Watsonville. A little beat-to-shit place with ancient faucets that made you afraid to drink the water. It had long grass in the front and back and I guess there was a shed or something in back too, and I guess that's where Andrew's old band practiced.

They paid for all of it with their jobs. Kathy taught preschoolers out of big cardboard books and Andrew baked pizzas in an oven and then sold them at a place downtown. The problems these people had didn't need fights for me to see them.

For a while Andrew was making drums when he wasn't at work—like, the musical instruments. This was when he wasn't doing the band or the movie thing. Books and internet told him how to put the drums together. I don't even know if he was any

good at it. Sometimes we'd be inside watching TV or getting high or whatever and he'd be out there—bang, bang, bang—and I never knew if he was testing the drum to see if it worked right or if he was done with the building part and was just playing music.

I'd go out there and watch him sometimes. He was always tightening something when I went out there. Stacks of drums all over the place, everywhere. None of them are any good yet, he'd say, but they all seemed OK to me. I don't know why he kept saying that to me. I couldn't tell the difference.

Kathy never said anything about the noise until the neighbor did. This guy was middle-aged and shiny from the way his head had no hair on it. Andrew was at work and the way Kathy tells it the dude was totally rational about it. He knocked at the door in a normal neighbor-not-the-cops kind of way and he smiled and said I'm your neighbor Tony and I'm sorry to complain but the drums are starting to get to be too much—you know, all the crack, boom, and so on? He winked at her here. Dropped one eye and smiled.

Yeah, sure, said Kathy. We'll keep it down.

I don't mind the music, he said. When you guys have music over here it's OK, but it's just all the noise from when it's only drums.

We'll keep it down, said Kathy.

Kathy mentioned this to Andrew, but almost in passing: hey the neighbor came by—he says to keep your drums quiet.

Who? Which neighbor?

This was before bed. Andrew had had a hard shift at work. There was a fight in the restaurant that day—people swinging beer mugs at each other and so on. It sounds like something out of a Western, something with cowboys and posse justice, but it was just his restaurant that night. They put blood on the tables and then left before the police got there.

OK, he said. Yeah, no problem. A neighbor came and talked to me last week too. I told him the same thing—I said no problem. Was it the bald guy?

Yeah.

I guess Tony the neighbor kept kids in his house that he and his wife made together. Later he said this why the quiet was important, that when your kids have to be in bed at eight o' clock at night so they can be rested in the morning for school it really makes life hard if some punk kid next door is beating on drums all hours. Things wouldn't have turned out like they did if it weren't for that, he said, later, to Kathy.

This guy was raising his kids in the same neighborhood where we were twenty and doing nothing much at all. The whole neighborhood was like this—with long grass everywhere and fences made out of ancient wood. There was a pack of dogs that came out some nights, and this guy was worried about some noise coming from Andrew's garage. I never saw his kids though, so maybe he was taking care of them after all.

I don't even know when everything came to a head, but we were all over there at Kathy and Andrew's house, a bunch of us. We were just hanging out. Kenny and Eric were arm wrestling, because they couldn't get enough of showing their muscles. They had all this skin they took care of with exercise, and we were on the couch and the chairs

watching them do this. They were both about the same amount of strong so for a while it was just their hands pressed together and everything to their shoulders shaking and their faces changing colors and you could see the face muscles moving under their skin, like there was something living under their cheeks and eyebrows.

Andrew wasn't there because he was in the garage working on his drums, because fuck him, he said, when Kathy mentioned the neighbor. Because we're paying rent too, he said. Kenny and Eric had been going at it for at least five minutes. Their arms were going to be useless afterwards and I wanted to see how it ended, and if Andrew had been paying attention he would have wanted to see it too.

Andrew was in the garage all afternoon. Pretty soon it was like six pm and we were in the kitchen with our hands in the refrigerator, pulling things out of cabinets and making food with what we found. Kathy and Andrew were always really cool about making ourselves at home. We were eating sandwiches and then there was the banging in the garage again. We chewed our dinner and it was all bang bang bang in the background, and Kathy told us all about the neighbor guy from the other day but I didn't think anything about it right then, even though I guess it was the sort of thing I should have thought about. My boyfriend had recently fallen over dead for no reason they could figure out and I figure this was why I wasn't paying much attention. To Kathy. They had consoled me earlier.

Outside the sun was getting low and there was a spot in the kitchen where you could see the leaves and vines ran the edges of the kitchen window and right around then the light from the sun came across the window there and it looked like everything outside

was swimming in honey, and I was sitting there looking at that and eating and listening to Andrew banging on his drums in the garage. There was some talking going on then too but I was mostly just looking at the light and wondering how long that was going to last—you know, until the sun moved—and then there was a face in the window. Just like that—there was nothing but the setting sunlight and then a face.

Above the face was bald, etc. It was the guy that talked to Kathy about the noise. He had his hands up on both sides of his eyes, closing them in walls made out of his hands, and he was peering in at us.

Hey Kathy, I said, and then the face was gone, and Kathy said what and I said her neighbor's face, or something descriptive and useless like that and then his face was back and Kathy said oh Jesus and the kitchen window broke across the kitchen floor. It landed in pieces on the tile, along with the rock he'd tossed into the house. The glass shone pieces of color at us from the sun outside, and the neighbor's face was up there on the wall, surrounded by the broken window. I put my sandwich down. We all did that, I think, except Kathy, who was standing up.

He stuck his head inside the kitchen, with his body still outside, and he swung it around, looking at the stove and the fridge and at all of us around the table. He didn't look angry like you'd think, like someone who just threw a rock through a window.

Kathy, right? he said, like he hadn't just broken a part of their house. He was looking at Kathy and I'll tell you what his face looked like something small and powerless was in charge of things, like he knew the end of the situation, and when Kelly didn't answer he said, Please stop with the drums. Please. My kids are sick. So's my

wife. We're trying to sleep. I tried knocking—I'm sorry. And then his face was gone and I know he said that they were sick but all I could think about was that it was barely past six and his family was already in bed. I hope this doesn't make me a terrible person.

The light outside was still the kind that makes you see the light, instead of what it covered, and then Kathy said fuck. She said a bunch about windows and Andrew, and then she left the kitchen and people started making reasons to leave and we all left.

They split up after that, like a week later. I don't know if the neighbor had anything to do with it, you know? Just when the relationship would come up in conversation Kathy would say yeah it sucks that it didn't work out but she's happy now, and pretty soon it got to where people had to choose between Kathy and Andrew, and since Andrew's folks had to move to Salinas because of his dad's job and since Kathy had her own place, most of us just stopped talking to Andrew, except for me.

Gabby said all of this and I could see sweat on her, and I had no idea if it was hers or mine or both.

Anyway, she said, I think I kept in touch better than everybody else. After a while it's easy to forget you were somebody who knew somebody else real well, when that's not how it is anymore—like when you think back on who you used to be when you were a kid. I used to be this totally different person and I've got no connection to that anymore at all, except for this idea that it used to be me, but I'm not even made out of the same parts anymore—all my cells in my skins and organs and things are totally different from when I was ten, so what keeps me attached to that little girl except for the idea that that was me, that we're connected, but I still hang out with Kathy way more than

Andrew, especially since his old band broke up. It's funny, because looking back now I can put everything together and tell you from the start, except maybe a couple months at first in high school, that it wasn't going to work between them, that it was just a giant waste of time, but we didn't know any of that back then. It's the sort of thing that makes you think, you know—how are we supposed to run our lives if we're never going to understand what's going on until years later? We never have all the information until it doesn't matter at all, you know?

Yeah, I said. It's fucked up.

We kissed some more after that, and she let me go down on her, and then we kissed some more. During all this I could hear the living room. It made sounds like music, and like the people from my band.

9.

It was still light out the first time we got to Luis Amador's house. We parked across from the address we'd found in the phone book and I turned off the engine.

So what now? said Ben. The stakeout had been my idea, and I hadn't accounted on it being light out, way back when this seemed like a good idea. The sun sat over the houses like a fat glowing baby. The leaves on all these trees turned and flashed in the light and the wind.

All the houses in the neighborhood were broken down, so you could almost see their insides.

I told Ben I thought we should drive around a little, that I didn't like the idea of sitting around in my car, in that neighborhood, in the daytime. I turned the ignition again and started my car.

You'd rather be here at night? said Ben.

We've got to be here at night, to get anything done.

So what's wrong with being here now?

We can't do anything now, I said, and everyone can see us here.

To kill time we decided to carry out another plan. Ben had an outline written in his notebook.

So we left Luis Amador's neighborhood, and we drove around until we saw a 7-11, and I drove into the parking lot and parked next to a couple other cars. There were people inside—we could see them through the big windows that were the front of the store, standing with shelves to their chests or filling plastic cups. The glare from the sun made it hard to see in places.

Maybe we'll catch someone stealing beer, said Ben. There was a man standing in front of the 7-11, off to one side, next to the pay phone, with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. His hair was big dreadlocks and the skin of his face was scarred with pockmarks.

I heard, said Ben, that if you've got the balls for it you can just walk in and walk out with a case of beer, and nobody's going to stop you. You've just got to do it because who's going to stop you for seven bucks an hour?

So we should stake out the 7-11 just in case someone decides to steal beer? I said
Yeah, why not? People do it.

If nothing happens at Amador's house we'll try your idea, I said.

We were going to break into Luis Amador's house to look for clues. After Ben told me that he'd looked up the old newspapers at the library we went back and read a bunch of stories, and some of them had arrests and names and things in them. The most recent one we found was Luis Amador. According to the newspaper he owned a lot of meth and was selling it to people, and he went to jail for it a few months before we started our research. The article said he was suspected of gang affiliations, which was a short way of saying he was all sorts of mysterious things.

There was a picture of him in the article. It was small and his head took up most of it and it was unnecessary. There was nothing in that photo that wasn't already talked about in the article.

We looked in the phonebook and his address was next to his name, and it seemed like as good a place as any to go to. We were looking for crime to fight. We had a location, and since he already had a history of breaking the law there was a pretty decent chance he was still doing something wrong.

We did nothing for a long time, but one day we were bored so we got in my car. We had the gun, and Ben had made three bombs out of gasoline, rags and screw-top wine bottles. We put the gun and the bombs in the trunk of my car and we went to where Amador lived and then we realized it was still light out, too light to do anything yet and

we drove around with warm water running through our veins, waiting for something to happen from us.

We watched the people inside the 7-11 until we felt like we were there too long. We didn't want the people working there to notice us and think we were the kinds of hobos that live inside a car. After a while we left.

10.

I stood up next to Gabby and put my clothes on, and cleared some space so we could open the door to the practice room. Gabby was dressed then too and we went to the living room and sat on the couch along with everyone else. This was also after we went into the bathroom and fixed our hair and Gabby's makeup. She stood in front of me with all these mirrors around us and asked how she looked. I straightened her clothes, pulled the wrinkles out of her shirt, and then she did the same for me.

Outside the bathroom the party was going late. It was running through the house, from room to room, just the five of us expanding until we filled every space, turned the switch on every lamp, until we were like lamps ourselves, our insides stuffed with burning filament and with no way for anyone to miss anything, except for a few things that maybe weren't worth noticing anyway.

11.

Stopping criminals was a lot harder than we'd expected. Or at least, hard in ways we didn't expect, because we were ready for nothing to be easy in the way that bad guys

fight good guys. Ben and I had researched how to sew up wounds, and how to get bullets out of our bodies and keep wounds from getting infected with pus. One afternoon when my parents weren't home we went into the backyard and punched each other's faces, so we could see what it was like, in case we had to fistfight a criminal.

After that we went inside and put ice on our faces and joked about ways to learn how to deal with being shot.

So it was a surprise when just finding criminals was the hard part, and it was feeling a little like a huge waste of time when we were driving around just waiting for it to be night and the streetlights flicked on all at the same time, and I started to follow them down the street back to Luis's house.

It isn't dark yet, said Ben when we got near Luis's house.

The streetlights came on. It'll be dark soon.

We should stop here and wait until it's actually dark. All these black clothes aren't going to do us any good if the air around us isn't black too.

I drove in circles until it was completely night.

We stopped across the street from Luis's house, keeping the car as far from the streetlights as possible, which meant keeping the streetlight in front of us exactly as far from the car as the streetlight behind us. I turned off the headlights and we looked at the house that had the same address as the one in the phonebook.

The house and all the houses next to it looked mutilated and lopsided in the night. There were toys out front, bicycles and swing sets and the like, all scattered out there like lost and broken jewelry.

So what do we do now? said Ben.

I guess we should watch a while, I said, and then if we get a chance we can break in and look around.

Watching the house sounds boring.

Maybe.

There were three small windows in a row at the top of the garage door, and all of these were dark, but the big window next to the front door had curtains across it and those were lit yellow so that you knew there were probably people inside, probably awake and watching TV, or, if we were right, filling drawers with piles of white powder or counting stacks of money or playing with guns. We watched that window until it went black and then we waited a while before getting out of the car.

12.

When the party was at the point where everybody had their arms around everybody else, and everybody loved everybody else, and we were out of beer for the third time, Andrew decided he was hungry, and we all thought that more food sounded like something we wanted.

There were still steaks in the refrigerator he said, and there they were when he opened the refrigerator, in styrofoam trays and covered in cellophane, cool and red underneath the plastic wrap.

It's never too late to barbecue, said Andrew.

13.

When we got out of the car the air was so you barely knew it was there around you. We hadn't seen any cars or people for at least twenty minutes and we opened the trunk and I put the gun in the back of my pants and Ben asked what we should do with the Molotov cocktails.

I don't know, I said. Maybe we'll figure something out later.

Because I want to use them. I made them so we could use them.

Do you have any suggestions for right now?

No.

We ran across the street in our black clothes, and went to the front door. There was a welcome mat under our feet, in the shape of a black cat, with a word balloon coming from its mouth that said HAPPY HALLOWEEN and then some exclamation points. We were trying to be quiet with this.

I leaned towards the door and pressed the side of my head to the door. I was trying to hear if there was noise inside but there was nothing I could hear.

Should we try the door? said Ben. I shook my head at him because he shouldn't have made noise, and then I put my hand on the doorknob, but it wouldn't turn in either direction.

We circled the house. We dodged garbage cans in the alley. A window by the garbage can had curtains with lace at the edges and I thought that looked like the kind of curtain someone might have in their bedroom so we kept moving. The backyard had no

landscaping. It was all dirt, but there was also a window there that on the inside was above the kitchen sink.

I took the screen out of its frame and slid the window open. Ben went in first and then me, and the sink was full of plates, which made it hard to climb through without making noise, and after we were both inside we stood there on the tile, surrounded by dishes and bags of snacks, holding our breaths.

There was a moon outside and we could see everything in blue and black. The refrigerator hummed.

We'd waited an hour after the lights in the house went off and from somewhere in the house there was the wet sound of someone snoring.

So where do you want to look for clues? whispered Ben.

I don't know. Not in the kitchen.

We went into the living room and there were the shapes of furniture up against the walls. A couch stretched on one side of the room and a big TV hung on the wall, along with framed photos that I couldn't make out in the dark.

I sat on the end of the couch. There was an end table next to it, with a lamp on it, and there was a drawer in the end table and I opened that.

We should have brought a flashlight, said Ben.

Yeah, maybe.

I felt around without really being able to see anything. There was a magazine and maybe some batteries, some pens or pencils.

I took my hand from the drawer and closed the end table.

Nothing, I said.

By the front door there was a hallway that opened up on some dark, where I'm sure there were bedrooms and bathrooms. That snoring too.

We're supposed to find something here, right? said Ben.

Hopefully.

I think we should leave.

And what then?

I don't know. Nothing. Do you think we'll have to check the bedrooms?

I got up from the couch and walked over to where the hallway started. There were bedroom doors on the sides of it and at the end an open door showed part of a bathroom, a little gray at the end. We walked to that.

There was a little light coming in through a pebbled glass window but even less than in the living room, so I turned on the light but that also turned on a fan and that was loud so I switched the light back off.

I can't see anything, said Ben.

We shut the door and turned on the light and hoped the fan wasn't loud enough to wake anyone, or make anyone think something was happening in the bathroom. We ran our hands through the medicine cabinet and found little orange bottles of pills like you'd see in anyone's cabinet. There were toothbrushes and that sort of thing. There were pipes and cleaning soap under the sink. It occurred to me then that I didn't really know what we were looking for or where it might be kept. I told Ben we should leave. I

switched off the bathroom light and opened the door and there was man there in the doorway.

He was a short one, and thin, and the moonlight in the living room outlined him so all the details were black. There was a lamp in his hands, trailing a power cord that swung at his ankles. He lifted it up in the air and pulled it down over my head. Pieces of ceramic fell on my shoulders for a quick moment before my knees came out from under me.

Later Ben told me he said Oh Jesus, and he pushed the little man onto the ground to stop him from doing anything else, even though the lamp was gone around me now. Ben pulled at me, where I was on the ground. I remember this from the way my shirt stretched against the front of my body, from where he was pulling. Something on the top of my head, near the front, felt like it was crescendoing, like an orchestra inside my skull was building to something, only there was no music to it. It was just this pressure building on the top of my head, and this taste like metal in my nose and in my mouth, and then that pulling at my body. I found my feet and Ben helped me stand up. There was some yelling, ladies' voices, and Ben would tell me later about how he kicked the little man who'd had the lamp, to keep him from getting up and doing anything else to us, while Ben waited for me to get up, and then we found the living room and the front door. My head was throbbing now where'd I'd been hit.

We got to the car and I leaned against it while Ben dug around in my pockets until he found the keys and we got in and Ben drove the car away from the house.

We crossed Sanborn but it was late and there weren't many cars. We didn't drive long. It was maybe eight blocks, ten blocks, three minutes or something like that. My brain wanted out of my head right then, and Ben pulled the car to the curb.

Why are you stopping? I said. They're going to call the police.

Yeah, said Ben, but the police won't get here for a bit. We're far enough away now anyway, and we probably won't fit whatever description. I want to use the Molotov cocktails. I didn't make them for nothing.

Right now? Can we do this later?

It'll just take a second. It'll be fine. I want to do something. We came out to do something and we didn't do anything in that house.

My head was really going at it with the pain now. He went on:

I don't know how we're going to make this work. The whole idea I mean. It's not working. I'm going to be right back.

He got out of the car then, and closed the door behind him, and I turned my head and watched him walk to the back of the car and open the trunk, and then I couldn't see him anymore because the lid of the trunk was between us. I opened the car door and waited a second for my head to quit unspooling, and then I got out.

Ben had one of the bombs in his hand. I followed him to the middle of the street and he twisted the cap on the bottle until it was off and then set on the pavement. In the neck of the bottle there was a washcloth, rolled tight so that it fit in the neck. He pulled this out and there was really the smell of gasoline then. He kind of fluffed the material

out in the air then, so it expanded and looked more like a sponge, and then he stuffed half of it back into the bottle.

You ready? he said.

I just wanted to go home and get ice on my head but I nodded.

He brought a lighter out of his pocket and made it light. The flame was brilliant. It hovered like an almond over Ben's hand and then he held it to the rag which lit immediately. Our faces flared with orange and he threw the bottle down the street.

Fire spilled all over the street. It spread about the street in eddies and puddles, and we watched it, and we watched the homes and yards it revealed in gold and red and sepia. The scattered pieces of glass glittered like bits of mica in the road.

I just wanted to see something for all our planning and everything, said Ben. I wish there was more.

The flames trembled in the air, their roots dark so they seemed to float, and they wavered tremendously.

14.

Back in the thirties, during the Spanish Civil War, my grandma's cousin was a deserter. He was drafted by the left to fight the right but I guess they didn't give him any weapons for the fighting. They just sent him out barehanded. So he played dead on the battlefield and when the fighting was done and everybody left, he went home. A friend of his from the army did that too, and they went back to Fanzara together. My family hid them in a cave in the hills, so that no one in town would report them, because there

people in town on both sides of the war and he and his friend would probably get executed if anyone found out. They lived on food delivered by my family during the night. They were in there for months, because they didn't have the tools they needed to do anything else.

The day after we broke into Amador's house Ben showed me how to change the oil in my car. There was a bolt in the bottom of the car that had to get unscrewed for this, in a place I probably would have never thought to look on my own. That's still the only thing I know how to do to my car, other than drive it and add gasoline.

15.

I hadn't thought about the wasps for hours, and didn't think about them when we went outside to barbecue. The grill was a gift from Andrew's parents, and it was all shiny and black even though they'd found it used. Under the heating area there was a little door that covered the propane tank.

The steaks were off to one side, on a plate, and we were all there watching. I had my thumb hooked into the back pocket on Gabby's jeans, and she didn't seem to mind. Diego was all full of jokes that he was telling us. I don't know if any of us were hungry, except that Andrew kept talking about it.

He turned a knob on the propane tank. It hissed in a surprising way, like air was escaping.

Is that normal?

Yeah, said Andrew. That's just the sound the propane makes.

He turned the knob that started the flames going and the noise kept on going, but with fire now.

I don't know man, I said. If you're not going to turn that off I'm going to stand over here.

Suit yourself. I'm going to eat steak.

Andrew put a steak and then more on the grill, and I was over by the house, with Gabby next to me, and Shannon and Diego too, and the propane tank exploded.

There was a ball of red like someone had taken a normal barbecue fire and removed all the glue from it. It looked like a big orange hot air balloon and then for the smallest part of a second it was large and scalloped like a rose. These are the only parts I remember, because Andrew didn't turn away quite quickly enough.

When the explosion was finished he'd fallen to the ground with ribbons of blood coming out of him.

We should have called an ambulance, which is what I think now, but the living room at Andrew's house was full of all these empty silver cans and the leftovers from various joints (the mess that the shattered bong made on the kitchen floor was brilliant, and early in the evening).

We got him in the back seat of my car and I drove. Later, when we got to the big glass hospital on Laurel, I left him with Shannon and Diego on the curb and drove away, because I didn't know if hospitals got you in trouble for driving drunk.

In the meantime, on the way to the hospital, I was going twenty miles an hour, because I was drunk and I didn't want to hit anything or run any stoplights. There was

Andrew in the backseat, between Shannon and Gabby, and later I'd find that his blood had made great floral patterns on the seats back there, and the ladies were telling him it was going to be all right, and that we were going to get him help, and they were applying pressure to the various parts of him, especially the one hand where I was thinking we should have maybe applied a tourniquet because of how much was gone and how much blood was escaping from it, but I was mostly experiencing all this through what I could hear because I was drunk and focused on my speedometer and the lane divider, and with all that noise back there I wondered if everything might have been different if I was blind, like really blind, like how does a baby know what it wants if it's blind and has never seen anything, or what would I think vision was like if I'd been born a blind baby, but I guessed that none of this mattered because Andrew wasn't blinded or anybody else in the car. In the end it was just his hand, which isn't as bad, but just as forever. There is beautiful plastic surgery out there, and Andrew, still under his dad's plan, had great insurance, but no amount of surgery could build a hand for him to hold things with, and driving through the streets at three in the morning, rescuing Andrew from that explosion with Diego in the passenger seat next to me telling me where to go because at that moment I really wasn't sure where we were even, and these beautiful people in the back seat, and two women I would marry forever right there with me, that was all really nice, in spite of it all. And inside of me, as I was driving us slowly enough that I could see the individual dashes of paint that split the lanes from each other, there was this rising action, this building up and then receding, like ocean waves, like the tide pulling and then releasing my insides, like it was just that over and over and there was the moon over all

of it, and behind me Andrew was pouring red across the back of my car and Gabby who had told me all I needed to hear and Shannon who hadn't done anything like that yet, and Diego was next to me just feeding me information about where I was going.