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## Jack Kerouac Does Not Lie

Kyle Shrader  
*University of Central Florida*



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**Jack Kerouac Does Not Lie**

by

Kyle James Shrader  
B.A. Binghamton University, 2000

A thesis submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

“Jack Kerouac Does Not Lie” recounts my pilgrimage in the summer of 2000, from southwest Florida to a canyon beach in California where Jack Kerouac—as I had read in his *Big Sur*—lost his mind forty years earlier. I was heavily influenced.

Kerouac’s *On the Road* showed me what to do with myself. *Big Sur* showed me where to go. In the twentieth century Americans shifted their notions of the west coast from a means for sustenance to a symbol of post-war freedom. Kerouac seems to embody this momentum; the world and the burning spirit his work describes is a precursor to the sixties. His muse, Neal Cassady, is the common link—appearing as Dean Moriarty in Kerouac’s first major work and later as himself in Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. My parents were a part of this westward yearning’s last true surge in the early seventies, when they ventured cross-country and stayed out there for a time. They’d caught the tail end of the wave, and told me a bit about it.

I was full of stories, mostly fiction. Sweating in my twenty year old conversion van with a big friend, Ben—whose goals were less “literary”—I sought to recreate the legends I had read, the movies I had seen, and the tales my parents had told me. I was on a mission; I wanted my trip to measure up. Ben was on vacation. Our folly is chronicled within; three weeks and four thousand miles of it.

Mom, shut your eyes. Dad, look at me now. T, please forgive what I used to be. And most of all to Ben, who must bear the brunt of my incomplete portrayal, thank you.

“And such things—A whole mess of little joys like that amazing me when I came back in the horror of later to see how they’d all changed and become sinister, even my poor little wood platform and mill race when my eyes and my stomach nauseous and my soul screaming a thousand babbling words, oh—It’s hard to explain and best thing to do is not be false.”

-Jack Kerouac  
*Big Sur*

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## ARRIVAL OF MY DEPARTURE

My big, stupid trip began bright and early in the glare and crunch and dust of rural dirt road driveway and sweat, always sweat. Somewhere up the Caloosahatchee, on Telegraph Creek, water everywhere and in the air as I shuffled outside, squinting to find, in horror, my van's blunt chest splayed and spilling its grease-smearred guts all over fender mat saddlebags and the mechanic's rug beneath my father. His dark tee was soaked through and streaked with my van's darker blood. His massive hands were black, permanently cracked with the grime and grease of many surgeries. The sweat ran lines and collected on hairs above this layer of film. Poor guy, we Shraders sweat. Our laundry room had a dozen or more of his drab, faded, and punctured pocket T-shirts on hangers; his scrubs. Most of them had been dark once.

I said something like "Black's a brutal choice, huh?" with all my smug discontent in there. "So," I said, we both knowing what it was I wanted to know.

His answers were terse from under the van, or leaning over it, or somewhere inside it, prefaced always with my name, his chest puffing and jaw jutting gruffly. "Do you *want* air conditioning, or not?" he said.

"One fast move or I'm gone" Jack writes and repeats as he stumbles, hung-over, to leave Frisco for Monterey and the Big Sur coast. He enters the fog and boom country from the north, at night. I'd be doing the same, in the light, but not for dozens of days and many manic miles.

One fast move or I'm gone, I thought, repeated, regurgitated as if I knew what it meant. That morning was out of my control. My dad slowed me down.

I might come to know what it means in a few days, in New Orleans, but that first morning—waiting for my dad to put my van back together so I could pick Ben up and get underway—I was a parrot. One fast move or I'm gone.

He was doing his son a solid by slaving over the van like that. We'd bought it the summer before on potential alone; he'd swung me by his shop to see it in the rows of heaps and stalks of weeds and warlike fire ants. It was all dust and suffocating heat in her carpeted, wood-paneled belly—faded yellow couch in back and captain's chairs up front, a removable table with four cup holder corners, four rectangular scenic windows, lined in their sills with brown loop carpet. She had a ladder on the back door and locking spare tire; luggage rack up top, a small plastic vent that did not work. The convex wood-paneled walls made her feel a bit like a plane, a blunt little fuselage. She was a short-wheelbase model like Scooby-Do's Mystery Machine. I'd brought her up to school after spring break to break her in. I threw my Goodwill bedroom chair behind her front seats, making it a living room or a den, a little pad. She'd been a good ship and when I'd gotten back to Florida in June my dad had pledged to get her prepped.

I was not nearly worthy of or gracious enough for the sacrifice he had signed on for; whole days and half nights spent contorting his fifty year-old arthritic and rapidly aging frame to the confines of her tight engine bay, only his latest endeavor on my behalf.

Never mind he kind of needed to keep himself busy. Never mind this kinetic energy was the way he'd stayed straight since my childhood—he was fully immersed on *my* behalf.

I just wanted to leave. I just wanted to see a sign welcoming me to some other state, any other state. But the guilt was there. The dormant Catholic in him came out this way. And he was right.

He reminded me about Texas. He'd done some driving in his day.

“Two days in there, *bucko*,” he said, “across Texas in August, *without* air conditioning?” Bucko was his word for me when he meant it.

He was right.

But on this, the morning I must leave or die, he had most likely bitten off too big a piece. History said it would most likely go much less smoothly—this last-minute operation—than in his mind.

I was also right.

We were both right, everyone was always right, and we couldn't even agree on that. He had never really sent me off with a fully road-worthy vehicle, not on schedule. An '87 Renault with a faulty fuse that randomly stranded me in intersections all over my hometown, my first car, a French car, French cars had Gremlins, my dad would say, I'd backed her into a pole on my first solo drive, freshly licensed and alone, my father trying not to laugh at my face when I moped back into his garage less than a minute after I'd left it in triumph; a '69 Fiat 850 rear-engine, two-seat convertible with its own, mysteriously faulty fuse that cut power occasionally, but was easy to push around town; a '77 Trans-Am restored in time for first snow, only to be retired by Spring, lost to rot; a '71 first-

series, big-block Monte Carlo revived from a bootlegger's barn, whose engine ate itself and stranded me for a day in central New York on my way to freshman orientation; an '89 Subaru wagon that overheated only two exits into my first post-move late summer migration north for school because of a simple switch left unplugged after my father and I'd performed a full engine swap, turning me around in the dark, preventing me from intercepting a love letter I'd mailed to my best friend from school, Mel, a car which was later coined the Boobaroo—as in, a boo-boo—by Mel. I'd see her in a month if the van held up.

The van had not yet let me down. My father was the sole reason my broke self had her, for this specific purpose, this summer, today. Still, it was painfully awkward to watch him fly in the face of history that way, making hasty *improvements* right up against my deadline; how he could somehow not be anticipating the hang-up, in whatever unforeseen form it might take, or at least let on that he was leaving room for reality. But for me to call this—the hang-up—what it was, inevitability, was to show no appreciation for his efforts, or respect for his abilities. No trust for my father's judgment. He said he could do it and he would. Who was I to complain?

I hovered and helped without faith, probing gently with intonation for a possible timeframe.

“And you're doing that *because...?*”—“That should *take...?*”—“*Then, what?*” and so on. Baby steps to reality.

Ben would soon be waiting. Soon, the big man would land several hours (driving time) to the north, in Tampa, and I would still be down here, fetching wrenches and turning over the engine with a click of the key and depressing pedals for as long as he

says and not a moment longer even if I couldn't hear him yell, "Cut it!" with her guts all exposed and screaming between the two of us. I'd be fetching last minute parts twelve miles away, one-way, more than once, the same monotonous orchard and pasture and trailer park strip mall scenery, then, once we were really into it, resigned to doing it despite the mounting resistance from reality but too far to turn back now, so out I'd go again in his car to fetch more parts, different brackets for the conversion, this time the RIGHT brackets, and fresh cream soda takeout lunch because he hadn't eaten all day, getting up as early as he had to work for *me* like this and besides, the man got cranky fast when he was not fed.

Ben would soon be waiting.

First indication that the big man was on the peninsula came via voice recording. My gas foot tapped our kitchen's faux-wood floor—fresh off a parts run—as the tape engaged and Ben's broken message played. He had called from a payphone in a busy terminal, hoping I'd already left. His voice sounded inflated and hopeful, mock-formal. "This message is for Kyle *Shrader*," he said through the static, "I'm calling from a payphone in an airport in *Florida*," or something along those lines.

My dad had been shaving; too hot for hair on the face. Grease and sweat caught in his new-growth stalks, his thick facial forest all blue and shaded-in, slick with wet air and skin. A brutal sun bore down, overhead; the angle of incidence as close to ninety degrees as it could be. Humidity near a hundred. All things approaching triple digits. Cypress needles clung to his smudged neck creases. Waste water pooled along the bottom frame

of his glasses—bifocals, so soon?—and dropped in a mist as he blew warm air through his lips, which just made room for more sweat, gradually building and streaming down his scalp from the ridged, veined corners where the dark hairline had retracted.

“Do they sell papers at the airport?” Ben asked. There was a bustle in the background. He meant rolling papers. This was his second call.

“Got me,” I said. “Maybe. Probably. I don’t know.”

He said he’d go look for some papers, then.

I wished him luck.

“Get here, dude,” he said.

A P.A. announcement sounded over the static.

I told him I knew.

The cypress line around our deep plot concealed much of the sky, except out toward the road where the yards were somewhat cleared and fenced and only a score of ancient, moss-strewn trees were left standing. We lifted up our sweaty brows to see lurking thunder heads along the river, through trees. It happens fast in Florida, especially that far south. They crept up the river and growled over our tunnel vision shoulders. We caught wind of the ominous gray anvil heads over the line, towering high and creeping up along the earth’s atmospheric rooftop, compressing our necks—gathering storms menaced the horizon like dark, furrowed brows. Then the air got heavy, suddenly, smothering. It bristled and snapped, grumbled indifference and sprung a leak. I needed to leave.

We shared a wet, rushed hug goodbye. My T-shirt kissed engine grease and gasoline and my father's sweat. Mom was at work for all this tenderness. She might have sent me off with a nice little Saint Christopher for the dash had she thought to do so. Maybe there was a hymn or chant or whatever we Catholics were supposed to do to summon the idol's powers, to protect me from the inevitable.

My dad tried to bolster my confidence in the van one last time. "I think she'll be just fine," he said. "Nope," he said, "I don't think you'll have any trouble. You're due for a smooth ride." The eternal optimist, he had a well-worn way with reality, a kind of resilient survival mechanism. He figured it was time for me that things went well, in terms of transportation. I said I hoped he was right.

The afternoon was upon us with its weather and inevitable traffic up the coast and I needed to leave.

I called the airport before I left to boost the big guy's spirits. I imagined him slumped against a wall somewhere, hugging our cargo, whistling or snoring, watching people go places. They had to page his large ass. I was put on hold.

"Hey there, *guy!*" he said, his tone somehow different—I couldn't read it.

"What's the word?"

"Sorry, Benny. Almost there."

He wanted to know if I was on my way.

I told him not "there" like the airport, but "there" like leaving my house. My dad was still finishing up.

"Oh man..." he said. He sounded afraid, letdown, uneasy.

I asked him if he'd found papers.

He said the news stands didn't sell them, but that he'd found a baggage guy or someone who had some on him.

"So you're good for a little while?" I said. I didn't believe him about the guy.

"I *was* good, man," he said. "So check *this* shit out," he said and told me a story. He was fired up through the crackle. Sounded like his cheeky, squinty face was smiling. Our connection was terrible. He had found himself a nice spot against the wall to wait, all stoned and happy and playing his drum—I asked him if he brought that damn hippie drum!—when a guy walked by and tossed a dollar into his open pack. He had been sitting there cross-legged on the ground, eyes kind of closed, biting his lip as he banged away and this guy thought he was a bum or some kind of airport terminal performer. I told him the guy had been right about the bum part. He said he'd made about a dollar eighty five so far. I asked him if he was ripping people off. I told him if he made enough to pay for our first tank, he could play his stupid drum whenever he wanted.

Crude oil was surging that summer, legendary prices. We'd see signs for \$3.00 before we made Big Sur.

Ben begged me to hurry. I told him I knew.

I gained a brief perspective on my day, finally, on the big, banked S-curve of North River where the land is fenced to the south, mostly cleared for cattle and I could see the sky for some distance.

The van pinged impending disaster and I wondered if she would keep me ahead of the glowing, gunmetal sky. I got high to road noise and engine rattle, no music, sweating

the moment I disengaged her new a/c to see if she'd stop with all this noise while I ushered in a month of my life I'd been dreaming of abstractly for years; my big, unencumbered-by-structure literary homage. Nothing planned but a destination—slash—turnaround point.

I wanted to hear my first miles pass, the turbulence of too much air moved aside by her blunt face clearly symbolizing something, but all immediately horrifying when overpowered in my mind's ear by detonation much worse than my father had let on after his test drives.

“And besides,” he'd said, always best-casing it for me, “these old straight sixes were fairly bulletproof.”

I was trapped inside her now and free to finally leave, if she held up.

The detonation itself—what my dad had called pinging—was an odd, miscast sound, as if granules of sandy roadside were shooting up against her underbelly as I drove west to the interstate, desperate to reconnect with my craft. She'd been de-commissioned from significant travel for two months. And now she had a sound that was in the wrong place—as Jack says about the surf in Big Sur when he first arrives at night and hears the waves against cliffs in the fog hundreds of feet *below* him—and this, too came from *under* there, rather than *next* to me, in my ear where it should have been in the flapping window space. It must have been what my father had mentioned with mild concern before I left; why I was now to run premium only, if possible, even with the summer prices. But it didn't sound right to me. I heard the engine hollow and full of tiny stones, sandblasting in there when I accelerated, beside my knee where the bulge of engine cap was covered in tan vinyl and cup holders. I could hear it.

As I made the interstate I played my first CD and re-engaged her air. She groaned and choked and pinged on the uphill ramp, my foot always to the floor on the inclines.

Pearl Jam's *No Code* is the band's most narrative and transcendental effort; Neal Young's influence. It had been the inaugural album for every substantial drive I'd taken in the past two years of transience, commuting, ostensibly alone, from Florida to good old New York State to finish my undergraduate degree. It had kicked off each leg of each trip, and I was still alive and not in jail, so why stop now? My little sendoff ceremony—I took it with me.

My stupid face was big in my van's wide rearview. Her windows had steamed over in the storm. She was packed with gear. I was blind inside but I could hear.

Torrential rain on her flat top was a tin roof song.

The wiper relay in her dash clucked. Drops tapped against her glass. Her blades yawned and slapped. Chunks of stratospheric ice at seventy-plus, the snare.

My van's cascading windshield water music.

I was out there on the snub-nosed hood being struck by it, fully *into* it all.

If this confession was fiction, the way it felt at the time, then the percussive curtain of hail I drove into less than an hour into my trip—hail the size of testicles, god's own swollen, icy gonads—was a sign. That, the churning squall line my van and I'd approached from the south, and that giant bullwhip crack and snap in the sky, loud enough to make me duck, all signified something. That things would not go smoothly, that things were not exactly under my control and that I should occasionally submit, I

guess. I was no man of god or much of a man at all, but even I could not deny that inescapably-Old Testament vibe roiling down upon my interstate path still an hour shy of Tampa. I should have slowed down or stopped like everyone else but I was on the road and this was a fucking literary voyage.

Everyone else had pulled off, their warning lights ablaze and diffuse from the shoulder and especially from the shoulder beneath overpasses, crowded and idling, waiting it out. But it was me and my van against the sky on I-75—alone in a narrow channel of wind and water between tall, Cypress banks—with that big, dark Mother drooping down upon us, all drums and ice and there was no goddamned way I was slowing down or stopping, now that I'd finally begun.

My sidekick, shotgun, wingman, Ben, was waiting at the airport and I was on my way.

It had all been done before, I can admit, by writers and muses and mothers and fathers, and I was doing it anyway, and really, honestly—if that's what you want—because it had already been done and written down and told and put to film. I would be forcing things and fighting the realities of first-hand life the entire ten thousand miles, fancying it all some form of literary suffering.

I'd kind of come undone after college.

After all his wayward yearnings and softer Buddhist wanderings, and later, alcoholic tremblings, when his mind turned on itself beneath the Big Sur cliffs in August 1960 Jack Kerouac saw the Cross.

I didn't have a damn thing to buoy me save for my van, my books and Ben. I was putting off Grad School to pay my respects, to spend a day and night on the beach where it all went down and maybe join in the myth.

August 2000 felt like a last chance at something; I wasn't sure what, exactly. I had books, stacks of pretense and second-hand accounts, and a driving force to self-destruct. Florida hell awaited my return sometime after Labor Day, alone. Jack had had his whole psychic crack-up beneath the Big Sur cliffs and bridge, listening to the waves, alone, and drinking, and I was on my way. Five weeks that might have been better spent applying for my future, instead eaten up by my flight to spend a day and night alone on the beach made famous in his book.

I was dragging along my third or fourth choice for a roadmate, Ben; Big Ben, Gentle Ben, dark-haired, freckled, squinty-eyed, often loud and sloppy stew of good times and high school nights in the snow drinking. And Ben, poor misguided Ben, he'd be weighing me down the whole time with frivolous notions like food and shelter. I figured we had the van, a *van*, for a reason: it was to be our shelter. But this wouldn't fly with the big guy. He would want to eat and take showers and sleep on mattresses along the way. He would seek the stationary conveniences of roadside America. He would seek comfort. He was on vacation.

Ben had only to be home by Labor Day to begin, of all things in the world, culinary school. He had time enough—a month—to do it right and the gullible, humble pie to do it poorly. He'd be our Captain Chaos; my '81 Chevy van, our cannonball.

But I was no J.J. McClure.

I was leaving with twenty two years beneath my belt, and on it, only two notches. Two drunken, nearly anonymous notches; I'd missed on number three. I'd declared emotional bankruptcy and hit the road.

Isn't that what you do, hit the road? Strike out in a shabby vehicle and broiling summer, sweat and see the world? Strive for literary suffering? That's what *they* did. That's what I was—we were, sort of—doing. I had demands of myself; things to live up to.

I was taking an exam.

And my fortitude was tested less than an hour into this big, stupid trip, driving north on I-75 into a blinding melee of August thunderstorm Armageddon. Everyone else pulled off the highway while I estimated the dimensions of my lane in the rain and mist, pointing my van onward. Their hazards bled and broke up on her blunt windshield. I thanked each one of them for their fear and for getting the fuck out of our way. I patted her dash. Her vacuum gauge shimmied in the red to the strange, unsettling sound of engine detonation. The needle really danced. We would make it, I wished I could pray. And they, the poor lemmings out there crawling along the shoulder and clustered together beneath overpasses, they lacked the fortitude to press on when everyone else was pulling off. They were not on a pilgrimage. Their roads did not lead to Big Sur.

Maybe they were right to submit.

But my big friend, Ben, my summer traveling mate was at the airport in Tampa and had been for hours already. It was my job to pick him up. This storm would not keep me from my first stop, now that I'd finally begun.

“Mankind” had just ended and Pearl Jam’s “Present Tense” was beginning, matching my state: “I *am* living in the now, Eddie goddammit I AM!”—I pleaded with Eddie Vedder and the dash and turned it up again to hear the words over the fray, swiping sweat like rain from my brow. I couldn’t see a damn thing. I leaned forward. It was all about momentum and go! Go! GO!—get the fuck out of Florida and go—straight off this godforsaken peninsula if necessary, if my options dried up. Anything to leave. The dark and dragging cloud line ahead rolled like a million muddy wheels. All signs pointed to tornado and I said go.

I’d seen a funnel cloud the year before, just west of the same interstate along the Tamiami Trail, dropping down from a similar sky. I chased it while I got high in my mother’s car on my way to summer class at Manatee Community—scout’s honor. I had a clear shot of it between storm cells from the rural four-lane highway as I approached campus. Its narrow elephant trunk twisted and tattered, grasping toward the ground. I wandered in my lane and hydroplaned to see it. When I got to campus and parked I lost it behind a tall, thin-spoked fence of cypress. I ran through the clustered array of pyramid-capped buildings, from overhang to overhang in the rushed, hushed air. Thunder snapped. Hairs came to life in a line down my spine. I got to the last, outermost overhang corner out of breath, to find the funnel gone. The sky was a boiling wake of a boat, churning. I begged it to come back.

When small branches and sparse tufts of pine struck my van on I-75 I scanned the seeable sky for a funnel. This was a damn debris field in my face; I flinched. Spanish moss waved at the tip of a wiper blade. I marked these items off my mental tornado

checklist. I didn't whole-heartedly believe there was a twister out there, exactly, but the math was adding up. Maybe it was wrapped in bands of rain, hidden by mist and clouds beyond her steamed glass. Maybe I wanted to see it. I rolled down her passenger window without crashing. Roadside trees bent and shuddered like flags. What I could see implied a great whipping, some giant weed-whacker churning up the Cypress groves beside the highway. What a way to start.

With her six, inline cylinders producing a kind of nearly-empty coffee can rattle I passed a ghastly blur of blinking hazards in the warm road rising mist and bleeding windshield. My vision was a Monet between wiper strokes; a recursive impression.

I was inside the storm.

Everything was loud and not to be ignored so I turned up the tail end of No Code to drown out both the cacophony of water and ice and the worrisome rattle in her engine. I set my eyes near the base of the cascading windshield—where the wiper pivots—so I didn't have to wait as long for it to come back around and clear the view and stepped harder on the floor, nearly standing in an old-timey mock-delivery driver stance.

“Benny,” I said, “I'm on my way!”

The rain and hail and wind relented. I passed through the outer wall of dwindling rain like a beaded doorway, the last few drops announcing I was clear. I was left with a momentary space of wet rubber over asphalt, the slick whirsh of adhesion. Her engine shook its rattle slightly.

My album began again. Soft guitar and bass played as though by bow and quiet vocals singing “Sometimes—I speak—of nothing at all / Sometimes I speak to myself...” I sang along.

The dark and curling line of dangerous clouds hung low in my clearing side-view mirrors. They laughed at the speck of me.

See you soon, they said.

She had been losing speed dramatically when I crested the Sunshine Bridge over Tampa Bay. Coming down would be mercy.

I got her up to eighty before the ascent, and, with it floored all the way and me in my seat rocking to help us up the grade we were doing only forty five or fifty at the apex. Her engine screamed in low gear inside its cabin-cap.

My father had drilled a last minute gauge into her dash to monitor vacuum at the manifold—essentially, how hard she was working at any given moment. This gauge was an arc of green, blue, red. Needle in the green and we were golden; blue, okay; and red was not good news for any length of time. Not only was the needle buried in the red as we climbed that bridge for the excruciatingly better part of a minute, but it shuddered there and trembled toward black oblivion on the dial as her pistons over-detonated the mixture with timing advanced and power insufficient. I thought it might shake itself apart.

Florida is a flat state—this was bad news. Only chance to see her climb, my only test run, and she barely made it. Were the bridge much taller we ultimately would have slowed to a stop. If her straight six didn’t shit out altogether.

There were mountains out west, I was pretty sure; taller orders than Tampa's Sunshine Skyway Bridge.

Ben's face was big exasperation outside the terminal as he flung his big pack into the back, roaring shut her sliding door too hard—I flinched—and yanking himself up and into shotgun, astronaut-glove hands on her passenger seat and windshield pillar. The van pitched starboard. Ben was excited and I yelled at him to take it easy. I wanted to fill him in immediately on the van; she was a good ship but had special needs and things to pay attention to and he lifted an open Ziploc bag of magnificent, skunky stash to my nose like smelling salts and threw off my entire speeding train of thought. He'd been responsible for supplies. While I was breathing in the pungent goodness, distracted, Ben told me his father—whom I didn't really know and hadn't known for sure was still alive—and his older brother, Tim—whom I had known—were waiting for us at a steakhouse somewhere in St. Pete. I'd hoped, since our departure had been delayed that we'd be leaving from the airport directly. But Ben wanted to see his dad for dinner. He thought he maybe knew which road.

He tried to turn down the stereo but his fingers couldn't manage the small, touchy all-in-one toggle switch and instead he skipped tracks and made it louder. I scolded and reminded him; the stereo's volume was not to exceed 15. He knew this, or had been barked at because of it before, on a previous roundtrip we'd shared my junior year, my first Christmas break in Florida. He'd tagged along to visit his dad, who was counting weeks. It was to be his last, weeks-to-live countdown. We split a case of canned Bud Light when we got to my parents' house—Ben downing 14, me, 10—as fast we could

and punched each other on their lanai in the pool filter whine and live air. At the end of the week I picked him up at his dad's, never meeting the man, and he lit a joint less than ten minutes into the drive and then dropped it into the Boobaroo's foot well. I yelled at him while ducking from elbows and shoulders as he bent like a bear in a seatbelt to retrieve it. We very nearly got pulled over when I passed a center median speed trap in the left lane. Everyone else slid to the right and I was left exposed. A cruiser cut in behind us and accelerated. Would I have taken the rap? Ben tried to turn down the stereo then and instead tracked ahead and made it too loud and I told him if we didn't get pulled over and he didn't find that LIT joint that he was getting out right there on I-75 and walking home to North Tonawanda.

We weren't arrested that day nor had we really ever been, except Ben for lifting a department store wallet some years before.

His dad had pulled through.

I told Ben about our van.

About her new and colorful gauge and what it measured—vacuum, detonation—and what that really meant—damage—and what it was we could do to limit it—nothing much. It took me quite some time to get this all across.

“So just keep an eye on it, is all,” I said.

“All you had to say, dude,” Ben said. Part one of my speech had taken us out of the airport and into Tampa traffic. When I demonstrated the correlation between pedal pressure and the gauge's needle, accelerating out of a turn onto a busy, strip mall-lined street, parking lots and store facades and endless ways to spend it all Ben wheezed at the needle's little jig.

“It’s fucking jamming out, there, dude!” he said and coughed.

I told him about the momentum game, the tedious exercise in perpetual pedal recovery we’d be playing once we got out west. Because she was underpowered to begin with, and in order not to glug down all the gas or fry her sorry six, we’d have to pay attention to the terrain, anticipating inclines with acceleration, using the downgrades to regain our speed; it’s a game we were going to have to get good at. The road we were on was very flat.

Ben said he got my drift.

There was more he ought to know but we were freshly stoned and I was searching for a steakhouse in an unfamiliar town. Headlights had sprouted up already. I didn’t want to stop for anything, even food. It was Ben’s dad’s turn to slow us down.

## STRAIGHT AND NARROW

In a Longhorn parking lot Ben told me his father was gay.

I had finally picked him up at the airport. We had gotten high off the stash he'd stowed along. I'd told him a few things I thought he should know about the van.

But I wished we hadn't tried the really good stuff when Ben told me what he thought I should know about his dad. Sunset was a banded, two dimensional backdrop behind the restaurant.

The sky was rainbow sherbet.

If I'd have told him about it—the sky, that it looked like rainbow sherbet—he'd have thought it was a fat joke, maybe punched me in the shoulder.

The sounds of St. Pete traffic lifted into the too-huge sky as our sandal-ed feet smacked pavement. Truck brakes flapped and I flinched.

I'd known him for nine years and never known.

So like a date to a dance I had to meet Ben's paternal parents for dinner before we could leave. It would be me, Ben, Tim, their dad, and the partner.

We all met awkwardly at the hostess stand, shifting weights and shuffling after the initial handshakes while waiting to be sat. It was a tight fit. We were in the way. The walls were packed with framed pictures and phony memorabilia. People brushed past. Of our group only the partner was shorter than me. Ben's family was tall. This

short partner was bald and shiny where the hair would not have grown in. He had a stud earring.

Tim was tall like I remembered but not as lean, not as young; it hadn't really been that long since I'd seen him, but he'd put on some thickness through the hips and looked a bit more like he really was Ben's older brother. He smiled and inhaled. He'd always had a nervousness to him. He once said to me, "Shut up, you stupid freshman!" when we were in someone's basement and too many people laughed at something I'd said. Everyone hushed and I kept asking myself if people actually said things like that when they got defensive.

Ben's dad had no grip. He looked sullen or suspicious. His limp handshake seemed to measure me. I couldn't tell if I was glaring at him the way he seemed to be eyeing me. His chin and jaw were fairly prominent but his mouth was thin-lipped and pursed up, like a grandmother's mouth. He looked like a math teacher, minus that mouth.

We sat across the half-booth banquette from each other in silence as the other three spoke—me high and anxious and apprehensive and horribly empty, and he probably fatigued and worn thin from a long vacation and longer fight with disease. I felt worse for me.

Dinner consisted of Ben and his dad's partner thumbing through an atlas and a handbook of the nation's national parks. His dad had just returned from a tour of the Southwest—a celebration of his latest remission, I think. I had been aware that he suffered with cancer, had been suffering for years. That had always been the explanation as to why he left. Maybe there were better facilities down here, or better weather in which to recover; I hadn't known. I felt ignorant.

I plunged into quiet and fatigue, deep into a trough—between waves. I drank coffee to jumpstart myself. Did not *drink*, per se. No reason to worry this worried man further, to send the wrong signals regarding my intentions. But coffee's a drug, my father would say, somewhere around his eighth cup of it. Dad drank it black, undiluted; his chronic stand-in. I'd spent the two months since graduation trying to activate that dormant Shrader drinking gene, to get ready for the real thing. Now that I was finally doing this the results would count. I had expectations of myself—potential.

After AA my father used to present litmus tests, little hypotheticals one could use to tell if they're an alcoholic.

If you cannot get up from a dinner table without first finishing your drink; if, when rising to depart you notice a touch of lush still in-glass, however small, and cannot leave without slugging it down—

Tim laughed too often and told us about some computer sales job in Jacksonville. His plans to be a Navy SEAL had never really panned out. He had dropped out of his fallback, West Point, and gone back to school for film, or something.

Ben and his father's partner made out a list of must-sees and if-you-have-the-times and never-minds. I think Ben took notes. I considered anything that stood between me and the coast to be an impediment.

Ben's dad looked not unlike his elementary school teacher likenesses in the dated photographs in Ben's house up north. But so rigid, so square except for that delicately shaped mouth.

Tim laughed and asked me what was wrong. He was seated at the head of our banquette; Ben and I on the booth side, their father and his partner in chairs. I had already forgotten the partner's name.

"I'm just tired," I said. "It's been a long day already."

"Which parks are you interested in?" the partner asked me.

"I don't know," I said.

"Oh, *no*?" Eyebrows everywhere elevated.

I knew there'd be camping, and probably hiking along the way, but not *where*. That wasn't the main reason we were doing this.

Ben cut in, to the rescue. "Kyle's really only interested in seeing the West Coast," he said.

"What's on the Coast?" Ben's father asked me.

"Big Sur is on the coast," I said. "There's a beach out there I want to find."

The partner asked me *which* beach.

I didn't know.

Conversation got back to potential destinations after I gave them my shorthand setup. Heads always nodded apprehensively when they heard of my major; cute little condescending, patronizing moments. I mean English, sure, you can teach, but creative writing? Good for me to pursue something so noble.

Ben and the partner ended up working up quite a list of places for us. Names like Canyon De'Cheilles, Mesa Verde and the Gila Cliff Dwellings did nothing for me. Archeology was not my thing. These two were leaning forward and planning things. Maps and brochures on the table told me this, as I was no longer listening. I realized this

and tried to pretend. The partner was recounting destinations from the trip he and Ben's father had just taken.

“And you'll need at least a couple full days to really see all it has to offer,” the partner said of some place in the desert, nodding with Ben. Nope—I stopped paying attention again. There would be no couple full days for anything until we made the coast and got that monkey off my back.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I wanted to say. “What the hell's going on around here!” My trip was being hijacked. Ben had only signed on for a seat in my van. We were going to split the gas. Sure, we'd stop a few places along the way, see some things, but we did not have time for a romantic tour of the Southwest. Ben had to be home by a certain date. I had my destination. I had myopia.

Tim giggled and breathed through his teeth. Maybe girls liked him because he was sort of tall. He turned to me with a straw in his mouth and tried for more small talk. He told me more about his new job, selling equipment to filmmakers. Wasn't he trying to *be* a filmmaker?—another dream down. I asked him about this discrepancy. See how he shrugs, and talks about bills. Sell out, sell electronics. He'd once sort of stolen a girl from me, at least in my mind, and she'd told me things about him. Ben kind of stole her from me, too, one night. A girl.

See how I recede from this steakhouse, this state, this waiting life as I sit there, staring at shitty coffee, trying to leave.

What would come next? Would there be good times, the gifts of this land, whatever's left, and girls? I hoped so but didn't know. Did Ben even like girls anymore? Had he given up?

Next memory, the very next thing I remember we're behind the van's headlights driving on the straightest road I had ever known. I missed the coincidence.

So straight—was this road—in fact that Ben and I placed wagers on our spatial relationship to a set of blinking lights in the distance that had been up there for a little while already. There were these yellow lights up ahead as we drove, really far ahead on the road for over ten minutes before we even took verbal note of them.

I asked Ben if he saw the lights up there.

“Yeah,” he said, “that traffic light?”

“There's no way that's a traffic light,” I said. “If that's a traffic light, we'd have already reached it by now.”

He assured me it was a stationary traffic light.

“Those lights are *definitely* moving, Benny,” I said. “There's no way that we've been approaching a stationary light for *this* long, and it's still *that* far ahead. Look at the map. This road isn't that straight for that long, no road is.”

“Kyle,” he said, “that is a light.”

I told him it was probably an oversized load, a big, long flatbed with big hazard lights on the back and those caution pennants hung from the tailgate. “We're just gaining on it real gradually,” I said. “Slowly making up ground.”

“It's not moving,” he said.

“Oh, it is,” I said, feeling real good about being right.

“It's a light.”

“Fine—let's make a bet.”

“Fine—you’re on.”

“Sweet.”

I wanted to speed up to get there faster, but the van wouldn’t have liked it. She had been fairly quiet since we left Tampa. The light kept ahead of us for an improbable amount of time. It had gotten cooler as we neared the panhandle. Air-conditioned air poured out of dash vents in a dual stream. It looked like tattered ribbons over fans, faking the effect. The engine pinged. The gauge’s needle shook.

We reached the blinking yellow traffic light after another five or more minutes of driving. I was wrong. Ben laughed with a wheeze. We hadn’t actually wagered anything, but I’d lost nonetheless.

The first time I opened my eyes from the van’s couch in the back, with Ben driving, I frowned. There was a dull ache down there, where things needed to get out. A whole summer backed up. Release—had I nearly come in my sleep?

I think maybe it agitated me to have someone else steering this thing. Ben’s big face grinned up front in the rearview, seeing me awake. The sun had apparently risen. I had missed the Alabama border, our first state line.

Out over the Gulf, past what might have been called a bayou, I caught wind of an approaching storm. Shut my eyes again, and fell from existence.

City of the Dead, ahead.



## RUNE

I stirred in the back after maybe an hour or two of sleep. It must have been early. I had driven most of the night.

There was a glare.

And the water was out there past the flat, low line of marsh scrub and tree, beneath the flat, pale morning sky and in the van, hot already, everywhere. Bayous and swamps and the Gulf and soon the Mississippi; an asphalt swath cut through it all, wet and steaming concrete vapor plume mirages in the late morning sun-lit highway swelter. Her windows were all open and this wet, warm air flapped and lapped at us furiously. The road was pebbled and cracked; her passenger tires hummed a soft protest. I could feel it in the couch. The road rose to meet me. My brow and my back and my neck and the crooks of my knees against couch and the length of my hamstrings pressed to nylon shorts, stuck to my glutes and that swampy, sealed-off place, down there, were all soaked and slimy, dripping my own objections. It was wet and warm and hot already, but not that oppressive, yet. Was I anxious? Afraid? Awake?

“He’s alive!” Ben’s big cheeks and dark squint in the rearview. “Good morning, Sunshine!” he said, that big nurturer.

Waking up angry with Ben driving would become a recursive theme on this trip—not that he would be doing most of the driving, or even his share, but when he did and I allowed myself to collapse, to let go for a time, my basic inability to hand over the reins, to relax set in. My mood soured rapidly. I was desperate not to fuck this up, to ensure it

lived up. I feared the freefall when I lost control, the psychic plunge, emotional ebb and tide. So let this be a chronicle of the sway. It was not the direction of the wave that interested me—amplitude is what I was after. I am sorry for how it comes out; the moon moves, the earth moves, literally we spin. The oceans were tugged and dragged, this sea of me swings.

In sunken New Orleans I did and said my lowest things.

Ben barreled us into the Big Easy just ahead of the Friday afternoon sun, which, in August in the southeast, was quite a thing. Above my damp couch the van's rear, top-hinged windows were propped. I-10 thundered and flapped, engulfing my dampness gently in its turbulence; still early enough in the day that Ben hadn't switched on our meager, struggling air conditioning. I was soaked. There is a word for keeping cool through constant sweat and air circulation. I did not know this word. I was skeptical of its veracity nonetheless.

Delta air was a super-heated sponge, cycling through the van's boxy cabin. It licked me. Wood paneled walls bowed out; the van felt like an old boat.

Ahead, curling itself around New Orleans—the City of the Dead—the Mississippi deposited a million years of mud.

My Faulkner professor and probably Faulkner, himself, called it the City of the Dead because of a flood around the turn of the last century that filled the streets with dead bodies. Pindell stood before the class in the afternoon dust of sunlight through windowed wall and nearly whispered the name, narrowing his eyes and scanning for inspired faces.

His gravely, often soft southern drawl elevated and effeminized for emphasis. The corpses that drifted through town, he said, had been long dead, but not buried. The streets filled with dead bodies because, being so low—below sea level in places, like Holland—New Orleans’ cemeteries are above ground. One does not dig down there; six feet under is the Gulf of Mexico. The dead are filed away, rather, in stone and marble mausoleums, beautiful mazes of private, eternal prisons. The Mississippi, a hundred years ago, flushed out and swept up the slumbering prisoners. To this day they sleep lightly.

I saw brothels and bars and Bourbon Street sidewalks immersed, silent bodies slipping through each scene in the soft, gray currents.

Definitely awake now, I was driving laps; midday traffic in downtown New Orleans, the Superdome, graveyards, the rectangular grid of French Quarter. I scanned side windows at quickly passing scenery, searching for an easily accessible above-ground cemetery.

“Death only closes a man’s reputation and determines it as good or bad.”—reads a plaque in a Big Easy brothel in *Easy Rider*, where Captain America (Wyatt) and Billy are waiting for the girls. Wyatt sees it as Billy complains, “It’s hot in here...Jesus...where are the *chicks*, man?”

While waiting for the girls and to drop acid and trample out into the Mardi Gras madness, Wyatt glimpses his future demise, a subliminal blip of smoldering roadside doom. They four then find one of New Orleans’ above ground cities of the dead and trip balls all day via choppy cinematography and score, close to death.

I, alone, wanted very badly to gain access to one of these above-ground gems. Ben would have to tag along. This was my stop. This one was mine. I had brought along some mushrooms for us, for this specific occasion, and my father's camera.

The fact that this was not Mardi Gras, the sixties, or a movie did not occur to me.

“What about this one coming up, Ben, right *here*—what do you think?” Wrought iron fencing threatened childhood Halloween horrors and tetanus.

“*Maybe*,” Ben said, getting at something else entirely. “I don't know, but maybe we should call for a *room*?” We were in town. We had nowhere to stay.

“So *not* that one, then? Was it locked? Did you *see*?”

“Scale that *fence*, then, dude, the one with the spikes on top. Call me crazy: *I* would like to sleep in a *room* tonight.”

“We'll *find* a little motel driving around like this, Benny, this is eff'n *New Orleans*! There are going to be rooms.” It had gotten warmer. “Oh, what about *this* one coming up, Ben; ten o'clock. What do you think? Is it open to the public? Can I get *in* there?”

Turned out they were all walled-off and gated, locked-up like little fortresses from what I could see from the van, driving by, for some reason unwilling to stop, for some reason spooked by the traffic and narrow lanes, old road, no sleep and that fatalism already seeping in. What was the use?

While driving down a main drag—Charles?—I contemplated handing Ben the wheel and diving out my driver's door, tumbling to a stop and hopping the closest ornamental fence, but timid-when-sober, never-been-arrested (but close) little me was not much for daytime trespassing.

They must have broken in in the movie. Or maybe, because it was the late sixties things were not as sealed-off as they are now, for insurance purposes or something. You could actually experience things first-hand, at your own risk. Or just maybe, because it was a movie, they never had to deal with such schematics. Just scenes. Just get the shot.

I gave up too soon and we drove the perimeter of the French Quarter twice, then once down the center seeking some magic figment-of-my-imagination thirty-dollar-a-night room on a Friday afternoon in August, my little compromise for Ben. But there was no such thing. Eventually I stopped us in the slums on the east side of town to call AAA from a payphone on a calling card, to Ben's big delight.

It was hot now, full-on melting. I hadn't yet set my eighteen-digit calling card sequence to memory. Broken asphalt glared. The payphone's metal shell was etched with sunshine. It had no hood, no shelter. With some discomfort and a shoddy connection I landed us a sixty-dollar-a-night job at the Radisson, on Grant. The hotel was shuttle distance from the Quarter, and more expensive than I would have liked, but anything would have been better than where I was, out there where it was all too bright, and back in the van—in the broiler—where we smelled loudly.

They made me valet the van. Immediately it was all wrong. I pulled up to the busy curb and began to unload, until a hop in a funny maroon uniform asked for my keys. No public lot, he said. It was valet or the curb, but not the curb right there, or even within a reasonable number of blocks or with any reasonable semblance of security if I eventually did find a spot, somewhere, so I should hand them over. It went against my value

system. I felt violated. It was complimentary and secure, he assured me, peering into her belly through the sliding door. The van rocked from passing traffic and the kid in the funny bellhop hat I didn't know people actually even wore anymore was being pushy. His hand twitched for the keys. I guessed I had no choice and handed them over. I didn't want all my earthly possessions out of sight or in someone else's care so I told him to hang on as I hauled out the majority of my gear, the big blue footlocker and everything; my books—*Big Sur*, *Book of Blues*, a Norton Poetry Anthology, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, a few others—and my ancient external frame pack and newer black daypack with notes for the trip and atlas and my clothes, my shit. Security, he said.

People watched me wobble past them in the lobby and the elevator and the heavily carpeted maroon hallways with my arms bowed out by big blue footlocker and multiple backpacks and odd things like belts and a pair of boots hung from my body, weighing me down like Harrison Bergeron.

First business, once inside our paper Mache-walled room on the first Friday of our summer together was to smoke, to get high, to simultaneously burn away our innocent, afternoon sense of security, and the sense enough to care. First, though—while still somewhat sober—I called down for the van, as we planned to hit the city streets and get a sense of where we were; food, lush, all that.

We were seated opposite each other on the insides of our double beds. The weight settled in around our eyes. Smoke wafted aimlessly between us. Lids hung heavy. We smiled.

Ben set up our laughable stereo system on the desktop, and we laughed: a walkman and two battery-powered, pocket-sized speakers. He had brought along an assortment of tapes for his driving legs—old school, Canadian shit—and this setup was his only way to hear them. He planned to use this in the van. Good luck with that, I said. It was quiet and crackly, vinyl distorted and tinny, but we had tunes.

There was a tunneling redundancy to peering through the peephole when high. The cop-knock at the door had frozen our eyes wide—well, mine; Ben's could only open so much—paralyzed in brief, mutual terror. I expected to see a fisheye of blue, bloated vests and jangling utility belts. I did not expect to see the silly maroon uniform of a valet and his silly hat. That unmistakable and irresponsible knock: three times distinct, sort of thing that shakes up the empty stomach and dampens the brow. But lucky for us—not so much for the van—I was wrong about the knock. We were not getting arrested. It was the van, he said, she had been hit.

This news was difficult to take in at first, face to face with a young, sober, slack-faced valet in the threshold of doorway. We are trained by television to look for a camera, and I did, first thing, scanning the carpeted hallway for recording equipment, a crew, some hint of a practical joke. I tried not to flinch.

No camera. No joke.

I got to ride the valet's mechanized fireman's pole up to see her in the parking garage, watching the cross-sections of floors drop like I was ascending some military bunker in a

narrow, open tube; had no idea such a thing existed. Stick out an arm and lose it. I had to take care when dismounting.

My van had a new watermelon of a dent in her passenger door now—perfect size for my head—and a mysteriously dead battery. I approached her like a parent; didn't want to let her see my concern.

A Mustang cleared its metallic throat around a blind bend and nearly nipped me. The exhaust note rattled and expanded in the concrete concert hall, tickling my inner ear like water in the shower. My personal, unapologetic tour guide told me to be careful.

Up there on the third or fourth floor, near the corner of the structure it did not look like the New Orleans they sell you: the hazy glow of southern summer over economically depressed, dusty streets. There was a filter over my lens. Dirty windshields caught the sun in a junkyard below; its wooden fences sagged. Everything was packed dirt down there.

Ben and I took dinner in an Irish pub around the corner from our hotel, walking distance, unable to retrieve the van due to the dead battery and the filing of a police report and the taking down of statements and whatnot. A Lincoln had hit her. An old lady in a Lincoln.

We took a booth inside the slender, simple place. We ordered pints from the bartender after waiting for him to recognize us—his only patrons—and come out from behind his counter. The walls were green with visible brushstrokes. There were napkin dispensers on the tables. It was all too bland and universal. We could have been in any city, anywhere.

The bar's soundtrack was a televised Braves game hung above the hardwood. It absorbed me. Lonely months spent in Florida had warmed me to the only summer sport, aside from tennis, and the Braves got ample coverage in the south. Millwood was on the mound, sweating profusely. He squeezed his cap's bill and swiped his dripping goatee, glaring in at the plate. The hum of crowd noise between pitches was a din. Always easy to immerse in televised sports, always easy to escape to that perfect world where the rules were known and the conflict contained, the roles defined—but where the hell was everyone? We were the only ones there. This was downtown New Orleans on a Friday evening; should the bar not be PACKED? We got the feeling there was something else going on, somewhere else, as we nodded and maneuvered our eyebrows back and forth until our food arrived. What was it everyone else knew that we do not? Was there anybody out there?

“Place is pretty empty, for a Friday,” I finally said to Ben. I set down my sandwich. “This is shit.”

“It's not *that* bad, guy,”

“Not the *food*, Benny.”

Loitering was the best word for it, what we were doing, I figured, seated beneath yellow streetlights and bumping off the backs of our hands on someone's front stoop just a block or two off Bourbon. I wanted to figure out what we were doing. It didn't feel right. Not the illegal activity—parked cars provided eye-level privacy where we were perched. Not our behavior—our demeanor was not enthused as we did white bumps from the baggie, and therefore not conspicuous, I thought. I didn't know. The stone steps beneath my

keester were not cold like I had hoped. They were pebbled and my cheeks seemed to compress. I could feel it.

This was New Orleans; I should not have been able to feel a damn thing.

This was New Orleans, we were not wasted, we had not even spoken to a female and my van had been hit.

Each time Ben was up to bat he wasted too much. The back of his hand was too bulbous; not bony enough to form a nook, not even close. His big, astronaut-glove fingers fumbled to pinch open the baggie. Chalky powder pyramids caved and spilled to the cement. He went in quickly to Hoover up what he could before it all fell or maybe before I noticed. My throat tasted of aspirin and my head was too clear. I could do math.

The bum had won me over with the line, “Try before you buy”—undeniable ethos in that, I had thought. I was mildly drunk at the time, buzzed. It all seemed straightforward enough. This guy with weathered skin beneath awkward baseball cap and oversized, ragged denim shirt asked us for a smoke, which, when procured, let him know we weren’t cops, he said.

Did we want?

I looked at Ben.

Sure we did. I followed him, the bum, from our corner down a narrow, overhung side street full of drunks and tourists and drunken tourists to an alley, down the alley, onto our keesters beside a bar, backs to a brick wall. Slumped there I noticed my hairy knees; stupid, prickly light hairs. Different perspective on the world from down there. I thought my sandals stunk. He repeated his tagline—“Try before you buy,”—and when I reached for the bag he scolded me—“Hey, man,”—and did his own, then dropped it by

my feet and said, “Be cool, man.” I picked it up and did a bump off his key, how kind.

He could hand me a key but not the bag. Maybe we were roommates, I guessed.

Nothing illegal about a key, so to speak.

In the street, a bearded hobo scuffed his feet like a sagging marionette.

I marched back to Ben and we found ourselves a stoop several blocks away, eager to kill some brain cells.

We’d made the mistake of drinking Bourbon’s famous frozen beverages on our first night along the strip. You walked up to a cutout in whichever building you were closest to, gave someone cash, and they gave you one of too many different kinds of colored, frozen drink. You then walked away, free to roam a public street, frozen drink in hand.

Sounded great. We were pumped to get shitted, save for one problem: the proof of Bourbon’s famous hurricanes was suspect. No guarantee what’s in there. Grain alcohol was synonymous with sucker; invisible, odorless, tasteless product my ass. Should we trust the Bourbon Street sidewalk bartenders?—Plastic aquariums of churning colors, the spinning promise of escape, thrum of refrigeration and the cool blast of relief?

“Tomorrow night we drink BEER,” I said from our stoop, “all night.” You can do the math with beer, you can prove it.

Ben had switched himself over to the good stuff halfway through the night, while I refused. I had told him he could have beer anytime he pleased.

“This is Bourbon Street, Benny. Fucking *Bourbon* Street,” I said. “Have a Hurricane.”

We made our lame way from someone's front steps to our lame and lonely shuttle stop early enough to wait for the last bus. Slumping on a black bench beneath yellow light and a swampy night, we were dry, out of the big game by one o'clock; we waited for a complimentary shuttle service, the promise of air conditioning.

"This is fucking unacceptable, is what it is," I said to Ben. "I mean, are you at *all* fucked up? Because I'm fucking *bored* right now, waiting for a fucking *bus* to take me back to my cushy fucking *hotel* room at one in the fucking *morning* on a Friday fucking *night*; the first official night of this *entire* fucking *road* trip and I should *not* be able to even *have* this conversation right now. I *should* be..." and et cetera.

Needless to say, the next night I planned to pre-game with some liquor, real distilled spirits. Swim with the other fishes and forget all this maddening stream.

My father said if you cannot, or do not turn it "off" at some point in the night, if you never reach that spot where you say, "Okay, enough,"—if it's never enough...

The van needed jumps the next afternoon to get herself going. I was getting to know the valet staff.

I drove my wounded transportation to a liquor store, which, turns out in New Orleans, was any store we pleased; added new meaning to the term, Convenience. We bought two bottles of rum at a CVS, I think, then ended up in the ghetto again, against the same damn curb I had called for our fucking room from the day before, the room that got my van dinged. On the road for two days and already she'd been hit, wouldn't start without a boost, and scenes were repeating. We were treading water in a whirlpool.

I drove away from the bright sidewalk in front of a barred-up bodega, with supplies for our pre-game festivities and a fleeting, renewed vigor for finding a cemetery.

But my father's camera would remain in its bag in New Orleans, save for a handful of hotel room black and whites, notably one of me taking a picture of myself, in a mirror. First shot of the trip: camera where my face should be, the bare tops of my shoulders just above the bottom frame of the glass, grainy, gray.

Lunch along Decatur, outdoors on a covered patio, hungry for this to actually be New Orleans.

We brought the wounded van back to the bastards at the Radisson after scoring libations and bypassing every graveyard in town, and took the shuttle down here, to the Quarter. Too much pedestrian traffic for her boxy rump, and after giving up on the whole cemetery thing I had had no more drive to steer.

Jazz was audible from across the street, from a covered café in the wide center median where Decatur splits around a market. Three pieces—piano, upright bass and trumpet—beneath a black awning. Soft, swingy stuff. Easy listening for the people?

I ordered a Po'Boy and the best damn gumbo on the planet, and bottled beer. Our server was young, tall, and un-shampooed; his dark hair clung to and curled against his stubble. My gumbo had shrimp and sausage and rice and beans. It was the only gumbo I had ever tried. It was the color of mud. Delicious, spicy mud.

Beside our table, across the black patio railing a bee—one of those overstuffed, hairy kinds of bees—flapped and hummed above a flower. I was distracted. A car showered thick, dark smoke down the street.

I thought this might be it.

Decatur is essentially a shopping district. Old storefronts renovated for business: some tourist trap knick-knack shacks, some sharp, expensive places. I had the opportunity to be a good little consumer and use a birthday gift certificate on sunglasses. I bought my first pair of expensive shades. Kind of item one easily sits on, or misplaces, a history of bent frames and popped lenses. Ten dollar jobs do just as well. But I should not waste my gift, and there was ample glare, so I bought myself a fancy pair of mirrored beauties. I felt guilty, self-conscious. Now I had something to lose.

On our shuttle ride back to Grant, Ben caught a glimpse of my open journal. Over my shoulder he read the title, “New Orleans Blues” aloud and pretended to comfort.

“Ah...little guy, *c'mere*,” he said in his best mock-concerned, grandmotherly way. I had brought along a Kerouac compilation entitled, *Book of Blues*. Thought I'd add my own music to the myth, my own contrived, melancholic rhymes, except that Kerouac does not rhyme in his short lines and poetic fragments and I was completely full of shit. I would have manifested a fucking mental collapse at that point—if I were capable—to make myself an artist.

Back in our room we listened to children through the walls and kicked off our pre-game festivities. Ben smiled when I stepped out of the bathroom in my towel. “Look at you, guy,” he said. I'd lost my baby fat senior year. We played blackjack for shots on a desk chair between our beds. I watched Ben smoke because I refused to dampen my

motivation for the night. Our room's curtains were white, but thick. The late day dusty twilight filtered through muted by more than half, a perfect backdrop. Ribbons of smoke rose and curled unto themselves. We gulped from plastic bathroom cups.

Ben's bottle was the Castillo, Gold. Mine, a fifth of Captain. Mine had cost twice as much. We each finished our own. We compared rum/splash cokes occasionally, mostly so I could feel better about spending so much more. And Castillo *was* syrupy, almost sandy on my teeth. The Captain was smoother. I told Ben that while Castillo is, indeed a bargain at its price, I gladly pay another ten dollars for the quality.

"And tomorrow, Benny," I said, certain of myself, "I'll feel a whole lot better than you will!"

The fat and the foreign got off at the stop for Harrah's: some pentagonal city intersection, broad walkways, the casino's gaudy face. A solid, sweat suited majority swayed the short bus off its rear springs as they dismounted. We rose slightly. My eyes swam in their sockets and stung. I felt carted, shuttled, ushered and quarantined behind tinted windows and hermetic seal from engine exhaust and everything else. My skin was flushed. I itched.

Early evening snobs were next. They pranced forward at Decatur, lazy necks and watch-ed wrists bobbing off toward material heaven on the shopping strip. Rustic, wrought-iron streetlights had begun to glow beyond smoked glass. Off behind the two-dimensional storefronts and condos, somewhere up there, above us, splashing and lapping at its levy, maybe ten or more feet above our bus the Mississippi drifted and deposited,

gathered and dragged. I got a touch of the swim. Ben and I were the only two left on the shuttle. We took it as far as we could.

There are pictures from this night, from Ben's camera, in color.

First one is by me, of the both of us in our bus bench, my arm extending the camera as far as it can. But our bodies are cropped off, improperly framed. My face is in the bottom left corner of the shot, at an angle, no human emotion. Ben smiles big. His eyes nearly disappear. Benny open your eyes. There is tension in my tight lips, a clenched look that Ben will see later in the night; the precursor to what will divide this evening.

Next one is also of the both of us, by me, but out on the bustling Saturday night neon and streetlight sidewalk, our backs against a brick wall, similarly miscropped. Ben grins happy time New Orleans. My face is fixed in a thousand-yard stare.

Yet another is by me, but of Ben this time, with his mouth agape, giggling, gesturing to the ladies behind him. Two drunken, middle age messes throw back their bloated heads while entering a bar. Beads around their necks. Halter tops and short, tight pants. Not possessing the physiques that such youthful attire suggests.

The last is one of me, alone, by Ben, a side view shot taken without my knowledge. Beer like a walking stick in my fist, khaki cargo shorts, blue polo shirt—I play the predictable part. My face is set and intent toward the street's growing mass. This is the last shot from this night. Our last correspondence before departure. That distant look on my face. Ben will see this look later tonight, and leave me out here on the street to fend for myself. He will walk back to the hotel solo, sauntering drunk.

We patrolled Bourbon with our beers. The street had filled surprisingly; I felt stupid for being surprised. Women were baring their breasts somewhere within chaotic, chanting and cheering circles of men. These mosh-pits sprung up in the street with a roar, crescendo-ed, and dissipated. On the sidewalk we brushed elbows and eyes with vacant, flushed faces. The last picture from our night. My face. We were fairly lit but still in control. We marched up the increasingly crowded street; I could still tell which way we were headed, toward downtown, toward our hotel. There was a current to this drift. We were slowing down.

Ben and I drank plastic beer and patrolled Bourbon Street on a steamy Saturday night in August. We heard the high-pitched woos and throaty yeahs that signal bare skin somewhere, then saw the quickly forming circles of commotion that surround them, but never really got inside. These black holes formed and broke apart around us, dispersing more reluctantly than they gathered mass. Somewhere in the mess of bodies and cameras held high and video recorders bearing down and beads—beads like lassoes everywhere, it's a goddamn drunken circus in the street, endless strands of slavery beads and colors—women, real women lifted their tops and shouted. We could hear their feminine calls from somewhere within the rings, howling for validation. Nipples were as good as plastic gold; attention and ten cent strands of Chinese beads. Breasts erupted all around us and were worshipped.

Faulkner calls them mammalian ludicrosities. Bloated glands and skin. I had seen only six pairs meant for me. I could not help but look. It was not the goods as much

as the human beings who bared them to us; what kind of woman behaves that way. Were they real?

Beers were cheap, reliable, and masculine. Trusty. Our top lips were dewy with foam. Ben's reddish goatee trapped ample suds.

We yearned for live music. An old black man working the door or the sidewalk or the curb pointed us toward a place, a joint, and corrected our pronunciation of his town. "N'awlins," he said, "N'aaawllins!" His jowls quivered as he dropped back his head like a hip wolf and let it rip. We practiced it for his benefit and for kicks, smacking each other on the shoulders, and headed in.

The place was packed; a two level joint with only one bar and a loud, brassy band. We figured shots in there could be trusted; you could taste the real deal. I dropped way too much on a round. We barely winced. The current carried us toward the stage and we swayed. Hot lights above the band made us feel like we were up there, sweating and strutting to the big band swing. Ben's eyes fixed on the flashy trombone player; he used to parade his slide from side to side like that, back in concert band, slurring and overblowing for his own amusement. There were about a dozen pieces up there, loud and showy; not really my speed. I elbowed Ben where his ribs should be and we dipped. The music was muffled only slightly outside in the swooning sudden blast of spongy air. I had felt trapped and anonymous in there, too far from my drink. No sense of time. This night would last forever until I woke up. Its pitch rose to a fever and plateau-ed.

On the sidewalk, down near the western reach of Bourbon where the herds thinned out slightly in the shadow of downtown—Grant was right down that way, maybe two or three blocks, tops—a girl argued with her boyfriend on our side of the street. Or maybe they didn't know each other. Either way he walked away and left her there. She didn't look that upset. Her short, ruffled skirt was paper Mache. She was quite thin. Tattoo on her shoulder. Big, pouting lips I could see from ten yards. She swayed a bit while scanning the crowd. Ah yes, a drinker. I sauntered up and one of us initiated.

Even that far down the street, in the mingling, noncommittal crowds her tiny voice was hard to discern. I tried to watch her mouth and not her swimmy eyes. Something about being stuck in New Orleans for too long, I think. Trying to clean herself up. I told her she looked good to me. She looked me toe to dome. Asked me where I was from and where I was staying. I tried to tell her about my trip and how much farther we had to go—I said further—and how much fun we were having already; anything to keep it light and amiable. Her eyes dipped in and out of the conversation. Occasionally and increasingly she swayed in place. She was impatient. She was waiting for something. I gave her my room number at the Radisson and asked her if maybe she wanted to hang out some time, maybe later tonight or tomorrow. She saw my face for the second time and said a soft maybe. Then she walked away. She re-entered the fray. I followed her unsteady progress with my eyes.

I took a shot in the ribs from Ben, whose cheeks built up beneath his eyes as he grinned, having patiently kept his distance until I struck out. He called me a stud.

“I don't know,” I said, shrugging. “She was all wasted.”

“Maybe she had to get back to *work*, dude.”

“Hey, at least I *talked* to a girl, Ben,” I said. “I’m *trying* here.”

“That was a prostitute, Kyle,” he said sternly, catching me off guard.

It is at precisely this point that Ben sees the look.

“No way,” I said. “There is no fucking way.”

“Okay, *stud*. Whatever you say—” he said and stopped, guiding my gaze with his own and said, “LOOK.” She was down the sidewalk a little ways, speaking with a tall, well dressed guy, her hand on his hand. The two of them turned to walk. Hard to tell whether he was walking away from her or leading the way for her. They crossed the street with her in tow. The distance between them increased. “You were talking to a hooker and didn’t *know* it?” Ben said behind me. “*Come on!*”

Chaotic background din—everything was background, receding. She was the only thing. First time I’d ever seen a prostitute—a real hooker—much less spoken to one. Binghamton had its share, I was sure, but they had been crack whores and difficult to discern from the common street trash. Fucking unacceptable is what it was. Our last night in the Big Easy. No way. There was no fucking way.

Ben emptied his beer on his face and down his throat. Mine was already gone. We were obliterated. I shivered for a second, intent on the crowd down the street, in the direction she moved. My face had changed. I saw her again through bodies, possibly following someone. Ben cleared his throat. My feet started to move, to drift after her meandering procession.

“Hey,” I heard. “Alright guy,” he said. He was not following. “Well,” he said, “I’m going back then.”

She was gone again. I tried to inventory her outfit in my swimming brain, cross-referencing it against the other girls on the street, everywhere around me. Maybe find a match. ID another hooker. Could be any one of them.

Random girls were followed; anyone I determined to be dressed a certain way, which was most of them. I slowly stalked them, moving in on conversations. Zeroing in. Stalking. Watching. Scanning. Following. Failure was not an option. I'd dropped the ball so many times, and tonight, right in front of me, drunk and skinny with an Eastern European, full-lipped face, it had been in reach.

Ben was nearly out of sight when I turned to see, down the street where the dirty crowd dissipated and mixed with the clean, the current running clearer—Bourbon Street's brackish delta. Ben's arms rolled about his substantial waistline in a shuffle. He was gone.

Consciousness becomes an intermittent series of photographs. Brief, first person snapshots. Low quality, grainy. Streetlights are spheres of fuzzy boundary. Ambiguity. Everything yellow and sickly. The sweat smell of sweat. I am propelled, carried along. Suddenly Bourbon's herd thin out. Where is everyone going? This is N'awlins, assholes! A real night never ends.

Seated on a curb, smell-level with sparse crotches. The scenery had shifted. A new crowd emerged; black children on bicycles, black men on children's bicycles, black women on too-high heels, really thin pedestals, dirty white men sweeping the sidewalk. There was no wind, only the brushing of matted push brooms. A street cleaner roared by

like a vacuum. The current of the French Quarter had settled down. There is a word for the static moment between tides, when there is briefly no current at all. I had come to rest on the curb.

It was slack tide on Bourbon Street.

Black man on purple bicycle could help me, whatever I was looking for. I had been waiting there, ass on curb, knees in front of me like an obvious tourist frog in my cargo shorts, leather sandals that strap behind my heels, pale legs, light hair. Elbows on those legs waiting. My empty plastic cup, crushed.

“A girl,” I said.

“I got you,” he said and I got up to follow his bike. He crossed in front of me, slowly, weaving back again and leaning too far to each side as he mowed a path. We turned down a side street. Young black boys joined our parade—impression of a posse. I was the only white person in the world, being led to the scene of an ironic lynching.

I was following a full grown man on a young person’s bicycle. His handlebars were flipped forward. His knees splayed outward. He was a frog. Everything amphibious. The kids around us kept out of my way. We all swam. His reassurances did little for me, whispered from the side of his face as he lazily pedaled, weaving. Just so long as I took care of him, for taking care of me, he said.

Some kind of slender railroad car strip club lounge, wide enough for a bar and booths.

Women mixing with men. Conversations. Drinks. The word “brothel” in my mind, but not so classy. The bartender told me to buy a drink. I had to drink. An old, saggy woman sat beside me and told me the same. Buy a drink. Cash in my pockets. Drinks. Women. A raven-haired girl in the doorway, advertising. The black man and his posse waiting for me outside, for their cut of the action. He scowled at me beneath the thin figure’s arm. They would not let him in. I think I waved.

Long, dark hair in the doorway. Legs like stripper’s poles. I ignored the large sack with bad teeth beside me and moved toward the door. She told me her name. I asked her to repeat it. Her name was Rune. I had no idea what had become of my tour guide outside.

Next thing, sandals slapped pavement in a hurried stomp. I was walking very fast. I raced the sun. It was a tie.

Inside our white-walled womb, sweet sleep ensued.

Lids parted painfully to Ben in his tighty-whities crossing the dimly lit room, falling into his bed. His body was large and pale, his underwear and shirt very white. He had just answered the door.

My blissful bubble of ignorance exploded in my throat as she entered the room. She approached my bed directly, nowhere for me to go. Couldn’t be more than ninety pounds, the girl from the doorway of the club. My bed sheet was to my chin. She slid beneath the covers after slipping out of her skirt and shirt. They fell from her. No panties and I removed her bra. No breasts either and my underwear was off.

Ben was a large pile beneath thin sheets. He looked almost blue now, cold. The air conditioner clicked on, rattled and began to hum.

“I’m afraid it’s all over when I come,” I said.

“It doesn’t have to be,” she said, her skeletal face framed by hamstrings and the backs of knees.

Despite the cold air and condom I could. Her legs were hooked over my shoulders, her head against the headboard—what it must be for. She slipped out from beneath me, began to dress. She mumbled something and said so it’s gonna be a hundred instead of seventy five. Something about a waiting cab. I reached beside the nightstand for my bag, almost beneath my bed for my disgusting wad of bulging cash and gave her some.

Ben was a large, pale mass on his bed. White sheets clung to his torso, gathered up from all corners, bunching toward him. It was very cold. Light was cut by less than half through white curtains across his bed. The hotel room shuddered. I searched the perimeter of my bed for the blanket.

Oblivion in the morning. Startling self-hate. Static.

A precipice.

That silence, that holding of the air before I jump. Crass cannonballs off the high platform. Currents of empty water ran cold down my spine, kerplunk in my infinite swimming pool soul, myopic morning stew.

Walking to our room to gather our luggage so we could leave—waiting on the valets to jump my poor van again, the idea of her as sanctuary forever tainted—I could have used some shelter. We passed the hotel’s rooftop pool. We were walking ghosts on a Sunday morning, just around the corner from our room.

“Hey look,” Ben said, minus ambition, “the pool.”

Its surface was foamy from activity, near capacity with children, all black. Their skin shined in the sunlight as they bobbed and splashed.

“Looks like a toilet bowl,” I said, then wobbled at the knees and scuffed against abrasive wallpaper for support.

She died again outside the hotel in the sun. The valet manager had refused to accept responsibility for the initial accident or for the now-dead battery. He had given me the insurance information of the other driver and told me it was my problem. He was kind enough to have a limo brought around for our final, farewell jump.

We complained to hotel management, Ben doing the talking, being a people-person, and got a night knocked off my credit card. The valet’s manhandling of my van didn’t fly as an excuse, something about private contractors and vendors and things, so we complained about a lack of fresh towels (which was true) and too much noise through thin walls. I told the manager I would have liked to take a shower before leaving.

## THE WINNER LOSES

I know what they mean when they sing, “Houston, too close to New Orleans.” Ben and I could really harmonize the Dead, he going high, me low; and if one of us put *American Beauty* in driving west out of the soupy bayou towards Texas in the sun—something to buoy my spirits with—then it was a good idea. “Whoa, whoa baby, back where I belong...”

Ben told me to let it out, man, that I sounded fine if I really sang and just used my own voice.

We left New Orleans early on a Sunday afternoon, blasting hot air and black insects aside, barreling straight for my sister’s place in Houston. We busted out of the Big Easy with a godforsaken lap-full of Big Macs and fries, something heavy to calm the stormy insides, anything to grease the descent. The McDonald’s had been wedged beneath the highway like some sultry northern ghetto beneath subway tracks, around the corner from our hotel. It was on the way out.

The roadway just west of town was elevated, raised above wetlands. The Atchafalaya Swamp; maybe the first real swamp I had ever seen, beneath a long bridge...that whole million years of mud thing, waiting to swallow me and my transgressions. There was no way to win.

Why fight it?

After his drinking days were done, my father liked to tell me he was the best bad example. He hoped maybe his mistakes would serve to deter my own. That I might learn from him in advance.

And just from watching, just from having been there as a kid, clips of it in my earliest memories, I was doomed. I'd seen my life play out a million ways in memory and TV and movies and my books. I was likely unable to self-destruct. I'd never be the muse.

Maybe my father had succeeded.

I had not seen my sister since Christmas with the family in Florida—since right before I drove the lonely road north to school in New York and then on to Vermont for the whole overrated millennial celebration—when the family had remarked at how quiet her boyfriend was. I had suggested any man would be intimidated by the Italian triumvirate of my mother and her two sisters. This brief pit stop in Houston would be an ideal opportunity to observe her and her man, Kevin, in their natural environment, to see if she had maybe turned the corner and found herself, and to see who the hell this guy was.

This stop would only be for a night and a day, a brief refueling at my sister's insistence, but she had been peripherally involved in this whole road trip thing I had going since the beginning. I'd first ingested Kerouac—for a class—in her undergraduate apartment. We'd driven to Florida together in her Saab.

I remember the thermostat went out in Georgia. It was June and we had to use the heat. I was the one who had to bleed her coolant system via payphone instructions from our father. It was ninety-plus on I-95 and we had the heat on full bore when traffic

stopped. We were near the front of the line. Black smoke lay ahead like a soft wall. Emergency vehicles passed us on the sloped, grassy shoulder and median. Tall cypress lined the divided highway. People got out of their cars. It was hot. Her heat was blasted into our laps. Ahead of us maybe thirty yards, flames curled and flared from the trees on both sides of the highway. We were nearly enveloped. My sister and I bickered and snapped. Summer in the south is hot.

Her naturally curly red hair had been streaked with blond at Christmas. It had been warm then, too. “Why do you care?” she would ask me when I showed disapproval of her decisions. To me it was some material effort at fashioning an image, advertising, immature contrivance, signs of someone who did not know herself. Her highlights made me sad for her as though I had myself figured out and I hoped it had just been a blip.

Ben and I arrived at some softball park after sundown, tired and of course, high. I had briefly protested the replenishing of my brain’s THC supply before we arrived—the task of meeting new people lay ahead and all—but Ben was not one to ration and I was not one to say no. Eye drops helped and so did the nighttime. It was not terribly quiet when we walked up to my sister and her friends in their small park-type enclosure, as they cheered Kevin’s team beneath the kind of lights that made everything feel staged and on video. There were insects. People had beers in their hands.

I spent several minutes lamenting the loss of my summer. The softball did me in. It was only August and we had just begun, we had many weeks still to go, but I couldn’t shake the thoughts of June and July, of having lost them to blue eyes and bussing tables. My ghetto Meg Ryan, I had called her; she was not actually in moving pictures, and

therefore slightly less flawless, in person. She caught my eye nonetheless, and I hers, I liked to think, despite the lack of results and the therefore lamented summer. Anyway I took just a moment to deal with all that. We had gotten close, but my too-easy, unmasked love was never requited. Never even had a chance, after the fact. My pursuit of her had left me emptied. I'd embarked on this trip having declared myself hollow.

Meg Ryan and I had played softball together—that's the connection, why I was thinking about it. I'd been a busboy that summer.

After the fun flood of memories I watched the remnants of a game. Kevin was on the wedge, under-handing the ball. He was tall and thin, his face nose-heavy. I think he smiled, spoke to and joked with teammates between tosses. He seemed nothing like I remembered.

After softball we sat around my sister's living room. Off-white walls, beige carpeting; cookie cutter apartment. Four of us: my sister and Kevin on the loveseat, Benny on the sofa, and me in a small chair. My sister had a roommate she wanted me to meet, but she was elsewhere. We got high, the four of us, excited and pleasantly surprised (I was) that Kevin smoked. For the occasion, maybe as a test, we smoked the good stuff.

Ben had smuggled down two key components to this trip: an ounce of mid-grade 'mersh (commercial), nothing too shabby at all, and also half an ounce of high-grade, homegrown hydroponic Amsterdam seed-derived Super Skunk Number Five, the real deal. A friend's father grew it up north for his cancer fight. It was the kind of stuff that could wake us up after hours on the road of smoking and music and the same scenery scrolling past; just one hit and HELLO! We're traveling! Look at the colors.

Just smelling it almost worked. Kevin's eyes lit up when I opened the bag for him. Ecstatic as I was that this man who claimed to love my sister smoked, I opted for the good shit. He coughed a lot. My sister coughed more. We sat around her living room.

"What are you guys talking about?" My sister said, always with a nervy chuckle.

"Whoa, whoa there Marissa," Kevin said next to her, quietly.

"What?"

"Hey there," Ben said, also soothingly quiet but forceful, "take it easy."

"Wait, what's going on?"

"There's no need to yell," I cautioned her, pushing a flat palm towards the ground.

"You guys are just messing with me."

"Marissa," Kevin said, "you don't have to be so loud."

"Yeah, just take it easy there," Ben echoed.

My sister shook her head. Her eyes were closed for a second, her smile thinning out. "But I'm not yelling—"

"Hey," Kevin interrupted very quietly, covering his ears, "really, we're all right here. There's no need to scream."

"Marissa," I said, even more softly now, "it's okay. Just calm down. We're all speaking with our in-side voi-ces. See?"

"But—"

"Ah!" Kevin yelled. "You hurt my ears..." and so on.

It went on this way for a while. Ben with his squinty-eyed smile, grinning them shut, Kevin coming through in an unexpected and perfect way, picking on the sister that had terrorized my sensitive, fragile youth, and me laughing in a way not entirely unlike her. Eventually she retreated to bed, unable to hang. The three guys sat there, free from the lightweight and shot it well, the shit, talked about psychedelic drugs and road trips and weather and why I think there's a difference between those who have tripped and those who have not. My folks, for example, and my sister—there's a difference. It is nice sometimes, to see how things can be familiar. Occasionally it is comforting.

First time I had gotten high with my sister—my older and straighter and only sister—I had to tackle her afterward in our backyard. She first hid beneath our house's deck, and then, once flushed she ran, hysterical. I got to chase her down like a linebacker and bring her to the ground. The thing that had spooked her was big Ben tip-toeing the perimeter of our fire pit—the one I had dug and bordered with my bare hands—pretending to teeter her way, threatening a fall.

“Ben, stop it,” she said. “You're scaring me.” Last thing she said before disappearing into the night. He had this effect on people, Ben did, like a lost bear in suburban backyards.

The next afternoon in Houston traffic and sunshine, as promised, my sister took us to eat gumbo. She wanted me to like Houston. The restaurant was new and in a strip mall of sorts. The place was kind of dead for being lunchtime, nice and relaxing. I was hungry.

“You know,” my sister said, “they say Houston's the nation's fattest city.”

I slapped Ben on the shoulder, as if to indicate that we'd finally found his home.  
"Oh, yeah? How do they determine that?"

"I think they took some kind of survey, and took in to consideration the ratio of health clubs to restaurants, per capita, or something. We have a lot of restaurants in Houston."

"But," I said, "What does that really tell you?"

"I don't know how accurate an estimation it is. I think it was in the paper."

"It tells you nothing. It's fucking BS."

"Well, okay. Sorry I brought it up."

"I'm just saying."

"So nice to see you, too."

My sister was excited when the gumbo arrived. She was eager for my reaction to it, never mind how we'd just come from New Orleans, and that this was a strip mall. She wanted me to like Houston. This was my first visit. Uncharacteristically, I admitted it was pretty good. Never mind New Orleans, maybe it would go away.

My sister asked me what had happened in New Orleans at one point. Then, sensing my unease, said never mind, she didn't really want to know.

I brought up our departure.

The idea was that we would leave at night. Our father had sold me the cross-Texas trip as some full-day trek; the sun would rise on us twice, I knew, at least twice racing up the van's back—cooking us—to the western horizon. Texas, daylight, August, my van—these things would add up. Leave at night, he had warned. Leave at night.

At our trendy strip mall lunch, when the bet between Ben and me was first proposed, my sister shared her local revision of my father's advice: "The sun is rizzed, and the sun is set, and I ain't out of Texas yet." I scorned her use of accent. I did not want to see her so impressionable.

The picture Ben's mom saw back home was taken later that last night in Houston, only moments before driving across the Lone Star State's entire and impressive width.

One must enjoy a proper sendoff, so we spent half the night at a bar with my sister and her cute little Persian roommate and Kevin before leaving. I'd always liked my sister's friends. And while one of us would have to drive the first leg in the dark, the other was free to drink. And if one of us had to drive, and watch the other drink, then that lucky drinker should drink to excess, really make it worthwhile and not be a pussy about things. So we flipped a coin or something arbitrary like that. I won. In this case, winner equaled drinker. Drinker therefore consumed four double-tall Long Island Iced Teas at the honky tonk dive bar, in order to maximize the worthwhile-ness of said arrangement and to not be a pussy about things. Four kinds of well alcohol, drunk to excess in a dive bar, plus several hits of the very high grade European marijuana once we got back to my sister's equaled a certain shade of green in the face, and one big time winner wrapped around his sister's toilet bowl at three in the morning, about to be driven across the entire and impressive width of our union's second-largest state, approaching sunrise. Ben had a hell of a time bringing me around in the bathroom, and precious hours with the earth's back turned to the sun were wasted.

Ben's mother alone in her old house, pictures of Jesus on the walls, opening a mailed envelope of pictures from her younger son's big cross-country trip. First frame in the stack. Me. The big winner, asleep, from above, wrapped around my sister's toilet bowl.

And she saw this drunken shot of aftermath, poor goodly woman, while we were still out there somewhere, west of the Mississippi, on the road and drinking.

I saw myself in the mirror as though behind a cascading sheet of urine. My skin was a ghoulish shade.

I woke up at one point in the early morning, still green, in the back of the van to Ben blaring the goddamned Spin Doctors on those auxiliary walkman speakers up there, and when Ben's smiling freckled sumo face saw my certain shade of burnt grass in the rearview, he gave the wheel a couple healthy jerks, arresting me before I could make fun of Pocket Full of Kryptonite or whatever corny shit song was on. The unnecessary movement caused me to gag and recoil—I was seasick and jaundiced—and I forced myself to pass out again, surrendering to scattered dreams and sweats.

Memory lingered, however. Which brain cells were they that I destroyed? The wrong ones, I think. It was time to forget.

## CONVECTION

I woke up soaked, quite literally wet and trembling in the morning somewhere in middle Texas. I wasn't sure what time it was, but I was sure we'd gotten a good chunk west through the waning hours of still-dark morning as I spun in nausea. I suspected Ben was driving too fast.

My shirt neck was wet with warm, sour sweat. The reason I was so hot in there—the inadequate a/c—was the reason we really shouldn't have been driving flat-out. Her engine was taxed above seventy or seventy-five. I lay on my back in the back of the van on the toxin-dampened couch, listening for a time to wind through windows and road under tires, passing; a crackling, static-laden soundtrack. We dipped and sprung with the road's relief. My back was part of the couch and the van and the road, and I was bottomless, sunken, dragging along the interstate riverbed. There was a moment then, stretched out stiffly and sweating, feeling the road, staring sideways out a tinted side window at thin, sickly-blue sky because I didn't want to see the ground in such a blur of speed, and all of this briefly in relative silence—Ben must have been between CDs up there—when it didn't matter where we were. We were moving, fast. The hungover, poison swarm behind my eyes was momentarily relieved. Where was I?

I was feeling the fallout from my victory the night before in farewell, dive bar Houston. Salt crystals blossomed in my eye sockets; squinting hurt and scratched the lenses. My dehydrated, cracked, jelly-mold brain bobbed and scraped bottom. The glare got in eventually and I could not look at the sideways sky like that for long.

Carpet lined the recessed sills of my van's side windows, a brown and faded yellow-beige loop mixture not at all unlike how I felt. Wall to wall shit on ceiling and floor; a broken up, kind of trail mix consistency. Faux-wood paneling filled in the visual gap of convex walls. The slight bowing-out of these walls gave the whole structure a fuselage feel. My van was a converted cargo plane. I was devouring distance from within her static den. Ben was up there—had been all night—chewing up the miles, probably driving too fast. We were moving. I could lie there forever, I thought, maybe finally give in completely were it not for the oppressive, heavy heat and the fact Ben's driving made me uneasy—he'd get us pulled over eventually, I was sure of it—and that really it probably didn't matter who it was up there if it wasn't me. As long as I was awake and fairly straight I'd be doing the bulk of our steering.

I guessed Ben had been pushing eighty-five or ninety all morning, not gauging her reaction or fighting to gain pedal, but flooring it. First thing I said to him once semi-conscious was in regard to the small notepad I'd left up front, in the vinyl center console, upon which we were to record miles consumed and gallons imbibed. With Ben at the wheel the van had a healthy appetite. His mileage was a full two miles-per less than mine, once we smoked and I did the math longhand, slowly, carrying it out to the hundredth. He had most likely gunned her all night, singing to his cheesy tapes and playing the drums too hard on her steering wheel heel and carpeted cabin roof.

I'd stirred once while it was still dark, pried apart my eyelids and seen him up there singing along and making time. He saw me, too, his big cheeks in the rearview, and gave the wheel a couple healthy jerks. My seasick brain sloshed against its hull and sent me spinning. I groaned and cursed the narrow slit of grinning, squinting eyes up front. I

glimpsed Ben in all his big glory, listening to sentimental tapes on cheap, portable speakers, chin to the windshield, finally left alone and loving it. He was driving too fast.

And before I could scrape my sticky mass off the couch to complain Ben pinned me in the back with a well-timed toxic cloud. It wouldn't reach me in the back—the van's open-windowed airflow moved forward—so I never smelled it, but his steady grin tipped me off. He had been silent and still for too long when I took note of his expression. His eyes danced around the rearview mirror in anticipation. What did not make it out into I-10's wind tunnel would be forever buried deep into my driver's seat, my captain's chair. Ben had seen me stir; this was a good morning. The thought of his inner self complete with particulate samples burrowing into the seat cover, to be activated by my sweaty back and ass when I took over, some acrid steam rising from seat fabric and stuffing and springs and the track that allows it to spin around 360 degrees, all of it rising to greet my slick skin through wet shorts and shirt kept me on the couch a moment longer, in the sweet space of limbo staring out at the anywhere sky.

I guess things were now officially underway.

**convective discharge**, *Physics*. the repulsion of ions of a gas by a highly charged body, creating a discernible wind.

Also, Ben's ass. His talent.

Maybe, then, a benefit to Ben's ensuing National Park aspirations was that we'd get out of Texas—and ultimately the van—much sooner, roughly 200 miles so. Having left from

the widest state's easternmost major city in August, driving due west, this was decent news.

El Paso was roughly 850 miles.

Carlsbad, New Mexico, Ben's first destination for this brief blip of subleased control, was roughly 650 miles.

The math was unmistakable. I had to give him that. Big guy was on to something.

If the next week or so of itinerary had been mine to plan, we'd have been aimed due west for the duration of that broad bastard, and the miles would have been rough, indeed. But worth it—there's a coast in that direction, things I'd not yet seen with mine own, stinging eyes.

Ben's plan to see Carlsbad Caverns, which I'd translated into a plan to turn north at Fort Stockton, leaving the Lone Star state and its long, straight interstate behind was some rare blessing. It was unbearably hot down there, dragging ourselves across the country's swollen asphalt belly. I could handle a little northward progress right about then. Plus, I had to allow the big guy something of his own choosing. We were very much in this together.

**convection**, *n.* **1.** *Physics.* the transfer of heat by the circulation or movement of the heated parts of a liquid or gas. **2.** *Meteorol.* the vertical transport of atmospheric properties, esp. upward (distinguished from *advection*). **3.** the act of conveying or transmitting. [1615-25; < LL *convection-* (s. of *convection*) a bringing together. See CONVECT, -ION] –**con·vec'tion·al**, *adj.*

Also, what happened inside my van while traveling with the windows down—because the a/c could not keep up—over broiling asphalt in August, esp. in Texas. There'd be other versions of hell and heat, and it would get much, much worse, but this is what we knew so far and we were desperate to escape it.

My father'd warned me in Florida and my sister'd warned us in Houston, and there we were, driving the width of Texas west with the sun in August. My father's solution was not working. If we tried the a/c we fried in my van, windows up, as sealed as they got. She simply couldn't keep up. She couldn't keep up and because my father had tried—installing an aftermarket compressor, advancing the timing—she was struggling not to explode. Ben's driving compounded this situation; things were becoming combustible. The sound of detonation eased me off her gas on every slight rise of the road after I took over, and western Texas had gained a certain roll to it as we made Fort Stockton and turned to the northwest.

Fort Stockton was a nowhere stop on the forever road. I took over driving in the glare and blare of flat, sun-baked expanse. A cop trailed us briefly as we loped through town in search of food, Florida plates on a two-tone van with tinted windows; the only two vehicles on the town's one road stretch.

One story buildings sparsely lined the drag, seemingly vacant, evacuated. Everything looked washed out, like an overexposed still.

The bright glow of fallout.

In August, it was hot. We were powerless against the heat. Windows open, interstate roaring, we sweat and waited to be whisked dry. The wind would wipe away the heat, was our hope. But it wasn't working. Texas is wide. We were wet. The van had a smell.

It would have helped our cause—and this promise of relief via circulation—considerably if the van's ceiling vent worked, which is to say opened, which it didn't due to my having had to duct-tape the outside of it sealed shut. I had stepped outside one afternoon that past spring to the perpetual gray rain and drizzle of New York's Southern Tier (its belly), and my van's ceiling vent's inability to keep it out. I spent that afternoon in the steady shower on my van's roof, squatting and tearing tape. I over-taped, sealed it off. Duct-tape has sinews and fibers inside; it's nearly alive. It would have helped our cause considerably if the vent were not dead as we drove west across Texas, would have helped her air circulation immensely. Heat seeks to ascend and escape, to show itself the door.

Air sucked into the rear vent windows from a pocket of low pressure that invariably pursued us—my van made a wake. This hot, wet air then dragged up and through the van's cabin and out the front windows in a flapping roar. It moved across sweat-slick skin.

In theory we were air-cooled engines, or maybe water-cooled, rather—anyway we were sweating enough to stay soaked and the moving air maybe cooled this wetness, however imperceptibly. Waste water—toxins, nutrients if we had any, and salt, mostly—exited our bodies as fast as or faster than we could replace it. There wasn't enough water in the Rio Grande to keep up the recursive loop. My shirts tie-dyed; they streaked white

with sodium. The back of my neck gained a perpetual, bittersweet taste. The inside of the van began to smell sour, our damp seat covers murky. Our backs were wet for weeks. We began to stew.

My van was a crock-pot.

**Convection oven**, a gas, electric, or microwave oven equipped with a fan that circulates and intensifies the heat, thereby decreasing the normal cooking time. [1970-75]

Also, the inside of my hot-ass gas-powered van when traveling with the windows open, etc; due esp. to the specific, vicious cycle of unconditioned airflow created therein, thanks in large part to inadequate a/c, a/c we couldn't use unless at night because it simply could not cool all that volume in the sun, a/c that had caused a significant misalignment of her pulley system and a new ping in her engine, things that would eventually slow us down and stop our progress and strand us all in due time, a/c whose installation alone had stranded Ben at an airport for hours with pack all filled illegal and waiting, a/c that would be useful only as a foil, it seems.

On the back couch I cooked evenly. Slowly turning myself in the late morning, I spun; a rare instance of symmetry, sleeping on a spit. I rose from there well done and took the wheel once Ben's cloud dispersed. We'd have to keep moving to make Carlsbad by dusk.

## BATTING PRACTICE

I wasn't committed to Ben's notion of wasting time in New Mexico. Turning north at Fort Stockton changed the scenery and our mindset, bringing actual destinations into range, but west was the direction I had set into my mind. I wanted to ingest miles, for hours—strike that, days—without rest. I wanted the sun to plummet several times before we stopped. I wanted it to envy my immense progress. I wanted Neal Cassidy to whoop as I shot past. He'd understand if I did not have the time or the brakes to stop this thing, once set into motion.

The Guadalupe Mountains rose up to the west as I drove north out of Fort Stockton, a curiously contained, seemingly isolated little range sprung from the endless flat plains of short brush and hard grass, the kind of mountains depicted in crayon on refrigerators everywhere. Complete—a quick glance seemed to reveal the Guadalupe's entire span, top to bottom.

“Those don't look so bad, Ben.”

“Yeah, dude?”

“I don't think she'll have too much trouble out here, after all,” I said to the dash, caressing her wheel. The landscape was gaining a slight roll. The van was hopelessly underpowered, and too much stress might tax her past the limit. “Will she?”

We made the big hole in the ground—Carlsbad Caverns—by mid-afternoon. I still couldn't comprehend Ben's desire to see that place. The whole bat thing had not been

presented in any dynamic, statistically impressive way—there were half a million of them in there, but Ben failed to mention this—and besides, we had this sort of thing (sans bats) back in New York State. Howe Caverns. I went there for our seventh grade class trip, on the way to our state’s capitol. Then again, Ben went to our town’s other middle school. They didn’t take class trips. Ben had been a Lowry tread.

Howe Caverns was a big cave, toured by boat, for the most part, via underground waterway. I remember where the boat ride ends, where the cave narrows and is barricaded by ancient, spelunking wooden planks and DANGER! signs, we could hear distant, rushing water in the ensuing darkness. Where the ride ended was where it should have begun. I remember disappointment.

On this class trip I got my first kiss, despite my paralyzing terror at the prospect of actual contact. She made the move on me, finally, towards the end of the bus trip. Told me I wasn’t bad, went back to her seat. Told everyone else that I had cut her lip with my braces. It took me some time to live that down—first kiss cut her lip—and to find someone else to show me what I had done wrong. The letter I wrote to her in school the next week, which everyone else got to read, didn’t help my cause. Maybe my classmates were right to ridicule. Such egregious use of cliché; there probably wasn’t much of a flame to rekindle anyhow. And all that trauma for a girl who could have killed ants with her glasses on an overcast day, glasses that magnified the blue veins beneath her eyes.

So screw Carlsbad.

I was pent up when we got there. My body was thinking hard about purging all the evil of my victorious night in Houston. I had to piss, maybe shit as soon as we parked. The pressure in my bladder region was pressing.

Alone inside the clean, quiet tile tomb of visitor center bathroom, not unlike a rest stop's, I sat and released a mildly painful fire hose stream. My temples flickered and I thought of aneurisms. The last surges of boiling pressure were leaving me when I looked down. It felt thick, my piss. The effort of expulsion was somehow different, more active as I pulsed to a stop. I forced out the last of it and looked. There was solid matter in it, like curdled milk. It slid down the inner toilet wall and collected in clumps. I was coming into the bowl.

My song changed some after that. I was embarrassed and a little afraid, and therefore able to shut up, relax and consider our afternoon's purpose. A Park ranger hit me with the whole bat thing in the visitor center. I had expected a gaping cave on a cliff somewhere, something ominous, but *in* the ground—*under* there—in this cavern or series of caverns, lived, at best estimates, half a million bats. We would first get to tour the caverns, which I hadn't even seen the opening to yet. We would then, just before dusk, get to watch as all 500,000 of the leathery little bastards left the cave to feed—Images of immense swarms in my vacant brain—People and cattle alike screaming and seeking shelter—An apocalyptic pestilence, and we were going to witness it firsthand. Finally, something real. What it was in my mind before experiencing it firsthand, and what it actually turned out to be, were often different things.

Stairs and railings led down and away from the visitor center. The landscape around us was hills and sparse brush, some green. We descended into what appeared to

be some sort of amphitheater, and where the stage would have been was a large, somewhat ominous black opening into the earth. The railings and rows of bench-like seats was a slight turnoff, but this hole could have been called gaping. It was vertical, set down into a bowl, the other wall of which was the stone amphitheater.

“So, Benny, we’re going to sit *here*, and watch the bats fly out of *there*?”

“Think so, dude.”

“But sitting across from the opening like this, isn’t that pretty dangerous?”

“I don’t know. Doubt it, if they let people do it.”

“Maybe they make us sign a waiver or something. I mean, look. Those little fuckers must fly right out over people’s heads! Surely someone has gotten hurt over this...”

“I don’t know, Kyle.”

I expected to see bats hanging from the cavern’s ceiling, which, as we trotted down the steep walkway from the gaping entrance was getting farther away. There were no bats. I wanted to see them asleep and clinging, a massive, squirming glut of flying rodents. They must have been farther in.

The cavern got expansive real fast. The concrete ramp went steadily down. Our steps were jarring with the decline. It was dark and cool. The limestone was pebbled, almost slimy. Spotlights illuminated chosen formations on the walls, floor and ceiling. Stalagmites looked phallic. Stalactites, sharper and feminine. They aimed at one another for eons down there, slowly growing closer.

“Ben, look at that one. That’s a dick.”

“Sure is.”

“I mean, it’s got a head and everything. He’s been circumcised.”

Foot traffic was fairly thin and we were able to carry on like this—all big and loud—the majority of the way. When people approached us, or us them—mostly families and Europeans, and European families—we would stop and let them pass. Anything to keep our distance, to remain self-contained and separate.

The ramp continuously turned hard, always pivoting and meandered its way down, always down. This was our first encounter with switchbacks. We were not aware enough to thank this, our first trail, for being all downhill. Ben, especially, should have been living it up.

In the Big Room, or the Great Room, or whatever it was called we saw the largest of the phalluses in a collection of several, tall white beauties. They let children see this? It should have been no wonder there weren’t as many Americans.

Soon, though, the novelty wore off. I had been humbled enough. Plus, no bats yet. People were mulling around at the end of the line.

“How do we get out of here, Ben?”

“I don’t know, man.”

“Do we have to march all the way back up that fucking walkway?”

“No. No, they wouldn’t do that to us.”

“Well, I don’t know, Benny. Do you see another way out? Fuck. What time is it? It could be near dusk.”

The way out, it turned out, was via elevator. The paved walkway had been off-putting enough, and the pointed spotlights, and the zoo-like information plaques, and the

Adidas-strewn Europeans and fat Americans and flash photography—and now elevators. And if I absolutely had to guess where the elevators would drop us off, where we would invariably be routed through, would I have guessed it? A gift shop; I think so. We could not leave without first passing through aisles and racks of postcards and stuffed bats—I had not seen a single bat, save for these stuffed likenesses—and soft carpeting and lame New Age muzak.

I wanted to kick capitalism in its gigantic cock and balls.

I was getting cavern fever. Ben browsed the gift shop's insipid selections. Surely it would be dusk soon. There was no way in hell—down there—that I would miss the flight of the bats. I was looking forward to a second coming. Microsoft Word would like to suggest that I capitalize that biblical reference.

An unmistakable theme park vibe was making its way to the forefront of my mind. Elevators, restrooms, drinking fountains and an underground gift shop should have signaled what was to come.

I called home from a payphone beside the Park's visitor center and parking lot. It had not been terribly near dusk when we rose from the depths—we had time to kill. There's a moment after you dial, before the call connects, where you have the time to turn and lean a shoulder on the payphone's shell, survey your world. Feel the wind, if there is any. From my spot, in this space I got the impression of an interstate rest stop, of stretching my bones beside the road in a warm breeze. I had lived this a thousand times. It felt somehow secondhand.

The sunken amphitheater's announcer, a ranger in Crocodile Hunter khaki everything, warned us of the bushes that time of day, when the sun begins to decline. Rattlesnakes and scorpions have a vested interest in the waning light, he said; they'll often come out to catch the last of it. Kids clung tighter to their parents when he said this. Parents played up the claim into their children's ears. I prayed the ranger was right. I was ready for anything, everything. We were high as helium kites.

Ben and I had been baking out the van in a parking spot when we heard the PA system ping. She was parked just over the ridge. I had been fretting with windows, trying to seal our lawlessness in. People didn't understand. They wouldn't, if given the opportunity. We were a scourge on this land, aliens; we emerged from the van in a cloud and the sound of its sliding door, a hastened roar. Normal people stirred inside their newer vans and SUVs. An attractive, healthy couple across the lot prepared for some kind of hike. Their T-shirts were very white beneath vests; their wool socks a perfect inch above each boot. Ben lowered down from the van, always with big hands for support.

"Easy there, guy," I said.

"Yeah, okay dick!"

"Easy!" I hissed. "Look around."

"*What's* up, dude? You want me to QUIET DOWN DUDE?!"

"Aw, fuck, hurry up. I don't want to miss this."

We scrambled down from the lot through spiny underbrush—if it's the only brush, is it still called under?—towards the heavily-railing-ed and paved little arena.

Vegetation of the surrounding hills was all low to the ground, low profile, sharp. An uninviting environment; the bats preferred it that way. It used to keep people away.

On our hard bench seats, far back from the cavern's entrance we must have smelled delicious. I cringed at the thought of the few parents who might recognize the scent. Bad seeds—both of us Pigpens, patrolled and protected by powerful clouds. The ranger went on about the Park.

“...and it wasn't until around the turn of the century that a young cowboy named Jim White found this cave entrance. He found it by following what he thought was a plume of smoke. Turns out that smoke was actually a column of Mexican Free-tailed bats exiting the cave, which they will begin doing shortly.”

I wanted to see the smoke. I punched Ben in the shoulder.

“Oh man, they must fly directly over our heads,” I said. “I still don't understand how people don't get hurt. He must be about to tell us to keep our arms down and not to stand up once it starts.”

Staring at the cave's mouth, though, the angles weren't right; the bats would be able to fly straight at my face if they chose.

“We'll have to fend them off when they come, Ben.”

The ranger went on to explain the predictable decimation of the bat population. That in the thirties there were over eight million of them in there in the summers—they're migratory, border jumpers from Mexico—whereas an estimate garnered in the mid-nineties tallied only 200,000. The cause of this was widely thought to be DDT. Did he mean to tell me we had poisoned this land? Us? *Americans*? The ranger said that the bats had been making a comeback, but that recent estimates had their population still at

only three or four hundred thousand. I thought three or four hundred thousand little harbingers of hell spewing forth from a gaping rift in the earth over our heads must still be invigorating! Right?

“Ah yes,” the ranger announced. “Here we go!”

“Where?” I asked.

“See?” Ben said, “In the opening there.”

“That? Those must be like the scouts or something, making sure all’s clear.”

“I don’t know.”

In the source-less glow of dusk the bats began their flight. But it was no exodus. There was nothing biblical about it. They looked fake, the way bats do when they fly, fluttering too much as though suspended by wires, some puppeteer above shaking his hands convulsively.

“They’re just doing laps,” I said. “When are they actually going to zoom up and out of there!”

The bats were flying in an unsteady gyre. The ranger used the term “gaining altitude” to describe the process. The flight up to the cavern’s mouth and into the sky was quite a climb for bats, apparently. It would take each bat many laps to gain enough altitude to leave. They gathered into a loose vortex, slowly thickening and growing louder. The ranger had asked everyone to be quiet, to not interfere with their echolocation. It looked lit by strobes, the way bats fly. If they don’t flap their wings they plummet. Between each stroke they fall just a little bit. The visual cacophony grew.

The ranger alerted us all to the presence of a visitor, a buck on the ridge for everyone to ooh at as the bats gathered. It was a mule deer up there, lazily grazing. Ben

and I delighted in its presence. We had never heard of mule deer before, never been exposed to the awkward relative of common northern deer. He had giant donkey ears and we imagined giant, bucked teeth as well. We looked at each other and around us, jutting our front teeth and burying our lower jaws behind them. “I’ma myoo deer! Hey, I’ma myoo deer!” we said in southern accents, crossing our eyes and blinking, imagining the mule deer as hick cousin to his brethren: hay stalk between his teeth, overalls, that sort of thing. Speedy Gonzales’ country cousin, maybe, drunk and stupid.

It had started to feel like Sea World, a certain theme park-ness settling into the spectacle. The bats were not going to fly over us at all. They were simply going to gather in the cave’s mouth and burp off into the dying day. It smacked of setup and letdown, of sterile anti-climax. I had expected the bats to rush out of the cave in a wind-making surge, only inches above our chins.

Looking around the packed and muttering amphitheater, I gauged people’s unfounded awe: right, left, behind, anywhere but ahead where the bats fluttered and spun. A young girl on her father’s lap, a blond, was also not paying attention. Her hair was golden silk, her skin milk. The blue of her eyes against her father’s blond, Scandinavian beard was stark. I spent years looking into her eyes, they were majestic; a royal blue. With several hundred thousand small, winged creatures flying in a tight, rapid vortex from the huge, yawning entrance of a cavern, I was blown away by the blue eyes of a young girl. Such peace—nothing could hide in there.

Imagine an amphitheater of people intent in one direction, mesmerized, and one red head turned against the grain, enchanted.

We headed for the gates as if the game had been decided—beat the traffic out of there. Visiting team lost and we had miles to go.

In a quiet line of traffic winding away from the caverns in the very last light, we saw bats like smoke, indeed, pluming up and into the sky, a dusty ribbon of exhaust meandering for miles. We mirrored each other—the cars and the bats—except that the bats would be back in the morning. We would not. We would be up in the mountains somewhere, terrorizing another natural, previously untainted place.

The narrow road in the rolling hills as the light failed could have been anywhere, and we were going anywhere, moving again. A line of taillights like post-game traffic, our own exodus into the night. I drove.

## GILA MONSTER

“Shit, Ben, I can’t sleep here.” I had said. It was dark everywhere.

Ben’s open mouth closed. I could barely see him on the couch, a couple feet away. He knuckled his nose, “I can.”

“I’m just going to drive, then, rather than sit here and sweat.”

“Okay.”

“Where is it we’re going?”

I had been driving west out of Carlsbad, groggy in the anti-climactic wake of caves and bats, of smoke without fire. Darkness had a way of informing road noise—or was it the other way? Something had certainly settled into the van’s cabin, some subliminal hum, a groaning, a longing for rest. The road can call you to sleep.

I had pulled us off onto this gravel turnoff, which turned out to be a park of some kind. Beside a swing set and a small picnic shelter, in a broad stretch of flat night we stopped. Ben had already found sleep. I was still looking.

...and thinking: this is where we get pulled over, already stopped, sitting in an otherwise empty, abandoned gravel lot. If this is a park then surely it’s closed. We trespass, loiter. If a car approaches it’s probably a cruiser. We’re screwed if that happens. ‘What are you boys up to?’ he’ll ask, hitting us square in the red eyes with his white light, looking down. No cops. No cops, no cops no cops no cops. We’re not hurting anyone, we break the law but in private. No one else need know.

...or maybe we're vulnerable, rather than vagrant. Maybe we're asking for an armed kidnapping out here, in the middle of nowhere and the night.

The sun wasn't watching, her back was turned.

I wished I could see what kind of country it was, out there. First question Jack asks the cabby when being dropped off in Big Sur: 'What kind of country is it around here? I've never seen it,' with more than a touch of nerves.

Maybe there was a silhouette of horizontal mountains in the moon's light, which was the sun's light, who then must have still been watching, secondhand.

A million eyes with unknown motives out there. Coyote country. I watched myself, as well; watched myself awake. I could see my heart clench. My adrenal glands surged. Soon the van's engine did the same.

"We can't stay here," I said. "I'm just going to drive us there, Benny. Where is it we're going?"

We had originally, loosely planned on visiting White Sands en route to the Gila Cliff Dwellings. It was on the way. We would have—visited White Sands first—had I been able to sit still long enough for the Earth to spin us into the light again. Instead I was driving again, passing it, west through the White Sands Missile Range. The Alamogordo-White Sands Regional Airport seemed to stretch for eternal miles of dashed lines, illuminated green and white—on both sides of the highway? That stretch of 70 was sterile and straight, smooth. Runways and lane markers broke the otherwise opaque stillness.

My father had a story about waking up out there, on the range, so to speak, having eaten peyote and passed out, waking alarmed to the sound of airplanes overhead, commencing activities. The story's most harrowing moment involved my father, bearded and fu-Manchu-ed, pulling away in his pickup truck in a cloud of dust, whistling to Chico, his Black Lab, with the tailgate down for him to jump in as my father mashed the throttle and got out of Dodge. It was terribly amusing, embellished, and less passive when he told it. I heard the real version later on.

I flew by this scene at seventy-plus with the cruise on and vapor pouring forth from dash vents—the air conditioning worked at night. We had already driven through a sharp storm in the Sacramento Mountains, where at higher elevation the a/c proved too much, and the fan too little. We'd drive through another thunderstorm in the tail end of the San Andres, just past White Sands, lightning snapping through the cabin as the van struggled up and over San Agustin Pass (5719 ft.), losing speed in a worrisome trend until we apexed and nosed back down.

These were the first mountains she had ever climbed. For the first time since Florida I was watching the vacuum needle dance. The engine rattled with detonation. Six, in-line cylinders pinged loudly. If I went into the climb with it floored, my foot mashing the pedal and already up to seventy or higher, then we'd reach the top at half that speed. If I didn't build such momentum—which I invariably did, despite the static—I'm not sure what would have happened. There's the very real possibility that some mountain ahead would prove impassible. That we'd lose enough speed and stop, short of the peak, slowing to a wounded halt and then rolling backwards down several thousand vertical feet at a steep pitch. I would have to re-instruct Ben on how to handle this new

topography, or do all the driving myself. It required momentum conservation; I battled for pedal.

And there were mountains everywhere, I realized. Our Southwest is a mountainous region; somehow the reality of this fact had escaped me. As my father had fitted her with her new pulley system and tweaked the timing and created the detonation and strain that might bring her down someday, I had failed to synthesize. There are mountains between Florida and California other than the Rockies; small, severe ranges that sprung up along every stretch, taunting our lack of power and the dangerous strain. The rigs I passed in the flats and depressions leading up to each climb passed us with ease on the ways up. Then we would hit a storm up there (mountains make weather), pass them back on the way down, rinse and repeat. I discovered all this mad world of the western midnight road alone. Ben was a sleeper.

Hitting the Gila National Forest in the first place was Ben's idea, as was every stop shy of Big Sur. I didn't care to spend an entire night driving there, traversing treacherous passes and changes in temperature and weather, watching the vacuum needle shimmy and dance to the worrisome rattle next to my knee as we climbed and she strained and screamed for mercy, watching air spew visibly like poison in the higher elevations, then the windows cloud over when I switched off the a/c, watching Ben's smooth face slackened, faintly snoring, mouth agape, one knee bent up, one hand hanging down to brown carpet, big fingers like astronaut's gloves fixed in subconscious articulation. Spending a night driving west when we would have to come back east again, to catch a daylight glimpse of a place we had just passed in the blackness, was almost unbearable.

I was itchy in my seat, bouncing and nodding to the ceaseless soundtrack of pre-selected CDs. I didn't want to spend any time doing this. I didn't want to linger there in Gila, once we arrived. I wanted to smack a finish line like a swimmer to the wall, both hands emphatic, then flip, twist and back the other way again. This was never part of my plan. I hadn't factored in much time for these National Parks. Ben's notion of this trip was not my own. He had things he wanted to do and see, things that, if not bringing me closer to the coast, were keeping me from it. Ben's itinerary might jeopardize my entire impetus for this thing. There is an objective here, Benny, an end to this means.

Ben wanted to see Gila largely and quite literally because Mesa Verde was on fire. The summer of 2000 turned out to be a legendary fire season across America's Southwest. Large swaths of Colorado and southern Utah were ablaze just days ahead of our impending arrival.

Mesa Verde's cliff-side ruins are more impressive, grander, and more oft-visited than are Gila's—Mesa is more mainstream. Ben was willing to settle for the latter—the lesser—if necessary. That sort of thing interested him. He wanted to see the clinging, lasting remains of past civilizations, of people we destroyed. I asked him several times why we were heading non-sequentially west like this while he slept.

“Benny. Why are we going west like this, it doesn't make sense!

“*Why*, though? We're just going to have to come back this way again.

“It doesn't make sense to me, man.

“Fucking sleep, then. I'll drive.

“Look at this gauge, Benny. Listen. She doesn't like these steep-ass mountains...”

Just shy of Truth or Consequences I turned us on to 152, west towards the Continental Divide. I had devised an alternate approach to Gila, having no local knowledge of the roads or the area's relief, just an atlas; an approach the inspection checkpoint officer on I-25 initially questioned, then smiled at wryly when realizing my earnest naïveté.

I had just snubbed a pinner when signs directed me to pass through the checkpoint. It was like a tollbooth or a weigh station, the only light and human life for miles. For some reason I approached this scene stoned, sure to involve a cop, with no reservations. I pulled the van up with a wince of the brakes and my big face in the window, grinning salutations to the attending officer.

“Howdy!” I think I said. We were out west.

“Morning,” he said, like a suggestion. “What’s your business up this way?”

“I’m taking an eastern approach into the Gila National Forest. Do you think that’s wise?”

“Anyone in there with you?” He made a show of trying to see through my dark windows.

“I’ve got my big buddy in the back asleep, shall I wake him up?”

“No, no,” he said, having made his assessment already. “That won’t be necessary.” Did I look so harmless?

“If I head west from here, I figure I can cut a straight path to Gila. Do you think that’s a good plan?”

My chosen route was primarily utilized by unsavory types, he told me, drug traffickers seeking to avoid detection. I shouldn’t stop at all or speak to anyone. And I

shouldn't leave my vehicle if something were to happen. All this, and it wasn't a friendly or easy pass to begin with, topographically.

"We don't patrol that route," he said honestly. "So keep moving once on your way. We've had some problems along that stretch."

I asked him if I should turn around.

"No, no." He smiled. It was a genuine, friendly smile. He was genuinely amused. "Just be careful," he said.

Or maybe it had been a nervous smile, nervous for what lay in store out there on mountainous, lawless roads I had ignorantly chosen as an alternate approach in the smack dead of night. Anything to leave my own, personal mark on this portion of the trip. Anything to say it was mine.

I hadn't slept a sober lick in days. I was pressing on.

Ephedrine. Two-Way Mini-Thins. Marijuana. My stomach. My brain, somewhere out on the snub-nosed hood, chin to the passing asphalt. The road had texture. Tires had texture. Together they sang a layered song.

Ben stumbled halfway to the front to see what all the commotion was about, bracing himself on the back of my chair and the ceiling. For a second he saw what I saw—nothing—then slammed into the van's sliding door, a foot plunging down into the well there as we continued to snake and descend. I was really jerking us through the slalom.

"You alright, dude?" he asked, his voice unsteady as he gathered himself.

“Absolutely! I’m beautiful Benny, you’ve got nothing to worry about!” I wiped my temple against my shirt’s shoulder. “This is crazy!” I admitted.

Ben backed away, back to the couch.

I am Neal Cassidy now, I thought, Dean Moriarty on a beautiful blitzkrieg right over the goddamned Continental Divide, I am a force of nature! I’ll write about all this experience and they’ll put me on the motherfucking table of elements for eternity. Ben couldn’t bear the deadly competent, no brakes hairpin descent—when they (the heroes of the page) agreed to drive some guy’s Cadillac back east for him, poor Jack couldn’t hack it, either, as Neal plunged them down the road with similar abandon—

My eyes were wide on guardrails and outer space. I was sweating from the rush of the task, two doses of Two-Ways and more than one joint. I should have slowed down.

“Why are we coming here again, Ben?” I shouted over my shoulder. We must have been close. Ben was forcing himself back to sleep.

“Gila, dude. Cliff dwellings, hot springs—”

“Who *cares!*” I said, gleefully. I was bent upright and pulling myself to the wheel, sweating over it.

The van’s suspension yawned, loaded up and sprung around another switchback. I had never in my twenty two years seen a road like this, and I couldn’t see a goddamned thing.

I had chosen this approach—from the east instead of south—as the path less traveled and I had been right about that. My headlights briefly spilled out over the guardrail and disappeared into a vacuous expanse—there was nothing out there, past the

spattering of Christmas trees. From above, the trace of this narrow mountain pass might have looked like coiled soft serve in a cone, or angel hair pasta in the upper atmosphere. As we skied through 180 degree turns my headlights lagged behind, intermittently illuminating empty night and forest canyon wall. The van turned like a bus, the front wheels almost behind us where we sat, the front end subsequently rowing from side to side, mowing the serpentine road.

The trees within my headlights' reach—perfectly plump little isosceles triangles—looked like the kind of evergreens I expected to see at or near the timberline, to which we must have been close. Somewhere back there, above us and behind us, a glowing blip on my tunneled field of vision, I had seen a sign, an altitude marker saying some kind of nonsense about 9,000 feet. We were crossing the Continental Divide. Did you know this country has a Continental Divide? It does—you can cross it. I did. And perhaps it was wiser at night like this; I couldn't see the fine line between road and free fall, my margin for error. My stomach tumbled and spun. I rocked in my captain's chair, feeding one hand over the other in rapid succession, then back the other way. I was steering a fucking freighter on the high seas. Increasingly I used less brake, letting them cool in the thin air as we gained speed. The van would not come unglued!

I hadn't really used my father's camera constructively, yet.

We had just broken through the harrowing mountain pass like a fever, and the landscape was now glowing faintly. Everything softened. I was dipping in and out of awake as the van dipped along a ridge crest. We were far from safe. Below us some

kind of valley beckoned, some kind of floor. If I say this portion of the road was like a roller coaster, does it make me a bad writer?

We descended into the foggy, cloudy valley. It felt like floating. Ethereal, torn-cotton hung everywhere. This was the sky. I was not exactly awake as I steered.

“I’m going to goddamned get this,” I said and stopped us, curiously enough, at a stop sign; a lonely four-way intersection in the sky. I got out in the road and fumbled with my father’s camera bag. It was a manual, fairly complex item, one I had practiced on the preceding year at school.

There was some kind of house-like shed set back a driveway’s distance from this surreal intersection in the clouds. In my halfsleep fog I could have been back in Binghamton, along some smoke-veiled valley road in New York’s Southern Tier—if these hills were not the heads of a mountain range, but the feet. Perspective was poor, the ceiling tattered and draping. We were somewhere in it.

The picture never turned out. I don’t know if it was the camera, the conditions (foggy, which means cloudy at higher elevations), or me. It was most likely all three (but mostly me). Cotton puffs clung to the hills, wafted. It did not turn out.

The park’s visitor center was not yet open when we arrived. We stirred outside the van in an otherwise empty parking lot. Hills rolled off in all directions. The air was perfectly cool, the sky cloudy. It was immensely peaceful. I was wasted.

I had just completed my first real athletic feat of driving for the trip and I was wasted. Eight or nine hours overnight, it had taken, after Carlsbad the day before and the width of Texas and a winning night before that at a dive bar in Houston. My knees shook

as I stood. It felt like coming down from an acid bout. Tranquility was interrupted by every sound, my nervous system jumped. A bird startled my brain. It hurt to be awake. I told Ben I was going to sleep, to wake me when the place opened for business.

I woke up with Ben driving for the third time on our trip, angry again, scowling. The angriest I had ever been. Ben saw this in the rearview, smiled and mocked my frown. There was no human being alive who looked stupider than Ben if they tried. As I stirred, the van rocked and lurched. We were driving off-road.

“What the fuck are you doing, Ben!” It felt like boulders beneath us, looked like a dry creek-bed.

“Easy there, *guy!*”

“Well, what the *fuck!*”

“We’re almost at our campsite.”

Campsite? I hadn’t agreed to any such arrangement. Why camp there? Why halt the train?

And why take the van through a fucking rock quarry to get there? The van couldn’t take such abuse—what was Ben thinking? Equipment beneath and behind my couch clamored, the propane grill groaned. The van was shaking itself to pieces.

“Where the fuck *are* we!”

My first official outdoor meal was cold Spaghettios, with meatballs (extra protein). Ben had set up the small grill I bought for the trip, to make Ramen Noodles. I had spit and sat down on a cold rock, opened my can and dug in. Cool metal and mediocre tomato sauce

tasted like blood on the back of my tongue. Small chunks of ambiguous meat didn't help, nothing could have.

I chased Ben away from that place with my face. I made him drive us back to solid ground and roads not made of rocks. We were not setting up camp in the Gila National Forest.

Smoking a joint on the approach to Gila's Cliff Dwellings made me nervous, conscious of our appearance—our obvious presence. Through trees I thought I saw a ranger on the trail behind and below us. Was he following our fragrant stench? Did rangers really care about such things? Maybe it was more of a fire hazard issue.

Or maybe it was guilt, instead of paranoia. Maybe the Monument's honor system pay station had been designed to reveal people like me, people who would not have paid had it not been for my big, honorable companion. A bulletin board at the foot of the forested trail asked for donations, to be sealed in envelopes and slid into a wooden box's mail slot. How much?—Ben debated. Who cares?—I argued. We didn't have much. What did they need money for?—no one seemed to come here. I had not seen another human being since the interstate checkpoint officer.

The ancient village itself was carved into a pair of eye sockets in the rippled, bleeding side of a cliff face, a cliff that rose abruptly from thick forest. From within these orifices, these eyes, having ascended a wooden ladder—after I warned Ben it might not handle him—we got the sense of looking out upon the past. Nothing manmade forever. Just trees and the wind. It was a better view, framed by ancient, almond-shaped eyelids.

Inside, the Dwellings were adorned with small, stone caveats. I took a picture of Ben standing where he should not, holding up a smooth rock that said, “DON’T”. Another shows Ben from afar, perched atop a stone staircase, holding up a chubby-digit peace sign. We had a tendency towards clownish-ness. We were lit. The brief relief from obsessive pretense was welcome.

And my manic swings took only hours to play out. The monument had not exactly been what I sought. Amplitude is what I was after.

“I think the trail goes this way,” I guessed. “Up there.” The hill steepened toward its ridge. Short brush and painful things with sharp edges clung to the loose hillside. Ben and I were disagreeing over which way to go.

“If you want to keep climbing dude,” he said. “Be my guest.”

“Don’t be a pussy, Benny.”

We had extracted the van from its campsite and driven over dirty roads to the Dwellings, and then another trailhead. Ben had sold me on the notion of hot springs. In my head danced moonscapes, flat rock seas of spewing steam, plus another opportunity to hike, to really go after it.

I ended up getting myself into some trouble on a steep hillside when the trail evaporated and I found myself stuck. Ben had turned downhill and into the valley below as I continued to ascend. A small, placid stream snaked into this terrain from a flatter expanse. I had an excellent view from my tenuous height. The area was fairly green, and save for the exposed rock and lack of actual trees—only shrubs out there, tall grass and slender plants I had never seen—it did not look terribly foreign. The ridge I hiked had

quickly increased in pitch; the amount of boulders and jagged rock exposed multiplied. It was possible that these hot springs would not disappoint. But getting there, from here, would prove difficult. I began to sweat excessively. The sun was shrouded in grey clouds, so it wasn't that. I found myself alone on the side of a steep, crumbly ridge, following a phantom trail. Ahead the ridge opened in an impassible gash, a crevice I would not be able to traverse.

Is there anything more American than screaming down to Ben in the valley below to take a picture of me—one foot on a rocky outcropping, elbow on that thigh as I conquered the ridge—while being stuck, very nearly stranded up there? He had to hike ahead to see the extent of the crevice in my way. There was a moment where I couldn't move my feet for fear of the ground breaking loose beneath me. Each breath dislodged rocks and sent them tumbling down the grade. There was a point on their descents where the slope dropped away and they fell the last ten or twenty feet. There'd be no scrambling down. I put my tail between my legs and backed my way down, cautiously. Always harder coming down, they say.

After all this, of course, the springs themselves were bullshit. Basically the stream petered out, and where it pooled, shallow, small jets of bubbles broke the surface, as if unknown creatures hid below the sooty bottom holding their breath, slowly letting air escape. A man and his son were making rings of stone around the individual spouts, quarantining the warmer water. Their quiet demeanor suggested we were intruding.

The hike back to the van found Ben and I lost on a tiny island of tall, slender stalks of space grass, boots soaked from the inescapable creek. We'd decided to follow the water once we lost the trail back. Each stalk of this strange plant was man-high at

least, covered in puckery suction cups. I imagined these plants coming to life, awakened by our noisy intrusion and ensnaring us. Our bodies would never be found.

We left the park and agreed to spend a night in a motel room. It had been several days since we slept in beds. Silver City provided us shelter. A former mining town, a boomtown, I supposed. Drinking there in the Drifter Inn, in our dusty, musky motel room I was still waiting for my trip to begin.

There was nothing then except how I would wake up. Nothing level or flat, no constant high. I was only happy when we left.

## EQUILIBRIUM

We had come down from the mountains that morning only to cross them again. Silver City straddles the Continental Divide, teeters atop it and coming down always hurts. The van did not exactly mind the descent, unaware that we would be retracing the route we had taken two nights before, in reverse.

She would complain when the time came.

We were on our way to White Sands, New Mexico. Nothing was free from the taint of pretense inside my brain. I had these pre-conceived notions of things.

Like my father's story from the early seventies about falling asleep on peyote outside his old pickup truck somewhere out on the old White Sands Missile Range, startled awake and gulping from the sound of aircraft overhead. What exactly had he been doing out there, alone except for his dog? I did not know. Communing with nature? Tripping his ass off? No one will ever really know but him. Surely it had something to do with inner peace, peyote, solitude, calmness and the search for such things—isn't that what comes into your mind when someone says White Sands?—some romantic ideal of desert dunes and silence, the sound of wind—the foolish cliché—maybe something religious—something spiritual?

I was after it.

I had read things.

Like a Student's Guide to Zen Buddhism, a slender magazine—intended for adolescents, I think—I had lifted from a fraternity wing of a dorm in Rowan College late

one night in New Jersey, high on legal (in New Jersey) grain alcohol, visiting friends of friends. The sad irony of stealing a book on Buddhism must have caught my eye at the time. It might be the only thing I have ever really stolen from anyone. What was a rich Greek going to do with it, anyway?

I had been raised catholic, but quit Sunday school after my First Communion. God, like Santa Claus, receded with reason. Buddhism also has a story—they're kind of similar, actually, Jesus and the Buddha. Both enlightened at thirty-three. I was two-thirds of the way there, strictly speaking. You know, mathematically. My time to flounder was fleeting.

On that same trip to New Jersey with friends from college, sophomore season—people I would see again before this trip was through—I saw Maddox V. Schilling in Philly at the Vet, then got vicious diarrhea from the red Gatorade I hid my grain alcohol in. I considered it payback and pushed out the evil, sweaty and secretly drunk; always the butt of the cosmic joke.

Fact is I was having trouble living The Middle Way of Life. Buddhism for Young Students says that its students “can end suffering by understanding, adopting and following the path of the Middle Way which, to Buddhists, is a practical way of life. The Middle Way is a path of self-conquest which leads to the ultimate goal, real happiness, perfect peace, Nibbana.” I was having trouble with the Middle Way's component parts. I was having trouble with Right or Correct Understanding (except for the recognition of impermanence and dissatisfaction), Right or Correct Thought (especially the clear mind and freedom from sensory desire, doubts and worries and laziness, willingness to relinquish any thing that obstructs my mental and psychological progress), Right or

Correct Speech (the whole thing), and I was having no luck with the better part of Right or Correct Action (specifically **2. Not to take what is not given, but to practice charity and generosity. 3. Not to misuse the senses, but to practice purity and self-control. 4. Not to indulge in lying or harsh speech, but to practice sincerity, honesty and to think before speaking. 5. Not to take any intoxicating drinks or drugs which will lead to uncontrolled behavior, but to practice restraint and mindfulness.**). I had not killed. But I had stolen a book that listed these instructions, and gotten high to read it.

This is the part where I mention that Jack had also turned from Catholicism to Buddhism, and that he had actually *lived* them both. I can never really align with either system, or believe the stories. Something about instructions, I guess, manipulation. Jack Kerouac is no longer getting paid when people buy his books.

And there was nothing pure in our hearts when we decided to try out Ben's dad's Eagle Pass to get into White Sands for free. Anxiety and guilt are not pure. They come from a longing for purity, the pain of that lack. I couldn't look at the white haired ranger when Ben idled us up to the Park's single tollbooth.

National Parks have these tollbooths at their entrances, and the toll they want you to pay is monetary. Ben and I discovered this as Ben ground us to a halt, the second vehicle in line. His father had sent us on our way with an Eagle Pass. This pass carried Ben's last name, but his father's first; a minor inconsistency in our minds.

The setting was surreal. A panoramic, bleached expanse had engulfed the van when we pulled off the highway. Just like that. Dunes rose up on both sides of us,

concealing and suggesting what lay within. Sharp vegetation clung to the sandy white waves.

The Missile Range along the road had been deserted and barren in the daylight, but not like this. We had just pulled into a dusty, white-lit soundstage. The fact that what lay ahead so distinguished itself from whence we had come was almost unnerving. A desert within a desert. A self-contained roadside attraction, with a tollbooth.

“How much is it, Ben?”

“I don’t know.”

“What does that little sign say? I can’t see past your fat head.”

“My fat head?”

He had a point. They didn’t make fitted hats large enough to fit my head. “Are you going to use the pass?”

“I guess so.”

We inched forward tentatively. I looked around and down and anywhere but at the older man.

“Afternoon, boys.”

“Afternoon, sir.” Ben said; I could tell he was smiling. People tended to like Ben, his freckled, goateed, smooth face of a baby sumo. He handed over the card.

“Which one of you is \_\_\_\_\_?”

“That’s me, sir.”

“License, please.”

The terrain ahead could have been a beach, a salt quarry or the apocalypse. A car passed through the booth in the other direction, fleeing.

“Why does your license say your name is Benjamin?”

I saw snowdrifts, a nuclear winter.

“Well, actually sir...it’s my father’s.”

Way to keep up the façade. Stern disapproval rattled though the cabin. The white-haired man grew several inches. His mustache suddenly looked like a cop’s.

“You can’t just do this,” he began—time to suck up our sacks and blink stupidly. We were baby dear—“I should report this. It’s illegal, what you’ve done. I should at least confiscate this Eagle Pass...”

“Yes, sir,” Ben kept saying. He sounded good at this. I would have let him off.

After considerable deliberation on the ranger’s part, he genuinely sounded conflicted, he charged us the twenty dollars!, gave us back the counterfeit pass, and let us enter with a sigh.

“I suggest you do not try to use that pass again, gentlemen.”

And off we went into the amusement park, the spiritual seas of white foam and scattered brush (seaweed).

A sea of me in a sea of sand, out there in the rolling surf and seaweed, the desert dunes intimate in their emptiness—it all sounds flimsy now, looking back on this place but White Sands was not a letdown or a flop. It was what it is.

A peaceful precursor to the Pacific; I shuffled my feet through white sand and drifted west. The gritty weight would be the same, when I landed on the beach where Jack had been. Hell, this wasn’t even sand; it was gypsum, the remnants of an ancient,

dry lake bed. The ground remembered water. We were hiking the Alkali Flats. I'd lost track of Ben. I thought of little else.

I spatula-ed white stuff aside as I walked, barefoot and wandering. I took pictures of it all. Storms dragged themselves across the Park in the distance, suggesting proximity but never threatening. Somewhere between where I walked and where the mountains were—miles of space—water fell from darker clouds in lazy, silent arcs. I stopped to record it. I smoked a cigarette. I took pictures of sand in my hand and over the tops of my feet. I've never been much for barefoot endeavors but it had seemed the only way to go. Shoes would have been awkward and intrusive. For the few hours we spent there, wandering wayward paths away from and back towards the van, Ben and I were not untrue. We were not aliens, or invaders. We were not out of place, or forcing the matter. We were what we were, where we were.

At one point Ben showed me how.

I had shuffled over several waves and nearly lost sight of the van where it was parked, at the end of the road. I had forced Ben to drive us as far into the park as the road would allow, past other parked vehicles so we would not be bothered. I had wanted to really get inside this thing, to see what it was like. Tracks and trails of human locomotion led up and away from all the cars and campers we passed on our slow progress into the Park. It seemed to be what you did when you came here: pull up, park, and walk away. I had wanted to run, to scatter off into the hills of ivory and strip away all signs of me. To my surprise it was Ben who actually knew how to do this, how to disappear. I encountered him, as I said, a short distance from the van. He did not notice my approach at first. He was, I realized, walking with his eyes closed.

“What are you doing?” I said, announcing my presence.

“Close your eyes, man.”

“What?”

“Just close your eyes, it’s crazy. You can just close your eyes and walk forever.

There’s nothing out here to get in your way. Try it.”

“Why?”

“Just close them, trust me.”

Trust?

And he sauntered off. I spent a second laughing at his walk, the way his arms must roll about his waistline, bowing out at the elbows, the way his hands hang limp in front of him. But he was serious and he was walking away, with his eyes closed.

I tried it real quick. Wind wrapped around my ears, cupped itself over them. Those far-off mountains felt close. The sound in the maze of my ears was the wind off their peaks. My feet shuffled muted sand, soft but close. I squeezed my lids shut and walked for several paces, then opened them again when I felt the earth descend. It was okay, of course, the dune was simply arcing, the trough between waves. It was completely possible to keep my eyes shut. There was no hill too steep that it would hurt, and besides, it was sand. And with my eyes shut everything was closer, anyway and easier to anticipate. There was nothing in the way that would hurt, only harmless brush in the low places that almost made me open my eyes again, nonetheless, fighting back the words scorpion and rattlesnake as my feet rubbed through the sparse brush of a deep trough, though nothing happened and I floated on, of course. It came down to trust. I was not all that good at it.

You can walk for minutes, maybe miles with your eyes shut. Faith was probably something like that. Closest I had come to disappearing, to completely shutting the fuck up in years. A gritty taste of bliss I mulled over later in the van, in the declining light with my tongue in my mouth, chewing on sand.

Ben had arranged for room and board for a night outside of Albuquerque with friends of his mother's. We left White Sands early enough to make the foothills on the edge of town just before complete nightfall. After stopping to call from a gas station's payphone when we were close, to finalize the approach we idled up the narrow, windy paved road to Heaven in the clouds. Being friends of Ben's mother, I could have guessed at our hosts' religiosity, had I thought to. I could have picked up on the strange, sacred thin air that had followed us up my special route to Albuquerque and just east of town, over several mountain ranges (and their subsequent storms) I had intended to miss with the special route in the first place, avoiding a major interstate for some time to do so—I could have guessed that the nice, smiling southwestern couple would be good, god-fearing folks.

They both had white hair. Their eyes and their jewelry were turquoise, their clothing denim. His beard was full, and fully white. They were the colors of sky. Their teeth were white as they smiled. She rushed to heat up dinner plates for us, apologized that they had not waited to eat—they had not known exactly when we were due in. We had not exactly been in touch until we got close. I would have felt ugly had she not fed us. It might have been shameful were we not like long lost sons, home for laundry and

hot food and beds. I smiled back and ate my meat, potatoes and vegetable, even the vegetables.

We were shown our separate rooms downstairs and bid goodnight. It was not late. I wrote my parents a postcard in the still sobriety of my guest room. We had not smoked since much earlier, and we had been fed. There is something eerily reminiscent about sobriety, a neatly made bed and clean, unobstructed carpet—it reminded me of holidays, of school breaks, visiting relatives. There should have been snow, smooth, white snow. The inside of my brain was clean and clear. My eyes were white. I could hear the changing pitches of silence in my ears. All clear in Albuquerque. And as I said, I wrote my parents a postcard:

New Orleans was fun,  
Almost too much—  
Endless nights, the Blues,  
And such.  
Carlsbad Caverns,  
Flight of the bats—  
Gila Cliff Dwellings,  
And hot spring baths.  
Today White sands,  
Tomorrow Canyonlands.  
Hijinx and always with laughter  
We are living this.  
Try to see it all but still  
There is much we miss.  
Many miles to go...

Love,  
Kyle

I spent that night's sober sleeplessness reading a synopsis of the Old and New Testaments. Like I said, there was something in the air. It was thin. I was not meeting

my oxygen quotas, maybe. I was reading about Jesus Christ. I read the Reader's Digest version of the Bible, Christianity's Cliff's Notes. I slept humbly and tried not to wrinkle the sheets.

I woke up early in the morning, early for me. I do that when I have not smoked myself to sleep the night before. My head was cloudy, which was actually clear, but foreign in the morning so it felt heavy. Reality surged in my temples, making me wince. I ascended the slender, carpeted stairs without thinking. There was no need to check on Ben, he would be passed out for hours yet. I realized I was tip-toeing at the same I turned and reached the top of the stairs, frozen there with both arms out and palms stiff against the wall. In front of me, in their adjacent recliners our host couple was seated and holding hands across the small gap between the chairs, heads up and back with their eyes closed. They hadn't heard me, nor me them. I listened closely to what they were saying; one of them was speaking softly. I held my breath and leaned in. It was the man speaking—he was praying. This couple was holding hands and they were praying, with me motionless behind them unannounced, listening in. He was saying a prayer for us. They were praying for Ben and for me, by name, as if they knew me well, and as if they cared. It was a sincere gesture. This display was not for me. I backed away down the stairs; I receded to my depths and got back beneath covers. That, up there had been theirs and not mine. For me, but not of me. A selfless act, on my behalf. They wished us well. This place was sanctuary, a heaven in the hills. I slept again.

When I woke for the last time for the day I ascended the stairs loudly, announcing each fall of my weight. I marched upstairs to a meal they had prepared, for me. I do not

eat blueberries at all but they were in those pancakes, and I dared not decline my generous, meticulously laid out breakfast. I ate blueberry pancakes for the first time in my life outside on their back porch, suspended up high in the Albuquerque hills on a sunshiny Saturday morning beside scores of hummingbirds. Literally dozens of flapping, buzzing, vibrating little winged angels, darting in and out of several feeders. Apparently hummingbirds live in the mountains of New Mexico. Apparently they flourish. Ben fumbled upstairs as I wolfed down food I did not like, I smiled at his cloudy morning face in the sky outside and continued eating. I asked for more. I basked in a bright sun. For a brief moment I was not me, and this made me happy.

## FIRE

We had left heaven in the hills that first morning of this marathon and gained considerable altitude; without coming down we headed straight for the belly of the Beast, turning north at Gallup in a trot, right up the main pipe: Route 666.

Route 666 traversed—and I write of it in the past-tense because it no longer exists, as such, the name now something less threatening and symbolic, 491, I think, but still the same route up—the eastern extent of Monument Valley’s red basin floor, an expansive stretch of blazing cartoon land in the high desert, the heart of which is just west of the Four Corners junction, the only point in America common to four states at right angles—is this insipid or apt? Listed counter-clockwise (our direction of travel), starting in the southeast, these conjoining states are: New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona.

State lines are arbitrary intangibles but still we tried to superimpose them over the rolling landscape as we gradually approached what the atlas called Colorado. Maybe those mountains over there, past the giant stone monoliths, at about ten o’clock, Benny, way off, are in Utah? I knew the road would take us there. Whomever paved this river was an artist.

I kept thinking of Robert Downey, Jr’s Australian accent setting the scene, narrating Mickey and Mallory’s bloody romp along that route. Oliver Stone did something for the southwest with *Natural Born Killers*. He captured its metaphysical, mythical quality. He saw its reptilian, sinister side. I remembered reading an article

about how Stone and his producers had taken road trips up this stretch, ingesting psychedelics, for research purposes. I think they may have gotten pulled over, maybe arrested. This was always in my brainstem somewhere, a sort of itch.

With my belly full of the blueberry pancakes they fed me I had been compelled west again out of Albuquerque, down from the mountains finally west again. I had never liked blueberry pancakes. My head had been so clear it stung in the sunshine.

I had experienced equilibrium (sobriety) in my clean, carpeted guest room in the mountains just east of town. It had been some form of heaven.

This departure was an exodus.

We would not stop moving and I would not rest for the next three days and nights, over which span I'd conquer sizable portions of five different states, five National Parks and myself. The first blow came only an hour into this flight, from a well known foe: we rose toward the Continental Divide once more.

"We shouldn't be doing this for a third time already, Benny," I said, referencing the drive to and from the Gila National Wilderness Area, the day before, and the night before that, irrespectively. It had been Ben's baby, checking out Gila. I had done all the driving, and the van all the real work.

She pinged and rattled on the first gradual uphill. I had thought we would be coming directly down from the mountains that morning, but I-70 west out of Albuquerque was a backwards ride up a gigantic burlap-sack carnival slide. Struggling up those long, steep grades out of town was strenuous. My body lost water. My shirt smelled mildly fragrant at first—they had allowed us to do our laundry back there—then

much worse, that nervous pungency. And my poor van, pinged and rattling and screaming itself apart up the giant slide in the broad, high plains as the rain and thunder and hail started in and everything disappeared. We plowed through it stoned behind steaming windows.

We seemed to be inside the squall lines as we climbed. The way the road was drowned in mist and wind we could have been in a plane, a noisy prop engine cargo plane in the rain. My eyes went from instruments to center console nervously; we had no horizon and her single engine six was straining. The vacuum needle buried in the red, shook so fast it blurred. Lightning snapped somewhere close.

The sky lifted as we swept farther west toward the Arizona line, filling her clearing windows with our first look at the land around us. Several-hundred foot red towers guarded our entrance to the true western plateau country, an ominous red turreted gateway to ancient earth. There were manufactured houses and trailers and some homes scattered along the bases of these red cliffs, small, marginal communities living beneath an onslaught of magnificent boulders and jagged slabs of stone. They tempted gravity.

Everything ahead was named devil-this and hell's-that and people must have always felt the way I did when we entered this land. If my van had a tail it would have been between its legs. We passed a large, plain white sign for the Divide.

We snaked between surreal plateaus and must have been close when I saw something absurd and good mood spoiling. A smokestack rose up from the red-ridged and slick rock divide to the north, like the giant un-lubricated cock of humanity, of mankind. Someone had decided it was a good spot to hide a nuclear plant, literally

cradled, nestled within the sculpted slick rock folds. The Hopi have prophecies for such things, and a word: Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Order. It's a movie.

It was hot as hell and as the weather cleared we needed to hurry. 666 ran north from Gallup through Cortez, Colorado—where the earth was on fire (literally) and Mesa Verde was closed to the public, so we'd be bypassing—then on into Utah, cutting across the Rocky Mountain State's southwest corner toward Moab, where the rocks blaze red at sunset in the Devil's Garden. We had eight hours until the sun fell, and 400 miles in our way. Our route looked on a map like a serpent coiling 'round a cross.

“It's make-able,” I declared to Ben. I was driving.

“Sure it is,” he said in that passive, palms-up, why-not way he had.

If White Sands and our spiritual one-night stand in Albuquerque had been high water marks to this trip thus far, then Route 666 and the resulting three day psychic binge would be the dry, scorched lake bed.

I remember Ben driving that day, what would become a rare occasion as he slowly, improbably disappeared. Sitting in the first mate's chair I saw slurred remnants of Native American culture slide by the roadside, for sale. Small cardboard and wooden signs were staked along the road, outside small huts and thatchwork sheds, small trailers on cinder blocks in squared-off alcoves of unfenced roadside brush, the only breaks in otherwise entirely-fenced stretches of desolate land; which is the other thing: this nation is entirely fenced and hemmed. Highways and county roads and state routes cut swaths through

private plots. It's all been claimed; empty, un-developed land, spoken for. We took it from the primitive peoples, and then turned it over to the beasts. Scattered herds of cattle grazed in places. Only pockets of displaced humanity persisted, clinging to a tether line of fuming, kiln-fired asphalt, pedaling postcard versions of an entire peoples' art. 666 ran through the Navajo Nation.

We were directed through a giant chess set of impenetrable, towering castles of sandstone. Gigantic, irregular monuments jutted towards redemption. Their shadows and silhouettes rose from the horizon and steadily filled out as we approached from miles off. Impossible time elapsed between first visual contact and the eventual passing of the beasts. These 1000-foot giants appeared to hover and float away from us as we tried to gain on them. We reached Twin Buttes first, then Beautiful and Hogback Mountains—is that what a hog's back looks like, Benny? I guess so, right?—nearly across the road from each other, and finally and especially Shiprock as we closed in on Colorado. They looked to have been fired from the ground, straight up to the clouds. Shiprock had almost made it. We approached and passed. All things earthly can be reached.

We blasted through this scene burning the byproducts of time and pressure in the engine between us, listening to it rattle. We could not progress without this worrisome reminder; the van's straining motor became my conscience.

Ben drove some that afternoon because I wasn't much of an afternoon person. I required siesta when the sun was high. I woke up early with a burst but it faded; by one or two o'clock I began to shut down. When the sun went down I'd rise again.

Later that day, behind a faint dashboard readout, illuminated road markings, and with fading silhouettes of close canyon walls sinking into the limitless periphery of possibility and darkness outside Arches Nat'l Park, I would awaken. Something would stir in my gut each time we approached idleness on that three day stretch—why stop?—why impede our own potential?—why not see what happens when...

But first and frustratingly, before this awakening the green, red, white and blue world as we gained on Colorado and then Utah was endless. We Pong-ed our way from mountain range to range over this ridiculous scale; small, but tall, little clusters of massive peaks with their own perpetual storm clouds like large-brimmed hats or menacing halos in this, the big sky west. The road seemed to extend itself, to tease us with proximity.

160 split east toward Mesa Verde and the sky was gray enough to be smoke. We rolled past, just beyond landslide reach of violent plateaus taunting those who clung to their bases in trailers and manufactured homes, eternally besieged from above. It was all fortresses and towers and perpetual siege, red death and jagged boulders from a thousand feet.

666 officially terminated at Monticello, in Utah. This small town clung sparsely to the eastern base of Abajo Peak, the tallest of three closely-packed mountains. These peaks rose suddenly and pyramidal from flat plains. Abajo must have risen two miles toward the sky.

We picked up 191 there and drove north into the daffy cartoon country of Utah's smoother, sculpted sandstone. Nothing on this earth should look like that without us

having already known about it. What was wrong with everyone? How was it possible not to worship such a place? The Navajo had been on to something. The rocks were red and white and yellow and clay, the grasses green. The sky was intermittently blue and white and gray. Our perception of contrast and texture expanded to include the formerly and naturally implausible. Everything singed our brains. Man could not build a theme park of such wonder with unlimited resources. We'd fuck it up.

I'm fairly certain the Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote did battle on that same stretch of road. The colors were better in person.

Arches was the first to fall on this binge. We took it fast and from below. Paid a toll at its gated entrance then ascended, via harsh, tight switchbacks in the van its outer wall. Her engine and exhaust note, windows down, narrated our ascent. Arches is walled off from the valley floor of Moab, Utah, where the giant red cliffs that frame town into a north-south crevice narrow from a mile or so wide to less than a hundred yards; just before the road disappears into the jagged fissure of the Moab Fault, right at its mouth we turned off and clawed our way up and over, barely. My poor baby, she cried loudly. Our approach was carved out by the Colorado and the Cane Rivers. The van was barely able.

After breaching the nearly-adequate defenses, I bore us past amazing things without flinching—over and around dramatic, red landscapes of fins that looked like city skylines and arches like windows and balanced rocks like waiting death—to our destination, as the guidebook directed: Delicate Arch at sunset, shy of the Devil's Garden and the Park's northern fringe. We'd driven roughly 400 miles since morning. The sun had begun its decline...we would have just enough time.

Delicate Arch's trailhead was a congested parking lot on Mars. I hadn't figured other people did this sort of thing. But it was Saturday in the great American traveling summer, despite the cost of gas. Campers, SUVs, and minivans spilled over onto dusty red flats, over stone so smooth it looked fake, like molded Plaster-of-Paris, painted the color of clay. A thin layer of crunchy residue lay like a film over everything—the earth's dead skin.

Vehicle doors shunked shut all around us; it was a staging area. People in T-shirts and vests and new hiking boots mulled about rear bumpers; children scampered and chased. I made Ben shut the front windows before coming into the back to smoke. He objected.

“*Great idea, dude. It's not hot outside,*” he stressed. “*We'll be completely comfortable in here!*”

All the commotion had me spooked. I was willing to sweat to keep our stink in. I lay low on the couch, almost hiding, shrinking away from the van's many windows. I thought about painting them black. No tint could have been dark enough.

We began to sweat more. It was amazing how fast pores compensated. They bristled. Ben made a display of swiping his forehead. His face was expressive.

“Fine, forget this,” I said. “Not here.” I stuffed the necessary equipment, pipe and film case of fun and lighter and smokes into my pockets and slammed open the van's sliding door. “We'll take care of business on the hike up.”

At Arches I wore my European uniform, my disguise. Blue/white sneakers, off-white knee-length cargo shirts, a navy blue ribbed a-shirt (a fancy wife-beater, my shoulders ablaze), brand name sunglasses, and a blue/white bandana, barely large enough to tie behind my fat head. I had shaved in Albuquerque and was understandably pale.

Freckles. I looked like an Irish or Dutch tourist on parade. There is something innocuous about a northern European on vacation, I thought, or maybe exposing my arms made me feel like a man. Either way, I looked foolish. It was not a disguise. If I had seen myself on this trip I'd have had fun at his expense. I looked like Eurotrash, like everyone else.

The Green River and smooth rock; the Road Runner and Coyote; Europeans and fat Americans; cartoon land and me and Ben, just two more self-fashioned characters in it.

First glimpse from outside the van was of a long haul up a wide, smooth, and steadily ascending mesa. It rose like the sinking ship's stern. Small things that were people were strewn along the trail in a line, smaller as they ascended; it looked like some kind of pilgrimage. They marched single file toward the Arch.

We ventured off the trail to find a place to smoke. I wanted to get high and Ben welcomed the break. It was considered a mildly strenuous hike. It was at least ninety out there with no shade. I was mildly paranoid about what I wanted to do, get high in public, in the open, and insisted we wander farther away from human traffic than Ben saw necessary. We sat on an orange stone shelf in what looked to be a smooth, dry creek bed and burned one. There were a few sharp bushes. The sun bore down.

As soon as we were finished—I mean immediately, as in: before I had the chance to light a cigarette—a group of three or four tourists passed directly in front of us, directly across our paralyzed view. We had been boisterous and loud; surely these people had heard that, and smelled the rest. It was a windy afternoon out on the smooth rock mesas and the tourists had emerged from the direction in which our hits had wafted. Expanding, pungent puffs of smoke—our private high was briefly burst.

The foreigners moved through quickly and quietly, though, almost timidly; as surprised and hushed to see us this intentionally far from the trail as we were them. What did they think we were doing, sitting together out there, laughing and lighting cigarettes? What could they have thought?

I looked like them.

We were really zooted and I felt odd, itchy; a picture Ben took of me came out strangely. I'm looking over my shoulder in my stupid outfit with big, pale, freckled shoulders fully brandished and bandana over ample forehead and skull pulled too tight, fancy sunglasses disguising red eyes, smoking a post-session cigarette, the best kind, but the picture is distorted. As if through some metaphysical projection, the photograph is divided into vertical, colored thirds; a bit of psychedelic eye candy out there on what looks to be another planet.

Ben and I shared surprise over the lack of safety measures on the final approach to the Arch. The smooth rock sloped (dropped) dramatically away from us—not that I was upset by the responsibility placed upon me for my own safety (it pleased me immensely),

but that I was shocked “they” would demand so much competence of the visitors to that place. The hike was potentially dangerous. It was potentially great.

Delicate Arch—our destination—sits on the far brim of a bowl-like natural stadium at the tip of a sandstone mesa. The hike to that point was a gradual incline over sanded earth, from one tip of the narrow mesa to the other. But at the last turn we were forced to the outside and around the stadium wall, momentarily scraping along a steep grade—you’d probably skid down the mesa’s side at first, but then you’d hit an outcropping or imperfection and ramp outward, tumbling and picking up speed, lucky if you’re impaled on a scraggly tree or brush and therefore cushioned...I swallowed that image in a gulp and smiled. The National Park Service was a Darwinian organization, seemed to implement survival of the fittest at its finest; after all, there was a reward waiting for the able among us around the bend. That was, until we stumbled upon the scene at the end of the trail and stepped gingerly onto the bowl’s brim, joining an immense flock of fidgeting, squawking tourists. Many others had also made it; probably all of them.

The majority of the crowd was gathered across the bowl from us, almost kitty-corner around the brim from the Arch. They basked and reclined as if they were at the beach; the Arch was their sun. They were packed together where the rim apexes, then spread more sparsely where it drops down into the basin. Ben and I had kept back from that scene at first, choosing instead to perch ourselves on the outside of the brim, backs to the crowd and the natural arch. There was majesty everywhere, and here everyone was

focused on one small geologic anomaly. The entire landscape was painted clay, kiln-fired for millennia. A smaller, adjacent mesa provided eons of eye candy.

At one point a bighorn crossed below us, in the narrow pass between parallel plateaus. His head so solid and heavy, his bounding effortless, Ben and I laughed at him and followed his masterful progress across the uneven terrain.

“Look at this guy,” I said to Ben.

The ram even looked up at me before bounding beautifully out of sight, as if to reiterate my inability to do the same. His ass was a cool white in the shadow between land masses.

As the sun’s angle sharpened the stone reddened. We took pictures of everything that wasn’t the Arch. Far off weather systems moved across a crimson earth. Wind kicked up and carried away the sounds of man. We were momentarily alone.

Eventually we had to make our move. The Arch was why we were there. Ben’s father and the not-to-be-dismissed guidebook had suggested it. I wanted a picture beneath the damn thing, and the sun was almost eye level already.

Facing Ben now, offset by a foot or two, I was speaking into his shoulder just above my breath.

“Shut up! Shut the fuck up!” I said, referencing the crowd behind my back.

“Jesus! These fucking tourists need to shut up!”

People were growing restless as the sun took its sweet time setting. The din of conversation and activity had grown. Shouts rang across the stone to relatives posing

beneath the Arch; children scampered after siblings; at least twice a water bottle clanged and scraped down the inside of the bowl and came to rest, a teenager reluctantly shrugging after it after being told to retrieve it, then laughed at by his peers. It was a long way down. I nearly spat as the second perp smacked past us in flip-flops.

Ben placed his paws on my shoulders. “Ah, c’mere...” he said.

“No.” I swam out of his hold. “This is horrible, Ben. They’re *singing*, for Christ’s sake!”

They *were* singing. To my shock and dismay, the youth group or senior class or church trip or whatever the seemingly growing mass of teenagers was had begun to sing, in unison, our National Anthem.

“Ah, no. It’s the National Anthem, Benny!” I cried. “Not out here! This is unacceptable. Not out here!”

“...The bombs bursting in air...”

I thought of jumping. I saw one of the teenagers down at the base of the bowl; maybe I could land on top of him, do the world twice the service. He was the one who had walked down to retrieve his water bottle.

I thought of water. That smooth, bowl-like base once held lots of it. An ancient whirlpool once stirred there. The base is not a completed ring; the Arch is positioned on a sort of hook extending from the mesa’s tip, so that when the Colorado rushed past it must have been diverted into the concavity, collecting in a spinning torrent. Ancient currents swept up and pooled, shaped what we had come to admire. I wished they would once again. I wished they would reclaim that place; the looks on all those people’s faces.

We took pictures. We got our shots.

There is one that best encapsulates my afternoon at Arches National Park. It is not the black and white with me alone beneath Delicate Arch, arms outstretched and no one else in the wide shot; no, that one gives the impression of perfect, postcard conquest, of sunny, solitary triumph. The picture that best captures my experience at Arches shows me leaning back against one of the Arch's legs, looking over my shoulder, startled by some guy walking through the Arch, stealing my moment and emerging from a sheer drop, stepping up from thin air through the natural gateway. I am really staring back at him in the picture. Ben must have also thought this pose stood for something more.

We left everyone in the dissipating twilight and whistling wind and headed down. The wind had really picked up. The lingering light drowned as it got dark, which seemed to happen rapidly. All those people acting like asses back at the Arch were going to have to navigate this trail in the dark, by fucking brail! We squinted to follow the small stone trail markers, the cairns, laid out every ten feet or so like Pac-Man pellets to be devoured—or to be detoured. I giggled like a maniac and hunched over to collect, then scampered to redeposit the smooth pellets around a bend, like a cartoon character picking up and redirecting a roadway's dotted center line into a dead end rock-face, painted to look like the mouth of a tunnel. There was a pure joy to it. The stacks of stones were arranged like beef Napoleons, layered and appetizing.

“What are you doing, dude?” Ben asked.

“I'm not doing anything.”

“No!” he said, catching my drift. “You can’t.” His voice was muffled in the wind. Gusts sustained themselves. Our ears roared.

“I can’t what?”

“Don’t do that, man. C’mon.”

“You come on, Benny.”

“Kyle, you can’t.” We faced each other in a pool of sinking darkness, braced against the breeze and grade. The whites of our eyes were not white in the dying light.

They were gray.

“Sure I can. Where are your balls for chrissakes? F these people. What do you care?” Neither of our faces could figure the other. This was nighttime; it had happened. The last grain of sunlight was gone. The wind swept invisible abrasives along smooth, sloped rock. I stopped my basket-armed collection. If it had rained we’d all have slid off the earth, anyway.

I didn’t know it then, but this was the moment when my big friend began to disappear. His resistance to my plot had really surprised me. It would be his last active moment for some time. Big Ben the philanthropist, the bleeding heart; where did he go?

Limping away from Arches, rolling down switchbacks into Moab Ben wanted to find a room. There were two directions to try and I drove them both in the darkness to humor him. Moab is a one-street drag. It goes to sleep early. Motel signs were not lit. A moon helped but only faintly. After doubling back past the Park and north again through the narrow Moab Fault, towards the interstate, I got the itch and pulled us into the last gas station for miles.

Ben packed a bowl as I flipped the flaps of my packed CD book, fed the changer's magazine and opened the lap-sized atlas and the park guide atop that, plotting. We'd been on the move since early that day in the quiet morning mountains outside Albuquerque. We'd made Moab and hiked out to the Arch by sunset, in time to see the descent. My temples sizzled with fatigue.

We would have to hit I-70 and take it west awhile, then drop down between mountain folds somewhere and snake our way south into the Dixie National Forest on the edge of the Grand Staircase. Ben's guidebook suggested sunrise over Bryce Canyon—it would be close. I would have to keep us moving.

The bowl's contents crackled and popped; smoke seized my throat. I slid the CD cartridge into place behind my seat and yanked down on the tree, into gear. Multiple guitars kicked in. That itch; that pleasing adrenaline—Why stop when we could keep moving? Possibly it pained me to knowingly backtrack like that; the distance north from Moab to the interstate would have to be made up sooner rather than later, but still we were moving. Possibly it pleased me.

“Looord I was boorn a traavelin' maaa-an...”

Before retiring for the night Ben brought out his hippie drum and together we sang and banged on things. I had the steering wheel heel and dashboard vinyl and engine cap cup holders; Benny had that damn drum. For a few songs we were both up there in our captain's chairs, carrying on.

There was a void, a lack, and the motion didn't fill it—I took this emptiness with me where I went—but it did distract. In a life that is tenuous at best there's no reason for

anything, only an impulsive inclination toward the infinite potential of empathic experience. As humans we have the capacity for catharsis; our borders are fluid. We can share with our surroundings. We can take part.

The potential for this was my only real hope for a stop-gap to impending oblivion, and driving west with my knee on I-70 in the mountains north of Moab in the middle of the night and the sky with the moon riding shotgun supplied ample opportunity for escape. David Byrne was calling me along—“We’re on a rooad to noowhere/ Come on along”—so I laughed and shook sweat from my eyelids. He was right; him, Benny in the back finally asleep, and me and my big bag of nothing all buzzing along and ascending in a pressurized pocket of van.

You can call it desperation.

I sought transcendence.

“Road to Nowhere” is a good song. It *was* a good song, at the time. Sounds corny now, but I was fully involved in it all. I was taking part; just a small, steering wheel-smacking, lead vocals-with-all-the-dressings-whilst-steering-with-left-knee (that foot propped perfectly on the front wheel well), ashing-my-butt-out-the-vent-window-from-increasingly-impossible-distances, cheering-the-small-flare-on-its-way-into-the-roar part, singing “We’ll take that ride!” I wasn’t alone, or confined.

My van’s engine played its part. The straight six was a coffee can down to its last bean, shaking furiously as we climbed. The contents nearly over-mixed as we crested a mid-mountain pass and our meager air conditioning turned to poison vapor. Our carved out highway pass fell away and the cold night sky opened up all around us, beneath us!

The temperature dropped. Benny the big music box had already lumbered into the back to find sweet slumber and the moon had taken over his duties.

The moonlit terrain appeared model-like; vast scale became imperceptible and toy-like in the scattered, accented light of my friend. Mountains like speed bumps glinted momentarily and receded into silhouette. The planet's jet stream spewed forth from dash vents.

There was a cool symmetry to the twin trails of mist; they and the roadside reflectors threaded past in parallel. There were some kinds of construction markings; extra reflectors and orange cones to hem us in. We had begun to descend again. I gulp to think of it but we were on some kind of bridge or raised roadway all the way up there; the mountain was suddenly gone, and beyond the broken yellow line and big orange...upside down garbage cans there was nothing. Just orange-painted Rubbermaid between oblivion and I; nothing more.

I lined one of those bastards up on the gradual downhill grade, taking an easy, nearly flush approach to the stripe of plastic cans, nonchalantly (with my knee!) sending one, and only one (with my van's front bumper, right at the corner where it rounds off) perfectly out into that night sky as a spiritual stand-in, as something to take my place while I finished that thing I had started. I did it without overcompensating or skipping a beat with Mr. Byrne. That fucker really shot out there, too. It lit up in my headlight then evaporated. I ended up stopping seconds later, before the bridge ended, to see if I could gauge the drop, to see if I could fathom the depths.

There was a bottom to that scale model representation of things, only it wasn't real. I mean, it was down there; I saw it. But none of it was tangible from where I stood

in the cool night, in my headlights' beams casting open-ended shadows along the road.

The van thrummed behind me. The Talking Heads suggested themselves from within it.

Wind moved and stirred and invited me out over the abyss. I knelt to palm the cool asphalt. I could feel it.

## LIGHT

Ben had had to be annoyed awake at Bryce Canyon, in the still-dark early morning. The moon was bright and burning white, almost backlit, but it was dark. The gooey stillness hid tall Firs and Ponderosa pine around the parking lot. A wooden ranch fence stood fuzzy where headlights had shone. Somewhere in the high altitude stillness the horseshoe-shaped amphitheater sat in the side of a thousand-foot cliff face, Bryce's secret treasure of erosion, millennia of wind and water, sculpting stone and painting.

It was three or so when we arrived. I had made good time. I gave Ben half an hour or so before I used my flashlight's strobe light feature, in his face for full effect. I yelled and carried on with raspy roadvoice.

"Wake up, Benny!"—and—"Now's the time to rise and shine!"—and—"Get the fuck up, Fuckface you've been sleeping all night!"—and—"I did all the driving anyway, now wake up and enjoy the fruits of my labor BIG GUY!"—and eventually—"Cock-le doo-dle doo!"

Ben was reluctant, almost sour about the whole thing. He took his sweet time waking up. I buzzed around him like a fruit fly to a pear.

The sun would be up soon. I had driven all night. I was not going to miss a fraction of the day's ascent.

"We're *here*, Ben! Why not wake up and *experience* it!"

Heavily, Ben followed me from the van in the blackness. The night felt absolute. There was no sound save for my fluttering, buzzing anticipation. There were no other human beings on the planet. We had that hidden place to ourselves.

Even at that altitude the black air was stew. We could not see. Sunrise Point would be the perfect spot for sunrise viewing, according to the guidebook—undeniable logic in that. Zero to sunrise in an hour or so.

We hiked briefly along a ridge, unaware of the brink just steps from our path, then up a crunchy, winding ramp to a concrete platform, a railing-ed trapezoid with two cold, perpendicular benches. Twisting from the center of the pad a dead, bark-less scarecrow of a tree startled me.

We could see Orion from our perch. I pointed it out to Ben, to give the big guy something to focus on. We disagreed on the constellation's orientation; Ben saw its three-star belt as merely the buckle, meaning the whole figure was actually on its side and comprised the majority of the seeable sky. In Ben's world Orion was a giant.

We saw the Milky Way, a slender cloud of stars. Looked almost like smoke. We disagreed on this one, too. We were part of it, I argued, within it. Our perspective was from within the disc, looking out; the cross-section of a plane's wing.

We chose the wrong bench, it turns out, and in spite of my haste we waited a good two hours for the sun to even begin its progress over the Aquarius Plateau off to the east, in the direction our seat faced. By the time pastels began banding along the uneven horizon, people had gathered on our platform, maybe a dozen or more. They talked in several languages other than English, which was comforting, at least. Our anonymity

remained partially intact amidst twenty of them mulling, chattering in the vast blackness. One of them, a woman, asked me where to look and I pointed to the east and to the northeast.

“I’m pretty sure,” I said.

The sun shed several layers of light from behind that horizontal eastern ridge—the highest-timbered plateau in North America, maybe the Western Hemisphere—then poked above it, further revealing our surroundings. I spent this time diligently scanning the lightening terrain, leaning out over the railing for a closer look. There were folds of rock revealing themselves, some colors, and surprisingly, lots of trees—Firs, mostly, Christmas trees—but nothing like the photographs in the guide, no vast, Technicolor amphitheater of erosion and rock formations.

“Maybe out in that direction,” I suggested to Ben and whoever else understood English. “I think it looks promising over there.”

As the sun’s waist broke the Plateau’s plain, promise soured. I didn’t get it and by then, only a thin breath away from turning around and discovering my folly—Bryce Amphitheater was actually right *behind* us, if only we’d turned around, or even looked over a shoulder!—my stomach was already twisting and squeezing, bubbling churning over the poison within.

I was testing out our mushrooms.

At some point in the waiting, gathering darkness I had slipped back a quarter mile to the van and to a sandwich bag full of dark, flat caps—crumbly, almost burnt mushroom hats—and chewed down what I deemed to be a little less than half a dose; just

enough to know if they would work when the perfect time arose for both of us to eat them, maybe later that day in Zion. If they would work, and also that they would not kill us when the time came, I was curious to know. I didn't necessarily trust the circumstances under which I had received them, in the back of my van in a Port Charlotte strip mall parking lot, from a coworker who'd just fled a fist fight. He was sweating in my van's stuffy cabin, struggling to catch his breath. His light hair was cropped from a recent stint in the Marines.

"I just popped the guy," he said between heaves. His eyes seemed dilated. "He was giving us shit, so I stepped up and dropped him," he said. "One shot, man, dropped." His knuckles were scuffed. He was doing me a favor. I figured cops were on the way. We smoked a bowl while I fidgeted with itchy paranoia and his friends waited in an idling car. He asked for twenty bucks and wished me luck.

The location of the actual amphitheater made sense, in relation to our observation post. You see—as we eventually did—the sun rises in the east, over the Aquarius and casts its first light to the west. This means, and meant, that any west-facing rock formations would be draped in shadow each morning until the sun climbed high enough to look down upon them over the Plateau. Therefore Bryce Canyon, being advertised as a prime *sunrise* destination, must have been an east-facing cliff. This piece of logic escaped me. I don't think Ben really cared either way. What's the difference if he didn't see the *entire* sunrise?—If he wasn't the *first* person there? It's all the same.

I looked long and hard out over the vast basin that lightened below us to the east, towards the Plateau. I was sure the sights and scenes I had read of in the guidebook

would materialize before us. I had no bearings. It took me some time to turn around, and realize what was what.

And there it was: the horseshoe-shaped amphitheater of orange, red and white sandstone cities. And it had already happened; the sun was high enough in the sky to make me squint. We had missed the gradual effect of new light gaining on the Canyon. We had missed the day/night line of light's descent from the rim to the floor as the sun rose, and the resulting suspenseful, patient progress of color. Instead we had to take it all in immediately, now that it was apparent. The reds had earthen-ed already, become more muted and orange. Layers of white like salt projected through the spindly formations in horizontal bands. Rows of towers and turreted fins graduated toward the canyon wall, striped with oxidation. Shadows stretched back like city skylines. Turning around and taking all this in was work. Doing it on psychedelic fungus was exquisite labor.

The crowd up on the observation platform was growing. It was backed up along the short, steep grade of the approach, spreading out over the conical rise at the northern point of Bryce Canyon's horseshoe amphitheater. That, and trees.

It was all silhouettes to me.

The horseshoe canyon rim sloped up at the center, and down toward the arms like a gigantic stone chair. Like my bedroom chair in the van. People had gathered at the northern tip of the chair's arm, over the conical rise where a cup holder might be.

I backed down from there as I realized the reality of my surroundings and that I'd soon be leaving it (reality).

I knew for certain that the mushrooms were working more than just a little bit when I found myself putting distance between he and the other patrons of the park. I knew something was up when I found myself alone along the rim, thinking of him in the third person.

Hiking couples marched single-file off Sunrise Point's precipice, down a narrow balance-beam of uneven, sculpted rock. There is a way wool socks are supposed to look: like two-tone contracted coils sprung from the tops of hiking boots, perfectly bunched and orderly (and under no circumstances uneven or cotton). There is a length of shorts that is apparently acceptable: like above the knees (and never below or four inches too large in the waist, sagging). One is supposed to wear a wristwatch, preferably one with a wide band and various gauges, dials, and time zones (rather than bare, naked wrists, a lint-clogged pocket-watch frozen inside too-large shorts). Sunglasses should be secured behind the head with a safety band (which, that night, after Zion, would make some sense). Smiles should be muted, when worn. Looking like that is serious business, after all.

That fucking death walk day hike down into the canyon was definitely serious business. Why did no one smile from the mortal anticipation? Gravity plus elevation equals potential energy. Couldn't they feel it build?

Maybe the hike down was a way to decompress, a form of release. Should we have been hiking? It might have proved too much for me.

I smiled nervously, my lips tense and drawn back from my teeth. They felt almost blue, my lips. My teeth quivered and tapped. Eustachian tubes extended for miles

in the back of my mouth. All sounds echoed off the confines of my skull. I was a cold air balloon, invisible and expanding. Soon the amphitheater would not be able to contain me.

I was disappointed that I couldn't find Thor's Hammer once the sun was up. I'd seen a picture of it in Ben's guidebook, and wanted to see it in reality. But this wasn't reality. I was on mushrooms at sunrise in southern Utah's cartoon country, scanning a surreal amphitheater of colorful rock spindles, spires, fins, hoodoos and grottos for a single, mythical formation; in an area large enough to be coined an official Canyon. Not *Grand*, exactly, but certainly enigmatic.

I was humbled.

Thumbing through my color prints two weeks later in my hometown, I realized that I *had* seen the damn hammer-shaped hoodoo—had even taken a picture of its silhouette—in the stew of first light and fog. I was then doubly disappointed, for missing the fact that I had not missed it. Everything always secondhand—we are removed.

The palace gates beckoned and I realized where I was. Bryce Canyon was the eastern face of a temple, the fortified outer walls and outlying crops of perfectly symmetrical model trees—forest green cones of perpetual bloom—planted asymmetrically amongst the minarets of mother nature, her mythical stone turrets like Thor's hammer, which I didn't realize at the time I'd already found. The drawbridge was laid out for me down there if only I could have unplanted my hollow trunks clinging to the canyon rim, if my lower jaw didn't tremble in the presence of all that and my stomach not squeamish from

the inorganic notion of decisions. I could have petrified and become a stump if there wasn't something we were supposed to be doing.

I shivered for something to defend, to hold; something to keep me there.

Often we just didn't know what to do. After only hours we'd be left staring at each other's big mug, asking 'What's the plan?'

Such a waste.

Here we were at perhaps the Earth's greatest display of time, its greatest record of what happens over eons of wind and water and just uninterrupted natural time, and we were standing around, shuffling our substandard footwear in the high altitude soot beside a concrete observation deck on the rim of it all, unsure what to do with ourselves. I might have had an excuse, with the mushrooms churning away in my gut and all, trying as I was to gauge their safety/effectiveness whilst under their growing influence, knowing that they did, indeed do the trick; only question left was would they kill me? But what was Ben's excuse? Where was the big guy? What did Benny do with this time? What occupied his mind?

Was he also growing uncomfortable, uncertain of our circumstances?

Again, like Arches and Carlsbad, Bryce began to feel like an attraction. It was a theme park; this morning's theme being erosion. I begged the big guy, when he showed up where I was standing, to drive us over there, across the amphitheater where the view would be different and the herds less dense. I had been standing and squatting in the same spot for hours. I'd named each grotto and hoodoo and crevice; wished each tourist

tragic death and felt guilty for it. Over there, where Ben drove us would be better. It wasn't in boldface in the book. We would get to be there alone.

It was especially uncomfortable around families. Adults and their children—having children makes you an adult, somehow, unless you are fourteen, and even then—they looked at us and prayed to their gods that no fruit of their collective loins turn out this way. I looked down at my melting body and boots and agreed. Something sinister and lurking about me; I caught myself sneering.

From above, across the Amphitheater the rock formations looked white at the tips, capped by either snow or salt; something pure. The layering of white upon earth arrested my eyes and my brain and started to squirm and to melt—how steady was this forked ridge they'd paved a parking lot and walkway and viewing platform upon and then fenced in? What were we doing, walking the path with a spattering of normal people who'd come to stand and look and then re-board their busses for the next stop? What was our itinerary?

The green trees between rocky folds were perfect cones. The night drive in had been tree-lined in my headlights' periphery, but passing. We'd not walked amongst trees or even really seen any in days. Bryce Canyon, known for its rocks, was the lush, forested basin I had been searching for if I could have made up my mind and done something with our time there.

Ben eventually evacuated me, always speeding—trees and sky flashed past multiple windows in the back of the van. I don't know if I was on the couch or the floor. Maybe I was hiding? I was intangible back there; bodiless, but vaguely aware.

I had become see-through. Everyone knew. Everything.

Bryce Canyon, more than any other, called me out. Keeper of all things west of the Colorado; Zion must have been its charge.

I didn't know what was happening or why we were moving again and always or even why we had gone there in the first place except to look and take pictures and say that we'd gone. Things felt like they were repeating as we drove away but the way the sun strobed through my van and flashed the shadows of trees across her wood-paneled walls made me happy to have her, even if Ben was driving too fast and the heat made sleep impossible. He didn't try the a/c and I nearly thanked him aloud from all the way back there as air poured over the couch from rear windows ajar, swirling dry and clean across my damp and dirtiness, my porous see-through self nearly transpiring in the cozy clutter of the back of the van. Ben's eyes checked the rearview frequently at first for the status of his bodiless friend. I floated back there, rolling with the leaf-spring lull and wished for someplace to land, some safe, known thing like an afternoon nap on a couch with the sound of a road and the warm wind to pacify me. I found some oblivion; a soft, quiet space of time and motion I cannot account for in terms of consciousness.

The next thing I saw obliterated what specs of me were left.

We had entered Zion. I had moved up and into shotgun after an unknown span in the back of the van spent between worlds. The park guide was face down over my thigh

when I told Ben to keep an eye out for Checkerboard Mesa, as if I knew a damn thing on my own.

Ben drove too fast around a too-narrow road through the Martian Wild West. We approached the odd, pastry-crowned bulging apple pie mesa—around a blind, tight turn, our world all cartoon sculpted sandstone, truly alien—only moments later, meaning I had been right. I was getting back into the swing of things by the time we entered the tunnel, which is when I saw it.

So what did I see?

I don't know. The stone portal passed suddenly and without warning, dowsing my frozen face in light.

Ben asked me at the time and I told him.

“What did you just see out there, man?”

“I don't know, man.”

Human eyes are too cynical for such things. How can I possibly explain it?

If you compressed the Grand Canyon until it was only a quarter-mile wide, or maybe even less, rotated it ninety degrees to a north-south trench, then melted pearl white candle wax over the peaks of the western rim—the Streaked Wall was crying at the sight of it all, that broad, bleeding pane of Navajo sandstone—then maybe you would be close. It was unexpected awe. It was foreboding; the symbolic names of the various peaks proved perfect upon first contact: the three-headed Court of Patriarchs with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob looking down condescendingly, knowingly, Angel's Landing, the Watchman, Weeping Rock, the Temple of Sinawava...some crazy Revelations shit in that canyon. Spine-chilling proximity of death—they didn't cover that in the book. Why

the names are such: the first white men to set eyes on that place probably shit themselves at the sight and the sheer reminders of their pathetic fleetingness, and sought repentance and forgiveness from their god. I guess I can't blame them when faced myself with the first gulp of it all at twenty miles an hour through the tunnel window on dwindling mushrooms and no real sleep—and, of course, I glimpsed a taste of that scene from about midway down the three thousand foot eastern wall, tucked into a T near the Canyon's southern reach, looking out across the breach from an impossible perspective, somehow hovering right in the sharp center of it all, a place that my brain, however subconsciously, knew I should not realistically be, entering a place named after paradise that would turn out to be purgatory, and poor little me with plenty to say but no one to apologize to.

This vista beamed in through the concrete portal, breaking the blurred texture of tunnel wall just long enough to shock me numb like sudden cold, to seal off my borders and bury whatever part of me was still alive down deep. One fast look desensitized me. The rest of my day was spent chasing stimulation.

## HEAT

Zion's visitor center was not unlike a small strip mall or new interstate rest stop when we arrived. People mulled and lulled about the outdoor displays of trails and destinations, planning their visits. Somewhere a new tram system idled and loped, sagging beneath the weight of boarding tourists. Bodies of all designs passed at varying trajectories, lining up for collisions briefly and narrowly brushing by. Small children flew below my radar. Somewhere someone filled a water bladder from a spigot in the searing sunlight.

Inside, first thing was a mountain lion behind glass. Frozen and filled with something other than guts, he scowled and made me sad. The tractor beam tugged me toward the back, past displays and stands and counters and racks, Ben in tow. Photographs of impossible things zapped me from the walls. The backcountry counter lay past a scale gray model of the canyon. I tried to usher Ben past before he caught wind of our task. Single-minded and still hot from the parking lot, I was trying to remember or forget a song that had stuck in my head in the parking lot; last thing I heard. How had this day begun? Business unfinished; an open lid somewhere, the oven left on.

We were there because I'd seen a picture in the guidebook. From Observation Point, the canyon was not only severe—taller (3000 feet from floor to rim) than it was wide (1500 feet from wall to wall)—but also lush. The view looking down the steep gorge's length is all lime green glades and wildflower patches; a deep, dripping wet oasis of life in an otherwise harsh terrain. The picture must have been taken in the Spring.

From behind his countertop of inlaid trail maps, the ranger dispensed warnings, straight-faced caveats. It would reach into the triple digits that afternoon; it already had, he insisted. A backcountry hike from the canyon floor would be strenuous, rigorous; definitely not our best option. But all other trails originated elsewhere. We would have to drag the van back up to the tunnel and east out of the park to a trailhead near the entrance, or west and north to a separate park, Kolob Canyons (where they ushered the majority of backpacking enthusiasts), to hike out into it all. But what was the point of coming to Zion if we had to leave the canyon? *Zion is the canyon. The canyon is Zion.* We were fucking in it, and if we were going to backpack, we were going to fucking backpack in the canyon.

We were going to do this. Ben was going to follow me up the canyon. The question is: why would he humor me so?

He was playing along, being a good sport at the desk as I parried the ranger's attempts to redirect us and our route. His (the ranger's) tone was cautionary and serious, and completely wasted on me. I grinned and jabbed Ben in the delt when the ranger reemphasized how strenuous the hike was *without* packs, and that due to our overnight aspirations we would be doing it *with* packs, in the mid-afternoon sun and heat. We were to bring ample water.

"You played football, Benny," I explained to him as we walked away, officially sanctioned by the federal government. "Think of it as training camp."

"Yeah, I played *freshman* football, and there's a reason I quit," he said. It was a sound analogy, nonetheless. It was mid-August, hot, dry, and we were about to sweat (more). A decent analogy, I guess, if you didn't mind the hard work of two-a-days and

the body's inevitable revolt. Moreover, this being August posed additional hazards to our adventure, as the ranger had tried to sink in. We had no real idea what it would be like up there. Looking back, I think maybe Ben did have a solid idea. So the question remains: why did he follow me as far as he did?

Foolish is ten minutes after parking our car on the asphalt oven, having entered and already exited the visitor center, being permitted, officially sanctioned, on our way.

Foolish is a National Park Service-sanctioned "strenuous" hike up a sheer cliff in three-digit heat and relentless radiation from a sun directly overhead in the August southwest with a three-hundred pound partner, five miles one way with an elevation gain 2500 feet, all beneath fifty-pound packs above inadequate footwear drinking uninsulated water during the worst fire season on recent record all because I saw a picture in a book.

So there we were at the foot of it all and we were going to hike to the top and camp up there. We were going to spend a night and stop this crazy thing, come back down in the morning reborn, or something. But we were going to do it, and my sixty pound pack said so.

It's rare that you can stare an entire day's travail in the sheer, rock face as we did at the foot of our trail. The canyon hangs a sharp left at its northern tip, around Angel's Landing and The (aptly-named) Organ, before narrowing and carving north again into the Kolob hills in a deep, dissipating chasm. Where the whole deal heads left we had clamored off our tram with our gear—at Weeping Rock—and scrambled east up a

harmless little hill towards the daunting face of Cable Mountain into the northeast corner of Zion Canyon. We shit our shorts at the sight of it.

There we were. And you can't even imagine where there is because being there, and looking up at it, being *faced* with it, I, myself really couldn't fathom it. And Ben. Poor Ben. The big bastard must have been calculating my untimely fall from those cliffs once finally forced to see what I'd signed us up for.

I'd selected quite a hike. The trail was barely traceable up the wall. The sheer scale of our impending task was inconceivable. The brain tries not to see things like that, doesn't return the body's calls. My eyes had to leave a message. They, being only eyes, had some difficulty describing what they saw.

"...because this looks *super* easy!" Ben pleaded, looking up. "*Not* hard work at all, dude!" Sarcasm begged me to see it another way.

The ranger had been hesitant to endorse my trail selection. He'd called it strenuous. Observation Point Trail to the East Mesa spur as a means to backpack up and out of the canyon, to literally hike to the top of Zion to sleep was a silly idea. The ranger looked the both of us down, a ragged display. A rag-tag duo. We had no idea.

I was unwilling to compromise. Fuck fires and heat stroke and flash floods and wild animals and the lack of backcountry sites and the fact that we'd actually agreed to leave the park on a spur trail and camp somewhere beyond its borders. Maybe I never planned to get that far but I wanted to touch it, to be there. I was going to live what I had seen. A panoramic photograph and a paragraph, made real.

“The Vulcan Forge,” Jack calls his canyon beneath the bridge, in *Big Sur*. I doubt in his travels old Jack ever saw Zion. Man was not meant to traverse such terrain, or to exist amidst such awe.

I missed things on this trek. Time passed in conscience-less chunks. My single-mindedness, mindlessness maybe—never mind the mushrooms that morning—was very real. It made me more than able to omit doubt.

Ben was probably figuring how far we’d have to trek before my fall could safely be considered fatal. He certainly wasn’t steeling himself for the hike, preparing for the pain and pleasure of an afternoon of heavy steps in a hundred degrees of hell. Big guy never really wrapped his mind around the whole idea. What could he have been thinking? I didn’t have a thought in my cavernous soul except Go. Poor bastard, I know what he must have been thinking. He was thinking, “Why is this uptight prick making me do this?”—and rightfully so; but these thoughts did not occur to me—Ben was definitely doubting—at the time or else I’d have nothing much to say about it all, now. I could say instead, “We went camping but thought better of it.” Save everyone some time.

It was at least 350° and climbing even before we set out. Triple digits today, the ranger had said with an eyebrow maybe. An honest man; I should have heeded. He had been trying to help us I suppose, looking at the looks of us. One drawn, one bloated. Both ragged. He’d suggested alternative approaches. Trails that did not involve getting from

the bottom of a three thousand foot gorge to the top, under absurdly burdened, bulging packs and an angry sun.

The ranger, however, had *not* said that the colored canyon walls acted as the clay lining of a kiln, absorbing and reflecting the ridiculous heat. There was multiplication involved, some kind of exponential amplifier. One hundred degrees was simply a starting point; just add idiots.

“Rangers feed you the company line; they try to keep people on certain trails. It’s not specific advice. It’s general. They don’t mean *us*, Benny. They mean us, *in general*. Like a disclaimer. I’ll bet there’s just not that many usable sites up there, is all.”

“I don’t know, dude,” he pleaded. “He sounded pretty *serious*.”

“Fuck that.”

“Oh, *okay*.”

“No, *fuck* that, Ben. We are here to get up *in* it. We are here to camp. I want to spend a night up there.” I was trying to spend a night in THE perfect place—I wanted to wake up on top of the canyon, unzip the tent fly and peer down Zion’s entire span. Naïve, forced shit. Inorganic, human folly.

“*Great* idea, dude. ‘Cause I’m *super* skinny...”

We brought four and a half liters of water with us on the hike (three one-point-five liter plastic bottles, the tall, slender, ribbed kind). The NPS recommends one liter per person, per hour of strenuous activity, adjusting to meet the conditions.

We didn't bring enough water. It wouldn't have helped if we had trucked an entire office water jug up that craggy cliff's paved and then not paved and then not even maintained footpath, unless we carried the cooler, too; an hour into the trek and our drinking water was practically steam. It hissed against our palettes.

Given the weight of my pack I might as well have humped a refrigerator up the trail; I strode up the infinite steps and ramps and switchbacks bent forward, scanning the rocky earth with my face and back parallel to it, trying anything to ease the massive and misaligned weight of my outdated, cinder-block external frame pack, the one I had used for Boy Scouts ten years prior. Often I marched with my arms up, hands above and behind my head hoisting the top of my pack's frame, like a gallow-ed prisoner. I expected the few fanny-packing Europeans we passed to throw rotten fruit at the mere stench of me. With their wool socks and sandals, sinewy inner elbows and backs of knees; they did not sweat like me.

I was no tourist in Zion.

I would not let Ben be, either.

Ascending several thousand feet of sheer, switchback canyon wall beneath a fifty-pound pack in such heat and draining sun—if the reality of that was not sufficient punishment, I was in trouble. Luckily for me, there was no reality. I was just a passenger, buried deep within an overheating and excreting outer shell. It was hot as hell and I felt nothing. Ben was not so numb.

No one, especially not a three hundred-plus pound, good-natured mammal like him should have to bear such abuse for reasons they do not understand.

I terrorized him on the trail. I pushed him to hurry; got impatient as he lagged. The big guy hiked slow and took breaks. I buzzed around him. The problem was I'd get ahead; with my back bent forward to shift my pack's awkward and immense weight and clang I could only see the stone directly beneath my shitty, burning boots (it was hot). I simply could not see him fall behind. Eventually I would realize this when briefly straightening my spine at a switchback, seeing my surroundings sans Ben. So I would have to wait for him to catch up, you know, shout words of encouragement and support, maybe mention some crazy aspect of the canyon's appearance to keep up his heavy spirits, to buoy his big burden, and in so doing I would grow impatient. I got myself fired up for the next turn, the next stretch of impossibly steady ascent. I bounced in place. My feet burned like engines but when he finally caught up to me—usually literally *up* to me, as in gaining altitude—Ben needed breaks. To him, each switchback stop was a finish line; one of many along the way. Small victories.

To me, a three hundred pound ankle weight: Benny the ball and chain.

Maybe he saved my life.

“Ben, look how far we've climbed already! We're halfway up!” I yelled, panting and straightening up at a switchback. Our perspective was changing rapidly. “This is no big deal at all. Come on, let's bang it out.”

I hunched the weight forward, onto my shoulders and reached to slap Ben, but missed. I had expected a large target. My weight swayed in my arm's wake. Looking down my vision was of two layers, one out of focus and dark, the other light and crisp.

There was incredible distance between the two. I heard wind. We *were* making progress, but where was he?

“This is great,” he wheezed from below. “I love this.” Ben turned the closest switchback and saw me for the first time in a while. “Because this would be *so* easy *without* the pack! But *with* it, it’s just great. I mean, it’s not steep at *all*, dude!”

“Ah, c’mon Benny. I’ll slow down. I’m sorry, baby.”

“...and it’s not *long*, either. We’re not even halfway up *this* part.”

“But there’s no one else *out* here, Ben. It’s fucking *ours*. Who else is cool enough to camp up where we’re going?”

“Who else is *smart* enough. Because this is brilliant. *Brilliant*, dude!”

“It’s awesome, Benny. You just have to embrace it. It’s a good pain.”

“Cause I’m super skinny.”

...and so on like that in the short intervals where I waited for the poor guy to catch up. Maybe I got off on the contrast, on how *able* Ben made me look, but I kept wishing and cursing quietly for less of a stone. So long as I could keep him moving, keep him talking and sweating up the trail—progress, however slow.

Where was all the green? Not an ounce of lush once we embarked and began ascending. Trees were sparse along the parched stone face; those that grew there did so under impossible circumstances. Smaller saplings mostly—reminders of the ponderosa pines that once flourished here before pale-skinned people arrived, and began to log—emerged from minute cracks and crevices on nearly vertical stone surfaces. There was no soil anywhere. How did they do it? These amazing little saplings surviving out there in

insane and impressive conditions and we wipe our asses with them. What gives us the right? We had passed an information plaque in the approximate spot where Cable Mountain's logging rigging had reached land and long, slender trees had touched down after their three thousand foot descent, in the direct shadow of Cable's sheer face in the rock-walled corner of the Canyon. The rigging was still visible at her peak, after nearly a century of wasting up there at the treacherous top. Peripherally, we were looked down upon by the Great White Throne, and Observation Point.

According to the picture that had lured me, our surroundings should have been greener. Upon closer inspection, things were turning out to be other than expected. Some brush was black, even charred. Maybe it had been greener before the fires swept through. What would it look like farther along?

At the mouth of Echo Canyon we stopped, now deep into the trail. We were up in the high country. We wrestled free of our packs in a harsh, backcountry gorge and sat on large boulders. There would be puddles when we stood up. I fished a water bottle from my pack and unscrewed it for Ben.

"*Yep*," he implored. "This water is *super* refreshing."

I snatched it from him and swigged, chugging and gulping while staring him down. Then I scowled and spat a little.

"Yeah, it's a little warm."

We were seated in a stone cemetery, the resting place of rocks. The massive and jagged boulders had not begun life there, though. Ben and I swallowed hard as we looked up the rock walls to whence they might have come.

An unseen raven cawed up there, somewhere, the only sound resonating waves in an ancient, dry creek-bed at 6000 feet. The mouth of echo canyon had things to say.

“*See, Benny?* It’s a rope.” I said, placing one leg over it, straddling the makeshift barrier, a kind of honor system blockade. “Now I’m over it,” I said, then brought the leg back. “And now I’m back. It’s that easy. What’s the big deal?”

He was seriously considering turning around. He looked at me the way he had in New Orleans, the night he left me out there alone.

“Why would you turn back *now?*” I said.

“*Lots* of reasons, dude.”

“Name one.”

“Let’s see: it’s not like we’ve been hiking up fucking stairs for like three hours now, or that this pack is heavy, or anything.” He held out his palms, shaking his head.

“And it’s certainly not hot out here, in fucking hell!”

“Well, name two.” I tried to laugh.

“That sign we passed back there said this was supposed to be the trail, our trail,” he said, shaking the polite, light-gauge rope strung across the fork of our diverging footpath. A tattered, formerly-white towel hung from the rope. Surrender?

“Screw that, Benny. We’ll just go this other way. Who cares?”

“Great idea! Let’s just march our happy asses in some unknown, super safe direction. You have no idea where that goes, or if it’s even a real trail.”

The path forked at a sooty fold in the steep ridge, our trail continuing along level beyond the flagged path, the other descending the fold and dissipating somewhere among rocks and burnt brush.

“So what? It’ll be exciting, man. Come on Benny, let’s do it! We’ve done all the grunt work already, the trail’s either level, or drops some; why turn back now?”

“The ranger wasn’t even sure what the fire situation would be up here. Obviously there *is* a situation.”

He had a valid point, if validity mattered. Apparently down in the canyon they weren’t aware of the current state of things up here, on the burnt backside, in the high, charred backcountry of Zion. Ben called it hell aloud and he was not lying. A literal inferno. The serpent had encroached upon paradise and my brain was pure reptile. That place was not paradise at all; it was my prey.

“Look around you, dude.” Ben continued to plead his case, unaware how far gone I was. “Do you really want to camp out here? I think I smell smoke. Where the hell would we set up the tent? And look up there, man, look at the sky; looks like there’s a fucking storm moving in. Remember what they said about floods?”

Armageddon?—plenty of driftwood lying around, fashion myself a boat.

I wasn’t going down with Ben. He was right about everything he said and I’d think about it later. The last sign had read, Observation Point 2.6 miles. I was going after it. No way was I coming down now. Not a chance in hell.

It wasn't his fault. He was against it from the start. Big guy knew his limits, maybe valued his life. Or was just plain scared and lazy like the rest of us, minus me at the time. Do not blame Ben. At least the poor bastard gave it a shot, right?

So it turned out we hadn't needed the insane weight of our packs. Guess it wouldn't have been so cathartic without the war, though. Sometimes it helps if the world pushes back, if I can actually feel the resistance. If I can touch it and it hurts, that proves something.

I remember watching my boots over each stone shelf like track flats over steps, training with high knees. I ran the final two miles up stairs. I couldn't really feel my body. My head was empty, and light. The stone stairway curled up and around a massive tower; at one point, the first moment when the trail brought me back into view of the main Canyon—the steps not more than three feet wide, the three thousand foot drop suddenly there, the place where we'd begun directly below—I was blasted with wind that had been waiting around the bend to knock me off. A blind bend on a narrow stone staircase, as though spiraling the outside of a castle tower, and I was running as fast as my empty bones would carry me. I caught myself breathing in rhythm; in-in-out in shapely, shallow little puffs.

Nearing the end, sprinting along treacherously tilted trails in the shade of small, cliff-side trees I first felt it. Endorphins and dry, thin air had evacuated my senses. I was empty save for an ominous, urgent pressure down there. I had to go to the bathroom near the top of Observation Point's trail, overlooking the canyon through trees on the literal side

of a cliff. I felt nothing but this, and the need to quickly move on. I felt only physical duty. The spiritual revelation of my manic hike was non-existent.

I had shit in the faith department, but plenty of faith in my shit department. It delivered at 6,500 feet with no way to distance myself from the trail to do it respectfully. It wouldn't wait.

As quickly as the feeling announced itself I was off again up the trail, leaving behind a rich pile of me and in fact the expensive sunglasses I had bought in New Orleans. I was so excited or high or dangerously close to heart attack and collapse that I had to take a dump up there, overlooking the canyon, and leave it, and my fancy sunglasses, too.

Maybe there was a certain purge in that. I strode to put more distance behind me, nearing the peak.

I came down eventually. I'd been able to spend some time up there alone, overlooking the most violent and ego-crushing gorge on the face of this mad, raging planet in the sun. It had been surprisingly quiet. The wind had died when I arrived at the tip. Observation Point was a narrow little peninsula jutting out over the Canyon's northern reach. I could look down her entire length. I could take pictures. I could watch people like mountaineering ants climb Angel's Landing and fancy themselves high. I could spend as much time up there as I chose, alone, until the wind came back and the clouds tried to gather and I saw a fucking tram down there, beside the Virgin River, a very real three thousand feet below, full of the overweight and infirm. Could I hear the River? It must have been the wind. I had to come down eventually.

Victorious, having thoroughly and finally defeated myself, having spent time up there alone in the surprising quiet and light wind on a thin peninsula three thousand feet above Zion Canyon, looking south down its length, I descended. “I am nothing now,” went through my head, but if it did, then could that be?

Feeling like a ghost, I fetched my pack—which meant passing the unmarked spot, then doubling back, climbing up to where I’d stashed it and jumping down the eight foot drop to a narrow trail—and felt ten times my weight as my heels jarred leg bones into hips and pelvis into back.

By the time I made the severe first wall of switchbacks on my way down, that daunting stretch that must have made Ben cry inside and curse my name, my body had rematerialized. My feet felt compressed and hot, the soles of my casual boots too thin. My inner, upper legs rubbed rash raw against wet cotton underwear. I began to descend bow-legged. The pack had now pulled a few ribs out of place from my spine. I tried a swig of water from gallon jug and spat. If it was 110 degrees out there, in the late day sun cast directly onto this final wall, which it was, then my water had cooked inside plastic containers. It nearly boiled. Where my inner arms met my ribcage the skin was bumpy rash. I had been unaware of the consequences of wet cotton against wet skin. There’s a school called Experience that teaches us such things.

To compound my building misery two Europeans, Frenchmen I think, trotted past me down the harsh, paved trail. They’d come from somewhere up there, where I’d been, maybe some alternate trail, one that wasn’t closed, and they were full of energy. They had no big, ridiculous packs; I had to turn sideways and grip the brink of cliff with my burning toes to let them pass. They took the inside tack without looking at me. Surely I

was conspicuous. Things hung from my frame pack and clanged as I maneuvered myself out of their brisk way. Their shoes were light, ankle-height running flats. They wore fanny packs and very short shorts. I think I called them fags. They hopped out of view, turning down a switchback, never breaking their incessant, ugly conversation. They gestured and I imagined them to be making light of my clamoring procession.

When I got to the bottom to wait for the shuttle, to sit down and simmer my body nearly shut down. It should have been soothing, sitting on a bench in the shade beside a creek and a river. My brain popped and snapped like cooling machinery. My ass cheeks on the slatted bench were concrete. I tried to ignore my feet. My shirt, when I forced my chin down, was banded with wide, white streaks. An older couple in khakis and penny loafers tried not to look. Or maybe they couldn't see me. When the bus arrived no one noticed as I used my arms to climb the few steps, lactic acid burning like hot cement in my thighs, or as I tried to contain my pack down the narrow aisle. I took a seat toward the back of a half-full tram. Before we moved I was nodding out against a sharp emergency window edge. Warm air moved over me. My head bobbed. I was neither alive nor dead. I was a ghost.

The Virgin River boiled at first taste of my toes. My top lip receded from front teeth, quivering. Ben took a picture of me dipping my feet in the water when I returned, grimacing up at the camera.

That same water had fallen from the top of Zion Canyon, somewhere miles north, then carved its way through the sandstone in a thousand foot shoulder-width chasm and emerged cool and untouched into the burning mouth of paradise.

My feet had wrinkled to a concrete cuneiform of the canyon and surrounding hills in the heat and hours spent under wet cotton and more than two hundred pounds pounding the trail in cheap, worn boots. They ached from the metamorphosis. Cooling the poor pads suddenly like that, dipping them in the liquid nitrogen river made me think they'd solidify forever in that mold; chasms and forks and spider webs of chasms petrified by the pure, holy water.

A well-deserved wallow.

## SILENCE

I took over in the middle of the night and nowhere with no gas and no way we were going to sit there until morning.

I woke as the van slowed, then stopped on a crunchy lot.

“Benny, what’s going on?”

“I’m fucking beat, dude.”

“What time is it?”

“I don’t know, after midnight.”

*After* midnight? That means I’d been out for over three hours. I’d actually slept.

It was absolutely lightless outside. I saw nothing; realized there was nothing out there to see. Somehow I could just tell. Had I really slept?

“I don’t remember leaving, I don’t think.”

“Oh, you were *out*, dude, which is good.”

He groaned between front seats and into the upholstered house chair I had kept in the van, from my last place at school. Always looked and sounded like Ben would yank those poor captain’s chairs from their bases as he maneuvered, clumsy bastard. His weight nearly snapped them off, each time. What had he said about my sleep?

“Easy on the chairs, Benny. And what do you mean, ‘which is good’?”

“Well, dude.” He was delaying. “Benny went the wrong way out of Zion. We went west!”

“So?” I said, sitting up on the couch in the shadows.

“So, turns out we needed to go east instead!” He wheezed as he laughed. “I got to drive back east through the park and out the tunnel after backtracking.”

“And up all those crazy steep switchbacks?!?”

“Yeah, the van hated it, dude. You would have been pissed.”

“So how long have we actually been driving in the right direction, Benny?”

“Oh,” he said, “about an hour now.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said, rising from the couch. “We can’t just sit here like this.”

“I’m *beat*, dude.”

“*I’ll* drive.”

It was not that time had been wasted while I slept. It was that time was wasting, and I could not stop it.

Three hours out of forty had been a blink. That certain feeling had not disappeared while I blinked. I had not conquered a damn thing.

Hours passed in a fuzzy state of awareness behind headlight glow over a rolling blackness set to music. I clenched my jaw and ground my teeth to keep from floating off. My face fought itself. The entire drive was dark and empty autopilot two-lane Arizona roads; we made the Grand Canyon without passing more than a dozen vehicles.

The Park entrance booths were vacant, unlit sentries. Nothing impeded our progress. I looked around suspiciously as we passed between, seeing and hearing the van third person, from above. I watched us enter, otherwise unnoticed. I couldn’t shake the feeling that it was somehow too easy.

Scraggly and short trees lined the long, smoothly paved drive in. The road rose and dipped subtly, winding its way west along the silent southern rim for miles. Pull-offs and parking lots and unlit overlook signs suggested IT was out there, to the right of the van as I drove. At times my periphery registered nothing in that direction. A void hovered intermittently. I was amazed how far we drove in, and what a small fraction of the Canyon's rim that had signified.

Around the Village everything was still and dark, all cars parked. I lapped the Park's lots and roadways several times in search of a spot. I had to turn around once, abruptly, having inadvertently headed for the south exit. Parked vehicles lined every inch of park-able street. Lots were surreally packed. Only, not a person stirred. The Grand Canyon was a vacant soundstage, an actual size model. My headlights patrolled its inanimate asphalt trails.

It had been Ben's idea before we left Albuquerque, coming to the Grand Canyon, but when I finally parked he wouldn't budge. Where had he gone? The big man had virtually disappeared. I set out from the van's side door in my sandals for the rim. My second consecutive sunrise, this time sans Ben.

There was a glow through unexpected fencing and trees—the radio tower cordoned off, corralling me. I think the fence ushered me to the edge, around its last post; I pivoted, swung myself over the void. I progressed as though pursued.

I must have moved from my first perch—after quietly eating and then discarding an apple from the Canyon rim's brink, listening for the impact from a mile down that never came—figuring sunrise would be better with a view to the west, where light's first

progress touches down upon the peaks and buttes within the canyon. Looking east, as I was while gnawing my apple, meant all things would be cast in shadow against the advancing orb. I'd learned this in Bryce. There was a lightly forested peninsula west of the lodge, maybe a mile farther along the rim; I had to make its apex to get that western view, always west.

An eerie hike through silhouetted, branchless bottoms of trunks in a new mist on the forested outcropping, the meter now running as scenery lightened around me—some kind of security spotlights, and starkly militant, high fencing; reverse twilight; a blue-screen backdrop; a thrumming vibration beneath it all, hastening my hike.

I was able to sit cross-legged and silent for hours as the tips of rocks began to glow. Everything was still. Even the animals were polite, staying mostly out of sight. Once a squirrel, or whatever Arizona has for squirrels, stuck its scraggly head over the brink, startled to find me there, and quickly dipped back down. I had become part of the scenery, almost.

I thanked the sudden sunrise for filling me with light as shadows crept up canyon walls, able to marinate in solitude and oneness momentarily, sweetly—until I heard the flap of engine exhaust and the squeal of brakes, then the hiss of doors somewhere above me. I had settled down near a shuttle stop. I stood and climbed up from my rocky recess as a tour of Asians spewed forth from idling doors. They took no notice of me, even as I appeared from *beneath* their observation post, having to scale the waist-height fence and stumble up from unknown depths. Cameras snapped and camcorders buzzed. Short, stiff people clamored about each other. I passed unseen into the empty, waiting shuttle.

I was glad for the tram; turns out I had hiked for several miles, unintentionally settling near the last shuttle stop on the south rim's loop. It took half an hour, driving, to get back to the van. I squinted in the hazy new light as my head bobbed against the sharp metal window track. There was a simmering.

I must have parked in the service area near the lodge, near the dumpsters, because when I limped back to the van after my long hike-and-sit the air stung with hydraulic and diesel groanings. Large things slammed and echoed metallicly. I wondered if Ben could possibly still be in there, asleep. Nonetheless, inside the van the big man was snoring it up, limp-faced and mouth agape, his giant forearms crossing brow and belly, framing sleeping beauty's face.

He was difficult to stir. I stirred harder.

After picture time at a scenic stop, we would be gone from there.

In our shorts and T-shirts, we were dressed like Vincent Vega and Jules Winnfield in their new digs in Jimmy's backyard, after getting hosed down by "The Wolf", except that we hadn't showered for many moons. We posed for a rim picture with the Bright Angel trail in the background, miles away in the gorge, then I got one of Ben pretending to fall off the brink, only his massive head with silly face and hand reaching out for rescue visible over the cliff. Somewhere back there behind him and down in it, the Colorado River ran steady and controlled and even, dammed upriver and metered. We may have beaten the water that far south, having left Moab thirty-six hours earlier. The Colorado has Lake Powell and a dam in its way. There was nothing in our way but us. And we weren't stopping.

We would make her next dam by midday.

I pulled into a parking lot on the Hoover Dam's east side, lucky to find a spot. I stuck my arm out the window into the heat and I swear some hair singed. It felt like reaching into an oven for food—we had no food. Who could eat in that heat? It was hotter at the Hoover Dam that day than I had ever experienced, even in Zion. 110 degrees. I fired the straight six back up, asked her for forgiveness, and crossed the Colorado for the third time that trip.

I crossed fingers for the next three weeks, on account of the heat—a casino's sign in Vegas that afternoon read 111 degrees on the strip—and the ever-spinning odometer. My father and I had assumed she'd already turned over at least twice (the odometer), meaning sixty-or-so-thousand really meant two-hundred-and...

The van would see her first repair shop of the trip in Las Vegas. She intended to act her age the rest of the way.

## AND THE END OF THE LINE

Las Vegas was the kind of place that worried me; not unlike New Orleans in my mind but more expensive. The desert flattened out in a wide valley, framed on all sides by mountains. Approaching from the south, Vegas lay out in line with our advance. The notable stuff was difficult to decipher as the strip ran away from us, to the north.

We were quickly on Las Vegas Boulevard in afternoon traffic and heat. A casino's sign read 111 degrees. The van had developed a squeal. I gulped with the burning potential for amoral deeds and my mind's overworked, strained sense of inhibition. Ben was content to take pictures of casino fronts from his passenger window. His camera stuck out into the day. He worked to get a steady shot at each red light. I did my best to speed away.

Our backs stuck to the cheap seat covers. In that kind of heat, the van could not keep up. Air died inside the cabin at each long red light. I worried that she might not make it off the strip. I was worn down on this, my third day running. I was worried.

I was in Sin City for the first time. I mean, what noteworthy contribution could I make to the legend of Las Vegas, short of being arrested, attacked, or at the very least alcohol-poisoned? Talk about contrivance: the town was built here by men for those very intents and purposes. When the bar is set so high (or low), what could I possibly accomplish that is both original and meaningful?

Doubt, fatalism and frustration festered and seeped to the surface in my wasted state. Sleep is not exactly optional.

The thought of winning money lifted me momentarily, otherwise mired in the squinting, belt-squealing stop and go bobbing of heads—a precursor to falling asleep. You have to have it to make it, though—money—and I didn't have shit to lose. Maybe they would take the van as collateral.

After being unable to contact a guy we knew from high school—a guy Bennie knew, from his side of town—we found a cheap room in a youth hostel just off the strip. I had thought it would be cheaper. Suddenly twenty dollars for a bed sounded steep. Everyone was in on something.

As we showered and dressed in old, blemished tile bathroom and musty barracks for a Tuesday night on the town, we glimpsed our roommates, an ambiguously European couple; somehow you can know that without hearing them speak. Maybe it's their dress, or that they don't speak right off; a form of rare, classy silence. I admired them immediately; thin, blue-jeaned kids, roughly our age. The girl was tall and attractive in a natural way. She didn't use much on her hair. They whispered to each other, then tried to ask Ben and me a question. I stood there half-dressed across the dim room, looking dumb, no doubt. Ben walked over to them. What must it be like to travel like that, with a partner? For a flash I felt that youthful surge, like the first days of college. All the potential of newness and sharing rooms and the opposite sex; a brief reprieve as I stood in the oasis of air conditioner air, my skin tightening and standing hairs on end.

I don't know the name of the place where we stopped. After dressing in our meager casuals we set out down the strip, which, it turned out, was several blocks away and harder to locate than I had expected. It was brutally hot on the pocked and endless sidewalk as we scuffed southward in our sandals. Cars and exhaust fumes and sunshine and no wind and car horns and traffic lights—the various notes and lopes of idling machines and the music seeping out through open windows bathed our clean selves in dirty reminders of this life. Squinting at street corners with the sun to our right, depressing crosswalk buttons—this was Las Vegas.

We stood beneath a façade of some sort, our skin lit up and colored by flashing lights. Natural light was fading gradually, slipping behind mountains outside of town. The sun was tapping casinos on their shoulders before leaving the ring, getting them ready to take over. I don't think anyone in Las Vegas could tell the difference.

I wanted to drink and gamble. The façade and flashing lights belonged to a casino. Inside, the air made us squint. It was intermittently bright and loud, clinging to smoke. We went from receding day to persistent night. Inside it was always the same: Atari for adults.

All my potential for pretense and unrealistic buildup seemed silly in Las Vegas. I was *too* tired and way too poor to make a dent in her mystique. Hunter Thompson had the seventies, and a job.

We were inside a stereotype. It was all fabricated for the loose-skinned and listless—for the slowly dying. I fought the urge to sink in my stool, to bow my back

forward and drool. I could achieve a state not unlike sleep. I could surrender like everyone around me. Cash it in. But we are fleeing! How dare we die on purpose?

Thompson sees America in Las Vegas, for all its catering to excess and its smoke and mirrors—the big distraction. There is no American Dream out there, just a bunch of lights and gaudy attractions. Just America. Just a dream.

Why bother tearing myself down in honor of that?

He writes, “There’s nothing more depraved than a man on ether.” Thompson at Circus! Circus! causing a scene—these days they would just usher him away. LVPD would issue a citation, maybe book him. Today it would be a legal matter, a financial indiscretion, in the end, probably probation: Hunter S. Thompson on house arrest.

Hunched like a tired truism over a bar feeding singles into video poker screens, drinking too-dark rum-and-cokes in a cloud of smoke, surrounded by thick quicksand carpeting and strips of blinking bulbs, dizzied by the clamor of arcade change and clang, we were sitting in a big cliché, a broadstroke stereotype setting, sucking at our drinks with thin, watery eyes. It was all too expected. How else could it be in an obscure, inexpensive fringe joint up the Strip? Everyone was old. They cleared their throats and coughed uncovered. Their eyes were glazed. A medicated, jaundiced assembly line of levers and large pushbuttons, the whole scene slowly sinking as we slumped over sweaty countertops and video screens, spending to the last.

Slowly I shut down.

Waves of short people in front of the more expensive and flashy casinos down the Strip. A pirate ship action scene: fireworks and water cannons, actors in costume trying very hard. The idling audience: small eyes behind digital lenses, Asian herds led around by outstretched hands, expensive recording equipment in those hands. Single red lights in the air; long-necked cyborgs, unaware of a periphery, blinders on. Electronic tunnel vision.

Down the strip we weaved.

It was the Hilton that knocked me out of the game. It was there that I first noticed those suited, hovering presences: slightly overweight managers, the early signs of awkward baldness, maybe even perspiring. To most everyone in there, it was serious business. Leering, looking over shoulders. Mouths as straight lines. Damp upper lips. Smoke illuminated by light strips. Money lost, gained. A mindless loop. A system. I was paranoid as if I somehow mattered to them.

A fifteen-dollar Twenty One table took its rapid toll, swift reminder of my marginality in their world. All eyes on the young amateurs, underdressed. Shins and toes exposed as they saunter out the door.

No one yelled TIMBER! as I wavered. Walking north between worlds, approaching downtown in patches of light and sound and passing traffic, my eyes shut. The heat became warmth. When I opened them again (my eyes), I was still walking, following Ben, but falling behind. Damp neck and heavy eyes, that abrasive cotton rub between my

thighs—I fell asleep on my feet, while walking at three in the morning on Las Vegas  
Boulevard—sweet limbo.

Finally.

## DWARVES ON GIANT HEELS

I'd driven through the desert night and made Sequoia by morning. I was a driving fool.

In *On the Road* we never get Dean's perspective on his athletic feats of endurance driving; often just Dean rambling, raving behind the wheel, Sal flinching and fearing for his physical health and retreating from front seats in order to salvage the mental, trusting his fearsome friend but fearing nonetheless. Where is that line? Where does it shift from eccentric talent to dangerous endeavor? And who's to say?—what goes through the mind of the muse?

Wolfe takes a shot at diving inside the synapses and networks of impressive effort, in his *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, but he was never there. He never rode shotgun or even in the back, yet claims complete faith in the pilot's competence. He got his information second-hand and sure, Neal never crashed. But *post hoc* analysis leaves out the possibility for a post-apocalyptic scene of steep mountain grade, tumbling vehicle and fiery wreckage. Wolfe knows it never happened, not literally. So he can fill in the blank space between un-crashing ears with Cassidy's confidence and constant chatter and his apparent lack of concern. But somewhere, in there, is strain. Sometimes.

I can't say what scrolled across my mental ticker as I drove the entire distance from Vegas to Sequoia; ten or eleven hours straight is not legendarily impressive, or literarily noteworthy on its own merit, but on the heels of my manic three-day Colorado Plateau assault, having slept maybe eight hours of the previous eighty-four, having driven upwards of twenty-four of them already, leaving Las Vegas at dusk and arriving in

Sequoia National Park at dawn, my copilot asleep on the back couch the entire time, I can say that it was taxing, to say the least.

My three-day binge had ended when I fell asleep while walking, on a liminal strip of Las Vegas Boulevard. My appending drive across the unseen desert, the next night, ended with me falling asleep while driving, on the switchback side of a mountain in the early morning Sierras.

Thirty-six hours behind the van's wheel, over a span of ninety-six. Eight spent asleep. Over that span I had taken psychedelic mushrooms by myself, gotten drunk and smoked weed like cigarettes. I had hiked vertical miles in three-digit heat. And I had done most of it alone, suffering the brunt. Benny was almost gone; ghost-like by that point of the trip, either asleep or drunk or maybe even driving while (and if) I slept. I was watching a three hundred pound young man evaporate back there on the couch. Had I done this to him?

Spread thin, burnt at both ends, alone and strung out on many things, maybe I can't look back and accurately recount the inner nighttime monologue. I was compelled. It somehow helped not to stop. My enemy was stagnation. Not moving meant not existing. I could see this world at the cost of me, and what a bargain: to see this world for free.

After our harsh, high desert romps we were both eager to find a place where there was actual soil, where trees could grow and shade was cast. That place was just across the desert, half a spin—an entire night—away, if the van was willing, and able.

She did all the work, after all. I just sat there singing and smoking, steered with my knee. And when I fell asleep rounding a blind cliffside turn in the mid-altitude morning, she stayed on the road.

The General's Highway climbs a dramatic vertical mile of switchback two-lane cliffside mountain road, but I'm hard-pressed to recall the scenery. I was asleep behind the wheel. I can distinctly remember blinking and fading toward a steep, uphill 120° turn, a vast glimpse of sky to my left, and then, next thing: that same blind notch of road receding in the rearview, a hazy mid-altitude sky behind it. Nothing in between. Approaching dangerous turn, then the pulling away from said turn. No actual "turning" in there, in my consciousness. Ben was just beginning to stir in the back and I think he asked if I was okay. I mumbled "sure" and brought us back right of the faded center line. There was a comical, knee-high old-timey stone wall between us and oblivion.

Mortal specks on the side of a mountain.

We made Sequoia National Park mid-sunrise. It didn't immediately sink in that we were in California, for the first time in both our lives. We were close, only hours from the coast.

I'd read a few Choose Your Own Adventure books as a younger man, a child, and cheated every time. If I chose honorably, without looking ahead, I chose wrong. One time I was turned into a hairy half-ape; literally half my character's body, in the illustration, mutated and mangled. The look on my face—the right side dark and puffy

and drooping—was sheer dread. I had chosen wrong. The evil queen was laughing; I would be her clown slave for eternity. I chose to cheat from then on.

At Sequoia, however, we had no means, no known shortcuts. I don't know why, but it wasn't in Ben's guidebook. There was no way to look ahead. I had no opportunity to pre-conceive an expectation; no second-hand account with which to narrow my experience. Therefore, after driving up and in we had to see a ranger about our backcountry trail and overnight accommodations.

But not before seeing the largest, oldest living thing on this planet.

I showed my gratitude for getting through—for staying on the road—in the Giant Forest. I hugged nearly every immortal monster there. The Giant Forest is a lush, green garden of red trees—giant, surreally huge trunks. They rise hundreds of feet from the fern floor in clusters. Ben cradled their immense children, the largest pinecones on the planet, unaware at the time that the absurd—bigger than footballs—cones were the offspring of different, much smaller trees. We ran around in sweet ignorance, hugging trunks, hiding from one another in hollowed stumps and red groves, whistling to get his attention. We wandered deeper into the Ewok forest in our bliss, losing sight of any trails. We nearly got lost. How great that would have been.

Finally the lush, green ferns and red not from rocks but bark, soft ground—soil!—and the sun barely filtering down upon two small, silly babes in the wood.

This energy thrust us farther into the park and into the backcountry office for our evening's accommodations.

We—meaning I—got to choose our hike. The khaki-ed ranger described the sites and sights of each backcountry trail, and the conditions to be expected. He suggested Pear Lake trail, which would land us on the literal top of a mountain, at the timber line next to a lake. He noted excellent star-gazing. But still a fairly barren, rugged terrain. We would be exposed up there. The ground would be rocky.

I maneuvered him around. I told him we were looking for trees. I may have used the word “lush”.

The closest he could come to that was the Alta trail. Alta is Spanish for “high”. The majority of the trail was heavily forested, he said, until you reach Panther Gap. Beyond that it is open mountain-side again until a meadow where we would set up camp. But it is a long, steep trek, he said—“Highly strenuous.” He looked at the both of us when he said this. Ben stood beside and slightly behind me. I hovered over the countertop, eyes racing across pale green glass-covered topographic maps. Alta trail continued on past Merhton Meadow to Alta Peak. If the day was clear enough we would be able to see Mt. Whitney across the Great Western Divide, whatever that is; the peak still snow-capped in mid-August. He again stressed, “This trail is rigorous. Best to get an early start, and bring plenty of water.” From the figures he shared, we’d be gaining more altitude than on our—meaning my—hike to Observation Point. It looked to be a hearty challenge.

We were husky, hearty fellows, were we not? This hike was why we had come.

The angry black bear buzz was in the air, everywhere, on the lips and teeth and the tips of tongues of each hiker on their way down—so soon?—from the top of the mountain,

emerging from the forest trail in lines of threes and fives, buzzing and smirking condescension, looking down at the ragged sight of us in the paved patch of afternoon sunlight, the both of us burping fungus, big with gear and overnight aspirations but small despite our size and shrinking. Everyone else was coming down with warnings and we were very much on our way up.

Word of an angry mother bear was our first omen, and it should have been enough. Accounts of her aggression up the trail, where we intended to be, hit us in our stupid faces before we even left the trailhead parking lot.

Hikers smiled nervously as they returned to the pavement pad. At the narrow mouth of the trail a group of three or so middle-aged men in their nice fleeces and day packs and expensive hiking boots smirked down at us from the short rise of forest wall, stepping into sunshine in what seemed to be a hurry. The sight of us amused them, in our cotton T-shirts (mine sleeveless and in support of the Buffalo Bills, another omen) and heavy shorts, my completely inappropriate casual boots and gigantic, outdated overnight external pack; the sheer width and bulk of our geared up selves must have been comical to them. There is a school called Experience that says backcountry hiking is supposed to be an exercise in efficiency. That, or these hikers were happy to be back from their hike, elated to have arrived alive, given the giant predator up the trail and all—but it was something more patronizing and it was too soon for it to be the mushrooms talking. The last of the line of hikers cautioned us first. He seemed to say it for his own enjoyment, mostly.

“You boys be careful, there’s a bear not too far up.”

“Up *this* trail?” I asked, blinking in the light.

“Yeah,” he said, squinting in the first sunshine of the lot—or was he laughing?—“but I wouldn’t worry much.”

Thanks, I thought. Thanks for that. Ben looked at me, and I him. I punched him and we entered the forest.

I had never seen a wild bear in the wild and the thought of entering its domain was unsettling. Who were we to deal with bears? A bear can kill you if it wants. Their presence was a reality in the park; all the dumpsters had intricate doors their claws couldn’t figure, cars were fair game, and in my pack, taking up too much space and weight, was a hard, black plastic bear-proof canister for our food and fetid gear. It wasn’t large enough to hide inside of. Panic struggled for a foothold.

These men who warned us may have been up to something, but our psychedelics would not be kicking in, yet, I hoped, and either way, bears were out there whether people saw them or not.

I was willing to ignore the sudden worry that we were re-entering the food chain—after a life of privilege—as we stepped into the forest, at least outwardly. I couldn’t let Ben catch wind of any doubt.

“We’re doing this, Ben,” I said and shuffled ahead of him through the unexpected soot of the trail, over networks of roots eager to catch a toe.

Despite the diminished lighting and hint of dank, my neck was quickly damp. It stung in the creases and places where I had nicked myself shaving in Vegas. Ben had faded my thick hair there, in the linoleum kitchen of a fellow Lumberjack alum; beneath my bandana it moistened and filled like a sponge. I didn’t immediately realize how fast a

pace I had set until we approached the next hikers on their way back—everyone moving in the opposite direction—nor why we were moving so briskly.

They kind of snuck up on me, the next two hikers, which was scary and made me stop because if two plodding, conspicuous people could surprise me from the front then what would a bear be able to do? I had been hunched over to shift my pack's weight from waist to shoulders when I saw their boots. I straightened up and stepped aside to let the two women pass. They were short-haired and androgynous, but women nonetheless; my spirit lifted to see them out there on the trail. They had obviously made it up there somewhere, and now back. But those calves, and muscled knees—they had done this sort of thing before. Two sturdy ladies that could have carried me out of California on their shoulders if they chose. I smiled and bowed my head.

Their demeanor quickly changed from gruff to kind, I thought, until the shorter one spoke. She looked from me to Ben, who had been lagging and was just catching up.

“Getting a late start, today?” she asked.

Why? I thought. What time is it? Do bears attack at night? I looked back at Ben as he stepped off the ashy trail with me to see if he had heard. His chest heaved and he coughed into a massive forearm. I heard him wheeze. The altitude was working on him already.

“Ah, well...” I heard myself say and felt myself shrug. My voice sounded cavernous and distant, someone else's.

The women fixed their faces and carried on past us, and it was all beginning: the foreign sound of my voice, the accusatory tones of hikers all moving in the other direction, all finishing this thing we had just begun.

We stood in that same spot beside the trail as another small group of hikers approached. My concern grew and filled out, got a job. The impending wall of potential doom was closing in on my ignorance and I came right out with it whether Ben could hear me or not.

“Is there really a bear up the trail?”

The lead hiker had silver hair that looked pristine and a kind, squinting face. I trusted him when he said there was.

“Yes, we came upon a mother and her two cubs no more than a hundred yards or so up the trail,” he said. His fellow middle-aged—everyone older than us, wiser—hiker smiled agreement. “She was pretty aggressive; posturing, feigning charges at us.” He plunged his fists downward to imply front paws stomping. “She had us a little worried until a ranger rode up on horseback and scared them off. She’s most likely up there still, pretty close to the trail,” he said, and then to our horror, added, “Take care!”—and they filed past us, a thankful bunch. They seemed to sigh relief.

In their dusty wake they left two silent pieces of useless meat, our sweat and the food in my big pack acting as chum. The muted thuds of our steps over loose soil were a dinner bell.

We had spent the early morning after sleepless night at the toes and heels of the largest living things on the planet, looking up and hugging those weathered, red giants at their widest points.

I had just woken warm from van nap in a paved patch of forest in the ambiguous afternoon, uncertain and groundless. I had asked Ben if we should eat our shrooms, to which he shrugged, and we did.

I felt feeble in the mountains. I had not really seen the drive up and in, the actual ascent into the middle elevations. Early on in our hike there were glimpses through trees of drop-offs and forked, forested canyons bathed in a curiously slanted light; little, brief indicators of altitude and topography, and the time of day. We were on edge already from passing bear warnings, so these fleeting views were easily ignored as we shuffled over soot. My eyes were occupied with scanning for bear. They were bolstered in this task by every hiker we passed, all going the other way, warning us and commenting on how late a start we were getting, and how far we had to go, and how aggressive the mother bear had been in defense of her cubs until the ranger rode up on his horse to scare her off.

We had just reached the top of a massive wall—what must have been almost three miles of moderate slope and steady progress (were it not for Ben) in—when we came upon it. We were higher than we had been before, on other hikes; higher than either of us had ever been on land. It had been hard to tell, until I found myself atop that treed, surprising rise in elevation—the forest suddenly gone vertical, the trail switching back, Ben

groaning at the sight of it—seeing past branchless, lower trunks, eye to eye with the sky. We had reached Panther Gap.

From its precipice the mountains receded dramatically to the west; we could see the flat valley floor of central California through this gaping wedge of sky. I stood still for a moment. Below me, what could have been a mile down a raptor soared, flying silently above his world.

The spin of our planet set things in motion. We had lit a late afternoon fuse when we ate those mushrooms; a deadline loomed as we began to feel the effects at Panther Gap, dangerously unaware of how fleeting that low angle light was. The external spin was more difficult to discern than the turmoil within. All our cavities churned in the dusty twilight of August in the high Sierras, and we had miles to go before we could stop. If only the sun would wait; if maybe its light would hold we could slow down and let our poisoned minds take in the sights and how to see them.

It all slipped away from us steadily. There was nothing we could do to stop it.

Our spur trail linked up with the Alta at Panther Gap and continued east along a steep grade. The land mass folded in and out, and after folding behind an outward buttress we found ourselves on the eastern side of a mountain around nine thousand feet at dusk on mushrooms. Light dissipated rapidly. Mercury plummeted like a stone down the steep slope. We could hear it skip and drop.

The fear crept in.

I would do it all over again and just as ill-advised to see the two of us again too close together and scampering in the opaque vacuum, Ben's belly right on the ass of my big pack like two running faggots running free, as the Kids in The Hall sang, both of us clinging to the pathetic slice of flashlight beam bumping along the uneven ground no more than a foot in front of my own. We had not yet made Mehrton Meadow when the sun finally punched its card after a long, lingering twilight and dove behind the mountain on us, taking with it all the light and heat and positive energy in the world. Our eyes were perfectly useless beyond the yellow cone at my boots; I pointed it there so we could at least stay on our feet as we shuffled, preferring to run into something rather than fall over it. Unseen eyes and fangs and claws swiped at us from beyond the glow, inches from our taut-from-cold and terrified faces. I couldn't stop my mind from showing me the ghastly potential of our black surroundings.

We had been giggling and stumbling nervously uphill for hours out on the mountain, slowly losing hold in the failing light and now it was gone and the trip was fully upon us as we turned into a dark fold of high altitude night. We seemed to be headed *in* now, and even down a bit, which was a load better than up at that point. Roots near our feet implied trees, sweet leafed living things now sinister and curled, and maybe where there were trees there could be a nice grassy meadow, except that they, the trees were suspiciously inviting us in, all of it improbable up there but essential that we find a flat place to set up our tent and hide, to hunker down and brace against the infinite danger of blindness and bears and how cold it might actually get as the air thinned and seemed to be sucked out from around us, up in the sky as we were, at night. Cold had not been a

consideration; it hastened the physical fear so I couldn't tell a shiver from a shake.

Everything trembled and we needed shelter.

If I stopped or even slowed to look sideways for a site Ben ran into me, we were that close; huddled together, safety in numbers, acting as human shields for one another. If it came from behind Ben was done. From the front, I might see the smoke-like exhaust of breath and maybe some spit-matted black hair before being torn apart; a near-paralyzing image I saw a hundred times as we marched farther in, keep going in. A branch reached out to grab my exposed shin and I shrieked. I moved the light around to see and tripped. We had to find a place and fast.

If I could do it again I would know that we were passing the small, sloped field that lent its name to this place, and heading up again, into the uneven and narrowing ruts and ravines of forest terrain. I sent the light right.

“How about there, Ben?” My lips were numb. “We need to find a place soon, what about right there?”

“I don't know, dude.”

“Or up there,” I said, swinging the dim beam elsewhere, ahead. “What about that spot?”

“I don't know man, I can't tell.”

“Well neither can I, Ben! But we need to stop!”

“I know.”

“Me, too!”

I wanted to dig a hole and jam my head into it until morning. I wanted to hide. Our tent would have to do. We ended up stopping somewhere at my frantic behest,

setting up the tent on a ridiculous slope. Ben fumbled with poles and sleeves and clips while I freaked out. The forest seemed to splinter and break around us. When he finished I dove in and closed my eyes, but the ground's angle was truly too extreme, and there was a thick root beneath my back. We dragged the tent ten or twenty feet up the hill and tried it there.

After settling on that spot and shoving our gear and ourselves inside I thought I should eat. Ben produced crackers and EZ-Cheeze but I wanted something real, something with protein that once lived on this earth. I sliced into a can of tuna, really chewing up a jagged mess of metal around the rim with my Swiss army knife and dug in. The whipped-cream-canister, my-sister-in-the-mornings-with-handfuls-of-hair-mousse sound of Ben's cheese product and the crunch and crumb of his crackers, and me eating albacore out of a can to the blue lantern glow of our flashlight filled the tent. Maybe a minute or two of noisy bliss like this, filling the gassy vacuum of our guts until the alarming wake-up smack of stupidity caught me unaware. Tuna fish at ten thousand feet? I might as well have stepped outside and screamed Come and Get It! Dinner was served for more than just the two of us, I told myself and took all the food away. Our tent was a homing beacon for miles in every direction to any mildly hungry omnivore. The smell of fish on dry land would be a goddamned delicacy to them and their supernatural noses. If we should not keep even our clothing in the tent with us, then surely seafood was out of the question. I snatched up everything we had while Ben watched—I made him finish—and fit what I could in the bear canister, which was suddenly small, and the rest in a plastic shopping bag. I fled from the tent and down the forested hill.

We were supposed to set up a triangular perimeter of odor to distract the bears, to keep them off our asses, but figures like at least ten feet up in a tree, and a hundred feet away from the tent meant very little in the sharp air and hardly moving molecules of mountain night, so I climbed up on a rocky rise and threw the black barrel as far as I could. I hoped maybe it would fall off the mountain in a commotion and take every inquisitive nose with it—Kerouac says it's impossible to fall off a mountain! with proof-like certainty in *Dharma Bums*. I disagreed. I then tied a rope to the sack and flung it over a tree limb above me, fastening it there, which, due to my being high up on a boulder, was very high indeed. I shuddered and sprinted back to the tent, roaring open then shutting the zipper, and climbed into my sleeping bag. My eyelids squeezed and revealed protoplasmic slide shows that said I was still tripping.

Our nylon shell flapped and scraped around us. Soon I was out in the forest, stumbling over logs on my ass with a bear in pursuit when it lunged for me and I screamed, startled in my sleeping bag by Ben's big arm reaching across for the zipper, having just reentered the tent. I yelped. He told me to relax.

“A bear won't use the *door* if he wants at us, dude.”

Every sound was wide bodies and paws, circling our tent. We were inside, blind to their approach. Sleep came mercifully and for real for the first full night in many, many moons.

Morning in the woods had a din, a smoldering restart that wouldn't remember me when I was gone. Birds that had watched my folly silently the night before now sang, carrying on unseen. Everything keeps turning and is ultimately okay and insignificant.

We had slept in a pleasant little wooded valley. There was no way to know how high we were; we could have been in any gully anywhere. The Meadow itself was a small, sloping pasture of knee-high green below us where the valley narrowed. I was sure right beyond the cordoning tree-line was the sky again and all that space, but there was no way to be absolutely certain and it didn't matter anyhow. We had not been mauled or trampled in our tent as we slept. We had been caught up here in the dark and cold and therefore missed the actual site, down closer to the meadow and a level, even plot complete with fire pit, but I had slept nonetheless and Ben was still asunder. We had this peaceful forest and pasture all to ourselves. I was beautifully alone.

Down beneath the boulders from atop which I had chucked the bear canister, over the wildflowers and goldenrod field bees hovered and zoomed; big, fuzzy bumblebees I could see from where I stood. My mind tried the whole bear thing again, briefly; where there are bees and flowers and trees there are bears. But it didn't stick; the poison had moved through my system in disjointed dreams and I was free.

I had to let it go.

Like the rules for a food and gear perimeter around our site, there was a figure for using the forest's natural facilities. I remembered a ranger somewhere saying one hundred feet, at least a hundred feet from our site and any water source. And if it was solid, I had to bury the waste. Sounded easy; I would just mope up the gradual slope above our tent until I found a suitable tree to act as my toilet seat. The pressure in my lower back built as I scanned the uneven and rutted ground for springs or streams or puddles or creeks. The tent fell back. Thin ravines that hemmed-in the valley grew deeper and more pronounced, and I wondered if they weren't underground springs or

high altitude runoffs. I crested small mounds, full of hope and something heavy, only to notice small trenches in the terrain full of slates of stone and stream-like elements, but no water to my naked eye. I dragged myself much farther than intended. I climbed.

Sunlight became more insistent through a sparser canopy; it seemed the valley was giving out on me and the deep, suspicious ruts that ushered me onward were not going to relent. I had to stop somewhere and quickly this endeavor was bringing me down, reminding of last night and making me sweat. I even began to pant, taking lunges as steps and sips as breaths; you cannot gulp to catch up at ten thousand feet. You must sip evenly through thin slice of mouth with absolute control. There is no margin for error with a high altitude diaphragm. I scraped moisture from my brow with a dirty wrist, other hand on hip, head on a swivel searching. My sprightly spirits sunk to my bowel and I stopped right there, wherever, claiming a statute of limitations on how long I had to look for a spot. I leaned back against a big tree, wide enough to conceal my bare ass from Ben if he emerged from the tent way down there and looked uphill, despite how far I had gone. I dropped my shorts with awkward wide stance and back against rough bark. Before I pushed I remembered the hole I was supposed to dig to bury the brown poopships in, and scraped the ground for a rock or a stick. I reached for a nice wide, thin, plate-like stone, reddening my lower back against the trunk. I dug like that, leaning backward but bent forward at the waist, scooping away moist soil between my legs like a dog digging. I delivered and skipped back to our tent to write myself a morning poem.

This morning I woke to shit,  
Dug a pit,  
And buried it.

With Ben still determined and asleep I set out for Alta Peak without water or food or much thought at all. I followed a deer out of the forested fold, which is a steep enough short hike on which to work up a sweat and I might have had to shit again, and when the canopy eroded into rocky openness the trail threatened with the dastardly tedious steps and turns up into the sun, probably two miles or more to go which was two miles too far when I'd still have to hike back down from our site, without water; we'd be hiking to earn a drink of water, and that was still hours away, and anyway my brain and body and the skin on the insides of my upper legs were simmering from yesterday's haste, a hike I still had to *undue* today; I wouldn't be back from the peak for hours, Ben would probably still be asleep but then we'd be behind again, chasing the sun off the mountain. I was thirsty already. I turned around and bumped my happy ass back to the tent, waited for Ben to wake, and we left.

When we came down I needed to eat; we had left Mehrton Meadow that morning without breakfast, and barely a meal the day before. That, and thirteen point five alpine miles under heavy packs on mushrooms. So I needed food.

At the general store I also had to return my rented bear canister. While doing so, after forgoing the whole food thing, instead contemplating the port wine selection in lieu of Big Sur, I saw a familiar face down the aisle, a thinly veiled B-list actor's face, beneath a blue Yankees cap and behind big, black sunglasses. I recognized the face and the man as C. Thomas Howell. Laughed at myself for doing so, so quickly, for remembering films like *Side Out!* and...well, later I got *The Outsiders* as well. He looked, in jeans and a tucked in black T-shirt, and his disguise (inside), he looked exactly

like an actor on hiatus with his family. That, and he was short. Reality is he is a littler guy. No camera tricks up there in the Sierras. His blond wife was much taller, or at least as tall, and also in big, black shades (inside). Were they hungover or something? With their two small children about their legs, they lulled about calmly and silently, but close together; a little family unit. I used to watch their father in movies on HBO from my couch as a kid, especially the unlikely beach volleyball flick with the red-haired guy from *Thirty Something*.

They had such an unspoken thing going on. They were together. I watched them through glass as they mulled out back on the wood deck in the scattered shade. It looked peaceful in the splintered sunlight. My brown bag clinked against the door.

We had to leave soon. Ben wanted to find a place to stay before night. We had to come down from the mountains for good.

## FUCK FRESNO

Perspective can be confined, claustrophobic, impossible in a small box with a big, loud bottle of Benny's cheap rum, spiced. The big man had been invisible for days but last night I heard him and he came back.

"Shut the fucking door, Benny." I hissed from my bed, before the sun set on our room's one west-facing window.

"Whaaat, dude!"

"Oh jesuschrist. Benny Decibels, here we go."

"Whaaatever, guuuy!"

"Just shut the damn door."

He was silhouetted against the second story railing, sending unsteady shadows into the room, across my legs beneath sheets. I had my head propped up against a cheap headboard with thin pillows, flat, and I could yell at Ben through the doorway without moving or looking at him. I could yell at myself in the dresser mirror. Too spent to drink more, too tired to sleep ever, I could yell at Benny, that big, drunk bastard. He had his eyes intentionally crossed, his tongue jutting his lower lip, smiling sloppily. I could see it without looking. He had a tendency to broadcast, to share himself with the world. Thing was—I slapped myself with the realization—people liked him. I hated my stupid, short red hair and evil red eyes set in big, smug face in the mirror. Angered by my anger and my impatience and my immobility for the night, sour in my bed; if I were Ben and rooming with myself I would have obliterated my senses, too.

Ben spoke to his mother over a payphone outside our shit motel room in the almost still morning midday, before we could leave for the coast finally for the coast. My eyes stung in my bed where I had been since we checked in the night before. Blood was syrup and pulsed inside the bone of my skull. Shade still bathed our side of the crumbly building. Sick light glowed in off hues of yellow and grey through thin drapes. Traffic tires on asphalt out there were unyielding and abrasive.

A natural gas pipeline had exploded in Carlsbad, New Mexico. Ben's mother was glad to hear from him, not knowing where we were on our trip, but knowing that Carlsbad was definitely one of our stops. Fresno is in central California, not New Mexico, near the center in the long boring flat and stagnant valley that comprises a part of the state that is not the coast. We might as well have been in Carlsbad; in fact we should have been. The worst pipeline accident in the last quarter century—twelve people had been killed—and what business had we so far away? So safe and sleepy and last night sloppy in our static carpet, concrete bedded, too expensive overnight slum when we should have been on our way west to the water, having been on the road for over two weeks now. Two weeks wasted not moving enough, not making progress and not yet at the California Big Sur coast. We should have been in Carlsbad hugging a pipeline. Fuck safe, shitty Fresno.

Had we widened the gap between ourselves and the mortal reminder, or was it gaining again? Just the night before last, before I relented to Ben and crawled into this tomb of starched sheets and clichés, I felt the fear. Dealt with bears on mountains at midnight on mushrooms and not dealt well, worn down with fatigue and always at the

mercy of altitude and air and the potential for a fall, for that one fatal toe-stub and tumble as I drifted off. But now this, here, and it felt like we were going nowhere else.

He'd lost our gas cap somehow, leaving Sequoia. He'd filled her up on our way down into the long, boring valley of central California in the near-dusk night. I discovered this unacceptability in the morning hangover din of a downtrodden Fresno fill station, on our way out of town. The last tank's mileage was missing from my anal notepad. Ben had forgotten his brain. I told him he was going to drive us around that shit town until we found a parts store. That we weren't driving another mile west until our gas tank was capped. How the hell could he have lost the lid? I threw a little tantrum. Our heads ached and beyond the station's overhang shadow the sun washed out dusty, crumbly pavement. Flatbed trucks and fenced-bed pickups shuddered over pocked roads. Ben convinced me to let it go until we got underway. I told him we were stopping at the first sign of civilization. Her exhaust note had an extra hint of sputter as we left for the valley of the grapes, choking on aerated, low-emissions gas. I felt the fuel rise and gurgle at the open esophagus, dirt and debris finding their way in, gas its way out. My van tinkled her way to the coast in my mind.

## SO CLOSE

The two-lane highway south of Monterey rose and clung to its cliffside notch. The coast was blowing in below all big crash and blue. I was trying to speed despite the winding racetrack terrain, listening to jazz, Ben beside me; both of us there—blasted in the face by Coltrane’s alto, some soprano, a rapid high-hat, Ben bobbing his head and trying to smile—but me all absorbed and sweating over the wheel, gulping at the visual boom of Big Sur and gulping most of all because I wasn’t even there.

I figured I’d probably ruin my flimsy homage to the beach where Jack Kerouac had lived my favorite book, or never even it at all. I thought all I had were Jack’s words to guide me, to literally show me the way. Kerouac—according to his own introduction to his life’s work, in my copy of *Big Sur*—wanted to collect the whole of his printed and published accounts one day, in his cozy later years that never came, into a single heaping volume with uniform names of people and places. He wanted his work to read like the life of Proust. I had never read Proust. Did he name names? I had hearsay. I had naïve notions of some abstract glory, and “fiction” to guide my nervous way.

I had cheap port wine for the occasion. I had no idea what port was, other than the too-sweet sauce Jack had leaned on during his west coast travails. I had visions of myself slugging it back, cross-legged in the same sand of Kerouac’s *Big Sur*, somehow joining in his epic song of “Sea” as the sun set and the sound of the waves took over.

I had my copy of the book.

I had myopia.

For all this to play out perfectly and inline with my aspirations and endless pretense I'd have to find the terrifying "Raton Canyon Bridge" along California's Highway One. Smart money—of which I had little—said that name was a pseudonym. But why conceal the identity of concrete? To protect it from people like me? Kerouac calls it a fourteen mile cab fare south of Monterrey. I wondered would I, under similar circumstances—those tangible stresses we both enjoyed—remember the precise mileage? Maybe the difference between a mind like his and a mind like my own, right there, though I feared there was quite a bit more to it than that. And I feared I would never find it, the beach, blasting south on the two lane swooping highway into Big Sur country from Monterey; no real way to know if Jack's estimation was in earnest. Her blunt nose mowed south along a bending notch in the bluffs. I was barely there.

And poor Ben, he was very much in that van with me.

I'd yanked him about four thousand manic miles thus far, abbreviating and condensing his intentions in order to make the coast with time enough to realize my own. This day was to be the end of my means. I had no idea how I'd actually make it happen. Ben knew this, I think. We'd left the modern world behind in Monterey. He knew there'd be nowhere for us to stay. He might have asked, "So, where is this place?" or "What's the plan, man?"—to which I would have replied, "I don't know."

We rocked and swayed with the winding road and Coltrane's chords, the wind through her cabin cycling in the rear windows and sucking out the front in an ineffective loop (the a/c too taxing on her tired six to use), the too blue sea all curling white and coming in against my forehead, partially blocked by Ben, seaweed and mossy cliffs

beneath his nose, scraggly green hills in my window's breeze and the sun burning it all into a moving picture.

Coltrane was kinetic and chasing the train hard and almost off track at times, it sounded like in the wind, but maybe that was me. I was an ignorant, wide-eyed-if-I-wasn't-high amateur about this whole operation—and then he went all jazz lounge, snake-charming C-side of *Greensleeves*, setting my concert band Christmas memories of spit valves on hardwood stages under bright, hot lights spinning. John Coltrane was blowing and really out in front of it, always dictating his own world. I could never catch it like that or blaze my own way, lost as I was or at least misplaced out there on the sweeping crashing swooping cloud coastline highway of central California, scanning every canyon, every bluff-spanning bridge for a place I'd been dreaming of for years and maybe forever. I was looking for myself.

The album plunged from frantic to somber and sentimental, then raced back up to full-on confused, cat-in-a-bag clawing and screeching crazy, sweaty talk. I pulled myself forward with the wheel and white knuckles to keep a wedge of wind between my damp back shirt and seat cover. We had the windows open and the air off.

The salty sea world wind swirled through the van with the back windows propped, the whole convection cycle cooling system ineffective on full blast but not taxing on her tired straight six and squealing serpentine, and John Coltrane was chasing the choo choo, all the adrenaline in my gut squirting and I was a sweaty mess. Ben couldn't figure how far it had been from Monterrey on our big, atlas map while I drove, his big fingers too large to trace and to find quickly, and by the time I thought of it we'd

gone too far. I thought I would have known it when I saw it but I must have been distracted.

Coltrane's C-sides asked: what's a chord sequence? Fuck all that, fuck it hard and chase down your own, they said. My chest laid down the traveling line and my gut surged the tattered strands of a melody recognizable, constantly struggling to hear it and predict the next riff then revise and catch up to it, always behind, all the while driving the swoop and meander of old Highway One and scanning the windshield's contents for an anonymous bridge and a canyon, of which there were many. My box set had been re-mastered and I thought I could hear the sound of vinyl.

“Do you hear that, Ben?”

“Your mouth?”

“No, I think one of the speakers is crackling.”

“I don't hear anything.”

“Shut up.”

It's all woe and startling vista gloom to Jack. Giant castles of rock out in the water, buttresses of craggy cliffs and ridges jutting out to sea, all of it raged against by big, frothy breakers in a ceaseless slap and roar—down there. You are always above your doom when careening up or down the Big Sur coast. Occasionally it is almost *over* there, when a cliff folds inward to the highway's notch, framing a depressed portal of the deep blue ocean, but always with that potential for a fall. Too easy just to stop steering and plummet. Maybe that's why Jack never drove.

The van ran poorly on California's three dollar-a-gallon gas. There was a lot of braking and coasting around blind cliffs, then pressing on the floor. She coughed a little, tried to clear her throat. She could barely breathe.

I asked Ben, "Do you feel that?"

"Hunger?"

"No, the van. She's slumping, Benny, she's dragging ass."

"Me, too, dude."

"So you feel it?"

Varying patches of color pulsed by my window: wild flowers, plants I'd never seen, ocean, stone, grass, sky, and low-flying clouds in a streaking, peripheral blur.

I'd missed it or it didn't exist, or maybe I hadn't paid enough attention in the light traffic out of Monterrey. We had been in the van on the two-lane coast for over an hour now, consuming gas and grass at an alarming rate. Striking cliffs and startling vistas of the vast blue crashing sea and the smell of that sea through our open windows on a brilliant day, deep blue everywhere, began to beat us down. The sun had passed overhead and was bearing down over the water, clouds seemed to patrol the coastline just offshore, a golden glare crackled off the roiling blue floor and John Coltrane was honking and barking frantically at the both of us, telling me to keep going and Ben to stop. We turned around at a state park.

Ben wanted me to look for a place to spend the night. Poor guy; this wasn't his trip. His trip had been hijacked for the past week and now I was completely gone—all worked up and sweating in my own anxious world while driving, and he was trying to

figure where we'd sleep. He asked me what the plan was when we stopped at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park, at the southern extent of my first-pass search. I was reaching too far. Any farther south and we would officially be out of Big Sur country.

The beach at Julia Pfeiffer Burns *looked* a lot like Kerouac's beach *sounded* in his book. The fear that I would never find the real thing, if it existed, caused me to compromise in my mind, and with my eyes. That beach right down there would work if it had to. If I could only get *down* there, that would do if I could hide away and spend the night down *there*.

We were outside, walking away from the van in a parking lot toward the path when Ben wanted to know the plan.

“So, what's the plan, man?”

“I think I'm going to ask someone.” There were people everywhere, tourists mostly, preparing for a walk.

“So, go ask someone, then.” Dockers and Dock Martins, penny loafers and knobby knees.

“No way, not here.”

“Dude, we're going to have to figure out what the *deal* is. Do it. Ask someone where your magic beach is.” Benny showing frustration openly, for the first time in some time.

“I will.” I had seen a smaller park up the coast a few minutes, on the inland side. I hadn't seen any cars or people outside. Maybe there, where it was quiet and the rangers sit around and read—yeah right, no one is going to know what in hell I'm talking about

or care enough to help. Hell, if it was me who knew and I asked myself where it was, I think I'd have lied to hide it from him.

The path was paved and narrow and wound down toward the water. The wind picked up and all the viney seaside bushes and trees began to stir yes, we're getting down to it. But the railings of our walkway were tall enough to keep us all in, Ben and I and the whole lot of listless tourists stomping and shuffling over slats. The bridge-like walk was growing congested and hemmed in.

I panicked when we saw the beach. It was the most amazing dreamlike scene I ever saw, trapped on the wooden planks and chain link tunnel looking down, a sea foam green cove of hidden beach, tucked in on three sides by vertical cliffs with a single strand of waterfall emerging suddenly from the rock face and falling, arcing down into the improbably tropical green ocean right at the waterline. There was no path to the water. There was no way I was getting down there.

"That's the tallest waterfall to empty directly into an ocean, anywhere in the world," Ben said in stoned astonishment—I waited for the "dude" that never came—referencing a pamphlet I hadn't seen him snag.

What did it matter, which beach? I was willing to bet it would sound similar down there. I'd have settled—out of fear that my big trip was shot—for any secluded patch of sand on which to wake up parched and blank. Give me a sandbox in the wind and the jug mouth to make it sing.

"There are tracks down in the sand, Ben!"

"Uh oh," he said, seeing my face instead. "Where?"

“Look! Down there, those tracks are *fresh*, too. How did they get down there?”  
Footprints perforated the sand beneath a rock face and scattered across the beach. Our path most certainly did not get there from here.

“I dunno, dude.”

“They must have *climbed* down. That’s what they did, those fuckers!”

“Looks super safe.”

“You think I could—”

“Get real, dude.”

“Why doesn’t this trail go down there? Fuck this; I want to *leave*, Ben!”

“Where are we going, man? What’s the plan? Where are we going to sleep tonight? And don’t tell me ‘on the beach’.”

I asked around at the small state park up the road and not a ranger knew a thing. Either no one had ever heard a damn thing about this place or no one gave a damn. Either way they weren’t talking. The name “Kerouac” barely changed their bland ranger faces. I might try up the coast a ways toward Monterrey, they said. A young one tried to sell us on the park at hand, listing off its unique features and trails and sites, and he got Ben going a bit. Waterfalls and wooded sites with fire pits and moderate trails; I saw it all coming undone right there in a gift shop visitor center beside a stuffed bird of prey, talking to a hopelessly square young ranger. Where were all the real Californians? Where were all the people getting after it, like me? Where were all the fools with dreams?

Surely people knew about this sort of thing. I imagined scores of ugly young Americans trampling their way down to the beach with triumphant wails as if they had the right.

“If you had to say,” I tried the ranger one last time, “what the most famous or well-known bridge is, up this coastline, what would it be?”

“Well,” he started to respond slowly and I was about-facing before he finished, Ben got hit by it, and we were off. “Maybe the Bixby Bridge,” he guessed. The Bixby Bridge.

Ben bothered me with more pamphlets he had grabbed as we pulled back out onto the road in the sun and Coltrane picked up where he left off and I ignored everything else but the distance between the van and the Bixby Bridge.

I must have been distracted—swerving north and rowing the ship through dramatic turns and over assorted bridges, asking Ben at each one, “Can you see the name on the plaque? What bridge is this, Ben? Can you *see*?” as we drove over its span and onward, upward toward the big bays, maybe caught chasing the Train, which is what he’s for, thinking how Miles Davis is a smoky black and white still, while John Coltrane is a trackless locomotive, smoke coughing up in explosive puffs, dissipating and dispersing like sewer steam, both of them cousins nonetheless in the outward expansion, not all that different after all—but I must have been distracted because the road dipped inland too soon, obscuring the coast with tall trees and we had made Monterrey without finding the place. No man has ever been so unhappy to see that town.

I took some time in a roadside parking lot, a beach lot where the trails off through trees went directly to the water, the landscape having tapered down to sea level in a lame leveling off as we unknowingly left Big Sur behind. I didn't care about that beachhead before me, but I needed time there not to take a walk out into the waves and undertow and never come back. What was the point of this whole undertaking if not to find that literary place and drag it down into my tangible abyss? All was lost and for naught without the beach. All things would remain at arm's length once and forever. The curse would continue.

Could it be any other way?

I limped us south again in the late day offshore sunshine.

Ben had a line on some state park campsites, somewhere in the center of the whole Sur region. He saw my state and tried to distract.

"This one says we can hike down to the water from our site, dude."

Answering him meant I'd given up.

"But it doesn't say how much per night."

"*Fine*, Ben," I said, "but you're going in to see what the deal is, then. I'm done with this."

He withheld his humor, his sarcastic mock comforting. We swayed in the cabin. I told Ben to get me high.

The pitch of tires on asphalt altered, expanded and hummed as we drove over a coastal bridge along our way south to Ben's campsite, the first major bridge south of Monterrey.

I sat up high in my seat to see what I could below. It was quite a drop to a steep, narrow wooded canyon inland of the bridge, all seemed to open up ocean side of the white concrete structure and I asked Ben what he saw in that direction and before he could answer and we had crossed onto terra firma again and its lower rubber pitch I knew where we were and looked for a place to turn around. The van's tires chirped as we swung back onto the asphalt, northbound, sending loose earth airborne behind her and tearing ass back to the bridge. Just past it in that direction on the outside lane was a small little scenic turnout, maybe a quarter mile north of the bridge so I one-eightied us again into the packed dirt pull-off with a skid of brakes and kept the van running as I ran ahead shoulder-to-shoulder with passing traffic to see.

A small dirt road dodged inland of the bridge at its northern mouth, where it should have, and a small creek seemed to glisten down there in the canyon, as it should have. If I knew anything at all, I had found the place. I couldn't allow myself to think it, but down deep there was no denying where I was. It was sunny and still and shiny calm and I promised that big white bridge I'd be back in the morning when there was fog and less light. Jack had first seen it all at night, not really *seeing* anything at all but fog and the ground beneath his lantern. I could not un-see what was around me but I could come back in the morning and see if I was right.

We drove south once more with jazz along the devastating cliffs and rocky outcroppings over thunderous surf and boom and all of it so big and violent and eternally absurd and totally logical, the only way it could be.

Coltrane's punctuation was some new thing, truncated and not unlike my brainwaves at the time—separate and self-contained phrases and thoughts, somehow interrelated and equal under the cobalt and cotton coastal sky; semi-colons hyphens asterisks and afterthoughts tossed over the flames and fanned, man, fanned...

South again down the coastal highway in that new silent horror of uneasy anticipation—silent save for the album, over and over, and the sound of road beneath tires, and turbulence through open windows—and we did not speak. I had a plan now but I had no idea how it would happen. My faith in words had wavered all day—what they signify, and with how much honesty?—most of what I'd heard and read rang true and stung when all was said and done—recounted reality and the perception of it—I bristled with the buildup of bittersweet expectation, impending doom and letdown, the only way to really learn anything—welcome it, I thought, it's the only way.

We did not speak. I stopped at a small roadside store for the next day's meager supplies, at a point where Rt. One ducks briefly inland, dry side of a bluff. I stood stoned in a surprising line of people, inside; last of the late day traffic. There was a campground of some kind behind the store, and a smattering of homes clustered along the coast. Were these tourists or residents I stood amongst, as I reeked of skunky smoke? I sensed impatience in the air. They watched me. They were residents. I was strange. The old man at the old manual cash register with big, bronze typewriter buttons was no tourist, he lived nearby, and he didn't appreciate the look of me. I slinked out of the country store confines with my plastic bag of sourdough baguette, canned tuna, and another jug of cheap port wine. When he checked my ID he frowned down his nose at my jaw-heavy mug shot, then at me.

We got to the campground too late in the day so all the good sites were established already under trees or around them, nicely shaded and nowhere near the latrines. We claimed our three dollar patch of trampled dirt and grass somewhat adjacent to the bathrooms. It was a good deal after all, modest and cheap, and as the day drained the stink was bad but not awful, especially as the sparse tree line lengthened its shadow across the field to include the small building and therefore ease off on the oven effect of a broiling marinade inside, seeping outward; only, as this happened the sun somehow got a last, real direct, unobstructed shot at us in our tent and forced us out staggering into the bare spot of sun and stink we had claimed as our own and off down to the beach, might as well.

By morning the smell would be so wretched that all the men and some of the women were using the woods behind the bathrooms, away from its radius of hell encompassing our tent with us in it.

Before we set out for the beach, Ben wanted to get high again. He didn't really have an off switch. He was reliable. Despite my plaintiff whines and cries he packed a bowl and began to puff and cough, and when he passed it I told him that we shouldn't, that the smoke would be so terribly obvious outside our tent, and that we wouldn't be able to sense anyone approaching. Then I took it from him anyway and filled my throat with searing medication. I jumped out with jug in hand before Ben was done and put a few steps between myself and the dome tent. The smell was there. I swigged the disgusting port and squinted, eyes all pleasant heavy. Ben emerged and we began.

The nervousness and anti-social paranoia bit through me like an onshore wind, cold and dark and absolute and inescapable, in waves. As the sun set yet again I found myself trying to climb deep inside and hide forever until morning bracing, bracing against the inhuman pull.

Marching out to shore through brush and short trees via broad trail with port jug hung from limp arm in vain as the day turned, everything graying—Ben more alive than I but subdued nonetheless, both of us plodding down to the thunder and wind of the Pacific for the first time. The arch-canopied trail opened to a gray, rocky estuary cradled by dark cliffs and breakers out past the shelf, and that haunting boom and spray. Airborne sand scoured us in waves and blasted itself into the grooves of jug mouth and my own, chewing on cheap wine. The howl of a million miles came chomping in beneath our shirts and shorts and skin and we shook, crossing the calm and cold protected water, deeper than anticipated, up to my stones in one spot miserable and making my way out. It would not do it would not do, tomorrow was the only thing.

Twilight transpired like water from the tree. We were out there on the rocky shelf in the wind skipping stones when the light was gone, just like that. Caught out there and suddenly groping the slick, sharp landscape for a way across the water to the trail and to the tent and to sleep and tomorrow—shit, Ben, we might have to wade across without enough light to decipher stepping stones beneath the gray surface, shallow places, hell, we might as well dive in and tremble and chatter our way back to the tent near the shitters.

In the morning I drove us up the coast and dropped myself off. I'd established a pick-up schedule of sorts for when I didn't make it down or I discovered I'd been wrong about it all. If I wasn't at the foot of the bridge by nightfall all was well with me and Ben was to come back the next morning.

I hesitated with a crunch before the road started its long, right turn dip down into the sunny canyon, hearing a faint turbulence in my left ear—there *is* a gap in the bluff, this really could *be* the right place. Cattle crossings made no schematic sense to me, visually. There were the rusted iron grates and cow catchers—I guessed they keep the cattle from ditching it as they pass, bottlenecking the drive. Did the fields inland of those hills still support such ranching?

I clomped my way down the stem of the dirt road “J”, eternally unsure if I was in the right place despite the perfectly placed gap in the bluff to my left where wind reminded how high up there I was and where cattle had crossed, as Jack writes, unable to actually believe it until I saw it for myself, no faith—I bumped along uncertain despite the obvious landmark, never convinced.

I continued down the unpaved shelf in the canyon wall's slope as it began to descend. The sun was hot overhead. As I stomped downhill in sandals the breeze lessened. The coast could have suddenly been miles from me. The southern bluff cut off my view of the big white bridge. There was shade from scrawny tree brushes below, and the sound of lapping water. I was worried and dehydrated, hungover wasted and I wanted very badly to say it all in one manic breath the way Kerouac seems to, to live and breathe the way he seems to have lived and breathed. I badly wanted to be.

## IN IT

Picture this: I am rib-deep in a cold creek, frozen (as in not moving) because apparently this creek is part of people's backyards now, and presently a woman is hanging her whites to dry in the narrow canyon wind, not ten yards from where I stand, unsteady in sandals on slick creek-bed stones. The running water *is* cold, coming up to my navel so I raise my pack and father's vital camera bag above my head all heavy, hoping to blend in. I am a scarecrow up a creek.

Sunlight sifts through an overhead colander, casting a plasmatic stew on the clear, cold stucco surface at my sternum.

Begins with me alone, feeling foolish—always does. Everyone seems to ignore that part *post hoc*, to deny it or leave it out for some reason. Maybe because it stings, maybe for the need for things to be good and glamorous and always appealing. But reality *is* the uncertainty, the inability to define for certain, to decide that it was good at the time, constructive, worthwhile, and tangible. Honesty is saying that I do not know. I was there, and it *was* something—*this* is what I know. I was nervous, anxious, paranoid conflicted—afraid it was a mistake. I was always headed toward some terrific disaster, nosing down, trying to be some kind of romantic second coming, a reincarnation, in reality unable to shake the mortal fear, my own vain mortality. I was waiting for the bubble burst, because it never pans out, not like the stories would have it—at least, knowing this, I can have a good wincing laugh at my own expense. At least I don't have to pay myself.

Cast down into the creek by an impenetrable, tall wall of wooden gates—giant doors really meant to keep the barbarians out, which I can't help but think are for someone just like me, one of those walls the right one, the one guarding the gentle wooded stroll to the Pacific if not for the unknown awaiting he who scales its height, the double barreled old man wondering what my business is and where my manners are—with the dirt road having hung an unfortunate left, inland, abandoning me, I was forced to wade my way down to the ocean through a surprisingly cold, deep, and fast moving creek, the little river's characteristics recognized in that very order in a prostate-squeezing dip.

It isn't like this in the book, obviously. Surely, and unfortunately things would have changed over the course of exactly forty laps around the sun, but I honestly hadn't given much thought to the approach, just the beach, just getting to the beach and I'd personally driven most of the 4000 miles thus far (cheers, Benny), toiling across the Southwest for three weeks now, broiling in my van for the soul purpose of arriving upon the beach that I pray (to no one) lay at the end of this creek that isn't supposed to be so deep, and according to the book shouldn't have required navigating in the first place—though forty years is a lot of time for building fences and forgetting heroes and I'm here to remember, to pay homage and to finally *live* it, to know what he was writing.

Being alone and feeling foolish aside, I couldn't turn back, having come this far. Ben wouldn't be back at the bridge above (with the van) until nightfall and only then to make sure I'd made it, the goal here being to spend a day and a night on the beach made immortal in Jack Kerouac's most honest effort, *Big Sur*—I don't know it at the time but I am unconsciously attempting to spend the night alone on the beach on the exact forty-

year anniversary of Kerouac's completion of 'Sea,' meaning his last night alone on this beach, cross-legged in his fisherman's outfit in the sand, hallucinating on the sounds of the waves, all night, writing it down.

Can you picture me, rib-deep in a cold creek, frozen with heavy gear above my head attempting to remain unseen by the inhabitants of this canyon? My footing was unsteady, and me in flip-flops, poor piggies getting crushed by large, smooth stones that comprise the creek-bed, alone, feeling foolish, wondering for certain if this is even the right canyon, if Jack was putting me on all this time and if he wasn't, and this is indeed the right place then do these people who reside here, these residents who have cordoned-off and gated the approach, claimed ownership and forced me into the water, do these people know who lived here before them, forty years ago, for six weeks of the summer, each night recording what the ocean had to say (which is to say a lot) and losing his mind, drinking port wine, listening, the entire time?

I am standing motionless at this point with arms up and out like a scarecrow contemplating the potential nihility of my existence, my invisible non-existence because I somehow remain undetected by the woman hanging whites with those idyllic wooden clothespins not ten yards from where I suspend respiration, holding still. I expect to be discovered in a scream and arrested; at the very least scolded and escorted away. Would you ignore me slogging through your backyard creek in the name of some drinking loon who lived and also wrote here in a cabin some forty years ago and went mad maybe on your property?

She is hanging laundry and there is a fool standing in her cold creek, up to his nipples with stupid, frozen face, wishing himself invisible.

I took pictures from the belly of the creek to document my journey, to help narrate how fucking cool (and cold) I was to be doing this. Black and white storyboards of light's splintered path through the canopy, down to me up to my solar plexus in cold, moving water. I could feel the water's rushing level there, at the vulnerable wind button just beneath my sternum as I stumbled over slick, unseen stones, my naked toes paying the toll.

That cold water alarm button in my chest said to seek higher ground in a shot of heavy surge, spreading out through my gut in a sickening wave washing—Arms up! The water nearly neck high in a dark pool sent my elbows over my head, suspending my gear like a soldier with his rifle, crossing a river—only I wasn't crossing but traversing, navigating the *length* of this thing till the ocean come, through backyards and side yards and Jack's old yard beneath a lime green light-speckled awning of silhouettes and sparkling water and me in the middle, feeling foolish for my trespass, foolish for my awkward trespass, my uncertain, second-guessing progress toward a beach that might not be there. And for my inability to see myself, taking pictures as I trudged, forging foolishly downstream; still just a fucking tourist.

I would be until I put that camera down on a rocky outcropping on the beach, horrified that it had died. I would be until I used my own ears, and a pen. Until I let go.

I skipped like a light-loafed loser from the mouth of the canyon across the perfectly rippled creek as it cascaded over sand down to sea, me having finally gathered the guile to sneak up and out of the water through someone's side yard to the dirt driveway, doing

so stiffly and hurriedly and conspicuous as hell, scared certain that the cops had been called already, eased only and finally by an older gentleman outside his bungalow who raised a hand to me and said, “Nice day for a walk, isn’t it?”

“It sure is,” I said, smiling, realizing the simple truism, suddenly beaming with pardon and grace and still squishing in my sandals and wet shorts, situating my gear about me and on my way down to water finally down to the water. The roadway narrowed into a walkway through trees and brush in the canyon bottom V. Occasional gardens of sunlight broke the scene, illuminating everything green and the water gray and white, still following the creek but beside it now, slightly above it. I walked faster, aware of the giant bridge somewhere ahead, above me signaling beach. In one stretch of path my ankles and toes were pricked and torn by a patch of thorns, for some reason making me move more briskly, more painfully and purposefully through the thickets. The sharp burning sting of my lower legs propelled me across flimsy planks over the creek to the other side where the path narrowed again and I wondered if those planks had been set up approximately where Jack had constructed his little mill race, his means for clean drinking water from the creek, or maybe where a tree had lay fallen as a natural bridge, musing until the canopy broke for good and I was taking pictures of the bridge above and at the waves ahead and also above, crashing down in white walls of thunder and panic and glorious triumph, however temporary.

I skipped across the remnants of the diminished creek finally free and out to sea, along the sand and to the southern end of the cliff-backed crescent beach, literally skipping and bounding high to see the big, loud world as it crashed and boomed in bursts

of cannon fire and wind exhaust; a tug of war that sucked and pulled and tugged and dragged and did so loudly with aplomb. I was ready to document my big day in Big Sur.

## JACK KEROUAC DOES NOT LIE

Jack Kerouac does not lie and I mean not to lie either, I mean to say it all. For after smoking my first pipe, my first cigarette, taking my first swig of water, ever, on the beach beneath the Bixby Bridge at last I come to realize the batteries in my camera are dead—to open it now to switch it out, film all filled and unwound would mean losing my trek to that point—and that I must tell this story now, and feverishly at that, standing stoic-faced in smug horror against the sheer rock face, the only shade I can find, and fleeting at that. Soon the midday sun will cross over the cliffs and burn me, but until then and even after—because, what the fuck, my camera broke, my luck—I can do this in spite of that and the terror of having to actually sit down here and *do* it, get it down and out of my brain without the help of tangible evidence, of physical proof, of man and machine...and everything, everything is here as Jack said it was, the cabin on the cliff (that was under construction the summer Jack was here), the stream drizzling into the Pacific from beneath the bridge in a rippled cascade over ribbed sand, the rocks out there in the water all slick black and battered by the crash and spray, towering giants up to their chins in heaving seas and the surf, thundering, booming *down* at me all slap and crackle and constantly coming in to claim its land, no destiny here but what she wants and what she wants is *us*, this land we've come to call our own and all the rest. I was backed up on the beach as far as I could be, spine and skull to solid rock wall in a thin drape of shade, an ever-diminishing shelter from the sun that would soon be overhead, then water, face to

face with this panting, breathing onslaught of artillery. I was backed up against it and faced with it and caught in the middle of it and completely on my own to record it.

My brain was burst and dispersed between my ears by the ocean's bombs, sucked out to sea in the shockwaves, frantically trying to figure my circumstances—can I stay? Not on the sandy southern stretch of beach in the shade, where small sea bugs that bounce and bite with shocking burn are washed ashore and left there by each receding wave, abandoned like soldiers on a landing; soon the sun will chase me into their ranks. And not the northern end, where beach is encroached by boulders and stones, a jagged bed of assault (from above, too?) until it tapers off violently into cliff, from which point you can see the tunneled sea cave Jack saw, bored out from the cliff side and filled, its traffic all foamy and white and filling its confines in surges, then flat again, a million miles of open water beyond its peephole lens in bursts of stillness were it not for the earth curving, falling away. And do I have the rations?—of course you do you modern fool! You have everything you need; just keep an eye on those waves, that tide—when does it come in? Now? Always, bearing down? There was terror and shock and most of all awe, just as he said, only I saw all its fury and mortal fear for the first time in the bright shining burn of day.

I fought the urge to flee.

First thing Jack saw on the beach by sunlight was an old, overturned and charred chassis of a car that must have driven off the road above a thousand feet (three hundred, really; I have no choice now but to forgive him his embellishments once faced with it all, sans auto wreckage though and therefore not quite as gruesome) and slammed, top-down in the sand, its corpse causing him to gulp. And I was gulping, too, from the task before

me and the world unfurling in a heaving roar and sizzle, to record my stay there with camera wrecked, and gulping most of all from the sound of the waves on the beach beneath the Bixby Bridge, a sound that no camera could account for anyway.

I'm hesitant to describe it. I hid amidst a fallen mass of man-sized boulders. I scanned the sky for helicopters. After the breathy buildup, snap and boom, rumble roar, sizzle chatter came a chop, a regular, rhythmic metallic chop. I heard rotor blades, churning pistons, chopped air. The diaphragm expanded, the ocean inhaled a long sucking breath and spit it all back out to crash and tumble up the beach, to reach and to retract. She whispered mechanical warnings in the vacuum of release.

Military helicopters on maneuvers nearby, their engine signatures expanding and extending along the coast's many coves. I couldn't convince myself otherwise. My ears knew what they heard. Either that or a police helicopter had come to chase me off with bullhorn and sand storm boomings. I ducked into an elbow of boulder shade. You would have done the same. Each wave was chased by that manmade chop. I scanned the horizon like a prairie dog.

In the receding patch of relief I examined the paralyzed camera. My hands were numb around it. She wouldn't rewind the trek down. An entire roll from the belly of the creek and from beneath the bridge, extended and ready to be erased in the sun if I opened her up. I had extra batteries in my backpack. I had a book in which to write down my dilemma. I had everything I needed and didn't know it. I leaned toward leaving, toward retreat. I shaded my brow to see the sea and sky and cloudy line of offshore threat and glow and all things colliding in the Big Sur afternoon.

I wasn't there for me but for the future. The threat of anonymity, of no means to visually prove my day and night when all was said and done and most of all the sound of the waves very nearly chased me off the beach beneath the Bixby Bridge.

I turned to "SEA". I sought guidance.

These gentle tree pulp pages  
which've nothing to do  
with yr crash roar,  
    liar sea, ah,  
were made for rock  
tumble seabird digdown  
    footstep hollow weed  
move bedarvaling  
crash? Ah again?  
Wine is salt here?  
Tidal wave kitchen?  
Engines of Russia  
    in yr soft talk—

Where the beach tapers off at its southern end a chair-like outcropping juts into the water line. I sat atop this perch to watch it come in. I squirmed with journal in lap as though my plight were real, as though my dead camera signified something greater than depleted batteries and coincidence. I felt some kind of literary circumstances at work; look at how I suffered. Foam sprayed my feet and shins as a sheet came in. I was afraid no one else would see it. I was afraid to write it down.

On the throne-like outcropping in the mounting foam and churn I declared immeasurable falsehood in my book with words. Who was I to call it a throne and place myself upon it as though I wasn't just a passing flea, a mortal speck of fleeting vanity? The ocean crashed and hissed, chattering Flee, you unknown thing! and the mortal stench ye' bring!

I begged genuine forgiveness from the faceless winds and laughing surf and most of all from everyone I was ripping off. I felt my insignificance, my funny isolation. I ran back to my pack.

Open camera—why not—revealed the magic roll of me in Bixby Creek had never even loaded. My father's camera was perfectly in order and I had simply screwed up loading film from within the water.

Finally free to be obliterated by the waves and disappear I took pictures with camera reinstated. As the sun declined its glare would come in low and sharp over the water, filling in the tubes and troughs with dark, distinct shadow. Perfect contrast—I was granted a waning glimpse.

While backpedaling in the sand, as a white sheet slipped over my arches and toes, I felt eyes upon me. I was being watched from the water, where the big swells grew. It looked at first as I tried to focus like a floating, bobbing corpse; a dark, dull gray face, vacant eyes. The world inhaled. I froze as you might to get a dog's attention, then took off up the beach. The dark head dipped under. Breakers thundered in a roiling line as I ran. When I stopped at the creek, hopping on my toes to see over the swells the seal came up. He had followed me. We watched each other. He rose and dipped. I hopped.

When I scuffed backward down the beach again, enamored with my little friend and glad to have some company down there I saw the top corner of tan van disappear onto the bridge above. It emerged briefly, north of the bridge then sunk beneath my line of sight at the highway's turnaround. The seal was gone when I turned to tell him we were not alone, that Ben was up there and he should hide. I imagined the shadow of a

killer whale in the dark face of a wave, shivering at the image of an orca beaching itself to snag me. I backed up to my rocky seat in the foam and waved my arms for Ben when his form unmistakably appeared over the out-swung northern ridge. He took a picture of me tiny and alone down there. I would have been able to prove it either way. Repeatedly my folly was revealed. Buildup, boom and smack; the gears of interference grinding in my ears between each blow.

There was a moment—after coming clean with the world—when my bliss was interrupted. I had ventured up the beach toward the northern, rocky end. There was a sandy shelf set into the cliff just past the creek, a protected little alcove. When I passed this spot a man and his dog looked up. They had quietly set themselves up with blanket and book and small little cooler lunch without me knowing. They scared me back between the boulders where I'd stashed my pack. He was a resident of this canyon, no doubt, down here to enjoy the private fruits of his beach. I hid again and also later when a small family also made their way down to the water, dipping their infant's feet in the creek's little delta. I ducked from the promise of detection. A helicopter threatened behind my back. Did they hear what I heard? Did it make sense to them?

In my rocky fold of shelter I ate canned tuna in a sourdough baguette. California sourdough is actually sour. I unscrewed my wine and swigged to wash it down—and ah, what antiseptic mouthwash. I was thankful for the wincing juice. I forced down a bit and waited out the visitors. I read "SEA" again in a boulder's damp shadow. As I finished the twenty six-page poem the beach had become mine again. When I read its appending date I realized none of it had ever been mine in the first place.

21 August 1960  
Pacific Ocean at Big Sur  
California

This was August 20, 2000. Forty years ago to the night Jack Kerouac completed his work on the beach. For three weeks he had spent whole nights in his fisherman's outfit with lantern and writing pad, seated and anonymous against the ocean's onslaught. In a short while he'd be on his way down to the water, maybe whistling until he crossed beneath the suggestion of giant bridge in the fog and howling wind, shut up and silent when faced with it all even on his last night. In the morning he'd finish his last lines and sign off, eager to escape back to the city rot and fermentation he'd left behind while hallucinating to the sound of the Earth's machinery. The choppy dissonance we heard was the same. What right had I to claim even partial ownership? I didn't have a damn thing to do with Jack Kerouac. His work was immune to my flounderings. Mine was forever informed by his.

The waves beneath the Bixby Bridge slapped me in my face. I basked in the beautiful sting.

The sun fell behind the perpetual, offshore cloud line. The wind picked up and sung in my port jug's mouth. The tide licked land a little farther up. I could taste the dying day in the recesses of my mouth, back behind my molars where I'd never tasted anything before. It had a texture.

I was coming to terms with the waves and what they did to my mind when the world took its last swing. An attack helicopter, an Apache, I think, appeared over the water in the southern sky. It flew nose down like a dog across my cliff-framed view. I coughed up port. It seared and I laughed tears.

I left Bixby Canyon as the sun plunged. I had what I needed to stay in wool blanket and wine. To tempt some overnight disaster, to tease the tides with my sleeping form in the sand, to force some kind of vain, derivative vision on that place. My somber stroll on the dirt road, out the tall corral gate I hadn't expected despite what I'd read, closing it quietly behind me, over the babbling creek by simple arc of bridge, then up the rise of canyon wall and bluff in coastal twilight was a choice. There was no right or wrong or other way for it to end. I passed Ti Jean—Jack's francophone, fragile name for himself—on his last walk down to the water alone.

I sat softly on a flat stone beside the bridge's white concrete and congratulated myself for a job well done. In my brilliant ineptitude and eternally doomed folly I'd forgotten that two summers prior, in that same midnight shift gas station in southwest Florida where I'd first read *Big Sur* and dreamt of Jack's coast, I'd also read a biography about Kerouac that names this secret canyon. I had known the name of this place all along without knowing it. And there I was, having proudly crunched back up the canyon's dirt road when all was said and done breathing deep, drunken sea-level gulps of iodized air, happy with myself for having found the spot and spent my day there.

I sat on a broad rock at the inside lip of the bridge in the still night for about an hour, the only commotion from beneath the bridge in faint bursts of salty crash. I drained my jug.

Even before Ben pulled off the road I heard his music coming down the bridge. He had changed the album in my absence. I don't remember what to. My head was full of waves.

"Sorry, dude," Ben said when I pulled myself into shotgun, his smile lit by dashboard glow. "I had to switch that fucking CD." He was softly cheerful and maybe apologetic, glowing.

We floated across the bridge with her windows down. The van's cabin buzzed. Wind barely flicked us. Ben asked me about my day. I didn't know what to say so he told me about his. He'd gone back to that country store for something, and had sort of happened upon some hemp-wearing kids our age out back. There was a campground back there. In profile his big cheek crept up beneath a narrow eye. He'd lucked into a drum circle after driving by the bridge to check up on me. He'd spent the day banging away with his hippy brethren in cross-legged bliss. They'd welcomed him in, fed him hash and hung out with the big man all afternoon. I didn't believe a word of his story but we smiled nonetheless and it didn't matter what I believed anyway. It's all stories. We confess and believe what we choose.