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The Failures of Ishmael Wolffer

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THE FAILURES OF ISHMAEL WOLFFER

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages & Literature
of Bard College

by
Roland Obedin-Schwartz

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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*to my parents
for encouraging me to roam*

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THE FAILURES OF ISHMAEL WOLFFER

– *by* –

Roland Obedin-Schwartz

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I have striven to be Thine, more than to be this world's, or mine own.
Yet this is nothing; I leave eternity to Thee;
for what is man that he should live out the lifetime of his God?
Moby Dick

And with what comes, a whole tangle of confused memories arises, hanging from it like wet seaweed on a sunken boat. Lives that you would never have known about bob to the surface and mingle with what really happened, and drive out a past that you thought you knew: for in what rises there is a new, rested strength, while what was always there is tired out from too much remembrance So, here and there on my blanket, lost feelings out of my childhood lie and are like new. All the lost fears are here again.
The Notebooks Malte Laurids Brigge
(trans. Stephen Mitchell)

– There's a depression on, you know?
– Eh, there's always a depression on.
The Sting

I

STUMBLING FOR LIGHT

– 1 –

The rustle could signify anything: a newspaper discarded, a roll of bills, leaves under thumb, crisp and untouched – it quiets as I smooth it out over the wood desk. Fibrous, speckled and lined, blank only from a distance, my fingers map the ground flakes of brown and yellow, churned remains of unnumbered papers that came before it. It beckons to be marred.

Heavy in hand, my pencil readies to strike, sloughing its carbon flecks so they may adhere and build up the line. These are lessons my father taught me. I can see his face, full of color dappling into cold white, made of lines not drawn but etched so deeply they grow him past his age, every line dragging my gaze into the judging, pale green orbs of his eyes, watching me from a distance. Mom's laughs press through the door, bounding from upstairs, and in response I whip my hand down, the line forming a crescent, the crescent a jaw.

They clatter down the stairs. Slicing up, I shape the cheek, lift the pencil to carve the lip and the daub of shadow above. Dad shouts, not quite words, and my hand jerks a rude scar at the top of the nose. I form it into the beginning of an eyebrow. The shade beneath will form the eye. Wailing. A door slams, volleys the rage back. The sounds enlarge one another, bursting into the room to furrow into me. His eye is too crude to be an almond but the pencil forms it in expectation of form. I'm not being specific, not drawing his eye, just an eye – it will not capture if it's undecided.

The house has gone silent, its sounds fading into the dust. The shapes are all there, so I'll have to examine the whole: it's not his face. The paper rips away, crinkling in my hands. This sound means only one thing. It falls into the pile of crushed paper and I finger the next sheet. I

wish there were a noise now, so I wouldn't have to work alone.

Come on, Irv, stop wasting time.

The dash read 29 degrees and cold seeped through the glass membrane barely protecting the hesitant body inside. Roving currents of bitter cold mixed with the car's dank reserves, invisible streams buttressing the cocoon, sidling up to his hands and then down and away so that Irving Plainer rocked in idleness. He grabbed at the bottle in the well of the passenger seat, a tequila he was partial to and almost sure Ishmael wouldn't know. He thumbed the price tag before reluctantly removed it. That would be too much, he thought, gazing out at the series of dark, jutting boxes and the blank field around. Jet black in the night, the shapes melted into the sky, flattening the stars into the glimmering backdrop of a miserably dark painting. Ishmael Wolffer's studio: once a slaughterhouse, Ish had ripped its ribs out, fashioned it with gashing slabs of concrete and stuffed it full of stretched canvas.

Feeling with his fingers, eyes fixed on the pulling black, Irving searched for the flask of hundred-proof whisky he kept under the seat. Like sucking a warm spoon, Irving let it gurgle in the back of his throat before swallowing; he felt the dull fire slip down and a pleasant, groggy tingle slink its way up. He sucked his teeth then shoved the door open; wind sliced out of the blank at Irving as he shot toward the fallen obelisk that served as an entryway to the sanctum. Dark, lit sparingly by small, circular lights implanted in the walls, the tube of hallway seemed a long canal inside a body waiting to extrude.

"Ish?" he called out, letting the word spread and lose itself. No answer. Typical. Asshole could have the decency of springing for some lights with a little more juice in them, at least, but

he supposed it didn't really matter: Irving was the only person who even saw this much. That he saw more was a dubious privilege. Bottle in hand, Irving proceeded. There was just one door, nestled in the dank shadows at the end of the hall. His hand reached the doorknob, a rough hunk of mahogany that emerged from the steel of the door. "Yo ho, Ish? I brought tequila!" He raised the bottle and sloshed it around.

Not a sound. Irving yanked open the door: a single light in the center of the room pallidly yellowed the massive space. Probably working on the Big One, Ishmael's years-old pet project, the one he wanted to be remembered by. All it did was define the studio: everything pointed to it, everything else was some shadow that defected to its glory. He was making something great by insisting on it every second. Who knew if it was any good? Some rich something would buy it up anyway, hang it in their living room and brag to their friends of their providence in acquiring, just somehow, darling, a real Wolffer. Irving would admit the piece was incredible or that it might be someday, but its creation passed beyond the bounds of obsession and seemed to grow on confusion and fear as much as talent. It made Irving sick just looking at it.

Licking the palimpsest of whisky off his lip, Irving snuck toward the thin edifice, hiding behind the stacks of canvas that surrounded it; he hated feeling like a moth scampering towards light, but relished the possibility of surprising his friend. The space was almost completely silent. A hum from the fridge, a buzz from the single light, a growl from the heater; all else waited silently. Irving peeked around the corner of the canvas.

The lamp streaked down the painting, blowing away all colors in its apex. As the light's glow tapered, individual shades started to bleed out of the seemingly black background, cloudy grays and purples and touches of ghostly white. Irving followed the light down the canvas to the

ground in front, where a lump stretched out. Big, about as big as a person; as Irving took a timid step forward he noticed a glinting black liquid pooling outward from the top of the lump.

Another step: the lump wore pants. A body. Irving stopped, felt the bottle come loose in his hand and fall against the stone. It made no noise – everything had gone mute. On its side, still whole, it rolled toward the canvas, stopped as it ran up against the small of its back.

The body angled away from him, facing the canvas. An arm extended upwards out from the head leading to a shape just out of the lamp's beam. Irving delicately stooped to check what the shape might be, careful to avoid looking at or getting too close to the liquid. It glinted and Irving knew what it was. Oh god. Oh god, Ish. His head wobbled.

Maybe it's the whisky.

It's definitely the whisky.

He collapsed into a chair Ish kept nearby. The castors rolled back a few feet so the whole scene could play out before him: The body arranged before the canvas like an offering; the absence of paints nearby, or jar of brushes, or glass of vodka or cold sandwich; no note; just a shock of light and the body. Ish.

It's not him. It can't be. You didn't look at the face. Maybe it's something else. "Ishmael?" What do you do? "Oh god, Ish."

Irving stood, still gripping the chair's arm, but its wheels scrabbled and he was sent rushing off, barely stopping mere inches from the body; impulse guided his eyes up to the painting. Streaks of red rolled down its thick face, a few still crawling down: the blood was fresh. Irving gagged, whipping toward the cold floor. Not vomit, not yet. He could feel the painting watching him, prickling at his neck, asking him to get close.

Okay, it's fine. Just make sure you know what's happened. Everything is fine. Irving leaned over to examine the face. It wasn't a face anymore. Chunks frothed over the top of the head and everything below had warped, pulled apart from the single, furious attack, but an eye stabbed out from the mercifully inky shadow. Its pale green shine Irving had only ever seen on one person. Okay, it's Ish. That's fine. Everything's fine.

He stepped back, bent down and picked up the bottle of tequila. At his touch some crack must have given in to its fall and the bottle shattered in his hands an inch off the ground, staining Irving's shoes and the body's pants, seeping underneath and around them. "I really could have used a drink," Irving laughed.

A little tequila had been cupped in the bottle's neck, probably a shot's worth. Irving ran his fingers over the sharp glass, then held it overhead and the drink poured down. God it's a good one. Ish'll love it.

They watch from the porch as I shove the last bag into the trunk, crossing their arms tightly as if to hold together. The car fills quickly; Homework's stocked me with weed and I've already taken liberty with the parents' liquor; I've left some clothes in the house, but there's little I have much use or desire for not nestled in the blue station wagon. An endless waste of a summer, the parading misery of parents sinking into middle-aged depression: if Dad wasn't on his boat or off in his studio he chased Mom through the house, demanding that she put her drink down – endless, gruesome summer. But Madeline's waiting at school. I'm gonna fuck her brains sideways.

Cyrus? She's doing this little wave. Dad seems to have deferred control, and is looking at

the trees. I trudge back.

Yeah, Mom?

Come here, Cyrus.

She brings me in for a hug, but she's weak these days, and shudders as she grips my back.

She sniffles. Shit. Don't cry, Margaret. Don't you dare.

Dad pats me on the back. Have a good semester, okay? Keep to your work.

Yeah, sure. Big ideas for the new project, Dad.

He smiles, looks out at the trees again. Mom lets me go and I watch as his eyes come back to me from a great distance. Make sure not to drop off on your other work though, okay, Cyrus? It's important.

I know, Dad.

Let us know if you forget anything and need us to send it, okay?

Sure, Dad.

They're going to watch me until I drive away. I hate when they do this. Well, bye guys.

Bye honey!

Bye, son. Be good.

Yeah, Dad, I say, walking to my car.

We love you! She says. I wave back at them, walk around to the driver's door, and step inside. The door slams and I exhale, savoring the quiet.

How could Cyrus describe the black of the box? A typhoon pulling in all around it: color, the forms of things, softness. So hard, the box, reflective like an ocean but not rich, without

treasures, hiding forever gone secrets.

Mom squeezed his hand through their gloves as it sank into the ground. No wind. Cyrus wished he could explain the black of it because he knew it would explain it all. It sank beneath the upturned earth and she let go of his hand. Under her sunglasses he could almost make out an eye, but she turned and the glasses reflected white light and another empty blackness. He waited to cry or scream, but nothing mustered. Everything had been taken away. Dammit, Dad.

– 2 –

He tacks up his work, five drawings on sketch paper. As a rule, Freshmen aren't allowed in this class – if I were him, I'd be sweating.

He sits, this kid, Ishmael Wolffer, and we all step up, hunting for fresh meat. This part's always silent because you can't risk being wrong about it yet. Most look away quickly; kid'll be eaten alive. I look. Raw, ultra-minimal sketches, impeccably thought out – that's immediately clear – the lines are deliberate, the pencil thickness instinctual. In one of them a dancer tiptoes up a rock. In another, a crumbling lighthouse fades into an encroaching bank of fog. I've never seen anything quite like it. How'd this asshole do it? My god.

The kid's looking at me, no expression on his face. My god? he says.

I shrug. What do you mean?

You said my god just now. What do you mean?

I shrug again, return to my seat. I didn't realize I had spoken aloud.

Someone knocking. Always someone knocking. Irving hid the bottle of rye in his desk. “Come in,” he grumbled. The door creaked, revealing a pair of, thick glasses wrapped around a gray face the shape of a lightbulb. “Yes, Norton?”

“Sorry to disturb you, Mr Plainer, but there's a problem with one of the inkers. It's sending out too much black and it's bleeding onto the other colors.”

“And, Norton?”

“Well, uhm. Well, Mr Plainer, we don't know what to do, and we were hoping you could come look at it.”

Irving stared at the man sniveling by the door. He used to kind of like Norton, back when he would walk the floors and watch the production, back when he used the machines himself. Now he hated Norton, his stupid glasses, his sniveling. “I'll be right there, just give me a minute, okay?”

“Yes sir, thank you Mr Plainer. Sorry to disturb you with this.”

“Right.” Norton crawled from the door, closing it as gently as his pathetic fingers would allow. Irving pulled a bottle of rye from his desk and poured himself a half mugful. It poured it down smoothly and when he finished, shuddering through the ecstatic, burning second when his brain shut up, sucked his teeth, and tossed the bottle and glass back in the desk before standing up. He threw on an ink-stained cardigan and strolled as best he could into the screening room. Norton stood by the black inker next to Brad Eames, the cousin of one of the company's higher-ups and now a useless intern. Irving often debated whether or not it was worth his job to see the kid get caught in a machine and fly into bits and pieces. “So, Nort, whadda we got?” Irving quenched a small belch, leaning up against an inker while he glared as authoritatively as

possible.

“Well, Mr Plainer, it's as I told you upstairs. Brad and I've turned off this ink and – ”

“So we're behind schedule then, Nort?” Had he ever used the nickname before? Not sure.

Norton took off his glasses, nervously exhaled onto them but, unable to fog the whole rim, tweaked in pain before squeaking “yes, yes Mr Plainer, we're behind schedule but the shirts were coming out wrong and I – ”

“I understand, Nort,” Irving roughly palmed Norton's shoulder. “You made the right decision. Both of you,” he prodded Brad in the chest.

“Please, sir, I would rather – ”

“Please? You would rather?” Norton squirmed. “What's the big deal, Braddie? What's getting your panties in a knot?”

“My panties are certainly not in a knot, sir,” he put a strange, unearned condescension on his words as if they were not only better, but more lovely than the rest of theirs. Slap him. Teach him a lesson, Irv. “But I do not appreciate your tone. I'm putting in my time, Mr Plainer, and I – ”

“You what? You put in your time to do what? To slow down production? To get on your high horse, you twerp, and talk this way to your boss? Who's writing you a fucking recommendation, huh?” Hands on his hips, he advanced towards Brad. Bite his head off, the little twerp. The shit. He leered over the intern, watching Norton writhe nervously out of harm's way. “Okay, Mr Eames, I think you have something you want to say to me, am I right? Go ahead, silver-spoon. I've been dealing with you my whole life, what's another fucking day of it, right? What makes you so special?”

“I'm not drunk right now, sir.”

Norton gasped. A sly smile crept from Irving's mouth. "You've worked here a few months now, right Brad? So what's wrong with this machine right now? I'm clearly too drunk to figure it out, so, you self righteous little shit, tell me what's wrong with this machine."

"I don't know, Mr Plainer. That's why we called you."

Irving laughed. "That's right, Eames. That's why I like you, you shit. You know what's up. Well, I guess," Irving walked over to the machine, turned down one knob, turned up another, and flipped the power back on. "You don't really know much of anything. You're what, nineteen maybe? That's cute. When I was nineteen I was making art. What do you have to say to that, you little fuck?"

"I'd say that you're now probably forty and working at a manager of a dying silk-screening store, sir. Have a good life." Brad strutted past Norton and Irving towards the exit. "Goodbye, Norton! It was nice working with you!" he called, climbing the steps back to the outer world.

"Kid doesn't know a thing, does he?" Irving slapped Norton in the back.

"Absolutely, Mr Plainer, sir. Not a thing. Hey, you got the machine working again!"

They were holding hands, weren't they. Were they? The image sped by too quickly, some blurred abstraction, but her laugh coiled through Cyrus' mind – lilting, haughty, happy – and punctured his fragile ego. Madeline was holding hands with someone else and he made her laugh. No, it's fine, whatever, I didn't see it right. It's the campus center, it gets tight in the commissary, they probably just passed one another. It made sense. Nothing more than that, Cyrus told himself. Everything's fine.

He pushed through the spiced cold into the thick, sucking heat of the art building and up the beech stairs spiraling to the second floor. He never took the elevator because he enjoyed gasping for air by the time he got to the top, the hiccups between thought when his body functioned merely to rediscover its equilibrium and his eyes blurred in the corners where color sways into gray.

It was Sunday and the halls were quiet. All white walls and closed doors, each studio peppered with defining newspaper clippings and ironic, tasteless self-portraits of the seniors trapped inside. Cyrus pined for a studio, some place to be alone with his materials and silent to the rest of the world. Not today, though, but he had nowhere else he knew to go. He strode through the quiet white and made a right into one of the sculpture studios. High ceilinged with gaping cold windows, Cyrus ripped the scarf from his neck and let his jacket slump to the floor, cold needling his skin. It was nothing, Cyrus. It was just a flash, a non-thing.

He had been casting rusted tools in plaster, attempting to make them seem impeccable. Some he had painted, others he'd left untouched in the warm, still white of fresh plaster. Trays of them met his eyes as he reached for the molds, rows of perfect wrenches, scissors and hammers – beautiful, clean, functionless. Cyrus ran his hand over the copies, searching out each bend and ripple the mold had found during casting, the pebbling of time's apathy he couldn't scrape clean. It upset him that he had not been able to clean them perfectly but the subtle signs of age and imperfection, almost invisible to the eye, only discoverable by discerning fingers – the underside of the back pick on the hammer's head, the finger-guard of the scissors – now pleased him indescribably. Cyrus grabbed the molds of each, blue rubber cases, and brought them over to a long, plaster-laden table. He scraped off the dried blobs of wasted plaster, muttering “idiots” at

the mess. He was the only one here enough to really have ownership of the room and they sullied it for him. He placed the molds on the table then, on impulse, rushed to the windows.

The view allowed for a huge part of the center of campus and Cyrus often watched people scurry to and fro as he waited for the casts to dry. Today she was all he looked for – she looked so happy with him. Cyrus gasped as his forehead touched the glass, the cold searing his scalp. He could make out distended ground yards below, curved in on itself from the warp of the glass so it seemed a slide, a soft carriage to burrow into if he jumped. The sting reached his eyes, scratching at the outer orbs while digging deep into the corneas, filling the blacks with spears. One by one, he put his hands up against the window then held still as the cold networked from his head down through his neck and chest and out to his fingers, his joints, and the powdery cracks at his knuckles. She doesn't love me anymore. That's it, right? “Shit,” he breathed, dry mouth full of saliva, a drop slipping from the corner down towards the slab floor. She's just strained. We both are. It's cold, winter, things get tough. Right? But she's not leaving, cannot be leaving. She would not do that. She can't do that to me anyway, because of him, because of Dad she would never do that to me.

Ritual propelled his movements. He took a bucket from the materials closet, filled a third with water, and walked over to the giant table of plaster of paris in the corner. A mound of white powder had been exhumed from the ripped sack, pilling in taciturn clods from disuse. Cyrus stuck his hand into the white powder: cool, not cold, never hard nor unyielding. His hand slipped deeper into the sack and powder puffed into the air from the disturbance; freed briefly from gravity, each particle abstracted in the air, thinning in flutters before disappearing entirely.

His fingers closed in the mound. From above, Cyrus watched the silt rise, a great whale

hiding under the unfathomable deep just beyond the first clear layer of sea. His hand released, the mound ebbed. He squeezed again but something small pricked his finger and he wrenched his arm back, raining plaster down around him. The ground had caked white and streams of it rolled down his body. What stung? he thought, coughing. There was nothing in the plaster he could see. Probably some speck attached to someone's hand, someone being careless. Casting tourists.

Who made her laugh? Maybe she met him at a party. Must've talked to her before. It's been going on. He's made her laugh before. He mixed plaster into a water bucket, smoothing clumps between his fingers. The mixture ready, Cyrus shook up the bottle of mold release and sprayed the inner surfaces of the molds themselves. Each piece of rubber contained an imprint of half of its object centered in a pale blue frame. Many couldn't recognize the shape of the original in the cast, thinking it to be some new object, but Cyrus always recognized the original by its absence, easily filling in what seemed to be missing. Registration marks held the molds in place when he put them together, and a small hole at the top of each served as a funnel to fill the absences.

After letting the mold release dry, he paired the rubber shapes and clamped them together with masonite. Cyrus poured the mix into the hole of the first mold, the hammer, then moved onto the scissors and, finally, the wrench, his favorite – so many twists, such a delicate machine capable of so much power. There was just enough mix to fill all three; Cyrus had done this so many times the amounts had been ingrained through muscle memory. Everything about casting was concrete, solvable with objects, clearly discerned. Mistakes made sense. Spray the mold, or the plaster sticks: simple. Though he didn't know where the prick came from. “That was new,” he muttered, sweeping the fallen plaster.

The plaster cleaned, Cyrus dragged a seat from the wall, unfolded it, and set it up against the window. He was in no mood to study or pretend to study. No mood for music, either, and he was out of pot. He set himself up in front of the window and waited for her to pass by, holding his hand. Infallible proof she couldn't explain away. People scurried to and fro, trying to huddle past the cold, as if it could be escaped. No heat anywhere. The cold room swaddled him and he rocked in its peaceful solitude. Everything's fine. Everything's good, Cyrus, he told himself. Just let the casts dry and add them to the pile. She's not walking by, certainly not with any other guy. All is as it should be.

The light had changed. His mom used to tell him he stared too much. I'm just thinking, he would say. What about? I don't know. Nothing.

Cyrus looked for his phone to check the time but when he stood to reach it his leg gave beneath him and he slammed down against his elbow. "Goddamn it!" he screamed, tearing up at his bleating nerves, "fucking Christ, Cyrus!" Cyrus willed himself to squeeze the toes of his sleeping foot, loathing the bloated tingle as ants of blood crawled back to the forgotten limb. The afternoon sun hummed through the room in great swathes of orange, haloing the masonite-enclosed molds he now dragged himself towards, impatient for his leg to find itself, tired of the throbbing in his arm, the bleary ache in his eyes, the sand in his mouth, the boiling of his brain.

He wrenched the clamps loose of the hammer mold and yanked the rubber apart. The cast popped free to reveal a soft, curdling cheese. He released it from the cast and it slipped to the ground in a dull slosh, neither crackling nor bursting – some monstrous combination of sold and liquid. The mix was wrong. It was never wrong. You fucker. You didn't mix it right, didn't pay

attention, you threw the plaster everywhere and she's off with someone and you didn't mix the goddamn plaster correctly you shit you worthless vile you fuck you fuck you fuck –

He slammed his foot down against the cast, grabbed the others and rent them from their casings, he slammed the molds down against the finished plaster casts on his shelf, heard cracks and splinters but turned, grabbing his jacket and bag and shoving out the door, down the endless white, the stairs, out into the freeze. You shit you worthless those cracks were your fault it's all your fault, isn't it.

Isn't it. The cold slapped him clear. He looked towards the campus center, off towards his unseen dorm room. You didn't mix the plaster properly. You didn't make her laugh. “My fault,” he said. “I failed again.” He grinned, content with his new discovery. He could be fixed. He could end the repeated failings for once and for all. The crisp air passed through him in waves, each calmly tamping down any hesitation. It would be so easy. It would solve everything. She would be happy.

Irving stayed in bed as the voicemail played: “Mr Plainer, it's Mark Wethers. I just got off the phone with my partner, Walter Eames. He told me that you verbally and physically assaulted his son, Brad, who has been interning at your Silk'n'Go for the past month. This is unacceptable behavior, Mr Plainer, behavior that Mr Eames does not at all appreciate. Now, Irving, you know I think you're a good guy, and you have worked for us for a long time, but I cannot let you off the hook for this. Brad said he thought you might be drinking. I know that your friend passed recently, and I am sorry about that, but this behavior is not part of the Silk'n'Go image. I'm sorry, Irving, but we're going to have to let you go. You'll receive severance, of course. I'm sorry to do

it, Irving. I'm sure things will turn out for the best. Be –” Irving had stopped paying attention before the machine clicked off; the ceiling played him a show of shadows creeping their way around from the window. It could be worth painting. “I've been fired,” he teased the words out, letting them settle. He shoved out of bed and made himself a drink. “I've worked there for twenty years. Longer than Norton. I deserve to celebrate.” Irving had little else. He'd cultivated a life around the measly job and visits with Ish and now both were gone, wiped out in seconds. “Now I'm free,” he said vacantly. Suppose it's true, he thought. I guess it's great. Now I have time to do my own work. “I could draw something.”

He looked over at the pathetic corner of his living room he called a studio: four feet of smudged wall space and a few buckets worth of pens and brushes. He stood, ripped a sheet of paper from his drawing book, tacked it to the wall, and reached for a thick sketching pencil. “I can do this,” he said, rubbing his chin. He downed the rest of his drink, sucking his teeth. Come on, can't be that hard.

Attacking the sheet of paper, he slashed through its abdomen and up its ribs, letting his hand guide. Muscle formed out from the lines, a bicep extending into an arm then, suddenly, pulling down into a furious tangle of lead, bursting out into other appendages, limbs grabbing other limbs. It expanded, freed from logic. With manic exhilaration Irving grabbed a red pastel and started rubbing the pigment up against the brush of the paper, let it clot, grow thicker, the color muddying. Panting, Irving abandoned himself to the page. He made great spiracles, slashed them open. The paper was creasing back on itself so Irving leapt from it, making another work on the wall itself. Pen gnashed into corners, defining other shapes. The pen nibs grabbed the pigment of the pastel and dulled, lost their ability to write. Irving dropped them on the ground

and grabbed a different piece of coal. He made a final arc between the two sheets, stopped, and stepped back: a pile of color and mess. Of course. He calmly took the push pins from the wall and let the pages spiral to the floor. Empty glass in filthy hand, he made his way back towards the kitchen for another drink before throwing a piece of charcoal against the wall, rocketing black shards and dust out into the room.

“Fuck, Ish!” He wanted to crawl into a corner, or leap out the window of the apartment. “We need a drink, don't we. Don't worry, I got you covered this time. Bought more of that tequila.” As he walked to the liquor cabinet he started to cry, heavy tears rolling without permission. A tremor seized him and he grabbed the kitchen counter, legs ready to buckle. “Worthless, ha!” he wiped his hands on his sweat-stained shirt. “Presenting Irving Plainer!” he opened his arms to an invisible audience, “the pathetic, powerless piece of shit!” He filled his glass to the brim with tequila.

Why don't you find yourself a nice little gun. Something pussy, a little bitch of a gun. Something you could handle. Follow in his footsteps for once instead of just idolizing the asshole. He swallowed the glassful and poured himself another, finishing off the bottle, and raised it to examine the color of the amber but his eyes kept slipping. You know, he'll probably be remembered for this, too. No one will remember your corpse, though. Just a bag of ash to dump in the trash.

The second glass Irving took more time on, three swallows to get it all down. “Well done. You finished something.” His legs buckled and Irving fell, his jaw catching the counter, slamming it shut on the corner of his tongue. Iron erupted in his mouth, hot and furious, and Irving screamed blood. He yelped and moaned till his voice was hoarse and the drips were more

spit than red and his floor a gristly expanse of spats and smears, then, his self-hatred muddled into a wet, dank mess, waited to pass out.

Cyrus swallowed the rest of the bottle and stared at the panoply of colors before him: magentas, sea-foam blue, odd, pasty green, shaped dots mirroring the waxy florescent glow of the desk lamp. Cyrus grumbled, cracking the second bottle. The first glimmers of sun patched through the deep navy out his window, tufts of barely there peach stretching from the horizon to his cramped room. He reached for a pill, scattering others to the outreaches of his desk. He leaned back and let it fall into his throat, sipping from the new bottle of gin to lubricate its journey down into his liver. His senses were dulling. He slapped himself in the face. A blaze radiating to nothingness. He scooped a handful of colors and chucked them down with another acrid swig.

Working his way to his feet, Cyrus positioned himself in front of his mirror. The painted sky glowed behind him on the verge of crackling into day. As the light crept around the room it drew a line around Cyrus' head, forming a halo as his face became a silhouette. Like the casts, Cyrus thought, absent. "This is the moment," he said. He liked the finality of the words. But something was missing, some unexpected lack of feeling. I should be sad. I should be something, now at least. Can't I feel anything? His reflection stared him down, waiting for the mixture to effect. Cyrus slammed his fist into his jaw. His first punch. The pain was even more exquisite than the slap, but soon seemed like a mere extension of the earlier sting. Desperate for it to last Cyrus grabbed a rock from his desk, held it in his fist and punched again as hard as he could. The pain was exquisite. Then he slid into black and let that gnawing nothing overtake him.

– 3 –

Ishmael had worked at Silk 'n' Go for so long he was halfway out the door, badge on his jacket, before he realized he had nowhere to go. For three silent minutes he stood in the fourth floor hallway, briefcase slipping down his fingers, staring at the moulding where the wall hit split-pea carpet. If he melted, he thought, the landlord wouldn't even need to clean the mess.

Ask Ish what to do. It was what he always did in situations like these. But they were rarely this abrupt or this looming, and Ishmael could usually answer back. The image of the body lay like a rock in his skull, casting shadows of doubt in all directions. His tongue, still raw, ran over his teeth, anticipating the usual response to indecision. The briefcase crumpled to the carpet, bobbing Irving up from his long, empty stare. He trudged back inside the apartment, past the chunks of excited ambition – coal, a hunk of brilliant burnt-orange pastel – and the glass shards of dissolution that had followed, sticky with old tequila. He pulled the Kahlua from the cabinet, vodka from the freezer, and milk from the fridge; milk's always a good way to start off the day. Real breakfast of champions.

Half an hour later the last slivers of melting ice teased apart in the pool of milky white russian, glass perspiring onto sketching paper. Irving was pretty sure the moulding in his apartment was different from the moulding in the hallway. No, definitely sure. Who would ever hear this great realization? There's absolutely no one. Well, other than the remaining Wolffers, but they would never deign to see you. Mary probably doesn't even remember you anymore, Irv.

He could see her with warm, crystalline clarity: angry and flustered, with that bead of sweat that never failed to slink down her hair whenever she lost control of a situation. He couldn't picture her now, couldn't imagine that she'd changed at all. And there was no way he could just drive over.

Give her the gun, Irv. She'd want to see it.

“Yeah, right,” Irving sputtered, but swallowed the rest of the watery russian and hurried to the worn hat box his reliably dirty friend, Officer Frank Smildy, had slipped the gun into. The box lid was tight, so it took more work than it should have to pull it off, but the wait still never quite gave Irving enough time to ready himself for the disappointment of what was inside. Pointlessly frightening, yet every time Irving opened the box, which he'd done at least twice a day since – every time, Irving bit his lip and peeled his eyes in grim expectation of *something*.

The glimmering black shape stared rudely up at him. Irving'd never owned a gun other than a half-broken bb rifle he'd found sticking out of a dumpster when he was sixteen. Freshman year of college he spent days pocking holes in his sculptures, endlessly proud of how little his teachers understood it, and how sexy it made him feel next to the other fine arts majors. This gun was different, though; heavier despite its size, capable of true pain. God damn you Ish.

Sometime during the few seconds it took Irving to glance over the gun he'd decided to make the trip to the Wolffers' house. As an idea it made no real sense, but he had no others so it would have to do. He scanned the apartment for other things he might need on the trip, pulled out a worn canvas duffle, dropped in all three of his shirts and his thick wool sweater, and kicked the duffle towards his drawers to loot the underwear. In a few minutes Irving had compiled most of his clothes, a few relatively full bottles, the rest of his cigarettes and a notepad. He couldn't think

of anything else in the apartment he would ever need again.

He spotted the painting Ishmael had given to him years ago as an apology for a night of cruel drunkenness. Irving had never thought about selling or hanging it. He had left the thing half-engulfed by its packaging, accumulating dust in the corner near the bathroom. Leave it. Doesn't mean a damn thing. For the second time that day he walked out the door, satisfied by having a destination in mind. He strode with purpose. He even felt, as he stepped into his car, hopeful. Almost hopeful, at least.

I slap the alarm silent before the sounds furrow into her sleeping skull. Her hair fans up my chest and neck, nose nestled against my navel. She smells good in the morning, like a paper bag filled with lemons, and it mixes nicely with my sweat.

Alarm goes off at 9. Meeting Ish at 11. Let her sleep another half-hour. Maybe she'll wake up and want sex. Never know with freshman though. Suddenly shy when the sun's out.

She buries her head deeper into my stomach. Is she waking up, or dreaming further? Either way, my throat lumps. I hope Ish approves, I really do. Sometimes even freshmen can surprise you with how deep they sink in. How much you can care about them, want them to approve. I can't wait to hear her voice again. I could lay here all day.

11:30. Ah, well. She did want sex after all, then a shower, breakfast. I'm not a complainer. Ish, brushing ash from the sleeve of a scratchy leather jacket, greets us with an annoyed smile. I know, I know, we're late. But look, I bring blame and proof! I hold up her hand in mine and she giggles, hair swishing, long fingers conceded into mine.

'Bout time, Plain, wouldn't want to miss this. He gives her a slight bow. Cigarette? He asks, closing the last few feet between us. He knows my answer so he must be asking her. Does she smoke? She nods. Guess she does – never smelled it on her. He beats me to his lighter and cups the flame for Mary to light it, watching her eyes close and she inhales the smoldering tip. You must be Mary, he says.

She exhales away from his face into mine. Nice to meet you, Ishmael Wolffer. I've heard a lot about you.

Terrible things, I'm sure.

She grins at me, then, back to him. It's decidedly mixed. I roll my jaw and inhale. Oh, fun, we're all being coy. Freshmen.

Irving lived less than an hour from Austel Flats, the Wolffers' home town, because he never had the heart or courage to move that far from them. Built in the seventies by a plastics millionaire out of the decrepit remains of a lost shanty-town ten minutes from the highway, it meant to be the liberal retreat for artists weary of New York. The first wave of California-inspired yogi shops and incense burners decomposed within years, leaving cheap land and a lot of nice development for wise investors to grab at, and by the late eighties Austel Flats had become a bastardized Massachusetts town, a New England picture book with veins of artistic idealism and squalor.

As he drove through the store-packed main street, down the half-block of apartment houses that looked identical to Irving's own and up the slow hill into the forested jumble of tasteful, dull country houses the Wolffers had lived in since Cyrus turned five, Irving found

himself amazed by the light on the familiar scenes around him. The last time he had spent time with the entire family was before they moved, and all subsequent visits with Ish, when they weren't at his studio, came at night when the rest of the family was supposedly asleep. The beauty of the town undermined his buffer of readiness, and as he neared the house his discomfort with the idea grew, and he saw himself as lecherous, crude. She might even call the cops.

Irving parked at the base of their hill. A snow-lined dirt driveway teetered its way towards a motley jumble of typical house appendages, wood-paneled and white, a stone garden overbite. Once, Irving had come to the house during the day just to see it; he'd spent the whole day staring up at it from the road, watching leaves break from trees and gently slap against the grand dining room windows; watched Margaret lord over her house, wiping down the walls, pouring herself a drink at noon and sneaking a cigarette before Cyrus got back from school. He never told Ish about the cigarette or the drink, and always hoped Mary might give him credit for the gesture she'd never know.

Now, defying instinct, Irving pulled off the generous curb and up the hill, slow enough to warn whoever was inside but too fast to let them stop him. He parked behind the lime-green Saab that must have been Mary's, pulled off his wool sweater, checked to see that his shirt collar wasn't too wrinkled in the rearview mirror, then grabbed the hatbox from the passenger seat and leapt out of the car. He did not spot any movement inside the house as he stepped in front of the door.

It opened before he could reconsider. Small eyes took him in, set inside a face formless from misery, yet all the features were still there: the high cheekbones and the hard outline of her lips, the long eyelashes framing eyes now squinting at him. She recognized him immediately but

would not speak, did not let him in, just waited. “Hello, Mary. Long time. May I come in?”

He saw her hesitate, consider slamming the door in his face, before averting her eyes and letting him in. As the door closed behind them Irving's eyes scrambled to grow accustomed to the dark of the entryway. Cut through with shafts of white from the blind-free windows, the house seemed in limbo between life and death. Who died? Irving thought, holding his tongue from saying the joke out loud. Mary led Irving to the living room, a mass of elegant chairs surrounding a small coffee table, and motioned for him to sit. “Coffee?” she asked the room.

“Coffee would be great, thank you,” he said, though she'd already left for the kitchen.

The house skittered with noises: the staccato hum of the radiator and the occasional bellow of the boiler below; the creak of a foot on the panel wood floor; an ominous scratch as he shifted in his chair. Mary had silently disappeared into the kitchen. She might have stopped existing.

The soft wood of the armrest swayed into nubbly fabric. Framed images hung on the walls, leaned against the floor, winked at him from all directions. Few were Ishmael's, he noted – he knew his friend's work very well. Irving felt an incredible urge to explore but held himself fast to the chair. He couldn't help but congratulate himself on being there: it is polite of me, Irving thought. Good of me to be here. The right thing to do.

She's being polite, Irv, not you. You've only been allowed inside out of respect to Ish.

Confidence dashed by his sudden awareness of circumstance, Irving started to push himself from his seat but before he could gather the courage to leave a tea kettle cried and Mary walked back into the living room with a coffee press and two mugs. She set them down and, after a moment, herself. Irving noted that her eyes focused on his chair. It's Ishmael's chair, he

realized. She must think I'm trying to replace him. "Thank you. I ran out of the house this morning before I had a chance to brew any myself. Almost fell asleep on the road." Mary glanced at her watch; her eyes moved briefly from the chair to the press. Irving reached out to push it down.

"Not yet! It needs another minute to finish." Her words scraped at him and her face shot through with furious and brilliant animation before sinking back into itself. "So, how are you Irving?" Her words failed to fill out the time, and Irving could see her impatience before he even began to speak.

"Fine, I guess. Pretty quiet. Still trying to figure out the right material for a new series I'm working on."

"Oh."

"Yeah, a series of landscapes, sort of fantasy landscapes, but very expressionistic." She reached out and placed her palm on the press; Irving couldn't decide if it looked incredibly sexy or grimly utilitarian – both. Still so beautiful. "Mary –"

"Margaret. Please call me Margaret."

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry. Margaret, listen, I just wanted to say –"

"I forgot the milk," she stood, mug in hand, and left again for the kitchen. Irving watched her go before swiftly pulling out a flask of whisky and pouring a dram into his mug; he took a swig from the flask before pocketing it, stopped himself from sucking his teeth. The whisky stumbled immediately into his head – no food buffered him against its charms – and Irving felt small in the chair, sinking away into the fabric. Mary's presence loomed over him, and the house seemed too portentous to grow comfortable with. Even the mug seemed massive in his dainty

fingers. He thought about her hands wrapping around him, enveloping him. He thought about leaving.

She came back, mug in one hand, miniscule spout of milk in the other. She placed it by the coffee press, sat, and faced Irving. Neither said a word, and Irving took a great gulp from his mug. What happens now? “So you were there,” she said. It was not a question.

“There?”

“You found him. My husband.”

“Yes, yes I found him.”

“He invited you?” Irving always assumed Mary knew nothing about their continued friendship, yet never had considered how deeply it might betray Ishmael's memory, not to mention his own reputation, however weak, were she to find out. But he couldn't lie, not now.

“Yes,” he said quietly.

“What did it look like?”

“Ish?” She shuddered, nodded slightly. “It was dark. He was on the floor.”

“He shot himself. He had a gun.” She looked towards a small painting of Ish's leaning against the floor, a crumbling lighthouse against a soft sea. “I never knew he had a gun.”

Irving made a ceremony of putting down the mug, picking up the box, and, with slight hesitation, extending it towards her. “That's one of the reasons I'm here, actually. It seemed appropriate for you to have this.”

“Appropriate.” Mary deftly lifted the top off the box – always had great hands – and stared down at its contents. The house made its sounds. Irving waited. “Why would I want this?” she asked. She continued to stare down at the gun. “Why would you bring this to me?”

“I can take it, destroy it if you want. I just thought –” She closed the box and put it on the floor beside her, finished her coffee, and stared expectantly towards Irving. She looked ashen, a lack of life. In silence, he gazed back. What had he thought?

Speak to her, Irv. Say something.

“What will happen with his paintings?”

At the door, Mary practically shoved him out. He turned, “thank you for letting me in, Mary, ah, Margaret. Really. Let me know if there's anything I can do.”

“Sure.” Irving reached out for a hug, propelled by sudden desire and abandoning politeness, and wrapped clumsily around her slight body. She did not stop him, but did not hug him, either – just stood there and took it in. Did he feel a small jolt, an unwilling willingness?

“Goodbye, Margaret.” he stumbled out the door towards his car, heard the door practically slam behind him.

She smelled like whisky, too.

– 4 –

Dad shakes my shoulder to keep me awake. We're here, he says. It still looks like nighttime so I scrunch back against the seatbelt. It'll be sunrise in less than an hour. Come on, you'll be glad you woke up, I promise.

Are we there?

Yes, lazybones, we're there. Come on, let's get to the water.

Did we stop for McDonalds?

I brought food with me, let's go. He gets out of the car and it's cold, then knocks his finger against the glass. He looks so serious and if I don't come I might get in trouble. Mom already got in trouble last night, they were yelling. I don't want to be yelled at. I open the door. All right big guy, you ready to do some carrying? He drops a brown bag on my shoulder. The surface feels like it's wet but my hand's dry after touching it. What is this?

It's a bag, dummy.

I'm not a dummy!

Oh, that's right, you're a lazybones. He pushes around the hat on my head and makes my head scratchy. Come on, lazybones, lets go. We march into foggy, thick blue, the sounds of water splashing out of a tub getting louder and louder. The air stings my nose but I know that's the salt in the air from the water. Dad told me.

How much more?

Just past this little hill, big guy.

I am a big guy. I'm over seven. I beat Scott at checkers and I'm taller than Ben and Susan. And none of them have ever been on a boat. I told them I had already been on one, but that's okay because I knew that I was going on one, anyway. It was a calculation, is what Mr Lawrence says in math class. I calculated it. I'm tired, Dad!

Your body's not used to being awake this early. I promise, soon enough, you'll be wide awake. He sounds tired, too. Once Dad said that I protected him because I was so strong. I don't know what that means, but if I had to I would protect him as much as I could. But I think he was just making me feel better when my knee got scraped when I fell on the gravel after trying to

balance on the –

Dad? What's the thing that I was standing on when I fell and scraped my knee?

He huffs. A hedge, big guy.

A hedge. I was trying to balance on the hedge, and I fell and I scraped my knee.

We head downhill and I make out lots of boats – the water sounds further away now that I see it. Lights at the top of poles shines on the boats so we can see them: at least ten, all waiting next to a long, white walkway that goes over the water. I don't want to walk on it. It could be a trick, or it could collapse, and then we'd drown instantly because my big wet bag would pull me down in a second and Dad wouldn't save me because the bag was too big. Dad told me about drowning.

Dad steps onto the walkway; it creaks when he steps on it like it's about to break and I stop before the walkway and won't follow. After a few more steps he turns and looks at me and he has a big smile on his face. Hey we're close – Cyrus? What are you doing all the way over there? Don't stop now, look, the boat's right there!

I shake my head. He smiles, I think. It's hard to see his face clearly because he's far away from me, but I think he's smiling a big smile so that his entire face is smiling. It makes me feel safe, but also scared. Maybe he's tricking me. He walks back and the walkway creaks again. Hey guy, what's wrong? I shake my head. There's nothing to be afraid of.

I'm not afraid!

Well, then, there's no reason to stop now, right? Look, it's about to get light on the horizon, and then we'll miss the whole thing and then why'd we get up so early, right? Come on, I'll carry your bag.

I shake my head. I want to carry it. I take a step onto the walkway and it doesn't creak, so I take another. This time it creaks, but it doesn't move or break. Dad walks next to me, his hand on my back.

Look, it's that one right up ahead, okay? That white and blue one.

There's a ladder on the side of the boat. It sways but I know I'm safe because it's Dad's. I climb up. It's dark but I can tell that everything is shiny. It seems really clean, too, like his office. It's really nice, Dad! I call out.

Watch out! A bag flies over the railing and lands next to me, then the other two. He's really strong. A few seconds later he climbs up the ladder and looks me face to face. Let's use the engine to take her out to the open, okay? You wanna help me with that?

The cockpit of the boat is like a spaceship, with big levers that we push and pull. The wheel is really big, too, and Dad keeps turning it the wrong way but he says that's how it's supposed to work and we don't crash so I believe him.

Hey, it's six thirty, come on! He grabs my sleeve and pulls me to the front of the boat.

I don't see anything at first, just deep blue that goes out from the boat up to the sky above us, the blue that is almost black but not scary like black; The blue next to stars. A glow shines in the center and the blue becomes more blue, and the glow cuts through the sky straight ahead of us, then pink appears with yellowish puffs of cotton candy, mixing with the cut line that keeps getting brighter. I squeeze his hand and he squeezes back. The pink reflects off the water in rainbows, white and green and pink and yellow, and keeps folding into itself through silver threads. The sky above erupts like a volcano and gold bursts out from the line, slicing the blue in two with a sword of light, and this great fat glowing ball rises out of a cloud bursting orange and

puffy patches of yellow blue, and as it rises it glows brighter and brighter until it lights the water on fire, shooting out toward the boat, warming my skin. I gasp as the ball turns the whole world on, drawing mountains in the distance out of black shapes, and suddenly we are very small and the dark blue world is massive and textured like a painting, and shooting rays of color and light burn through the sky as the sun brings forth everything I could ever see.

I shiver. Dad squeezes my hand so hard it hurts. I look up to see if he's smiling but he's crying. I pull his arm. Why are you sad?

I'm not sad, Cyrus. I promise I'm not sad. He keeps looking out at the sky, so I look back with him. I think I know why he's crying but I cannot say.

At a rest stop an hour out of Austel Flats, Cyrus hunched over a footlong sub like it was a prisoner's stolen feast, ripping away at it in huge, unchewed swallows. He'd been constantly hungry the past week, a strange accompaniment to his evacuation that culminated the failed attempt, as if he could not refill what had been emptied from him. Whenever he thought about Dad he would get hungry, too, and would need to eat or the pain of the very fact of it, dad's death, final and inarguable, would crush him under its weight. It's as if his attempt and his father's death were connected, parallel, equal in weight; as if his biology saw some connection he couldn't quite grasp. Sometimes he wondered if his dad had ever thought about killing himself. He often seemed so miserable. Maybe he did, Cyrus would think, almost laughing. It would probably make more sense than a robbery. He couldn't imagine his father as a hero or a victim. It seemed pointless, his life being stolen away. Though Cyrus' own death had been stolen away from him, too, and the time he saw extending forward looked just as pointless.

“How old are you?” a voice asked out of the ether.

“Twenty.” Cyrus responded automatically. He realized someone had actually been talking to him and looked up: powder blue fanned out from her eyes and she stared down at him like he was a hunk of fool's gold.

“You look sad.”

He scoffed. “You have no idea.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” Her reply stung. She sat down across from him and watched him eat.

“Excuse me?” he muttered, “I'd rather be alone, please.” She grabbed a forgotten tomato slice hiding in his sandwich foil. He'd never seen her before. She smiled at him, cheeks crinkling – younger than Cyrus first assumed, probably his age. Cyrus grunted and returned to his sandwich, but ate daintily, trying to impress.

“You don't talk much, huh. Okay then, Mr Sad, meet me in the men's room in two minutes. And don't pretend this happens to you all the time and flake on me.” It was the first conversation he'd had in days. It was out of his conception: thrilling. He wadded the sandwich foil and followed her instructions, never once thinking of doing anything else.

The bathroom was empty except for a lonely whistling in the end stall. He walked up to it and cleared his throat. She opened the door and pulled him in, then, sitting back on the toilet seat, undid his belt. As she swallowed him her nostrils flared hot round his pelvis, warmth he had forgotten, and her hand crawled over his mouth to shut him up in case anyone came in. In that instant every thought he had rushed into his brain, meaning nothing, just slivers and figments that churned gobs of vapid feelings. At once in the moment and freed from obligation to it, he

basked in its immediacy, not cannibalizing it with questions, nor denying its power by retreating; as he came he pulled her hair and gazed up at the ceiling, eyes spotting, at peace for the first time in his sexual history. Then she kissed him, pushing her tongue into his mouth. Something comforting about tasting both of them, solidifying the moment.

“You live in Austel Flats?” He nodded. “Here. Only take it if you'll actually use it.” He took the paper and she smiled again in that crinkly way, then patted his chest and walked out the bathroom. Cyrus did not look at the number, but fingered the bumps it made on the other side of the paper again and again.

In the foyer Cyrus almost called out but decided instead to make his way to his room. The house was dark, musty; cobwebs of air clung to every surface and the spaces between – little had moved through the space in a long time.

The bedroom door creaked as it opened. The windows had been overlayed with curtains to suffocate the room, and when Cyrus flicked the lights a film of dust claimed every surface. The trash can was still full but the bed had been made, his mother's one Pyrrhic victory over parental destitution. He circled the room, fingering the dust and gazing down at the clutter as if it were a stranger's. He tried to remember why he didn't take the scattered books, why he took the ones he did. His hand grabbed a lonely pen cap; useless hunk of plastic, Cyrus thought. It slipped through his fingers onto the carpet. Flotsam surrounded an even stack of books on his desk. Admiring the well-planned pile, each book larger than the last descending to the wood, he gathered the desk's contents in his arms and sent them all hurtling to the floor. The clatter of noise swiftly wisped back into silence, bringing attention back to wheeze of his meek breath. A

container of ink had broken in the fall and spread over the floor. Cyrus dabbed at the stain with some dusty tissues, feeling his fingers dampen as the tissues absorbed the fluid. Pregnant with ink, he squeezed the pulp and watched the puddle grow back.

A deep, mossy odor, damp wood and sour, singed his nostrils as he entered the kitchen. Cans littered the counter and swarmed the trash. Empty bottles dotted the room while glasses lay sticky with margarita mix. A single fly fluttered over her roost, choosing a place to land. The only non-alcoholic items in the fridge were cartons of orange juice and milk; the juice tasted tangy and bitter but he finished it anyway, then found a candy bar in a drawer and chewed it as he looked through the cabinets. A can of spinach, two cans of tuna, a shelf of cans of beans. Cans and space. He opened another cabinet and a bottle of vodka fell out, smashing to the floor. Another spill, joyously spreading as it was freed of its container. A grunt came from upstairs, and a sudden shuffling.

“I’m back, Mom,” Cyrus called up.

Silence, then: “I’ll be down later, honey. I feel a little sick.” Sick, huh? He liked that he did not miss her. Empowering, maybe. At least some things in their right place.

Alone in his room, Cyrus undressed in front of the mirror. He ran his fingers through his shock of hair, shit brown and uncertain; his chest sagged slightly, as did his gut, the price of over-eating, lack of exercise, a stuttering metabolism. The layer of fat couldn’t hide his leanness – rather, it accentuated it, calling attention to his jutting collar bones and the hungry lip of his ribs. Hairs grew anemically, wisping without purpose.

He started to lower his jeans and stopped: nestled on each side of his groin was a small

puff of blue, markings of his bathroom tryst. He felt his heart beat as he grabbed himself; he'd not wanted to masturbate in weeks, not since the attempt. Cyrus had spent the past days outside of physicality, eating only by instinct – sensation made him queasy – so the sudden, groping desire to reenter the tangible world overwhelmed the actual desire to come. He fell back on his bed, panting, running fingers up and down his chest, around his nipples, through his hair. The need for physicality passed over him like a cloud, but he could remember that tranquil second and how potent it had been. He was happy he had her number, though he doubted he would use it. He shivered, making himself frown, then smile. Nothing else to do, Cyrus waited for sleep to come.

She's making pork chops. Mom's going to make me one, and make Dad one, too. She lays out ingredients on the table: the pork chops, which are pink and white and wrapped up in plastic so they look fat; little bottles of things, each a different color. What's that? I point to a bottle filled with red.

That's paprika, honey.

What's paprika?

She laughs. Paprika. It's red, see?

She lifts the bottle, dabs her finger in the red, and wipes my nose so my nose is red. Hey! I say. She laughs again and rubs my hair. She puts the bottle back with the others and opens up the pork from the wrapper. Her hands are long and thin and are really fast at picking up things. Each piece of the pork goes on a silver sheet and is rubbed with paper towel. I wonder what pork is. Dad said it was a pig, but it doesn't look like a pig to me. It looks sort of like chicken, but

chicken is shaped like a chicken. The pork should be shaped like a pig.

One by one, Mom opens each bottle and pours the colors on the pork. She puts on some of the red powder, and these green flakes, and extra olive oil, she says, and then she twists one of the bottles and these black chunks fall out and it makes this cracking sound like whatever is inside is being chewed like cereal. Then she looks up at me. She does not say anything, just looks. What is it Mom? She smiles, looks away. I scoot closer to her on the counter. When's Dad coming home? She goes to the sink to wash her hands. Her back hunches like when she's sad and wants to be alone.

He'll be home in time for dinner, honey.

Where is he?

She turns back towards me, comes over, and hugs my head. She rocks from side to side. It's warm. I reach my hands out and I hug her too. She kisses my forehead. I'm scared. Everything is dark and I close my eyes and am alone even though she holds me. I don't want to be alone. I don't want it.

Light shards scored through chinks in the window curtain; poured from a pitcher, the waking world filled him up. It took a minute to recognize where he was, despite knowing the fact of it – textures were different than he remembered. “I don't even know,” Cyrus said, surprising himself. Madeline wavered by his mind's eye, a passing glance of her hair as she leaned over him with a damp cloth, forcing him to sputter back to the world. His great shame, failing at that one easy, selfish act, some evil juncture of fate and pill chemistry and terrible luck. And forgetting she had a spare key to his room. He had already tired himself with the blunt irony that she had

saved his life.

“Honey?” a rapping at the door, bone smacking bone. “Cyrus, honey, are you awake? Cyrus? Would you like me to make breakfast?”

“There's no food in the house.”

Silence fortified the door, pushing the two Wolffers further apart. “Well, at least let me come in and see you.” He refused to answer. “Please, Cyrus. Or come out, come out so I can see you.” Another tap, rippling away, consumed, again, by silence. Cyrus willed himself into not caring, but made out the sound of resigned shuffling and was gripped tight by pity.

Opening the door he found himself staring at her back hunched over the kitchen counter. Her robe dripped off sagging bones, weary from use. “Let's go to the store, mom.” She let out a wrenching sigh, happy as a guffaw and twice as lonely. “I'll drive, okay?”

He knew that she counted to five before turning. “Okay, honey. Anything.”

On the ride to the store Cyrus couldn't help but glance down at the lost bramble of his mother. Curled into the seat, eyes bright and nervous, gripping her purse so hard the veins seemed ready to break free. At one point she opened her mouth but all that came out was a broken cluck. She reminded Cyrus of something dead, brought back to life by an electric shock that made her body harsh angles and released itself in moments of desperate anger. He pictured her poring over her history with a dusty microscope, searching for the moment magic passed her by. My mother the mad doctor; her family, me, her crude experiment.

Margaret Wolffer examined every item Cyrus put in the cart as if each contained some

vast riddle: she rolled her fingers up and down the sliced bread and prodded the veal steak package until the plastic tore and Cyrus had to hide it under another one.

In front of the wine aisle, she stopped. Cyrus watched from a distance, more curious to see what choice she would make than judge it. This morning was probably the longest she had gone without drinking in days. Cyrus almost wanted her to take a bottle, confirm the totality of her destitution. When she turned away and grabbed a tub of hummus instead, Cyrus blushed. They stared at one another's secret thoughts, each guilty of knowing what the other was thinking. Hummus, she mouthed. Cyrus nodded. Yes, hummus.

The trip animated her, and on the ride back she battered Cyrus with questions: "How were your classes going this semester? Are you still working at the studio? Do you have plans with your time off?" After so long absent from the role, playing mother must have been refreshing. She seemed to have forgotten, or was ignoring, that he'd been put on academic probation. That Dad was dead.

She let Cyrus carry in all the bags but wouldn't let him put them away, just shooed him to the counter while she set up the coffee machine. Cyrus was exhausted, angry: where was his thank you for driving her, his reward for getting her out of the house, for ripping the glass from her hand for the whole morning? You're welcome, Mother, he spat at her silently. You're welcome, he screamed. It's just what a son should do! "So, honey," she turned, smile ready. "How is your girlfriend these –"

"Over, Mom." Cyrus snapped.

"Oh," she said. She looked like a fish. "Would you like to talk about it?"

"No, Mom, I would not." She sucked his venom without complaint, but, he could see the

fraying fabric of her control and wanted to tear it away. “How is it your business, anyway?”

“I’m your mother!” Her ace, and it wavered.

“Jesus, Mom! What do you expect of me? Do I owe you something?” He pushed off from the table. He wanted to slap her, wound her in some way.

“Honey, I’m sorry.” Her words stopped him cold. She broke the arrow of anger tensed in him. He slumped. “Break-ups are hard,” she turned to the stove. “How would you like your eggs?” Lax, waiting until she could stop being the parent. He’d broken her already.

“However, Mom.”

She cracked them into the sizzling oil where they fluffed, unable to jump away. “You should go see your friends today, get out of the house. Enjoy your time off.”

He started a retort but reined himself in. “Don’t really have any.” He meant it; he’d isolated himself from his high school, from the whole of Austel Flats except his parents and, well, and Harrison.

“What about Harrison?” she asked the eggs. Cyrus said nothing. What about Harrison? He roamed in his pocket for his cell phone and his finger brushed against the scrap of paper and its bumps. She dropped the plate in front of him. One of the yolks had broke, spread onto the white.

In his room, Cyrus debated whether or not to call the number. He thought he could still smell her. After five minutes of pacing he called Harrison instead. On his way out Cyrus noticed a glass of orange juice perspiring on the counter. He reached to take a sip and his nostrils burned. Almost a whole morning. Almost.

Irving leaned back against the door of his car, feet stretched up against the other end of the back seat, cigarette limp against his lips; the position had been perfected over days of idle staring. Bitter spikes wormed through the slit windows looking for expanses of bare skin to strike, tapping away at the warmth barely encapsulated. His nose ran, mixing with the acrid streamer of smoke from the cigarette, keeping him nauseous enough to not get hungry. He kept a few energy bars in the glove compartment but none had been touched. Food was a separate event – this was about looking.

He'd grown accustomed to the house, wood slat, dark from years of rain and snow, its treasures hiding under a hobbled metal roof. A small porch no one used. Gaping windows kept uniformly blank, save those brief moments when a black wisp materialized, searching for escape from the cold building. Mary had a habit of exploring the world outside but refused to touch it herself. It baffled him that she didn't march up to his car, as he doubted the few sparse trees really hid him from view.

Kid's back now. And gone already, off exploring. Irving had a dream of running into Cyrus by accident, falling into talk of memories they had not actually shared, and then Cyrus would invite Irving over for dinner. When he didn't focus on it, the dream flourished, expanding out from chance encounter to his whole life, but the moment he paid attention to the dream it collapsed as if it could not bear the concentration of tangible life. He considered tailing Cyrus, but could see little value in the endeavor. Still, if it had to come to that...

The house lay silent. He'd been staring since ten, and his watch read past two. Time to

eat.

Irving chose the whaleman's breakfast from the menu and sat at the bar, drumming his fingers against the faux wood, its soft patter failing to drown out the noise of clanging forks and knives and the phlegmy grunts of bored office men on their lunch break. They knew him already at the Lighthouse Diner, knew the routine. The waitress hesitated as she came over – they knew him well. “Afternoon, Molly,” he said, making a point of leaning towards her name tag.

“Whaleman's breakfast for me today, extra toast, and two cups of coffee.”

“The coffee's refillable. You don't need two cups.”

“I want one cup full. Always. I don't want to see dregs, Molly. Okay?” She scribbled.

It seemed impossibly unfair that he could not get any closer to them. He deserved it, for his years service to Ish. He knew them so well. He meant no harm. The coffee arrived, two mugs, that off-white, milled pulp look, thick lips, tall. She poured the first cup and started the second before getting to the dregs. “Sorry, sir. Let me just get another batch for you, won't be a minute.”

How long will you wait for them, Irv? What will you do if it never happens?

The waitress came over and filled the mug. Irving smiled up at her, all teeth. She cringed. “I'll be right back with that whaleman for you.”

“Good. I'm starving.” He drank down the full cup and ran his finger over the bits of charred grounds. He couldn't think of any step after this, after connecting with the Wolffs. There was nothing else, and the immensity of this lack would be intolerable if he fell into it. He needed a cigarette.

Harrison Wheeler lived alone in his grandmother's modular home, working part-time as a bag boy at the local supermarket. Before closing, he had a window of about ten minutes when the cameras weren't manned and he could nab his groceries for the week plus a few packs of bic lighters – he loved removing their meek child safeties. An outcast by choice, he and Cyrus got along well. Other than the year and a half of silence after Harrison tried to kiss him, they were probably each other's closest friend. Now, waiting on the familiar slab steps, Cyrus wondered if coming over may have been a mistake, if he was opting out of something new for the comforts of laziness.

The door cracked, greeting Cyrus with heavy smoke, nutty and citric. “Oh, hey man!” it said. No choice left; he followed the smoke inside. Harrison melted back into one of his couches, motioning Cyrus to sit. All lounging surfaces, from the double lazy-boy by the TV to the sofas it faced, to the mattresses and futons sprawled and crumpled over every inch of floor space outside the four feet he divided off as the kitchen. Tapestries hung from the ceiling, posters squabbled for space on the walls. A coffee table sprouted out of a giant foam cushion in the center of the room, covered with any stoner's dream paraphernalia.

Since he was about sixteen Cyrus had loved smoking. Its illegality and secrecy, the way it used to make him feel; now he loved its consistency. Like all things, the drug changed as he grew accustomed, but he could always return to its warm, undemanding embrace. “Wolffer, haven't seen you since, well, not in a while.”

“I forgot you were at the funeral. You didn't have to come.” Harrison dropped nuggets into the grinder, each a blackberry, and crushed them between its steel teeth. “Thanks, though. For

coming and all.”

“Yeah, of course. Armed robbery, man, stupid way to go.”

“Yeah,” Cyrus replied, staring at the tapestry undulating through the air so he wouldn't have to see the pity on Harrison's face: across a milk-blue backdrop, yellow dots sparkled and popped like the sky in some technicolor fantasy. Since the attempt he had prohibited himself from taking any drugs, even coffee and aspirin. Substances had betrayed him, promising answers too readily then snatching them away. Needing to feel in its entirety seemed crucial after everything, but Cyrus had not felt anything at all, not until the rest-stop bathroom. He'd been a lack, neither depressed nor content nor willing to act; barren, clinging to vestiges. The blow job didn't fit. It seemed totally out of place.

“Greens, man. Enjoy.” Harrison held out the fresh bong, loaded with ice and cool to the touch. As he inhaled silky white strands clouded the glass chamber and, underneath its coolness, a warm finger played his lips, asking to come inside. The ember released its streamer of smoke when Cyrus pulled the slide, the smoke shooting like a hypodermic needle into the back of his brain, upwards, fanning out into his dark crevices. His lungs blew up hot and heaving and he let it out in rivers, letting it glide from his lips and shoot out his nostrils.

Numbness without numbness, a brain on pause – a tenderness whirled in the center of every system in his body, and Cyrus focused on spinning into the whirring cogs. He wanted to tell Harrison everything: how he found her with someone else, laughing; how he refused to speak and let it eat away at his insides until there was nothing left worth sustaining; how all he wanted was her and when she found him, unexpectedly alive in a pool of his own waste, she cut the cord and left him, saved and forgotten; how, finally, he became a misery, a silent, mocking failure,

emptied of everything, his life a crude joke forced upon his zombie spirit.

“That's some dank weed, Homework,” Cyrus giggled.

“I don't remember the last time someone called me Homework.”

“I dubbed you, ha. I dub thee!” Cyrus reached over and tapped Harrison on the shoulder.

“Like God, man. Dubbing.”

Cyrus nodded, yeah, like God.

Irving trudged, mystified, through the young adult section of the store, shying away from the explosions most toys seemed to be making. He had no idea what he was looking for, but figured a gift would be appropriate when he finally met Cyrus. However he met him. He picked up a robot, which writhed in his hand and pinched his skin.

Do you know what he likes, Irv?

“We haven't talked about it in a while, Ish.”

He's in college now. A grown-up. A wall of toys swords and guns lit up as they belched their tinny, crashing noises. Everything moved, played with itself.

He probably doesn't even play with toys anymore, Irv. That was a whole lifetime ago. He doesn't remember you.

“Might've talked about me with the kid.” Sure, he thought. He might have.

Curiosity pulled him there: in one corner on the second floor his father had spent

countless secret hours, locked away from wife and child. Across the hall from the office was the guest bedroom. One morning when he was eleven Mom snapped at him, and when he'd guiltily gone to be forgiven he'd seen the hastily made bed in the guest bedroom; snooping became habit; he learned that Dad sometimes wouldn't sleep in the house at all.

Cyrus pored over the door to the private office, waiting for some guiding sign. An instinctual sense of purpose. Tell me what to do, Door, he wanted to say. Having only seen the inside of the room in gasping glances, he did not know what to expect – he could not bear to touch the doorknob and find it unlocked. Its power lay in its mystery, the possibility that it held something he didn't know. His hand roamed over a knot in the wood, about the height of his forehead, a hole slowly boring. A slight crack at the bottom let out light, so faint it seemed as though something tried to block it coming through, or the light itself was dimmer on the other side.

He bent down to look at the doorknob, still careful not to touch it: a rod of pale, pinkish gold, highly polished, stuck out from the side of the door's navel. A small fingerprint marred one side as if someone had crudely grabbed at the knob and missed. Hard to imagine, because the knob itself was such a bulbous, carved chunk of rock: filmy white with waves of yellow and pink, toying with transparency, no less opaque than the door itself. Cyrus' eye kept losing the center of the artifact: an orb, perhaps an eye itself, indifferently gazing. Pushing against it revealed a void, a minute keyhole cawing against the pastels that made up the rest of the door. Cyrus hoped it would give into the pressure of his gaze and swing open or else be wiped from existence. He could not decide which fate he would prefer, but closed his eyes and cupped the doorknob in his hand. Cool to touch. He wrenched hard as he could. Nothing. “Goddamn it,” he

muttered, sweating.

Cyrus spent the afternoon through the evening in his room, packing and repacking his bong with Harrison's newest crop, picking up dusty souvenirs – high school poetry compilations, old comics, a collection of miniature toy gun keychains he collected for a week from the fifty cent ball machines at the pharmacy – and putting them wherever they seemed to fit. Cyrus the sandy beach, slowly thinning with each breath of the ebbing tide, delivering its flotsam, taking it away, leaving him with less and less to make up his time. With every hit, with every object, some half-memory tingled to being before pulling away, the tide teasing him with a mirage of truth. From time to time he heard his mother shuffle past his room to the kitchen to make herself a drink, slowing down while she probably whiffed the mossy stench of the pot. Two lonely pirate ships searching for their vices in the night, agreed to mutually pretend ignorance.

I'm just like her. It gave quiet comfort. Scariest of all, he thought, that our mutual shame comforts. But when he thought about his mother, he did not hate her – he just loved her and pitied them both for falling so deeply into shadow.

At the prow of the ship, we stand defiant against the building waves. Still by us, the sea extends flatly outward in every direction, but, somewhere underneath the dark cloud by the east, waves grow, becoming gnashing, rearing paws. The sea will eat my tiny body if I am not careful.

He puts his hand on my shoulder to help me stop shivering. Remember what I told you. I nod and say I do, but I do not remember. Here come the waves, he says. Remember.

The waves rise, swooping closer, black and blue, white, burning. One stands over us, its eye ripping at my skin. It is a beast I taste and hear and crumple against, but all I see is myself,

mirrored for an instant as the rushing wave stills, forming a glass sheet perpendicular to the great ocean.

He grips the railing so I do, too, but I know it will not help. Cupping our ship, the waves' jaws engulf us, the teeth crash, my hands slip off the railing, the water pulls me away but he goes on holding – then all is black, rushing, silent.

Cyrus woke hacking as if his entire body gone dry, then lay still in the bed to orient back to room. While sleeping he had knocked his bong off the dresser and the foul water had leisurely irrigated the carpet, and when he blindly reached to pick it up only half came away in his hand; it caught on on his thumb as it slid away, slicing it open; he cried out and smashed the rest of the glass with his heel.

Glimmers winked out from the delicate swoop of each fragment. Lowering until his nose nibbled a filament, he let his eyes lose focus on the shards until they seemed brilliant balls of color. He thought about falling on the glass, slashing his face all to ribbons. His thumb throbbed. Carefully, easing into the motion, he pushed the bloody hand down against a pile of small shards and glass dust, skin molding around the glass before its points pierced into the soft embrace of flesh. I must have seen this before, Cyrus thought, before agony overcame thought. It seems trite.

Reflected in the bright bathroom mirror his two hands seemed strangers. The left, pinkish, crisscrossed with delicate grooves and the hint of blue veins. The right was inverted: red flames burst from the palm, laced with glittering points that transformed constantly under the light. The blood had dried and flaked in between red and rust and waited to be sloughed off; the glasses

pieces were badges of valor – proof of his pain.

The sting started to ebb so Cyrus took a pair of tweezers to the glass. When he pulled the first shard a scarlet bubble broke free, wetting dried blood as it curved under his palm. Cyrus diligently worked through the whole hand, yanking out the glass splinters. By the time he was done the sink shone like a ruby and the sun had started its ascent. He wished someone could see his harrowing and validate it for him.

Back in his room, Cyrus picked up the scrap centered on his desk – the only thing he kept on it now – and dialed the number. The receiver clicked after six rings and he could hear her breathing, but no words. “Hello?”

“Yeah?”

Okay, calm. Breathe. Exhale. “Hi. It's me.” More breathing, thick, tired. “We met, the rest stop? The bathroom, I guess.” The breathing shuffled. “Did you hear me?”

“Call back later.” The line went dead. Nothing else to do, he looked for a spare bowl.

He had called back and agreed to meet for lunch, but outside the diner fear overtook his self-wounding confidence. He saw her waiting through the window, surrounded by his own reflection. What could he possibly say to her? He would leave before she saw him, just a phone call and nothing more, a brief, forgettable annoyance, but his feet refused to budge and her eyes took the very moment to land on his pathetic face. She grinned, eyes locked on him even as a waiter dropped off a mug of coffee and she mouthed a delicate thank you. She's taunting me. He looked down: he was hard. “Fuck,” he muttered, then repositioned himself and, out of options, pushed his way through the front door.

He took care to place the heavily bandaged hand down on the table before he sat. “What happened?” For a terrible second Cyrus thought about veering into confession but thought better of and tried to play cool.

“Fight, actually,” he said. “Not my normal cup of tea. Got smashed against some gravel, but it's okay now.” He sounded weird to himself, thumbing through the menu before looking up to see if she had bought it – how could she? Pale in the light, a constellation of freckles streamed across her nose and cheeks, softly ready to accept him, he thought. She hid the softness with the hardness of her eyes, red-shadowed today, matching the red humming through her hair and lips, but the eyes themselves were blue spattered white, brilliant as a thundercrack.

“A fight? Doesn't seem your style.” She grinned, coy; he lapped up her affection. “Anything else I should know, college boy? How's home?”

“College boy?” She raised her eyebrows in his retaliation to the name. “Fine. It's not really home, anymore, though. Where I live.”

“Not anymore.”

“Yeah. Not anymore.”

“But your parents still live there.”

She was condescending to the point of fury, and he wanted to leave, but she put her hand on his wrapped paw and all thoughts of escape melted in her warm touch. “My mom does,” he said.

“What about your dad?” Cyrus looked away, out the window, down. He couldn't say. “Oh. I'm sorry, never mind.”

They both made motions as if to escape the situation, her lifting the menu, him pulling

back his hand, but the waiter thankfully arrived, balding, sweat-stained, and she instantly lit up.

“What'd you like, doll?”

“Santa Cruz scramble, platter, with bacon, home fries extra crispy, and can I get the french toast and the fruit cup? I know it says choose, but I'm just so hungry,” she lisped to the end of her sentence, stopping just shy of grabbing his crotch; Cyrus tried to control his overwhelming jealousy; the waiter didn't write down a word but stood dumbfounded. “And a refill of coffee, please.”

“Right, of course. Right, coffee. And for your friend?”

“I'll have the same.”

“Fruit cup or french toast, pal?”

“French toast, pal,” he replied. She laughed. Cyrus beamed. The waiter took the menus and attempted a little bow for her as he walked away. He wanted to milk her laugh but, caught without a task, Cyrus had nothing to say. He found himself disappointed by the irrelevance of his hand to her. She leaned in close as if waiting for him to speak so he opened his mouth, hoping words would just hop out of their own accord, but all he managed was a gurgle.

“You don't know my name,” she said. He blushed. “I don't know yours either.”

“Oh, sorry, it's Cyrus,” he said, thankful for something to offer. His face shot to the side and his ear rang; numb at first, pain branched through the fat of his cheek and into his jaw. He shook, whimpering from the slap, then felt the warmth of her hand resting on his crotch and came.

“That was for not letting me guess your name, and for lying about being in a fight,” she said rudely. Cyrus was still too overwhelmed to speak. “Shit, it was too hard. Sorry, I run high on

impulse. But,” she leaned in, “you kind of liked it, didn't you.”

His underwear was now cold and sticky and very uncomfortable. She was not what he had expected, stronger, uncomplacent, and indifferent to his delicacy. “No pain without pleasure, right?” he tried acting cool.

“Exactly right. Don't roll your eyes at me, by the way. I might be itching for another slap.” Her aggressively infective cheer stung him. He no longer knew why he was there, what he hoped to get out of the date. He did not feel bursting but, rather, ready to crawl so far into himself she could never find him. “So, what's my name?” she asked.

“Psycho?”

She laughed. “Don't be mean. Okay, maybe I deserved it, but –” their food arrived in heaping platters; she took a slab of french toast in her hand, dropped a slice of bacon and a scoop of egg into it, rolled it up and stuffed it in her mouth. “Okay, how about this. If you slap me on the face, I'll tell you my name,” she said, chewing.

Cyrus picked at his potatoes. “Right.”

“I'm serious. Guess or slap.” Cyrus couldn't remember the last time he hated a meal this much. He reached over and patted her cheek, covered in slight fuzz like a baby. “I'm not even giving you a letter for that. Not hungry?”

“Not really. Sorry. How did you know it wasn't a fight?”

“I just – listen, I'm sorry, I –”

“It's fine.” Cyrus pulled out his wallet. “I'm not feeling so great, though.” He put down enough cash for both of them, stood, and headed towards the exit.

“Wait, please!” she called as Cyrus pushed through the door.

She ran up to him outside and had to jog to keep up pace, talking in harried breaths. “Hey, okay, I’m sorry I slapped you, please! Slow down! Hey! You still don’t know my name! Cyrus?” She had stopped and was yelling to Cyrus, who kept walking, who couldn’t bear to stop, even to look back. She had to shout: “If you want to know my name, give me a call some time! No slapping, I promise!” He reached his car, got inside and put it in drive. He tried really hard not to look back.

How dare she. That bitch, how dare she assume that? Thinks she knows me? Fuck her.

He had been violated. He yanked the shower on but was too incensed to stand long enough to let it warm and stormed out of the bathroom without turning off the water, only returning, shamefully, a half hour later once the steam spread outside the door. Her fault, too. What gave her the right? He had wanted her to console his pain and wrap herself around him, warm him with pity, but she molested him as if he were a child. He wanted to hurt her, but how? She would just laugh at him again. Just forget about her, he thought, her face plastering his mind, the speckle in her eyes.

Still, he’d felt again. She made him feel. And she was right: a pulse shivered when she slapped him, something further down than his member. But he was not hers to play with.

Two hours later Cyrus found his mother in the kitchen, steam gently wrapped through her dress as she dumped pasta into a colander. “Hi honey! I’m just about done with everything. Could you set the table, please?”

“Not hungry, mom.”

Kindness vanished. “Set the table for dinner. We are eating dinner together as a family, Cyrus!” The words cracked even if her voice didn't, but it did not break. Abashed, Cyrus nodded.

“Good. What would you like to drink?”

“What you're having.”

She set down two beers, poured them expertly into glasses, and loaded the pasta into a massive bowl of sauce and chicken. The two sat across from each other, for a moment happy to just be silent.

“Looks good, mom.” Beaming, she raised her glass. The clinking glasses reverberated, encircling them.

“Cyrus? Honey, you set the table for three.”

“Oh.”

Cyrus jumped at the ringing phone. The clock said 2:43. “Cyrus?” the voice came small and nervous. “Cyrus? It's me. Please don't hang up, just listen for a sec, okay? Cyrus? You there?” Breathing heavily, he moved the phone away from his face so she couldn't hear him. “Well, in case you don't – it's Beatrice. Cyrus? My name is Beatrice. If you don't call me, I just thought you should know. I'm sorry – I shouldn't have called so late or whatever. Please say something, if you're there.” A heavy sigh pulled up in him. “I hope, well – call me, if you want. Goodnight.”

He lay in bed thinking about her name and warm, vague memories of her body past daybreak into morning. A rare calm had stolen over, sliding out from his stomach. Beatrice. He

could pull her down from the ether of furious mystery, play her through his fingers, his tongue, his eyes and the burning sides of his crotch. Aroused, he stayed his hand, breathing until the ripples of arousal faded into focused placidity. He could not recall the last time his mind had been so sharp, other than, perhaps, that one second in his dorm room as the sun overtook the mirror, just before the chemicals overtook his body, but this moment he could control, let develop – it wrangled his greedy neuroses into a locked cage labeled Insignificant.

But it's just a name, he thought, failing to break down his smile, relishing that he couldn't. Nothing had been answered, she was still separated by a pane of glass, but now he saw her through it. He could approach with eyes open. An adventure. Beatrice.

A clammy name, he admitted, too weak to hold something so powerful. He laughed for being so frightened of her. Propped on a branch, he gazed over the pieces of his life, labeling them, adding Beatrice. He had stayed on the branch as long as he could, avoiding any contact with life, but the bough was lowering. When the sky was bright he wrenched the blinds open, refusing to let his room hide. Yes, he thought, pulling on his sock, something is different.

– 7 –

Cyrus heard his mom leave the house for a rare jaunt outside so he bolted from his room and up the stairs, careful to be as quiet as possible even though he was the only living thing in the house. What was once his parents' room had become an aberration, split between a frozen mausoleum of what was and a decaying image of what she had become. Cyrus' return and recent, brief moments of sobriety had done little to stem the tide of ruin: empty bottles of whisky lined

the drawers opposite the bed, ranging in size, illustrating the progression of her alcoholism from fad to obsession to lifestyle to life itself; few bottles not swarming with dust were smaller than a liter; it had always been her style to free-fall into new hobbies, he thought. Generally for my benefit, but why shouldn't she have her fun? Glasses stacked on the night stand. Perspiration rings littered the bedside tables and cabinets, body outlines at a crime scene.

Cyrus stepped through a few empty vodka bottles toward the bed, hastily made on one side, amazingly pristine on the other. His father's bookshelf remained, like his side of the bed, untouched save by dust. This surprised Cyrus until he remembered his own, dusty room. All paintings and photos were gone, their absences starkly visible, save a single, framed snapshot resting on the bookshelf of the three of them. Cyrus was about nine and they were waiting to get on the ferry to Alcatraz. They stood in front of a photo of the island against a brilliant blue sky, his parents smiling, gripping Cyrus by the shoulder while he looked off into the distance, who knew at what.

Next, Cyrus moved onto the drawers, starting with her nightstand where he found some old rings in a cracked dish and a vibrator that he tried to banish from his mind. His father's nightstand, clearly parsed through already, held a broken sports watch, some matches, and a note Cyrus had once written, apologizing for taking both brownies. He started towards her jewelry box, then stopped – his father's hiding spot had always been the sock drawer where Cyrus had found what would be his first bowl's worth of pot – and he rushed over to it as if he were fourteen again and thrilled with wickedness. Inside a strip of suede, folded between a pair of black and tan silk socks, the key lay waiting. It was the length of his palm and a knuckle, the pommel shaped like a claw gripping for dear life. He laid it out his bandage, watching light

refract off the gentle curve, then rewrapped it in the suede, pocketed it, closed the drawer, eyed the room once more, and left.

The key weighed down his whole body. He had to push himself to reach the office door; need pushed Cyrus to take the key out of his pocket, not desire. Remember Cyrus, something is changing. You have to see this through. He didn't buy his own hustling.

It slid to the very edge of the shaft before striking something and breaking the agonizing silence. Cyrus looked down the hall to confirm he was unwatched, readied best he could, twisted the doorknob, and pushed.

Thin shafts of light skimmed over the room from breaks in the blinds, shaping forms through dull gray. Woody, old, cryptic as the sea. He let his fingers scratch over the boxes against the wall, the leather chair, the hard oak of his father's desk. He found the groove where he stabbed the matte tablet during one of his childish, clandestine explorations, and remembered how furious Dad had been. Grazing the books on the shelf, he smiled whenever he fingered a crease on a spine. Yet, as Cyrus' eyes adjusted, a treacly, chastising sense of wrongness came upon him – I shouldn't be here, I don't want to be here, I don't want to see. This is His room and I'm collapsing it.

Following instinct, he ran out to the hallway, slamming the door behind him. Something inside crashed the ground, but he could not go back. He locked the door and went back downstairs to what he knew; he kept the key in his pocket.

“Jay?” Harrison held a joint delicately between a tapering, wooden roach clip. “It's African. Amazing, right? All these stoners, man, meeting online, telling their stories. You think

Africans knew I was a stoner before the internet? Nope should be your answer, cause nope is the truth. But now all the voices will be heard, man, and none of those voices will matter. It'll be equal, flat." He held out his hand and passed it through the air while Cyrus took his hit.

"Don't you mean, nice rollie by the way, don't you mean all of them will matter?"

"What'd I say?"

"None. None of 'em."

"Oh. Either, I guess." They passed, pulled, passed again. "So what happened to your hand, man? You look like clubfoot."

"My hand?"

"Yeah. Your hand."

"Right, yeah. Got into a fight."

Exhaling, the smoke was lighter; Harrison had stolen the rest inside his lungs. "Uh-huh, and?"

"I don't know, some guys tried to jack me and I sprawled on some gravel."

"Man, that's rough." Cyrus nodded and took his hit while Harrison sat back in his seat. "Can I ask you another question?" Again, Cyrus nodded, passing the joint back. "What, like, actually happened?"

"I just told you, I said I –" he stopped, mind hiccuping off the tracks of the tired lie. "I was, dude, I got stopped outside the grocery store by some guys in hoodies and shit, and they asked for my wallet and pushed me against some gravel."

"Okay, man, you got mugged. Bummer. You'd like to talk about it, let me know. Roach hit?"

Cyrus shook his head, barely aware he had stood during the story and now lorded over the room, purple in frustration, twitching. He took a deep breath and tasted the weed in his throat, a burnt fig on a crumble of sharp cheese. Tongue thickening under the spell of his coming high, Cyrus fell back into the recliner. "I stole something today." Cyrus waited for Harrison to put him on moral trial, but he just rolled a new joint, waiting for more. "My mom has, well, I took the key."

"To what?"

"Oh. My dad's office. It's been locked, so I found the key and took it."

"Any discoveries?" Harrison tied the tip and ran it through his mouth.

"Nothing, actually." He laughed; a nameless but specific fear had threatened to take him in that room, but he could not explain what it was, or why he knew to be afraid. "Weird, though. Hadn't been in that room since before. For a second it was like nothing ever happened."

"But it has."

"Yes. It has."

They let the moment sit and Harrison pulled deep on the joint. "Rough, man. Well, this is a decisive moment for you: do you keep the natural order of things? Or let the zombie live? Could learn from that zombie, but it could also eat you alive. Tough choice, man."

"So what would you do?"

"Never debated killing a zombie before. Ignorance is bliss." Cyrus nodded. "But, then again," He passed the joint, "you're not so innocent anyway, are you? Maybe not eaten yet, but bit by the fucker, certainly. If you're already poisoned you might as well go full monty."

Inhale. "Is anyone?" Exhale. "Innocent, I mean." Cyrus wanted Harrison to keep talking

so he could melt into the voice.

“We're all innocent about some things, man, and some things should stay that way. You'll learn everything you need to know 'bout a man if you know what he's innocent of. Your guilt,” Harrison inhaled, “your guilt defines you and makes you different from me, from my guilt. That's the world, man. That's how it's made up, but that first time, that time when the innocence is cracked, or gone, or scrubbed off or whatever, that's it, it's gone, gone for everyone. Here, take this.” Cyrus balanced the roach clip on his fingertips while Harrison sat up, gliding his hands through the air. “Okay, think about the first time you smoked pot, right? That first time, it was something else, man, it was new, because you were innocent to the sweet song of mary jane. It was its own new thing. Now every time after that time, it wasn't that first time, was it? And it wasn't its own sweet song, its own time, either. It's always like another time, it'll always be like something else. And you better know the guilt finds its way, man, slithers in that first time. Always slithering, man. But you have to hold onto those first times, man. You'll be able to define what they mean for you. Choose the experience you want. Just don't expect to ever be innocent again.”

“And that's how it is.”

“That's how it is, man. Kill yourself once, you can't really ever quite die the same way again.”

The sun hung low, a hunched cardinal on the bough of an ancient cypress tree, as Cyrus meandered his way through shadows. He traveled without direction; he'd smoked another joint with Harrison and was deliriously exhausted; when he turned his head colors raced to their

positions first with the lines following. They'd talked about Beatrice. Homework sold to her occasionally, said she was inconsistent. Cyrus had taken this to mean that she was interested in him but might not be soon and as he walked he considered the best way for him to go about seeing her without losing the sense of righteousness that had made him walk out on their lunch.

The key scratched against his thigh, a lucky talisman. I'm ready for anything, he thought to himself, walking in and out of patches of orange light. I could fight off a gorilla if it came lumbering at me this very minute. I could go home and take all of her bottles and break them and say now you've learned and you can't do it again. Rebuild my family with my own two hands. Stop the burglar and beat his face in and – the words caught in his brain with webs of bitter knowledge, held fighting, rotting, stink oozing through the door he'd put up in an attempt to barricade the pungent, entrenching cavern of sadness that threatened to bring him back to reality. He walked faster, hoping to outpace the weakness in him, broke into a jog, pushing faster and faster.

He ran for blocks, traversing the back roads of Austel Flats' dilapidated suburbs towards the center of town, only stopping when a car swiped inches in front of him blasting a deranged musical wail. Exhausted, Cyrus bent over his knees, and when he finally looked up he faced the diner where Beatrice had slapped him. It's close to home, she'd told him on the phone; Cyrus was willing to accept it as a sign. She answered on the second ring and Cyrus thought she sounded excited. “Where do you live?”

“Cyrus! You drunk?”

“No!” he laughed. “No, not drunk, but I'm by the diner, and I – where do you live? I could come see you.”

Now she laughed, told him directions and asked if he could remember them or if he wanted her to pick him up. "I'll be right over," he stumbled towards her apartment, hoping he would never hear her laugh again.

Beatrice lived in a three-story condo painted pale yellow with blue molding round the windows. She stood outside smoking a cigarette and as Cyrus approached she pulled another from behind her ear, put it in his mouth and lit it. He took a drag when she took one, and tried to exhale in the same way. Their faces glowed amber when they took their drags, breaking the silent darkness of her doorway.

She finished her cigarette first and crushed it on the sole of her shoe, watching as Cyrus took a big drag, and as he did she opened her mouth to speak but Cyrus lunged forward and shoved her lips up against his, blowing the smoke into her mouth so it seeped out the sides as she grabbed his hair and pulled him in. He let the cigarette fall and reached his hand down the rim of her jeans to squeeze her ass. She pushed him off, eyes glimmering but pulled at his jacket so he'd follow. He planted his feet and wouldn't let her pull more. "What?" she panted.

Cyrus slapped her across the face. Her mouth agape, Cyrus stepped up and rammed his hand down the front of her jeans to feel inside her and as she whimpered her face burst red where he'd hit her. She grabbed at the lip of his jeans and pulled again. This time he let her.

Cyrus expected to wake in his own bed, sure without a doubt that the night had been a delirious dream, shocked when his eyes focused on the strange coral ceiling. He found himself naked, stretched sideways over a pair of futons held a foot off the ground by a series of drawers and bricks. The room itself, when Cyrus managed to turn his head to see it, was filled with

objects: a broken accordion rested on the sill of a large window, a sewing machine attached by a vise to a wooden bench, hunks of splintered wood lay in a corner to feed, he assumed, a non-existent fire. He smelled coffee, and after a minute rolled onto his side and then sat up. Reddish splotches lined his chest and stomach and Cyrus was afraid to look at his neck. Letting his brain try to put itself right, Cyrus grabbed his boxers and headed towards the intoxicating scent.

“Morning,” she drawled as he entered, bare back lined with bites and scratches. “I was gonna fry you eggs, okay?” She measured flour into a large bowl. Cyrus took her nakedness as an opportunity for some rare courage so he strode up behind her to cup her breast in his hand. “Let me measure,” she cooed, slapping his arm.

After breakfast they dressed and walked through the wisp of local park, smoking cigarettes as tired men huddled through the cold in heavy coats. Cyrus never realized how many bodies lived in Austel Flats, how he'd missed hers so long. “Why were you at the rest stop?” he asked as they settled on a frigid bench.

She stared off for a long time before answering, letting her ash grow long and gray. I was looking for someone like you, he hoped she'd say, someone to give this mad world direction. I knew I'd find someone who could show me what the world really was. “I wanted to leave,” she said finally, face a blank. Cyrus toyed with the thick disappointment in his mouth. “Do you ever feel like, I dunno, like you're out of purpose? Like, you had a life or whatnot and then it just runs out, and then, well, yeah?” Cyrus nodded her along. “I moved here four years ago. I'd been living in New York and I had something to show for it.” She formed a ball over her stomach with her hand. “I was in love with him, this guy, and so I followed him here.”

“Pregnant.”

“Miscarried. While I was sleeping, actually, and I was alone a week later, here.”

“You want a kid?”

“No. Well, yeah, sure. Something, I think, I dunno. Maybe a kid? Not here, though, not at the Flats.” She looked over at Cyrus, then back out, down to her wrists. “There was nothing here for me, I left and so I found you.”

“Why didn't you go farther?”

Beatrice looked Cyrus square in the face, determining him. He felt more naked now than before, but held her gaze. “What happened to your hand, Cyrus.” She took a drag of his cigarette. His heart ached.

“I did it to myself. On purpose, I think. With broken glass.”

“Why?”

“Because I couldn't make myself feel better so I thought I might as well make myself feel worse. At least something, you know?” He had never thought that before, much less said it, but knew it to be true the second he heard it. At the words a small pressure in his heart seemed to melt away, something he hadn't known was there until it left.

“I didn't leave because I was scared of being a child again. At least here I don't feel innocent. I've grown up here. I thought I had, at least, but when I saw you looking so pathetic with that shitty sandwich, I knew – you, Cyrus, are the one person who feels just as innocent as I do. And I bet you don't know why, either. I had to stay, to find out. Just seemed necessary.”

Cyrus had not considered himself happy for a long time, and often thought he had forgotten how. Dad died while he was away with Madeline's family, enjoying the freedom of

being a guest at Christmas, blandly appreciated. Then Mom called and told him to come home. Why? he had asked. Your father's dead, Cyrus. He's dead. Come home. Everything had been so simple, a straight line without bend or wrinkle. When he hung up that phone he had not known what to do. How to process. What it meant.

For a time, there were no Wolffers at all, just shells with spirits inside so small, so unknown, they could not even find themselves. More like death than death itself, an unaccepted emptiness. They saw the world but did not touch it. Cyrus had never been to a funeral. When he got home he went to his room and sat on the bed. He was tired but it did not seem appropriate to sleep, as if it desecrated the holy ritual he was suddenly part of. He turned on some music and skipped through songs on shuffle, looking for the right tone, passing by tracks after a single, dissatisfying note. After he shut his computer the music echoed in the walls and he remembered thinking that he was inside an egg which was starting to crack and didn't know what to do to save it, so he took his phone and called his dad to ask him because he was always good at things like that. The phone rang, rang, rang, and Cyrus couldn't bear the sound of it like rapping on his brain and then the voice appeared on the other line and Cyrus started to speak before he realized it was the machine. Something pushed up next to his heart, a filling hollow constricting everything else, and he closed the phone knowing no one would pick up, and he never dialed that number again though every day he wanted to. Ever since everything had been empty and silent and Cyrus had felt the egg cracking around him and could not endure it. He could not see the other side, but he could feel the breezes of loneliness and unknowing and so he bottled himself in.

At school Madeline had carried him, holding him up in his egg so he would not fall and seep out. His angel, Madeline. With her, he thought, everything would be fine. No more

cracking. Cyrus no longer knew if she dropped him or he dropped himself. He was neurotic and he pushed and pushed until she was gone. Laughing with someone else. He knew it was more but never asked. Just smiled until the necessary materials were gathered together. The egg filled with hate and love and that evil laugh. He would drop the egg himself and be born again drowned into a dark mystery, filled with shades of strangers, maybe his father and if not then nothing, anyway. Everyone was gone so he would be gone too.

For almost a week he scrounged the campus for pills: met up with friends long since abandoned just to nab from their prescription bottles; faked stomach illness with the nurse; bought cold medicine from various drug stores; loaded up on cheap painkillers. He bartered for two bottles of gin, locked himself in his room, turned off his computer and started drinking at sunset. He had written a note, bloated and empty, apologetic and excoriating, which he had destroyed immediately after Madeline found him, saved to drift.

His body lingered, but Cyrus was gone, aimlessly searching the abyss, hoping when he hoped that he might find something to cling to, tell him where he was, at least protect him from the unknowing so that it would not drown him again. Walking home from Beatrice's house, Cyrus thought he'd stumbled into a companion in the darkness, someone to help him find a path among the shadows. It seemed to Cyrus as though whatever had imprisoned his heart was dissolving, and he had the ability to hold something real inside, let it grow.

He got back to the house around midnight and headed straight for the stairs. Though scared, Cyrus was too driven to stop. He passed his mother's snores, heading directly for the knob, fishing the key from his pocket. Exhilarated, he shoved the door open and switched on the overhead.

The light spilled over the room, illuminating the pulsing veins beneath its surface, captured as if on pause for Cyrus' perusal. The room was formed of wood and he could almost feel the life in the material: shelves colored deep cherry, the desk oak, ash forming the spine of the chair – the room spoke in creaks. Glass shards blinked from where a glass had fallen – a calming reminder that he'd already been there. Cyrus picked at the pieces, marveling at how a single, curving shard held the whole room in its reflection. Twisting slightly, he noticed a dark box underneath a stack of papers, hidden so blandly Cyrus had never noticed it before. He dropped the glass and gingerly lifted the papers, making sure to remember everything's exact placement, then took out the box to examine it more closely. A hat box out of place in the room – clearly not Dad's. Cyrus laughed, shrugged, and, opening a present, shifted the top off. He looked and everything else became very small.

He stared at the gun for a long time, then calmly put the box back where he'd found it and closed the door behind him. Everything had been so simple.

II

EVERYTHING CLICKS, FALLS APART

– 8 –

He's gotten so big!

Yeah, barely wanna lift him anymore, little fatso.

Mary laughs, rich taps, as she bounces Cyrus up against her shoulder. Her fingers wrap around the back of his neck, milk-colored, long, never painted, always feeling through something. As she laughs her tresses cascade down to reach the sublime small of her back. Ishmael's got a slap-happy grin on his face and stares at her as if trying to eat her with his eyes.

Can I hold him? I ask.

She looks over at Ishmael and I politely smile and look away. Ishmael laughs, sort of a forced belch. Mary brings him over to me, grip still tight against the sleeping body. Careful, Irv.

I cradle him in my arms. His giant, glassy eyes stare right at me, not unaware but quiet, taking me in. His mouth quivers in an o as one hand reaches up to meet me. I bring my face close and let him grab my nose. He blinks. I see her out of the corner of my eye biting her lip. I see the excitement in her eyes. I can't help but hope I'm the cause. Then Cyrus laughs, little hiccups of air. I puff up my cheeks and he laughs again.

He likes you, Irv.

I can't help but grin. He's so warm. A great big lump, noisily breathing and gazing up at my face. I'm jealous of his calm. Close to his face, I whisper: Got your whole life, little guy. You've got a brand new world to explore.

Mary takes our plates to the kitchen to rinse. She won't let either of us help. Ishmael leans

back in his chair, swilling his beer. Didn't expect this to happen, huh.

He's amazing, Ish.

He looks down at the lip of his bottle. I know he's debating something. Flecks of paint crust under his fingernails and in a few spots at the tip of his shirtsleeves. It's his good shirt – I was with him when he bought it – but soon enough they all become work shirts. Mine, I regret, is starched clean.

Mary sings as she cleans, a lilting tune without words. I down my beer and grab his, taking them to the kitchen. She watches me approach, smirking when I shake the empty bottles. Get one for me? She asks.

I keep my hand against the glass while I wait for her to see it but she just keeps cleaning so I take the other two back to the table. Ish gulps his down. Something's gnawing at him.

Irv, he almost yells, Mary and I want to ask you something. The water turns off. She's examining me. I am nervous, starting to sweat. Could y – Irving, would you be, well. Mary crosses her arms. Sorry, tongue-tied. Irving. Mary and I were wondering if you would be willing to be Cyrus' godfather.

Little Cyrus, the whole world ahead of him. Doesn't cry, just watches. Little Cyrus has the perfect parents. He's going to be happy.

The clouds broke and snow plummeted down to hold the world in place under its crystalline white, bitter cold but only after a minute of soft, still nothingness. Irving hunched in the passenger seat, old coffee pressed to his lip in constant anticipation of drinking. He lit another cigarette, rolling the window down just a crack to let the smoke through and dull, snowy spats took their advantage. His eyes watched as the Wolffers' house disappeared under the dreary

blanket. Just go back to the motel, he thought grudgingly, nothing will happen, you creep.

The tang of smoke lingered when he finally sipped the stale coffee, muddying together. The flavors should have fit but made each worse so that Irving had to control his urge to spit. “Nice to meet you, Cyrus. You may not remember me, but I remember you. My name's Irving, and I am a friend – I *was* a friend, of your dad's. I was a friend of his. Since your age, actually, Cyrus –”

It's noble, Irv, a noble endeavor. Sort of pathetic though, since he'll never hear it.

He drew out a long sigh, listening to it stretch, define in pale echo. It was true. Any basis for their relationship had been eroded; there was nothing for them to cling to. “Cyrus, my name is Irving Plainer, I'm a friend of your parents.”

Not quite, Irv.

He pushed the cigarette butt out the window and reached for another. The car reeked of stagnation, only growing. The house door opened and a figure stepped outside. Dressed in a t-shirt, Cyrus must have been shaking, but stayed still in front of the house, head pointed towards the second floor. Many minutes passed before it began to waver, out to the sky, then the ground, deliriously searching, then his body collapsed where it stood. Irving readied to jump out of the car, but he stood and sprinted inside before the coffee cup could lower. “Sorry, kid,” Irving muttered, slumping into himself. “Wish I could help.”

Cyrus stared up strange house. He tried to make sense of it, the gentle, sloping dry-blood roof, falling down on a series of wooden slats; the gaping windows: one seemed the same as the rest but kept pulling his eye as if it were an impatient, devouring black hole. Though he knew it

was the office window, though he could draw the whole house blind, it never remotely looked like it did now. His body shivered out to him from the navy cold of night, but shock had wrapped his brain in silence.

At some point his knee must have buckled; pain woke Cyrus, snapping him back to the world. He lifted his leg, moaning, the sound reverberating into the trees, reminding him that he was a cause of effect, that he was not only an audience to that uncanny office.

“Cyrus Wolffer,” he said. Yes, he thought. Yes, that's me. Cyrus Wolffer. He whistled, listening to it. I'm cold. He looked down. Snow everywhere. It was snowing.

Cyrus looked up again, just for a second, and marched up into the house, undressing himself while he walked, ripping off each clammy item as his legs guided him where they would.

His eyes went immediately to the box. It looked just as he left it, but seemed wholly alien, each item replaced by a duplicate. He collapsed again, now exhausted. Pulsing anxiously and with closed eye he reached into the box and lifted the curious metal up to feel: minute carved crevices; ridges at one end that smoothed toward a dip at the other as the barrel folded down, revealing another barrel underneath, all smooth like soft chalk. Its insistent weight pulled him out of revery and he opened his eyes: sucking black, awkwardly dead in his hand, but when he shifted and the butt of the grip nestled into his palm, thumb folding over, fingers following, its shape seemed destined.

Only then did he notice his nakedness. It was not his, the gun, but he wanted it and could see that through his scared flesh. He stood, covering his erection in one hand, gripping the gun in the other. His reflection looked back at him from the dark window, overpowered by the gun; he couldn't bear to look; he flicked the light, gathering his bread trail of clothes as he stumbled back

to sanctuary. His gun now, a secret from his father for him alone.

So, Irv, what do you think?

I am led down a narrow passage into a wide, dark blob. The air is sour and full of dead things. I think it's perfect, Ish, I really do. I couldn't imagine a better place to paint by feel.

Oh, right, light.

I hear the tightening of a chain and instinctively grab at my neck, a low vibration squeezing my head. The lights burst, garish, too sudden and I shut against it. Fuck, Ish! Little warning next time.

Sorry. Figured the humming gave it away. The electrics are corrupt, have to be gutted. Come on, stop being a baby.

His new favorite words. Corrupt and baby. Poor kid.

But I look. First thing I see is a dark swath of what must have been blood splayed on the ground. The room's gigantic, big enough for a small tanker, air dense with particles and gray feathers. Dark steel hooks hang from the ceiling, some still laden with small chunks; grates litter the floor every ten feet or so. With each step the room echoes then goes dead, as if the echo had been taken in for slaughter.

It's great, isn't it Irv. The bulbs, brights as they are, bring no light to the room. It just sucks it up. I need to leave. I mean, it's perfect, he says. Needs some work, but –

I rush back down the dark passage to cool air, sucking sun before, trembling, grabbing at a cigarette from my coat pocket.

Ish offers a light. I want to scream at him to leave me alone. You okay? You need some

food? Want to sit down?

I'm fine, I'm – I just need a minute, Ish.

I know it needs work, and the feng shui is kind of, well – but there's money coming in from the latest series and they're basically giving it away. Soon as I have the funds, I'll –

I spit.

You sure you're okay, Irv?

Glad the pieces are selling, Ish. That's really great.

“Mornin, friend! Name's Al, welcome to my range. Haven't seen you round before, so you'll need to fill out the range contract 'fore I can let you shoot. Have yer own firearm?” A wispy white flock of hair jutted straight up off an ageless face, shorn to bare stubble at the sides; the rest was black, from bandana to army boots; his right hand on a gold pistol, left gripped the window of the car. Cyrus regretted coming, making all this public. His reflection squirmed in Al's aviators, nodded. “I, um, I have my own gun.”

“Glad to hear it, friend. You can park over there, I'll grab yer paperwork.”

Picnic benches lay in the prep area, covered flimsily in a wind tarp, and two men hunched in green camo cleaning the separated pieces of their rifles. One glanced up at Cyrus, roved over the human target before, satisfied or bored, returning to the task at hand. Tall trees surrounded the whole range; targets stood on the far end of an icy field, divided into individual prep areas for the shooter. Cyrus felt immersed in ice, desperate to free himself from the situation. He couldn't bring himself to leave.

“Where's yer arm, friend?”

“What? Oh. Right, it's in my car.”

“Okay, well go on 'n get it.”

“Not even my own damn gun,” Cyrus muttered, following Al's orders. He grabbed the box, stopped: the thought of walking back from the car, being seen with the gun, not his gun, seemed too real, telling, though what it said Cyrus could not place. He often yearned for his father, the sound of his voice, but right now his incorporeality pressed down on him threatening to rend his bones from their sockets. Cyrus hoped to will himself straight out of existence.

Too late: Al was heading toward the car. “Thought maybe you was nappin'. Come on, friend.” Al handed Cyrus a sheet and motioned for him to follow, and at the table handed him a pen. Cyrus frigidly signed, anxious to get it over with, when he noticed, among the endless, bland words, DO NOT POINT YOUR FIREARM AT ANYTHING YOU ARE NOT WILLING TO DESTROY. He tried to avoid the words but his eye obsessed.

Like signing his soul to the devil, Cyrus relinquished the sheet. “Now, do you have yer own ammunition or would you like to purchase a box?”

“Uh, what? Purchase.”

“O-kay. Caliber?” Cyrus quickly attuned to his ignorance. Caliber?

Al smiled, motioned for Cyrus to open the box. “Nine millimeter Springfield. That's a fine weapon, friend.”

“Yeah.” Nine millimeter Springfield. Dad must have known that.

“Maybe I'll give you a quick lesson, introduce you two?”

“No!” Cyrus cried.

Al clucked. “Well then. Here ya go. Let me know if you need help, friend.” He shoved

Cyrus towards a lane on the range, dropped the box of rounds onto the table, walked off, and eyed Cyrus carefully.

The bullets looked like sticks of lipstick or tiny missiles, copper like armor. Cyrus pressed in on the grip's buttons until something clicked and the magazine crashed to the frozen table. Clumsily dropping the gun, Cyrus held the magazine and a single bullet in his hands, waiting for them to slide together. Nothing.

Trembling, Cyrus placed the bullet against the lips of the magazine but it refused to fit. He shoved and twisted until, seemingly from magic, it landed home inside its cradle. Another excuse not to fire, gone. Rudely shoving the magazine back into its cage, he rammed his arms straight out, and pulled the trigger. Nothing – shit, what now? He sweat through the cold. Pull the top, he thought. In movies they pull the top. The bullet rose from darkness to wink at him. He pointed and squeezed. Again, nothing. Snow wafted through his body, icy drops of fear cruelly eddying. Al walked towards him; he scrambled. Safety, he screamed to himself, safety! He fumbled at the levers until a red dot appeared. For a third time, terrified, Cyrus pointed the gun forward. Everything moved slowly this time – Cyrus sensed the inevitable tendrils that brought him to this point. It was already painted out. Fire, he thought.

Fire, he mouthed the word. Dammit Cyrus, fire! With every passing second time slowed further, reducing the world to shapes, to stillness, the weight of the gun the axis of the cold Earth's spinning, keeping the trees from ripping out their roots into the whirling, unknowable cosmos, blue night exploding into day. “Fire!” He pulled the trigger.

– 9 –

Irving tried to look calm. He stayed below the speed limit and gave the awkward tilt-and-smile when stopped at a light and someone happened to look inside. It's okay, just my brother, sleeping through the day while I drive around aimlessly. No, can't take him home, Mom would call call the cops. Ha, yeah, I get that a lot.

Jesus, Irv. Well done.

Cyrus seemed intent on sleeping and it was becoming a problem. His face still seemed baby-like, fat cheeks and that squeaky angry expression kids get when they're too tired to stay awake but don't really want to be sleeping. Good looking kid. Needs to wake up.

Irving found a quiet road in case things went as logic told him they should, checked the rearview mirror, gunned the engine for five seconds, then slammed the brakes. Cyrus grunted as he shot awake. “HrmmwhereamI?” His eyes shot around the car, assessing the situation, then focused on the stranger.

“Feeling okay? You were out for a while.” Stay as calm as possible, Irving repeated to himself. Keep him calm.

“Who are you?”

“I saw you faint and offered to take you to the hospital. Al really didn't want to call 911.”

“So why am I not at the hospital?”

“Do you really want to go? I figured I could just drop you off somewhere when you woke up, and you wouldn't have to deal with the ER.”

“Are you going to rape me or kill me or something?”

Irving laughed squeamishly. “No, no I'm definitely not going to rape you. Or kill you,” he added, “I promise.”

Cyrus kept staring, unamused. “You know, it's really creepy that you laughed when I asked if you were going to rape me, like you are going to rape me.”

“Yikes, sorry kid. Not the intention. I just laughed cause it makes sense, you know, that you would think that. This is probably a weird situation for you. Cigarette?” Irving offered him the pack. “Actually, mind giving me one?” Cyrus kept his gaze, but took a single cigarette from the pack and put it on the dash. Smart kid, getting pretty annoying. “They're not poison or anything.”

“I believe you,” he said, not taking one.

“Oh, do you not smoke? Is it okay if I smoke?” Silence. “You're making me nervous, kid.”

“Do I know you from somewhere?” The lighter popped from the dash. Jesus, what now?

“I don't know, maybe? Maybe you saw me around or something.” Cyrus took a cigarette from the pack and pressed in the lighter. He held the cigarette between his middle and ring finger, curled in so that he could cover his face when he smoked. “You hold your cigarette the same way!”

The lighter popped again, but Cyrus had frozen. “Same way?” he asked finally, letting the words sink.

“Your lighter's gonna get cold.”

“Uh-huh. Same way as who?”

Irving glanced down at his own hand to see if, maybe, he held it the same way. He

already knew the answer. “I don't know why I said that. Forget it. Where would you like to be dropped off?”

“Do you know my parents? Is that why I recognize you?” Getting close. Irving regretted the situation and feared what was about to happen.

Kill him, Irv. It'll be less awkward.

Irving laughed again, but Cyrus barreled through. “Is it one of my parents who smokes like me? Do they smoke? Is that why you picked me up?”

“Listen, kid, I don't know what you're talking about, I just made a stupid mistake, don't worry about it, okay? Forget I said it. Where do you wanna go?”

Silent for a minute, studying Irving's face, Cyrus primed the lighter again. “You're Irving, aren't you.”

So plain, so matter of fact, like a grandfather clock stopping. “Yes,” he responded in dumb monotone.

“His friend from college.”

“Yes. His friend from college.”

“The one who works at Silk 'n' Go.”

“Yes! Jesus,” he barked, then, softer, catching himself: “Yes, I work at Silk 'n' Go. Sorry. I'm a little off guard, here.” He didn't expect Cyrus to know that much. He assumed he could make his own impression, but Ish had cheated again and done it for him.

“You're off guard? I'm in your car, dude.”

“Haven't heard dude in a while,” Irving smiled, despite mortification. Cyrus smiled back. The lighter popped, again, and this time the kid took it, checking the same way Ish would to

make sure the whole thing was lit before putting the lighter back. Unbelievable. “You ever see your dad smoke?”

“He smokes – ” he realized what he said and lapsed into silence.

“Your mom smoked too, a bit, in college.”

“No shit?” he brightened.

“Yeah, that might have been my fault. Well, me and Ish.”

“Hard to imagine them back then. Must feel like a long time ago.”

Irving didn't know the answer. Strange how little changes in twenty years. “So, Cyrus, where would you like me to drop you off?”

Parked at the base of the hill, Irving gruffly handed Cyrus a scrap with his prepaid cell number. “If you ever wanna grab a coffee or something, catch up.”

“When was the last time I saw you anyway?”

“Long time ago, kid.”

Cyrus rolled his eyes as he got out of the car, but it was sweet, not angry, not the sullen sarcasm that Ish always talked about. “Yeah, I'll give you a call,” he looked in through the open window: his nose and cheeks, red from cold, brought out his pale expression and the lean, strong jaw and high cheekbones of a man emerging from childhood. His eyes glimmered with a hint of his father's green, but his lips were sculpted like his mother's. Really good looking kid. “Hey, Irv? Don't tell my mom I was at the gun range, okay?”

“Our secret. I promise.”

He walked away, calling out: “The cigarette, too!”

Irving nodded. The cigarette, too. Little Cyrus Wolffer, suddenly a real person. And he doesn't hate me. And he didn't have me arrested. A good day.

As the waitress dropped off Cyrus' coffee Irving stumbled into the diner, awkwardly looking around for his anchor. Cyrus raised his hand and Irving ambled over, knocking against chairs. "Hey, Cyrus! Really glad you called."

"Uh, yeah, good to see you." Irving's bloodshot eyes glinted as he sat. When the waitress came he ordered the sea captain's breakfast and two cups of coffee.

"Big eater."

"I'm a diner kind of guy."

They sat silently, unsure of where to go. Cyrus had so much to ask Irving; he'd been thinking about his parents the whole night and called Irving as soon as he could, but still had no thread with which to follow.

"So, why aren't you at school?" Irving finally asked, prying them from silence. It was a parent question and Cyrus was turned off; at least he was talking, though, hopefully better than nothing.

"I was – I'm a junior, by the way," Irving nodded. Probably already knew that, probably knows a lot, probably disappointed in me, too. "I needed some time, to –"

"Right, right of course," Irving silenced him, trying to respect Cyrus' privacy; the man's discomfort comforted. "Do you like it, though? School?"

"Yeah, sure. Haven't really thought about it recently." Madeline flashed through his head, a blond, screaming whip of hair. "I broke up with my girlfriend."

“That's rough. Breakups in college are terrible, especially when you see them all the time.”

“Yeah, exactly. Maybe it was for the best, though. I don't know.”

“Did you love her?”

Hearing his voice make the word love, with its thick, slow scratchiness like a record covered in molasses, was both hilarious and unnerving, but it seemed like a genuine question. “I think so. No, I definitely did.”

“So what happened?”

Had he been given the time to think about the situation, Cyrus would have been put off by the invasions Irving was making. But need compelled him. This man didn't seem like his parents or his friends, he's talking different, looking for different things; some unnamed third category of person just for him. The change of feeling happened suddenly but the freedom intoxicated him and Cyrus eagerly responded: “She was cheating on me. At least, I'm pretty sure she was. She stopped talking to me about real stuff, made like everything was fine. Spent a lot of time with another friend of hers, some other guy. When I asked she said they were like brother and sister.”

“Right.”

“I know, right! But I wanted her to be happy I guess, and she seemed to be enjoying this guy's company. Plus, I was dealing with my own shit. Dad dying and all.” Flushed, Cyrus had trouble not speaking. He needed to say more. “And my work.”

“Your work?” The food arrived, acknowledged passively.

“Yeah, my, uhm, my casting stuff. Stupid art stuff, really.”

“I cast in college, too. Tougher than it looks.”

“Yeah, easy to do a good job, almost impossible to do it perfectly,” Cyrus spoke animatedly. Irving nodded, a slab of french toast, ham and egg busying up his mouth.

“So, yeah, I guess I distanced myself from her. And then I kind of hurt myself.” Irving stopped chewing. “It was stupid, I – I dunno, I drank too much one night.”

“On purpose?”

Cyrus looked from his mug to Irving and back again. In both mirrors he saw himself anxiously trying to speak, but was scared to hear what might come out. “Yeah, on purpose. I took a bunch of pills too.” The release was immediate, like a balloon exhaling. “She found me, Madeline. My, uhm, ex-girlfriend. She had a key to my room and found me and got me conscious.”

“Would you have died otherwise?”

“I don't really know. Probably not. I blacked out, puked out most of it. I think I knew it probably wouldn't work. But, who knows, maybe.”

“Is that,” Irving paused. What was he going to say? Now that Cyrus had spoken, seeing Irving clamp shut became unbearable. “Is that why you went to the gun range?”

“To what, to kill myself?” Cyrus laughed. “No, no I wasn't planning on trying again. Seems pretty stupid, huh. I mean, it's a pretty dumb thing to do.”

Irving nodded. “Yeah, really dumb. So, did firing the gun help you with it?”

“What are you talking about? Help me with what I did? Not really. It's just weird that my dad had a gun and I felt like trying it out.” Hollow words, when finally spoken; Cyrus did not believe himself. Why did I fire the gun? he wondered, the question blossoming, until then unfertilized.

“That's not what I mean, Cyrus. I mean, with your dad. With what he did.”

“Did what? What does my dad have to do with –” gut feeling stopped his throat. “What are you talking about?”

Irving shamefully focused on his plate. “Fuck,” he muttered.

“Tell me, Irving. What are you talking about?”

“How did your mom tell you your dad died?”

“No. No, she said that he was robbed.”

Irving chuckled, an empty throb. “Jesus, Mary,” he whispered.

In later moments Cyrus would wonder if he'd always known, if he had just wanted to believe the story because it was easier, because it kept him safe; he'd wonder, did I ever want to know? Did I always know? “Your dad took his own life. He shot himself. I'm so sorry, Cyrus.” Everything clicked, fell apart.

“I – I have to go,” Cyrus mumbled, tossing some bills toward the table. “I, uhm – bye,” and he was gone, out the diner like a shot deer running for its life.

A body made of pieces: organs jostled out of sync, muscles spasmed, nerves sent errant messages, blood splashed loosely through tubes, signals all of them, overwhelming the base of his skull, beating, all beating. Cyrus gunned the car through a stop sign and roared as lights erupted from the rearview.

Waiting. He turned the car off, shaking, still waiting; compulsion spoke: “Come on, cop, come here or I'll rip your spine out your back and shove it back in, I'll pop your brain cunt, come on. Come on. Come on.”

A bright day, muffled, happy faces enjoying the snowy trees, while every second distending to agony, a rampage bubbling through pores too small. The cop came up to his window and Cyrus passed him his license and registration. “You mind telling me why you just ran a stop sign, sir?”

“My father just shot himself. I need to get home.”

The cop was silent, then, “are you telling me the truth, sir?”

“Yes I am telling you the truth. I just found out less than five minutes ago and I need to get home.”

“How far is your house?”

“Ten minutes at most. Please.”

The cop handed back the documents. “I’m going to let you off, but if I see you doing anything like this again I’m taking you to the station immediately, you hear me? Drive safely, especially now. Now, hurry son, and good luck to your family.”

Cyrus turned on the car and peeled away from the curb, the cop’s words already gone.

Irving sat glumly, looking at the rest of his meal. He hated that he was hungry. I shouldn’t feel hungry right now, I just ruined that poor kid’s life.

He deserved to know, Irv.

He sopped a piece of hash brown in egg yolk and crunched it between his teeth.

Now he’s just as broken as you. Share that.

The spot where Cyrus had been seemed to hum, as if some of him remained; not enough; Irving wanted him back. Cyrus is all I have, he thought. I’m sorry, kid.

“Mom!” Cyrus screamed through the house, over and over, filling it with rage. “Mom! Mother! Margaret!” he said, rushing the stairs, ripping open the bedroom door.

She lay in bed. “What's wrong, honey?” she asked, eyes closed.

“Did Dad shoot himself?”

“What? Don't be ridiculous,” her words barely left her mouth, weak droplets of spit, before falling flat against her.

“Did he? Margaret, did he shoot himself?” Venom, every word, stabbing hard as he could.

“Yes.”

“Thank you for telling me. Please join him.” Cyrus grabbed a bottle of vodka from the floor and swung it at the wall, slamming the door shut behind him as it smashed.

Cyrus pulled the hat box from his room and ran to the car, heading for Harrison's. He couldn't bear his waking mind another second.

“You okay? You look like you ate a ghost,” Harrison watched as Cyrus filled his biggest bowl to the brim. “Come on man, that's an expensive way to brag, just tell me what's going on.”

“Torch a wand, Homework. Do it now.”

“What's going on, man?”

“My dad shot himself in the head. Torch the wand.”

Harrison mutely incinerated the weed until the milked smoke appeared solid. It pulled into Cyrus' lungs, his brain, out to his limbs, biting every nerve, stopping only when the body had filled. As he shut down, Cyrus saw a scared man whimpering on a boat as waves overtook all

sides, drowning out the pale sun that failed to warm the cold sea.

I watch Dad through the cabin window. He does not know I am watching and takes off his life jacket and his shirt and keeps going until he is naked. I have never seen him naked before. He walks in a circle and waves his arms, then stands very still, facing the horizon where blue meets blue.

The boat rocks. I don't want to, but I keep watching. He steps up onto the railing and balances on the mast. Then he leaps.

He hangs still in the air, floating, his face calm. He falls and I do not see him. I run out of the cabin toward the great crash of the water but all I see are white ripples and foam.

Dad! The foam eats itself and the water smooths. Dad!

Silence.

An arm pops up from the water, pulling, then a head. It looks like him but it is different and when it looks up at me I do not recognize it. Cyrus?

I heard a splash.

I just fell, big guy. Don't worry, just a little fall. His words come from a great distance and I look away, toward the blue that goes forever.

– 10 –

He had been sleeping a dead sleep so when the phone rang Irving was glad he had kept it by his face to scratch him awake. Just let me sleep until I die, he thought, then, cursing the early-

morning dark, fumbled to accept the call.

“Hi. Uhm, Irving? It's Cyrus. I, well – sorry about yesterday, me just running off and all.”

Irving thrilled, but stayed silent for fear of breaking the dream. “So, yeah, I wanted to say sorry.

That was pretty lame of me.”

“Totally fine, Cyrus, no apology necessary. I don't know if I should have told you –”

“No, thank you. I'm glad I know.” We'll see about that. “So, yeah, I wanted to say thank you.”

“My pleasure.” My pleasure? “I mean, well, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I get it. So, well, maybe we could meet for coffee again or something?”

He stood up in the dark and looked around the room, able to make out shapes and, with them, fears. What do I do with this kid? What happens when Mary finds out? He had been so focused on the introduction that he was thunderstruck by the dilemmas facing him. He's going to ask questions, questions about his parents, about me, why I haven't been there. It'll all be over again.

Cyrus didn't know what to do. He had crashed at Harrison's but for all intents and purposes was alone. So he had called Irving, but it provided little solace. Irving could only reveal more ugliness; it was not in that man's power to make Cyrus feel loved.

His head still throbbed but his body had succumbed to a near numbness, slowly playing out every action of the last day in pastiche. The garish colors lapping Harrison's walls coldly mocked Cyrus' crumpling spirit further into itself.

It doesn't make sense, Dad. He tried to purge the thought but the virus had caught on,

growing fat while it cannibalized whatever else Cyrus had once, so recently, been able to consider. Everything became suicide. Everything was inches from the brink, ready to jump. Cyrus feared he might have driven his mother to suicide, pushed her too far when she was already suffering – she had been living with this torment alone, he thought, feeding the nightmare.

Let her rot, all I care.

Had he already known? Had there been some inkling? The robbery always seemed ideal, some miserable but innocent capstone to a great life, as if the confrontation between Dad's good and the World's selfishness could not leave both standing and, for all his greatness, Ishmael had to fall. Cyrus knew his story spun too smoothly – maybe he always had. The pieces didn't fit: warm memories could not bely the angry truth of his father, the images that threatened to suffocate but kept coming: furious at Mom, screaming at her for ruining the coffee; staring out the window while Cyrus told him about school; ignoring his work, them. They piled, forming a thick guilty mass that caught dry in his throat.

He looked at the clock. Almost eight. She'd just have to be woken up, he thought, and called Madeline, and as the phone went to voicemail she called him back. "Cyrus?"

"Yes, it's me. I need to talk to you."

"You sound awful." She had been sleeping – he could tell from the cotton slur of her voice. "What's going on?"

"My dad."

He wasn't sure if he heard her breathing, or just himself. "Oh, Cyrus."

"He killed himself, Em. He shot himself in the head."

“Oh god,” the voice rasped, too close to the receiver. There was some leather in it, as if she was being quietly choked. Or if someone was pulling her slowly back into bed. “I’m so sorry, Cyrus. When did you find out?”

“Yesterday.” She’s with someone else right now, isn’t she. “Little over a day ago are you with someone else right now?”

Another silence; he heard her breathing, had covered the receiver on his phone to hear her side better. “Cyrus, why did you call me?”

“I thought you still cared about me.”

“I do, you know I do. Are you going to hurt yourself again?”

“No. I don’t know. Maybe. Probably not.”

“I can’t keep doing this.”

“I thought you cared about me. Just tell me if someone else is there.”

“This is unfair.” No longer cottony; she was probably sitting up in bed, naked breasts hanging soft while some lumbering hand held her navel, trapping her in its den.

“Just tell me. I need to know. I need to know, Madeline.”

“I’m going now, Cyrus. I’m so sorry about your father. Please be well. Call me anytime,” the line went dead. Call her anytime. She wouldn’t even answer a question. Call anytime. She probably thought she meant it. He stared at the clock. Maybe two minutes they had been on the phone. Cyrus felt worse.

Beatrice called. Cyrus felt a white flash of shame. Why did I call Madeline? The name made him shudder. Because I’m weak.

“Hey, Bee,” he mumbled, a child awaiting punishment.

“Morning stranger,” her voice twinkled. “Wondering if you'd like to meet up later?”

“There's nothing I'd rather do,” he responded, and knew it was true.

Beatrice glowed through his numb, an effulgent drug that teased through his melancholy, promising salvation from guilt and sadness and the possibility of fashioning something new. The feelings strobed with every heartbeat, each swallowing the last, until there seemed no loss left to consume and all he could ever hope to be was her. The staccato of his life smoothed into an endless stream and he followed it as she took him in her arms, as her fingers grazed over his neck and down his spine, as hot breath twisted through his ear and bare skin arched in the cold, and as their bodies met he believed he was truly happy.

He stared at her ceiling, letting her fingers graze his chest. He knew she was watching him, knew that she could tell his happiness was no longer total, that the world had caught up to him, even here. But he could not speak. Not unless she asked.

“That was your first time,” she said plainly. “Not your first time having sex, but your first time like that.” She ran down his chest to the sunken cavity of his belly. “I only had sex like that once before, the night I got pregnant. I could tell then, too, that I was pregnant.” She kissed his shoulder. “Don't worry. We're not pregnant. But I feel good again. Warm.”

“He left you though.”

“Yeah, but he loved me. Still does, probably, some part of him. And part of me will always love him. Doesn't mean he can't hurt me, or that I can't hate him,” she studied the indents between his ribs, counting them, learning his body. She still has no idea what's inside.

“I have to tell you something.”

“You're pregnant!” she teased, tickling the hair on his crotch.

“Yesterday I found out that my dad killed himself.” The woods boomed, then deflated, meaningless to him. They were too hard to comprehend, and Cyrus was tired of them; but Beatrice shot up, holding the sheet around her to hide her chest.

“Oh my god Cyrus, oh god! I knew something wrong had, I shouldn't have – ” she turned away.

Her back was too much to bear. “Hey Beatrice. Look at me.” Adamantly turned, she welled in him a nauseous fear. “Please, please look at me,” he said again, softer. She turned; there were tears in her eyes and the sheet drooped from her chest. “This was amazing, the best thing that could have happened to me right now. I've been – broken. Lost. In pain but numb. I don't feel that way right now.”

“I'm so sorry, Cyrus.” Now that she turned, he was tired of talking. He hoped that would be the end of it. He was sorry he had told her. “How did you find out?” Damn it all.

Do you think Dad would like RISD?

No answer.

Could take Brown classes, and it's a really impressive program. My counselor said I have a really good chance of getting in.

You should ask him.

I did ask him, Mom, he said I have a good chance of getting in.

That's nice. Did you ask your father? Did he tell you when he's coming home tonight?

Late, I think. You have time for another drink I'm sure.

She takes her time to look over. That's not what I'm asking, Cyrus. And that was very rude.

Sorry if I offended, Mom. Just thought you would want to know.

Cyrus left Beatrice's apartment with no goal in mind, just drove, and with every block more of the wonder he was sure he had felt with her jostled loose, grinding out the wheels of the car and fading into the cold light. He knew the loss would be inevitable, but did not expect it to happen so quickly, taken over by schizoid wanderings that would not tether, violent desires, not sensual but guttural and crude; Cyrus relished it and let the feeling guide his hands.

The headstone looked different. Smaller. Almost fake. He wiped away snow and found a pile of dead flowers. Tossing them away, Cyrus stared at the gravestone:

ISHMAEL WOLFFER

Father, Husband, and Artist

He Saw the Beauty of the World

& Captured It For Others

1970 – 2010

It seemed like a pathetic joke, its meaning unknown to the teller. God damn you, Cyrus thought.

What the fuck, why did you do it? “Why didn't you talk to me Dad?”

The grave said nothing. Wind scattered loose snow, tossed it through the air, and settled.

He reached out and placed a finger on the gravestone, running it through the letters that made out his father's name, and then the first word, Father. “Dad?” It did not give to his touch.

Fuck you, Dad. "I'm sorry," he whispered, and the wind picked up and took it away.

He got back late. The house looked the same until he saw the kitchen, where what had been a full bottle of vodka was now nearly empty. A tremor of guilt: whether or not she deserved it, he was killing her. That much was clear. "Mom?" he called out, gently as he could. He heard a ringing glass, a scratch of fabric, then silence.

"Cyrus?" the meek voice replied. He felt a warm spot in him at her voice, a mix of love and pity, barely sensible but deep down in his core.

"Yeah, Mom, it's me."

"Oh," the voice said. Then, even more quietly, "there's food in the fridge if you're hungry."

He looked: indeed, she had stocked it full, including a stack of just cut rib eyes and two six-packs of local stout. "Thanks mom!" he called to the house. He would talk to her after he ate. "Want me to make you anything?"

The stairs creaked as she hobbled down, as if afraid to scare off the tempted prey. "I'm so sorry, Cyrus. I didn't know what to do."

Anger threatened the room, closing in on them. "Let's not talk about this now, okay?" he looked over at her. She stared at her feet.

"Okay," she whispered. Dammit, Mom, he sighed, breaking at her grieving frame.

"Listen, Mom – I understand, okay? Let's just not talk about it now. It happened. Whatever." He went back to ripping at the steaks. "I'm making you one. You need food in you."

"Do you forgive me, Cyrus?"

He couldn't look at her and turned to face the window. Bathed in white, Earth had frozen to contemplation. It looked so easy. "What do you think, Mom," he said finally, "pesto on the pasta, or just garlic and oil? Maybe just garlic and oil tonight. Yeah. Let the ingredients do the talking."

"Right," she said in response. Cyrus wondered if she ever forgave his father, or if she, too, could not accept it.

– 11 –

We throw empty beers to the dying grass. Terrible as I feel, Ish looks worse. She serious? I ask.

As kidney stones, he smirks, nineteen for an instant. He drops the beer and the crash turns my stomach.

It was an accident, Ish. I don't know what came over me.

Yeah, well, the last time you touched her was four years ago. Should've remained that way.

I told you I'm quitting.

You quit. You said you'd quit.

I quit, yeah.

Ishmael opens another beer, downs half. Red bags puff against the green from his eyes: he hasn't slept. Jesus.

So I'm not godfather anymore, huh.

Can't be. You're not allowed to see Cyrus.

The words form a hollow. I know it will only grow, even as its just born. Ever? He nods. Ever. My godson, already talking. I wonder if he'll remember me. I gave him a pen. She probably threw it out, not appropriate. Poke out his eye or something.

I'm sorry, Ish.

He nods, but he's stopped listening. His retarded little brother fucked up and now he takes me out behind the shed to shoot me before the townspeople come with pitchforks.

The studio's starting to come together.

Yeah, he says, far away. once it gets warm enough I'm going to have windows installed. It's too dark.

Will you tell Mary I'm sorry, Ish? Please?

Margaret. Call her Margaret.

Oh.

And no, I won't. She doesn't know we're talking.

Oh. Right. Never mind, then.

A few minutes before he was to meet Cyrus, Irving panicked. What is this was a trick? What if Cyrus hated him? What if he brings Mary?

Jesus, Irv.

Cyrus' car appeared round the corner. No one was with him, but when the kid stepped out of the car – that's not Cyrus, Irving through. The face had lost its immature spark, its glib, effortless confidence, satisfaction untested; now it hung severely, swooping pity carving through

impish features, like a deprecating clown. He walked as if hiding from the world, but not from fear; as if, perched high enough, everything might just pass by him. Yet as he got close enough to dole out a weak wave, Irving could see that the kid held himself together solely through hollow pride, checking his posture again and again because his natural inclination was to crumble.

“Hey, Cyrus, glad you called!” he sounded too excited, as if it were fake, but Cyrus gave a big smile which turned out to be far more disconcerting. “Hungry?”

“Always, my good sir, learn that about me.” All fake, acting. Kid would say anything he's so scared. “Have a cigarette?”

“How long you been smoking?”

“Bout a semester into school. Try not to buy packs, but bum all the time.” he twitched against the cold and scraped some ice with his foot. “Kinda shitty, I guess. You don't have to bum me one if you don't want. Sorry.”

Irving lit his before taking one for himself. “Just, ah, don't tell your mom, okay?” He didn't quite feel right giving him a cigarette but knew it would only piss the kid off if he didn't.

They walked. “So, uh, can I ask you a question?” Cyrus asked after two-thirds of his cigarette had burned away.

“Shoot.” Don't let him ask anything! he thought, scrambling. “Hey, uh, where do you want to eat?”

“I know a good burger place.”

“Great, sounds great.” Silence again.

“So, uhm, anyway,” shit, no shutting this kid up. “So, I was wondering why I've never really seen you around, you know?” The thought of lying came and went pointlessly. He would

know and it seemed, Irving tasted the word: inappropriate. I have a responsibility, I'm the adult.

“Kind of a boring story, kid. You sure you don't want to talk about something more interesting?”

He clucked, eyes expectantly wide. “There isn't really anything else I want to talk about right now, Irving. And I'm not a kid, and it's a fair question, and we both know I'll find out eventually.” He pulled open the door to the restaurant and heat basked over them. Sharp kid. Oh, right, not a kid. Another fucking Wolffer.

Their burgers arrived, big, juicy patties on small buns, overflowing with melting cheese, bacon, mayo and avocado. “Good choice, kid.”

Cyrus bristled. Hates the name, such a child. “So, you're my godfather?” he asked, chewing.

“Yeah, I guess I still am. Unless your parents found you another one.”

“Never thought I had one.”

“Well, congratulations,” Irving tried to check his enthusiasm.

Cyrus took another bite. He didn't seem unhappy about it, at least. “So, uh, Godfather?” he said, mouth full. “Why am I meeting you now? I'm twenty. You're like, twenty years late.”

“You did know me when you were a baby, Cyrus. That I promise. You were really fat.”

“Thanks, asshole. So, why'd I never see you?”

The dance kept returning to its ugly center. He didn't want to lose Cyrus, not yet, but wouldn't be able to avoid the question. “That would have to do with your mom. Well, your mom and me.” Cyrus waited for more. “Okay, me. You see – ” aw, fuck me, “I had a bit of a drug

problem when I was younger.” He waited for it to sink in.

Cyrus snorted. “You were an art major in college, of course you had a drug problem.”

Irving shot back indignantly, angry that Cyrus made light of the situation. “Yeah, well, I had a pretty bad one. And one night I let it get the better of me.”

“You killed my grandparents.”

“I tried to sleep with your mom.” There. I said it. Jesus, now storm out, kid, get it over with.

“Like, rape her?”

“No, not like rape her, why do you always assume rape? What's the matter with you?”

Irving snapped. “Sorry. Shit. No, not rape. Well, not really. I had done a lot of coke, and I thought I saw a signal, and I went for it.”

“Wasn't I born?”

Oh what are you a detective? “Yes, yes you were already born.”

“That's fucked up dude.” Irving nodded. Yeah, it's fucked up. “I mean, shit, my dad was like your best friend.”

“You know I introduced them, your parents?”

“Still fucked up.”

“I know. Anyway, your mom asked me to never come by again, so I never did.”

“But you still hung out with my dad.” Irving nodded. “So he forgave you then.”

Why, Ish? Why did you? “Yeah, he forgave me. He knew I was just being an idiot. I still had feelings for your mom.”

“Feelings for my mom?”

“How do you think I introduced them?”

“Oh,” Cyrus said, getting quiet. The restaurant bustled and they sat still as statues, cocooned in history. “Do you still do coke?”

“I quit.”

“Yeah,” Cyrus said, still quiet. “This has been a really weird week, you know.”

“So I guess my dad was kind of a dick, huh, taking her from you.” Cyrus looked over at Irving; he was still caught in memory. “I’m sorry, that really sucks.”

They walked for over an hour after the burgers, smoking cigarettes, both listening to Irving's stories of Dad. Learning about this side of him unsettled Cyrus but, now addicted, he needed to hear more. The jigsaw piece stories made sense, fitting into an image of his father he never had but always felt the shape of, perhaps projected in himself. He wanted Irving to tell him more, to explode his world into the light of knowledge, but Irving seemed terrified of saying anything, caught in the memories like nightmares, forced to live them out though he already knew the miserable ending. He felt bad for Irving, who seemed like a lost teenager grown too old. Despite himself, Cyrus eased into trusting him, the unintentional stranger. He knew almost nothing about him, either. Had Pandora's Box been able to lament its place it would probably be Irving. “Hey, Irving?”

“Yeah?”

“What's your last name?”

“Plainer.”

“That's sweet name. Can I call you Plainer?”

“Your dad always called me Irv.”

“Yeah, well, I like Plainer. Can I call you Plainer?”

“Go nuts, kid. I'm calling you kid, by the way.”

“Cause you think you're Humphrey Bogart.”

“And you think you're not twenty.” Dad had said that to him once, or something like it.

Cyrus had rolled his eyes. He didn't now, didn't even think to question it. Fair enough, he thought, and let it pass.

Without Cyrus around, Irving had nothing to do. He smoked half a pack staring out the motel window onto brown snow and the parkway entrance where trucks hollered by, shaking the pane. He had enough saved for a little while longer, but no income and nothing to do with money if he even had it. His job, at least, had sapped the abyss of free time. He thought for a minute about making something, but had nothing to make and no desire to make it. He wished Cyrus would call. Pathetic, he thought, swinging from one Wolffer to another like monkey bars. Relying on them to take a god damn piss.

Irving turned from the pale reflection toward the bathroom. Standing over the toilet, he waited.

At four, as the light started fading, Irving stepped outside his dingy room for a walk. The coming dark seemed to ease his pains, buffering him through cold and the isolation of blackness, pushing him from unsettling idleness. He passed his car and continued down the street, kicking black snow up into the back of his trousers and the hem of his jacket.

Austel Flats was made up of segregated neighborhoods; nothing stood between them and the flow from one part of town to another gave it a variety that belied its true size, but Irving could not help but tell when his presence became unwanted, his clothing judged, his cigarette offensive. At a glance, he was the only person he saw smoking, but the occasional firefly from a corner of bored teens gave away the mixed truth of the otherwise picturesque Main Street.

Irving's shadow shrank and blew up as he passed the glowing wattage of each store window, silhouette distending over shapes on the sidewalk, hunched, quickly tripping its way, making up for its limbs' clumsiness with an imperial sense of hurry. There was something almost admirable about the way he walked, akin to the proud, haughty defiance that had made him such an idol to Ishmael when they were young. But Ish is gone.

There was a cavernous lack in Irving, a lack that Ish had filled, or had seemed to fill. Was it gone when he died, or had it been gone a long time before?

Irving never made another success after college. He had a single show, a spectacular flop; Ish and Mary had stayed until the end of the opening, her belly days from bursting, and when they left he knew that his own child had died, that the small failure of the show was merely symbolic of the great failure of his heart, unable to believe in himself in the face of vastly superior talent. And Ishmael knew it, too, but he needed Irving even more desperately. He could wallow in Irving, be a failure around him. A drunk. It's why he let me find the body. Made me find it. Bastard.

The thought of it made Irving's blood run cold, but brought him back to town and its dirt-snow streets: he had been standing still in front of a gallery space, surprisingly large for its location, filled with dinky landscapes painted neon.

“Sir? We're closing,” a tired voice said as he stepped through the portentous doorway. She sat at a small front desk, a few catalogues tastefully laid out in front of her, reading *The Shining*, but stopped to eye him carefully.

“Please, it will just take a minute, I promise.” She started to object but he strode into the space and her apathy won out.

The main room split into two smaller rooms on each side, and all three connected to a final, magnificent square, twelve feet tall and adorned with thousands of small ceiling LED bulbs that gave the space an eerie glow. Ignoring the pictures entirely, Irving spun around the space itself, dazzled at its possibilities. Not warm, but not cold, either, and the walls held mystery. An idea flourished into possibility, then plan, in Irving's mind.

“Sir?” the voice's echo slapped the walls. Even the acoustics were right – they sounded like waves.

“I'll need a business card, ma'am.”

It was not until the eighth pebble tapped against his window that Cyrus bolted from bed and pulled open the blind. Hand full of rocks, Irving gave a big grin. Cyrus gave a jerky little wave back and pointed to meet in front of the house. “Morning, Cyrus!”

Cyrus hissed for Irving to shut up, then pushed past him outside and shut the front door. He kept having to reexamine the strange man that had shot into Cyrus' life, spastically inserted, attached by jerky strings. He couldn't understand him, what he did with his life, why he was constantly around. When telling stories Irving's place had been clear, but as a person, as a thing in the present, he frightened Cyrus. Despite fear, he found himself growing fond of the man but

that, perhaps more than anything else, upset him. Am I that similar to my father?

At the door to Cyrus' room, Irving stopped, staring, and Cyrus had to pull him in to close it. He continued to stare wide-eyed, eyes eating every poster, sock, and pencil lying about. Cyrus felt a tremor at the back of his neck, a tautness, an impulsive warning. He remembered his father's words – or, perhaps, he had learned them in school – never to talk to strangers. Must have been taught when he was a child, and at the first instance put to practice, Cyrus had scrambled to let him in, crossing a boundary more easily than any conscious deliberation would have allowed. Maybe Irving wasn't a stranger, he thought. Maybe he has the right to get close. Maybe Dad would have wanted it.

Irving turned to him, beaming. “Your room is really great, Cyrus. Really great.” Cyrus pursed his lips, nodded. What do you say to that? Seriously he must be high. “You're probably wondering why I came over.” He caught something of Dad's aloofness in the sentences, the same distant quality, as if only passively concerned with his words as they came out, glancing at their ostensible meaning, far more interested in their effect, a distance that Cyrus had admired and hated for a long time. Surrounded by it once again was a comfort he had not noticed during its absence.

“Yeah, Plainer, that is definitely on my mind at the moment.”

He laughed, warm and chocolatey. “You're sharp, kid. I had an idea.” He stopped, waiting for Cyrus to ask him to continue. He's playing with me; like Dad again. Cyrus inclined his head to take back some power. “Okay, well, here goes. It's a little weird, maybe.”

“I can do weird.”

“I was thinking we could go back to that gun range.”

A cold swept up through Cyrus like a rug pulled from under him revealing a gaping hole. The gun. Dad's – “No!” Cyrus nearly shouted, pushing Irving back. The man cowered, tensing in panic; Cyrus didn't want to hurt Plainer, Dad's giant pet, secret like the gun, and saw, in that moment, that Irving's existence in his life was dependent on his own decision, on his own actions: he had all the power. “Sorry about that,” Cyrus called out to Irving, far away in himself. “I just – that brought back some intense stuff. ”

“The gun.”

“Yeah.”

“I get it, kid. Sorry, it was a stupid idea.”

“Yeah, kind of a stupid idea.” They stood in silence, then, “yeah, okay, let's go. But I'm driving.”

Hat box nestled under arm, held with a disquiet, even disgust, visible in the twitch at every step, they propelled themselves through the empty field. Al greeted them from behind a cup of coffee, cheeks red but not friendly. “Mornin', fellas! Awful early to come shootin', but I say that's the best ti – don't I know you?”

“Yeah, there was a – an accident, I guess.”

His eyes grew. “Oh, oh right!” then, conspiratorially, “you okay, son?” They nodded. “Good, good. Well, glad to see it brought together some aspiring shooting partners. Just don't get too excited, now. Here, first box is on me.”

Al took them to a lane near the corner, close to his truck and far from the entrance to the firing stations, probably to minimize the visibility of any other incident. He brought a box of

rounds, and walked back to his coffee.

Cyrus took the gun out of the box, Irving loaded the magazine. “You go first,” Irving said, quietly, “if you want.”

Dutifully stanced, Cyrus tried to hold the gun level in his dry, wintered hands; the freezing metal seemed to slip from his hands as if rejecting his uneager embrace; he drooped and handed the gun over. “You go first. Please.”

Irving had been dreaming of it, forming and reforming it in his mind until the literal object was merely the heaviest version he'd held, but not the most true. There was nothing dutiful in his stance, no conscious attention to purpose, just a need to satisfy an ageless yearning.

“Breathe in through your nose, Plainer.”

“Okay. Yeah, okay.”

“And then breathe out your mouth.”

“Yeah, I got it!” Irving snapped.

“Jesus, Plainer, sorry.”

A smile flickered in the lines of Irving's cheeks, the wisps of artifact that gently crossed his face, crinkling them into a blueprint of his life since that innocent, lost time when he was still smooth-skinned and happy – he fired, laughed a big, barking gallop, and kept pulling until the gun ran empty. The slide shot rudely back like a fracture and Irving dropped it to the table, his quaking body bringing him back from ecstasy.

Cyrus was silent a long time, studying the man. When Irving fired it was as though he lived out a lost memory Cyrus never had. Past *deja vu*, a moment that was always there. “Do it again,” he commanded.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, Plainer. Do it again.”

They sat in Cyrus' car, smoke escaping through window slits, sipping cold coffee. Cyrus played with the gun: ejecting the magazine, struggling to pull back the slide, pressing the buttons. Though empty, Cyrus kept the barrel averted, curiosity persistently continuing an exploration that belied his fear. A cigarette hung from his mouth like the forgotten straw of a bedridden patient. Settled and peaceful, Irving watched Cyrus with a father's careful, gentle satisfaction. “How you doin, kid? You're quiet.”

“I'm not quiet. I'm just – ”

“It's okay to be quiet, Just curious, wanted to make sure you were doing okay.” Cyrus didn't respond, but slowly inserted his finger into the barrel of the gun, running over the lip and feeling the contours inside. “Thanks for agreeing to this. It was – ”

“Necessary,” Cyrus interrupted. Irving gazed through the smoke at the man across from him.

“You're an artist, right kid?” Now Cyrus laughed, a hollow, practiced evasion. “I'm serious.”

“Kid.”

“Cyrus. I know you're an artist.”

“He tell you?” Cyrus muttered.

“Actually, no.” Irving couldn't tell Cyrus what Ishmael had liked to say about his son's work. Ishmael didn't even know what he thought, if he hated it, or loved it; he was too scared of

Cyrus' talent to determine his own position. He wished it did not exist.

“Cause I'm not. Not good, anyway.”

Talk to him, Irv. Stop pussy-footing around.

Irving snorted. “What's funny? I know I'm not good, okay? Fuck you for laughing at me.”

“No, I'm not laughing at you. I'm pussy-footing, kid, that's all. I'm pussy-footing you.”

“What the fuck is pussy footing?”

Irving brushed some ash off his pant leg. Be the bigger man, he reminded himself – flaccid words of encouragement. “Why don't you consider yourself an artist?”

“How do you know I am?”

“Alright, kid, I'm not your mom. Let's talk.”

“Oh, fuck you.” Cyrus turned and pushed his cigarette butt out the window as Irving offered him another, which he angrily took. “How do you know I am an artist?”

“I've seen some of your stuff.” The comment wafted through the air, and took a long time for Cyrus to take in. Seen my stuff? Naked, caught masturbating with a finger in his ass licking pictures of his mom. Words formed slowly, clumping towards his tongue, fell apart. “When?”

“In your dad's studio. We hung out there a lot.”

“What, fucking?” Irving's eyes petered to slits, and he dragged on his cigarette instead of answering. “Aw, shit, you weren't actually fucking, right?”

“We did not fuck, no.”

“Cause I think that's more than I could really handle right now.”

“You're in luck, kid. Your dad had a lot of your work in his studio. It's still there. The studio is basically untouched, since – well, it should be just as he left it.”

“After he shot himself in it.”

“Yes.”

“I sort of hoped he kept it there. I brought home a lot of stuff over the years, I guess, and there's a bunch at the house, just lying around and stuff, you know, what parents do. I didn't really know what he did with everything else,” Cyrus lapsed into silence. “So,” he said quietly, “you've seen my art,” his voice put quotes around the word as if it were a delicate interloper. “Kind of crap, huh.”

“Your teachers don't think so.”

What does this guy know? “Yeah,” he chose his words, “I get good grades, but who doesn't in art classes, right?” Irving agreed, but that's not why he had asked the question.

A big moment coming, Irv. Man up.

Irving saw through crystal, finally defogged. He hoped, desperately, it would not crust but he had to take control of the moment. His chance to be important to Cyrus. To matter, now that Ish is gone. To give him what Ish never did. “It's true. Art classes are the easy A. Work barely and prosper.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“What'd your parents say about your art?”

“My mom likes 'em, I guess. The way she has to, but what does she know about art, right?”

“Quite a lot, actually. She's got a better eye than your dad.” Irving knew the line was self-deprecating only after he said it; he'd convinced himself long ago his art had pushed her away. Away from him, toward Ishmael.

“Yeah, right,” Cyrus said, but knew he was not lying. “Well, she's a drunk now, anyway. Whatever, it's life. Good for her, I guess.”

“Sorry to hear that, kid. Really sorry.”

“Kind of makes her a bad judge.”

“You'd be surprised,” The words drifted. “So what about Ish?”

“Dad? I dunno, he thinks they're fine I guess. Whatever. He sees so much great stuff it can't really figure, you know?” Sinking into sad memory, Cyrus inhaled until he had to cough, then did, enjoying the fullness of pain as his throat scratched red, bringing him back to the present.

“He doesn't like your work, does he.”

“It's fucking freezing in this car, shit. Didn't even realize.”

Jesus, Irv. You're not the kid's therapist.

“Yeah, freezing. Wanna eat?”

The thought of staying around Plainer upset Cyrus, like a mirror that followed you around, always visible out of the corner of your eye, a slice of yourself staring back, intersecting the rest of the world. But, just then, anything else would have upset him more. “Yeah. Could eat a pig.”

Cyrus sat fitfully through the meal and said little, so after paying the bill and driving back to his house, Irving clambered into his own car and drove off into the dark maze of Austel Flats' back roads. His mind fluttered, pulsing out random thoughts: can't afford more cigarettes, maybe should hand roll; need a hat, something cool, something like a colorful beanie; hands are dry;

he's scared; I'm scared; need a job; need to go to the gym; need to drink more water. Blinking, he made his way into the dark tunnel he knew too well, and into the cold light of Ish's cavern, sublime in stillness. A fragile silence threaded every surface, and each step Irving took seemed a small invasion, the echo of his footfall crumbling Ishmael Wolffer's grand mausoleum. There's drugs here, Irv. The first thought of why he might have ended up here flickered like a dying light; tractable, it had a clear answer at its end. But that wasn't why he was here.

But why was he? No choice had sponsored the trip, nothing declarative or memorable. Muscle memory guided him into the center of the gaping, dark studio, not choice. With his eyes closed he could drive here and take any item from the studio he pleased. He might even know it better than Ish himself, who always lost things, blundered his way. For Ishmael it had been a psychological retreat but for Irving it was an object of study; though interested in the bug he had learned to be content with the study of the cocoon, fearing the bug might die if he examined too close; so, he tiptoed around Ishmael's life, acted like a servant, and was treated as such.

Maybe you should have taken the gun and kept it, Irv.

"Fucking Christ how should I have known!" Irving tramped toward the bar shelves but stopped as realization flooded over him. Cyrus' corner: stacked against each other, a small fortune of budding paintings, drawings, welded metal and, newest, ceramic work. Young, a lot of it, often messy, but alive, potently realized, purposeful. The successes were not accidental but the cause of well-determined hands. Irving flipped through the images with calculating eyes. Cyrus made these, that sullen, genius kid, and hates them all. Irving stopped at a pastel, a dense piece on a thick slab of paper: still-life, a glass against the blue-green table that had to have been the dining-room table at his house. A wispy black shape caught in the glass reflection, his mom,

and, going up the glass, he followed the table to the corner of the frame where the wisp, Mary, sliced the white of light through the window. For a thick material the lines were fine, the colors soft, the architecture perfect. He turned the sheet over: *Cyrus Wolffer, 3.17.06*. He was a junior in high school, fifteen, maybe sixteen – Irving counted, sixteen. Jesus christ, Ishmael, you've been totally wrong about him.

“You're wrong, Ishmael,” the words carried in the air, but there was no one to disagree, no fight against them. Quietly, then, Irving said “he's better than you.” Those words, those sparkled. Strolling to Ishmael's tools, Irving found an image carrier, covered the pastel in deli-paper, and carefully slid it inside. “And how dare you convince him otherwise. You're a blind, arrogant asshole, Ish, and you missed out.” He knew how to bring Cyrus into his own. He knew what he needed to give Cyrus.

Ish sits by his viewing area with an open bottle of champagne. His shoulders hunch down at what must be a picture. After Mary mentioned liking them against the wall in college Ishmael's been unable to examine work any other way. Ish? I whisper. He doesn't move, or, barely, but he's heard me. After a minute his hand reaches out, but only to take the bottle. As he swigs I see his eyes, wide open, vacantly staring up at the ceiling. Hey, Ish? I brought some new.

No need. There's an ounce and some blunt wraps in the drawer, he says, pointing. He saves me the task of rolling whenever I come over. It's nice to be better at something.

The room fills up with more canvases every time I see it; more just stretched, more just finished. He knocks off massive sales-worthy pieces every day and squanders the profit on beefing up a tomb that no one sees but me. Mary's never been allowed inside. Cyrus probably

doesn't even know where it is. Ish couldn't afford to lose me as a friend cause then he'd have to share the secret with someone else. We might as well be lovers, but I think Ish may be asexual.

You sure you don't want to try my stuff, Ish? It's super active, real sticky. I know he'll say no.

It's cool, man, how else'll I get rid of that ounce? I pull out a jar at least three ounces full, ignoring the other jars, none of which are empty. I took Cyrus out again the other day, he calls out. He's getting good, really getting his sea legs. Even spotted a whale! Well, he said he saw a whale. I didn't quite see it, but it could've been. A bit of fin, what I saw by the time I got topside. Ha, he slurs into silence before sputtering again: He was so excited, Irv, just hollering so loud, never seen him so excited in my life.

How's school going for him?

Cyrus? Oh, fine I guess. Really liking his math class, somehow. His painting teacher –

Ish dribbles off, still talking, but the words jumble in a knotty mess barely loud enough to hear. He's waiting for me to finish his blunt for him. Ish's face seems out of focus, slap happy and miserable, obsessive yet clouded. His eyes expand, then close to slits, as if he's fanning the air around his nose with his eyelashes. He stares down at a painting the size of a piece of paper, much cruder than any of his own but with the same, gasping swath of life. It's the flukes of a whale, shooting back towards the sea.

Cyrus?

He made it for me. It's good, isn't it?

It is, Ish. It's great. I rub his shoulder. He passes me the bottle of champagne, which I don't drink; the bottle is warm and nearly empty. He does not seem pleased by my answer, but

rolls the blunt through his fingers.

You have a light? He asks finally, still staring at the painting. Mmm. Nice. Sit down, Irv, take a seat, pop a squat. Look at this painting with me.

You should be proud of him, it's damn good. How old is he now, ten?

Nine.

Incredible. He pulls deep from the blunt, holds it, then coughs. It sounds as if something heavy and wet sticks to his insides. I feel sick. Not happy with it, Ish? I manage to ask.

You can tell when someone's got it, right?

Sometimes.

Always, Irving. He uses my full name when he's preaching.

So you could tell with me, then, the first time you saw my work? If I was any good? He nods. So, was I? Any good?

You're okay, Irv. He doesn't hesitate to crush the wind from my chest, just takes another drag.

Right, thanks. Well, your son's great. And he's fucking nine, so be happy for him.

He shakes the empty bottle. I am happy, see? Champagne. Celebration.

Oh, good, cause it seems like a fucking mortuary in here. I push back the chair, screeching against the cold floor. Don't drive 'til you're sober, Ishmael. You want to be able to take Cyrus to school in the morning.

I turn and walk out the door. He yells something out to me as I leave, but I have no interest in making it out.

I almost never have to sign for packages, so the man at the door is a surprise; I wish I could return it, once it's finally unwrapped: a Wolffer original, framed in gold. Good size, too, it would've sold for a lot. The card reads:

sorry about the other night, brother. insobriety is no excuse, you deserve better. – I.W.

Right. Better. A ten-thousand dollar apology, ready to be sold, the noble aid to the starving artist. No, starving friend. I haphazardly lean it against a wall, back to the room, and sit back down for the rest of my old fashioned and whatever's on.

At the next commercial I flip the picture around, still keeping it against the floor. It's nice that he sent something. He knows I'll forgive him, anyway, and it's nice to have some art.

– 12 –

Irving ceremoniously placed the canvas rectangle on Cyrus' bed. Cyrus recognized it as his father's. "Where'd you get that?"

Irving ignored the comment – the answer obvious, anyway – and, proceeding to unzip, turned to Cyrus. "I have a favor to ask."

"Shoot," all false bravado, Cyrus was anxious to see what lay inside, anxious that Irving might further gut the muddled memory of his father.

Irving pulled out the sheet, wrapped ghost-like, and carefully unfolded its interred contents. A pastel glass from Ms Branch's still-life class junior year; Cyrus had forgotten it completely. Another sheave of forgotten memory, placed back in its proper housing. "I'd like to buy this piece."

This some kind of joke? Plainer trying to fuck with me? “Buy it from me?” he stammered.

“I need you to name me a price.”

“You're kidding.” Plainer fluttered from the drawing to Cyrus' face, a bird caught inside on a rainy day. “Fifty bucks, I don't know, just take the stupid pastel.”

“I'm not going to let myself rob you. Ask for more.”

“Okay, two hundred.”

“More.”

“This is really weird.”

“More, kid.”

Cyrus clucked. Fine. “Okay, big spender: thousand.”

Irving focused on a corner of the image, assessing the offer. It seemed perverse to Cyrus, as if he was being violated in the man's mind. “More.”

“Fuck you. You even have that much?”

“In time. I'll give you a deposit.”

“Two thousand.”

“Sold.”

“Two thousand dollars. Just take it, please. On me. Consider it a gift.”

“I will not accept this as a gift of pity. We've made a deal.” He put the piece down carefully and extended his hand for Cyrus to reluctantly shake. His skin was dry as parchment.

“Listen, Cyrus. Don't give people gifts unless it's a gift you truly want to give. If people offer you money, take it. I'm the most generous buyer you'll ever meet.”

“Uhm, Plainer?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“I have a favor to ask, too.”

“Shoot.”

“Take me to Dad's studio?” Please, Plainer, don't fail me now.

Morning light bathed a powdery blue-yellow over the open blur of the studio. Taking ambivalent steps, his feet traipsing through his father's exhumed tomb, Cyrus tried to take in the whole of his father's secret world. Like standing corpses, canvases littered every wall and the space between columns; dozens more hanged from thick cables, almost swaying or waiting to sway. Thick, full air entered his lungs, sticking like cobwebs or gobs of fat, and with it the crashing concrete studio itself, erecting a rough-hewn skeleton where there had been the soft tissue of assumption. Like the gun, mysterious and inarguable. Like rending a limb. Like losing a father –

Cyrus rushed past Irving outside, panting for air. He heard footsteps following, then a hand on his back, warm, awkward, soothing. “Come on, kid” the voice murmured, “let's get some breakfast.”

Cyrus had protested, said he wasn't hungry, but ravenously put away the omelette platter Irving ordered for him the moment it arrived. “I had the same response, when I went there the first time. Worse. It was terrible. Started as a coop and slaughter-house. Didn't think they had both of those in the same building, but there you go.”

“Haunted by cattle,” Cyrus muttered. Irving laughed, uncertain. “What kind of stuff do you do?” he asked distantly, “like, for your time. Your job, anything.”

“I don't know. Nothing, really. I worked at a t-shirt screening store for a while, but I guess you know that.” Cyrus' fork dejectedly scratched across the yolky plate; the sound shot out through the general din of the diner, calling to Irving, taunting him. He continued, shaky: “Usually people send in their own designs and we just copy them onto a screener and – it's all pretty automatic, actually. Used to be more interesting, we would do a lot of it by hand, making the screener, loading the inks, and – listen, Cyrus, what are you looking for?”

“Hobbies, whatever.”

“I, well, I worked at the store a long time –”

“But not now.”

“No. Not now. I guess I'm between jobs. Hobbies, too. I was an art major in college –”

“I remember.”

Irving's skin crawled; he was being judged, mocked, even. He couldn't remember. The kid never knew. “Yeah, well, I still sometimes make stuff. But it's just something for fun, you know? Expensive to do all the time.” Why justify yourself? He thought, angry, at how quickly he obliged Cyrus' request.

“Any good?”

Irving felt Ishmael in the question, the rude, callous assumption, its flippant mockery.

“Have my moments. It's tough work.”

“Did my dad like it?”

The question roared, brutalizing him – he'd been asking, always asking, the same

question since before Cyrus was born. Hearing him say it gave it new life. “Yeah,” he shot out, trying to defer the overwhelming crawl of misery. Cyrus gave a slight nod, disinterested. No, not disinterested. He knows exactly what Ish thought. He’s felt it, too. “No, actually, I don’t really think he did. He didn’t tell me to my face but it was obvious.”

“Oh,” was all he said, so soft it might have been an exhale.

“He didn’t really talk about my work too much. He liked it a lot in college. Supported me a lot. But, after a while – ”

“It was pity.”

The waitress appeared, filling their coffees. Cyrus ordered a side of bacon. “You eat a lot,” Irving said dumbly.

“So do you,” he grunted, and returned to his meal. Irving watched the way he planned out each bite, finding the elements that interested him, the twist of spinach covered in a translucent, egg-white stream, the drop of mixed butter and syrup, the final dollop of cheese, sort of beautiful, thought out to its essentials: Cyrus was all-consumed with something rich and painful, but his hands, his stomach and tongue, his eyes still had their needs. Irving pined for that passion. Drugs withered his away. Well, not the drugs; they simply made the fear easier to bear by converting it to apathy.

The bacon came, crispy and gleaming. He put down his fork, grabbed a piece, and mechanically swallowed the whole thing. “I’ve been doing ceramics,” he said finally. “Cast-making. I don’t really know why I’ve been interested in it, but I’ve been doing it for a while. Changing them in lots of ways, breaking them, adding many together, anything, but – really, I just want perfect copies.” He took time before he continued, as if the conjuring the words: “The

white of the plaster, the smoothness, it's really beautiful, it's pure or something, quiet, happy with itself maybe. Each takes a while, though, and its own amount of time, and you can't do anything else, just let it lead.”

“What do you cast?”

“I'm going to cast the gun.” That was it. He suppressed a smile. That's what the bacon was for. Support, so he could say it.

The gun, Irv. If you'd just taken it.

“Are you sure you want to – ”

“It scares me. It's evil. And it let him cheat himself out of, I don't know, life, I guess. I hate it.” He saw lines of white pistols, creamy and pure, stretching out past sight.

Piece of shit, Irv. This kid just thought of his breakout. Younger than Ish. Asshole. Asshole Wolffer, another one. Irving saw himself fading. Rage came up, for a second, overpowering him – he wanted to reach out, grab Cyrus' throat, choke him, stab out his eye and hear him scream. He wanted to drink a bottle of rum and spit it out, spark a match to watch him burn. He needed a cigarette. He grabbed a slice of bacon.

“I'm going to do it. I want to use the studio to make them in.”

“The studio?” Irving mouthed through the fatty pork, rage melting to bitter jealousy, controllable, something he was used to.

“My dad's studio.”

His fucking studio, Irv. Your studio.

“You sure that's a good idea? I mean, earlier – ”

“Yeah, Plainer. It's a good idea. It'll be hard. That's kind of the point. I don't really plan on

enjoying this.” He sounded like he had grown five years or twenty. “I’d like a copy of the key.”

He’d like a copy of the key, Irv. Like it’s his right.

It is his right. “I’ll get copies made,” Irving sighed. “I still have my doubts.”

“Me too,” Cyrus conceded. “But it needs to happen. Impulse isn’t good or bad, not inherently. Dad told me that.” They’d both been told a lot of things by him. What else, really, could Irving ask him to follow?

– 13 –

Cyrus couldn’t bear to spend much time dampening under the persistent failure of his house, so he sped on towards Beatrice’s. Unlocked, he stepped inside. Almost no noise infiltrated the apartment, but he could make out the mouse-like sound of scraping and, terrified, inched past the kitchen towards the open bedroom door, keeping to the side so that whatever scratched away couldn’t jump him. Finally pooling his dripping nerves, he launched in the room.

“What the fuck Cyrus!” Beatrice, naked on a stool, jumped at his entrance, dropping a piece of driftwood she had been whittling.

“I’m sorry! I thought you were in trouble!”

“What?” Her body prickled with goosebumps, her chest heaved, and desire gripped him fast. “What?” she asked again.

“Your door was unlocked so I thought you might be in trouble and – why are you naked? Why is the door unlocked?”

“Sometimes I do it, sort of to taunt myself, give myself a scare,” she blushed.

“Like now?” She nodded, grinning, her fear becoming pleasure. “What if someone ever did come?” She lifted a razor-sharp cleaver balancing next to the stool, muscles visible through the milk of her skin, rising like dunes as she handily swung the blade through the air. Cyrus laughed, impressed, erect and, in a very real way, afraid.

Beatrice closed the space between them, swinging the cleaver back and forth in her hands; feet from him, Cyrus attacked, one hand in the small of her spine, other grabbing her hand and squeezing until she dropped the blade. Their mouths closed, then his neck rose into flame as she slid her tongue down it. “I’m about to come,” Cyrus whispered in her ear.

“That’s just fine, another’s round the corner and you’re not leaving.” He let her continue. So easy, giving it all up. I could give it all up, and just feel this until the end, he thought, and almost believed himself.

The studio light waxes over the deli-paper coal drawing I’ve been failing at, the image I had been so sure on already fading away. I’ve littered the table with the necessary drugs but they aren’t helping, and though I rub coke on my gums and wash it down with the stale end of a beer all I get is the taste of aspirin and the beginnings of my night’s third headache. It’s not working. None of it is.

Mary has not called me back. It’s been a week. She was walking towards Kiefer House two days ago, or maybe his dorm one over. Whorish little thing, aren’t you? I throw the chunk of coal at the canvas, thudding black dust into the air. Seemed so easy, teased me, make it all seem just great. Now you’re just an ashy pile.

I don’t mean it. I just want to hold her again and all I can feel is the space around me

she'll never fill. Leaping, I grab the deli-paper by the corner and slash down; it billows like a loose sail in the wind, wrapping around my arm as it crumples into a dead mass on the floor. The light flickers and I see a body, but it's gone. Clearly, more coke is the answer.

Inhaling the full line, I lean back and wait for the viscous, grit-white drip. Maybe I should bleed on it, I say aloud, kicking the deli-paper to pass the time. Not a bad idea. The coke's taking too long, so next comes a cigarette, and inhaling leaves the satisfying taste of burnt and tar, and then spit. Shit, blood would probably just make the piece worse.

The art studio has a large, sheet rock backyard for adventurous students to make dangerous experiments, and the school's security has no interest in stopping us unless someone's dying, which almost never happens. Laughing my way through the third in a chain of cigarettes, I drag the yards of deli-paper out into the silent center of the yard, lit by a single, prison-style halogen bulb. Outside the harsh line of sallow illumination, ink-black spreads out and up past sight.

In the middle of the courtyard, the waxy paper seems to undulate under the light and its shadow, swaying with the currents of searching air. The curves themselves are beautiful, but the whole disappoints, leading nowhere. I want desperately to make sense of it but I can't so, flicking open my lighter, I hold it under one drooping corner until the wax singes off, melting and evaporating at once, letting the paper catch and hold the flame for a whole breath – it crackles and begins to spread, coiling furiously, ravenously grabbing the next inch of material. Smoke wafts upwards, braiding into thick locks of dark gray smog.

Irv?

What now? I don't know if I spoke aloud or not. The crackle overpowers my throat.

The voice calls again. Irving? Steps behind me, feet away. Cigarette's dead so I light another. Irv, what're you doing? New project?

Yeah, Ish. New project. Pretty great, huh.

It's beautiful. He steps closer. I think I can almost smell him above the toxic soap stench of the burning wax. Not really supposed to be beautiful, buddy.

It is, though.

Cigarette? I bought a pack, believe it or not.

Ishmael scuffles close enough to grab one from my hand and steps back before he lights it. The fire is at its apex, brilliantly crackling around us. My sleeves are white hot, my boots almost melting. Ishmael coughs. This shit has to be toxic, man.

Probably is. Why are you here Ishmael?

I hate that name. I turn to him for the first time, just a second, and see the concern in his face. Fear. Fear of me. Good for him.

Irv, I wanted to talk to you about something.

Shoot.

Something pops in the paper, probably coal, skittering sparks. It's about Mary.

You fucked her.

I – yes, yes I slept with her.

Congratulations, Ishmael. Want my approval?

Yes. The fire's pathetic already, dwindling to a grim mound of ash. I wish I had more to burn, but it seems besides the point now. I'll just drink instead.

Irv, I think I love her, he says. Of course he would. Of course he says it, and I can't.

She's a freshman, Ish.

So am I! And, and she's twenty-four, anyway, so it doesn't even matter.

She's twenty-four. She's older than me. I didn't know she was older than me. Okay, so you love her. I refuse to look at him again. If he wants to look at me, he has to come over. The privilege of age. Why does this concern me, Ishmael? Because we were fucking and now I guess we're not?

Because your opinion of her matters to me, Irv. I want to know what you think of her.

I did fuck her, didn't I?

Ish doesn't do anything for a long time. The fire putters to death, glittery blue under the naked bulb. I'm sorry, Irv. I didn't know what came over me. I should have asked you before I did anything. But I do love her.

You thought you loved her. Isn't that what you said? Despite myself I've whipped to face him. My face cracks with char.

I know I love her! I want to marry her! Ish stands still, taking in what he said.

Marriage? I stammer. My tongue lolls like a shot deer collapsing. Are you fucking serious? Are you fucking – you're a baby, Ish! You're just a little kid and you want to marry her? I mean, really? I had my dick in her less than a week ago and now you wanna ring that slut?

A throbbing web erupts from my stomach out to the corners of my skin, and I bowl over to the harsh, cold ground.

Fuck Irv, I'm sorry.

You punched me.

Yeah, I punched you. I don't know what came over me.

You're in love, you fucking cunt. I'll never tell him any more than that. It's not up to us, anyway, who gets her in the end. When she walked into the studio the decision was made. I look over at the char-pile, literally all I have to show of my recent work and I can't even lift it or it will be destroyed. I thought I was so close; I thought I got it. But I guess it was Ishmael's to win all along.

Pale dark. Cyrus sat up in bed, fanning the blanket's white hills out in all directions, covering the mossy mount of her curled sleeping form, arm reaching round his stomach. After it was over he had asked for a cigarette and they had smoked in silence as she drifted to sleep, but he continued to light and puff and sit, staring at himself in the window when the glow of store-lights had faded. The cigarettes slicked moisture away from his lips, tongue, and throat, drying out his whole body though he knew, lower down, that his insides gushed in a roiling, urgent wet mass, hidden by soft skin and barely unable to seep through his pores. Outer fluids had dried to flaking; others, still loose and greasy, designed to keep from losing their vital wetness, splashed here and there on their bodies and the sheets. And she soaked wet, all of her brimming with water and other, thicker liquids, which had pumped out from below and now shed from her skin, even up through the skein of hair that nestled in the caverns of his flesh and all around, forming a dark not-shadow, massive and scratching.

Cyrus sat disgusted. It cycled through its forms, brandishing its cause to various targets. When he came the disgust was total, as it always was, an instant lack of pleasure and overload of thought. During the sex, invested in her, in the experience, he felt not only loved but complete;

the moment it ended those feelings, as if a fleeting mirage, wrenched free from his senses and all of him was surrounded once more by the dry desert of his unhappiness. He had come multiple times, coaxed again and again to new games and gambols. In the rise, anticipation blossomed to carnal need, to love, to ecstasy, and after every ejaculation the world dropped its sexual fetters, senses overwhelmed with the brutality and impersonality of sex without any of its warm, sensual underpinnings. There's a difference between sensations and sensuality, Cyrus had once lectured Madeline, a difference in connotation, in the types of senses. As Cyrus came, sensuality gave way, immediately, to sensation, caught pantsless at church. He could see where in the cycle everything seemed to work so well, to be whole in itself, but could not possibly find a way to force himself back into that state. It would have to wait, and come in time.

He wished he could sleep away the empty dissatisfaction, ignore his disgust the way Beatrice must have, through the blinding abyss of sleep, but Cyrus stayed awake, his flint-spark illuminations at each drag lining out the night's prison. He couldn't form the feelings, but he knew this had happened with Madeline, too, and with the other, precious few lost moments, humiliating but brief, which allowed, fantastically, the cold walk back home through pallid night. He couldn't leave Madeline, and now couldn't leave Beatrice, either, nor did he want to; for all the emptiness, Cyrus needed this thing, pined for its wholeness, and in those brief moments when he could claim it as his own everything he felt and saw and understood made sense and the world could be justified. He sighed. What was he looking for in them? Didn't really matter who. So long as the shape fit, he could put whatever he wanted into it.

But what about the way she swung the cleaver, the way she fries an egg or kisses your neck? She shuffled slightly in bed. Was it just desperation that he clung to? Fear of loss? The

ease of having that shape to hold? What if it were suddenly gone, passed out of existence, through the void into nothing? And maybe –

Maybe she did matter, Beatrice. Maybe he couldn't simply cast on her the same desires, the same needs, as everyone else. No one ever did what she did in the bathroom. No one ever excited him or let him be as honest as she did. Maybe it did not all have to be inevitable, these cycles of need and disgust, of wholeness and emptiness. Maybe he could transcend, just as he transcended his father's suicide. But he didn't, not really; the horror would come back, the disgust in all of them, all the Wolffers and the bastard child Irving, the fear and the loneliness and pressing need in the back of his head to solve all their problems and his own by just disappearing. Following in his father's footsteps, he saw now – even that's a cycle. The one motion towards an original act within myself, out of the endless repetition, and he beat me to it. Even when I didn't know he killed himself, I did, somewhere, I felt it, suffered for it before it came to me in words.

Like the lines in his father's portrait that could never be erased, that called back his repeated failures: he would draw it again and see the palimpsest of what came before, even on other sheets, even from other years. Every line held the full failure of all those previous attempts, just as Beatrice's sleeping form held all the disgust of Madeline's, just as every time he came he culled forth the misery of the times past. Everything ended, and in the morning he would hold her close and love her again, and the cycle would keep spinning, and the hatred, the disgust, the fear would come in their time, and the love again, too. No point to burn it all because it all keeps turning. That's what he wished he could tell his father, that it all would keep turning, that there would be a reason to put down the gun just as there was a reason to raise it. The infinite

repetitions were beings he could cultivate, Cyrus would think, in those moments when everything seemed right. He couldn't hope for the whole of anything anymore because there was nothing whole he'd left to break apart – no matter how many times the dawn would come and split apart that blue, and no matter how many times the blue would heal itself into its single, unbroken pane, he would never forget that first moment watching it split. He could only try and hold it in memory as the glory that it was, to keep the cycle where he wanted it to be. He hoped it could satisfy him, as it did not satisfy Ishmael, but he did not know how. He could see the circle spinning, but, caught inside it, could only feel the pain as he watched the world whirl by.

– 14 –

In a simple frame above Cyrus' bed hung a small painting of a ship at sea. Though the sky was bright and the clouds serene, waves in the distance threatened to break over the skiff and send it hurtling. A lone man leans over the thin railing, his face turned toward the waves. His outfit, blue and white, melts into the rest of the image such that only his hand gripping the prow and his sunburnt neck hold him within the image instead of losing him in the rushing water. Staring at it from below, caught in the glare of his bedside lamp, Cyrus thought the man looked like he was clinging to the sea itself, so that life would not pull him away. His father gave it to him to help him sleep, but now it kept him wide-eyed, wondering what Ishmael had feared so much.

I just don't think he has it, Mary.

For god's sakes, he's nine, and he's making them because of you! His teacher called to recommend he transfer to a private school.

Of course they're impressed. He has good handwork. Both of us do.

She laughs. What does good handwork mean?

I know I'm not supposed to listen through doors but whenever they talk like this I can hear it over the TV so I don't think it's that bad. It seems like a good calculation.

You need to reinforce him, Ishmael.

Kal-kyu-lay-shun.

That's what the boat rides are for, Mary!

Right, right, the men only boat rides. You and that sailboat, every week now.

For my work! I'm sick and tired of this conversation again and again! I thought we were talking about Cyrus.

It's the same thing!

I don't want Cyrus to be eaten up by this world. It's not safe for him.

He's nine!

It's not safe! I started when I was his age but I was ready for it.

Ready for what? I'm ready for it. I should go tell them.

When you were nine you were ready for the art world? Really, Ish?

Yes really goddammit!

It is quiet for a long time after dad yells. I hope he never yells at me like that. Just don't crush him so soon, Ish. Please.

Yes, Margaret.

Margaret? That's where we are? You're a child.

Oh, Jesus, what is it with you? Always cutting my words to pieces. Oh, of course, your lit degree, excuse me.

I didn't graduate, Ishmael. I started this family for us instead, remember? For you?

Another thing I'm guilty of. Did I ruin your entire fucking life? Is that it?

Dad cursed!

I've given you everything, Mary. I don't see why I always turn out to be the bad guy.

You're not any guy! You're gone all the time, at your studio, your boat maybe, how should I know.

With Cyrus!

Sometimes, yes, you and Cyrus. Just you two.

She won't know how to do things and she'll hurt herself. That's what Dad told me why she can't come.

Fine, is that what you want, is that what this is about? You want to go on the fucking boat?

Yes, Ishmael, the boat, something, anything.

Why didn't you say so? Is that so hard? Someone's walking. I run to the top of the stairs and hide low enough so that they won't see. The stairs are really creaky sometimes. They're talking so loud it doesn't matter, though. Uh, huh. Guess I'm just too dense then. Too much paint in my ears. How dare I, right? Well, you're officially invited on the boat.

Oh, great. Thanks a lot! Dad storms to his office. He slams his office door and it shakes the floor and the stairs. Mom goes to the door. She's crying. Mom?

Oh, hi honey. I'm sorry, were we too loud? Daddy and I were just, um – we were just having a discussion. She wipes her face and walks towards me. I'm sorry if it scared you.

Are you okay?

She leans down and gives me a hug. Yeah I'm okay, honey, just a little upset. Wanna come help me make some dinner? I nod. Okay, let's go.

Is Dad okay?

Your father's fine, honey. He just needs some time to himself.

“So what does your mom do?” they lay in her bed, tossing a ball back and forth.

“She's, I dunno, a mom I guess.”

“Oh wow, Cyrus, that's so –”

“So what?” Beatrice exhaled through pursed lips, teasing the ball through her fingers before shooting her arm straight out from her chest, curved just enough to veer right as it plummeted towards Cyrus' face. It stung as it hit his hand, then rolled off the bed. “Shit,” Cyrus scrambled after. Beatrice turned onto her side to watch him.

“You make her sound so sad.”

It had rolled under the couch and Cyrus couldn't find it. His head hurt from standing so quickly and something in Bee's tone sent shivers dancing across his neck. “So?” he asked defiantly, “she is kind of sad.” Her arms stretched out toward him but her eyes were big and welling and she turned from his gaze. “What's wrong?” the question seemed hollow.

“Nothing, it's nothing,” she muttered, turning onto her back, wrapping her arms behind her head as a pillow. Her chest heaved, breasts shifting upwards as she inhaled, then falling back

down and to the side with every exhale. A longing throbbed at his chest, something stuck there, thick and sticky and grabbing at his organs. He stood, watching her breathe, the thin shirt accentuating the pinkness of her skin and the thick, dark waves of hair fanning out from her skull. A longing past desire, a longing to be in her, or to be her, swim as her. Some fullness she seemed to have, the way her body moved in harmony with every breath. Cyrus was jealous. He walked over to the bed and stood above her. Her eyes were barely open, and closed as Cyrus got closer. "Did you find the ball?"

"I don't know my mom very well. I know that she's sad."

"It's important to know your mom, Cyrus."

Was that her key? Knowing her mother, was that what made Beatrice so full? "I know my dad much better."

"Did you know he was going to kill himself?" a flat statement without remorse or embarrassment. A burning lump of acid disturbed the pit of Cyrus' stomach and he wanted to hit something. She opened her eyes to look at him. "Well?"

"Fuck you," he muttered. He couldn't look her in the eye. "How dare you." The acid clawed, changing, growing guilty. The anger seeped into something colder, more alien.

"Did you ever think he was going to do it?" Cyrus couldn't speak, couldn't move, could barely breathe. Collapsing to his knees, he peered under the couch where the ball had gone. It's here somewhere, it has to be. "Cyrus." It couldn't just be gone. He heard a creak behind him, and he moved down closer to the gap under the couch, but it was so dark he could barely see anything and had to reach his hand blindly underneath to feel it out. "Cyrus, talk to me." Her hand alit on his shoulder, just her fingers at first, then, slowly as if melting, her whole hand,

warmth spreading over – the sticky thing in his heart started to burn, he took a big, rib-pulling breath, and as each bone relaxed the long wet sigh became tears.

Beatrice wrapped around him, molding their shapes together. He trembled under her, his mind emptying out. The sticky heat spread and filled him over and he cried harder and turned in against her chest and let her hold him. She cooed in his ear and squeezed him tight, and he told her that he loved her, and she kissed his forehead.

Loaded down by a stuffed duffel, Cyrus shoved into the indifferent studio. He set down the bag in the middle of the room; its size marked his presence, staked his claim in the gaping room, and let him take it in with calm deliberation. After breaking down at Bee's, he felt ready to trespass with impunity, to reclaim his father – to do something, anything. He couldn't be further harrowed.

Giant stone slabs petered out to the corners where light could not trespass. Wide, deep windows cleaved through the far wall to let in sun from the east and pale wisps of light faintly illuminated to the forms around him. During his first exposure to the studio Cyrus had been overwhelmed at the endless number of canvases but now he marveled at their size: huge, each and every one, and Ishmael must have lugged each to and from the hanging cables that served as easels. Cyrus remembered his dad's endless rants about swaying when they were on the boat and, noting the lack of bottom hooks, determined that he must have painted that way, his canvases rocking away from him.

The focus of the room was a single painting, a looming eight feet tall, maybe fifteen feet across, swirling mass of deep grays and blues, puffed here and there by purple bruises and the

white shock of foam. After a minute of quick glances Cyrus could make out a wave, then another, perhaps an ocean. Something else ran through it, some dark clot, an eye that bore out at him. Or maybe it wasn't an eye, but it followed his gaze like one, regardless, holding him in awe, pulling him in, repelling him; it would take time before he was ready, so he set off to explore the rest.

He walked past the windows, watching his shadow clamber over the shapes of the room, noting the automated blinds and the complex system of lights overhead, all undoubtedly controlled by some portentous switchboard. A closed rolling door made up a wall, probably how the cattle went in and out. This part of the studio was coldest, and Cyrus hurried in the other direction.

The non-windowed side had more to offer. Cyrus encountered a small kitchen set-up, equipment enough enough to make a great meal for one, maybe two. Near the kitchen was a full bar, many of the bottles barely touched, and next to it a dark wood cabinet with two deep drawers. Cyrus pulled one open and greeted the unsubtle scent of potent marijuana; Homework'll be jealous, he thought, lifting one of the jars and noting flecks of yellow, pink and orange between the hairy white-green – fruit peel keeping the stock moist.

Next came a toilet and shower cordoned by a wooden barricade, a sink and, indeed, a dull silver switchboard; Cyrus turned up the heat and a grumble came from below, booming for a moment before shifting into a polite hum. As Cyrus rubbed his icy hands together he prickled against the gaze of the looming opus, barely visible behind stacks of canvas. “Not much more,” Cyrus whispered.

He trudged by the entryway and glanced at his duffel, no longer very protective, before

nearly walking into corral of work, smaller than the rest, paintings largely but other shapes too, sharper and softer. Mine. My stuff. His heart fluttered. Some Cyrus forgot he had made, but his hands quivered to touch and remember. He placed a finger against a slice of rough-welded metal and gasped at its coldness.

Too much – Cyrus turned, walking past a bed, comfortable for one, tight for two. He doubted more than one person had ever slept there, anyway. He was behind it now, cloaking him in shadow; too thick with paint, the canvas allowed no light through. Cyrus tiptoed closer, circling to face it. As he walked, the image grew, dominating his vision until the crash of deep color drowned his sight. Cyrus had to stop and look away, digging his palms deep into his eyes to stop itchy tears.

Opening them, Cyrus was overcome by the physicality of the paint, the leaping thickness of it, the curve of the strokes. He could see his father's hand, almost smell his sweat. Bits of paint had been scraped off, other areas were muddy, but something horribly beautiful persisted somewhere in the oil, demanding his attention. Cyrus explored the piece, putting his finger to it at points, noting its softness like living tissue. Dad hurt this canvas and it hurt him back. It's his soul.

Flecked through the daubs were rusty dots, a miserable constellation against an angry sky; once he recognized the material he turned away, his hand suddenly meeting his knees, his head sucking down to the slab stone floor. He met a dark, seeping puddle, dry now but not always, rusty too, and thick. A sickly odor caught in his nose like a humid metal pole grubbed over by small hands – Cyrus gagged, a burning mote making its way from his nostril down to his lip, growing as it went. He shot his head upwards and back, holding onto his nose, but not after

he spied that single red drop abstract from his face and pop apart on the ground where it, too, would seep.

Cyrus did not feel faint, his head did not wobble. As the blood rivered across the lines of his hand he stepped back and took in the whole of his father's image, counting the puddle of vital liquid as part of the whole, walking side to side to see it from all its angles. It was the closest thing to a self-portrait Dad ever made. He saw his father naked on the boat, the waves holding him. And then he noticed something on the side of the canvas, words. He walked closer until he could read them and, when he did, could not help but laugh, spattering fresh blood on the painting, on the bluish black in the corner, tickling the sides, scratching against the words themselves: *For Cyrus*.

“Thanks, Dad,” Cyrus said, still chuckling, “you're such an asshole.”

So what do you want to do with your life, bud?

I don't know. What do you want to do with your life?

He laughs really loud. I don't get it but I laugh, too. I mean, what kind of thing do you want to do? Do you want to be an astronaut?

I scrunch up. Nuh uh. Too cold.

Fair enough, fair enough. I'm not huge on the cold, either. So, what else? Firefighter? That's not cold. The boat rocks under a mild wave. I never thought about being a firefighter. It's really dangerous bucko, but I bet you could handle it. You'd have to be very aware of your surroundings.

Did you want to be a firefighter when you were a kid?

No, no, never a firefighter. He looks out over the water, silent. Sometimes when he does this he wants to be quiet for a while, but I don't think this time. I wanted to be a deep sea diver.

Why weren't you one? I see Dad swimming into nothingness, surrounded by big, glowing creatures with fins and suckers.

It's kind of like being an astronaut: it's too cold down there. Plus, when I was a kid divers still had to wear these big metal suits –

Like astronauts!

Yeah, just like astronauts, and the suits would send you straight down to the bottom of the sea.

It sounds terrifying. I see Dad in an astronaut suit sinking into nowhere. No glowing fish. He's just gone. I'm glad you weren't a deep sea diver, Dad.

Yeah, me too. He sighs and looks out over the water again. I'm not sure I believe him.

Do you like being a painter?

Of course. I love being a painter. He's still looking at the sea and he sounds kind of like a robot. I lean over and push his stomach and say: beep!

He smiles at me but when he speaks he sounds the same: I'm going to go inside for a minute, okay? It means he's going to drink. Mom told me to tell her if he drank on the boat but I won't. He only does it when she's not around and sometimes it smells weird down there, too, like that time we saw a dead skunk, but more like flowers. But I never tell Mom. It's our secret.

I step toward the aft. Dad says you never call it the front or the back or the left or right. Prow. Or aft. And port and starboard. And, and –

A big crash sounds on the port side. There's a big white frothy explosion off in the

distance, and coming out the top is a giant tail a mile long with flippers as big as a plane. Dad! I scream. Dad, Dad come quick! I don't take my eyes off the tail for a second.

He bursts up behind me, what's wrong? and rushes beside the bulwark toward where I'm pointing. The tail drops down into the water and disappears. I didn't know anything that big existed.

Did you see it? Did you? Did you?

I did.

Was that a whale? He pats me on the back. That was the most amazing thing I ever saw.

I show him the painting and watch his face. You made this? I nod and try not to smile. This is really something, huh. It's the whale we saw. I nod again. He looks from the picture to me. This is really great, big guy. Thank you. He hugs me then returns to the painting. He's smiling, but it's not a whole-face smile, just his mouth, and his eyes look past the picture.

Do you like it?

Of course I do. It's great. Just like your old man. His voice sounds strange. I know when he talks like this, when he looks like this. He does it with Mom all the time. He doesn't like the painting. I failed. I'm sorry, Dad, I want to say, but I just smile back at him with my mouth. It's the best I could do.

“So, how is your casting going?” she asked from across the living room. She had been sitting silently for almost an hour, staring at the wall while Cyrus absently watched TV. He pretended not to hear. “Honey?”

Shit. “Yeah, Mom?”

“I asked how your casting projects are going.”

“I don't know.”

“Oh, really? That's too bad.” Cyrus flipped the remote in his fingers a few times but could not, would not say anything. “I'm going to get some water. Would you like anything?” Cyrus shook his head and watched her shuffle out to the kitchen until she disappeared from view. Dammit, Mom. Leaning over, Cyrus placed his finger on the carpet, following the pattern around in swirls that became geometric shapes. Simple shapes that made up the whole carpet, a great big thing extending out across the whole room. Little squares and rectangles and curves that arched over each other. She had bought it five years ago, and when she brought it home Dad laughed to him about how it looked, but he let her put it in the living room, anyway. Cyrus had always liked it, but never told him. Always scared to. Too late now, huh.

She came back, dress scratching against her chair. He could feel her watching him, waiting for him to crack. “Everything okay, honey?” Cyrus pulled himself from his droop and looked up at her. Her face was lined at the corners but still smooth in its center, and her lips curved gently from one side to the other, pink gently steeped in deeper red. The red had come back. Her eyes were still flat, though. He remembered how bright her eyes used to be. She held a mug to her chest in both hands. Cyrus knew it was a drink, probably a white russian, seeing as it was still light out. She used a mug so he wouldn't see what she was drinking, but he could still smell it. They angered him now.

“Fine, Mom. Just looking at the carpet.”

“Your father hated that carpet.” Cyrus smiled despite himself as she settled back in her

chair.

“I didn't know you knew, Mom.” She smiled, and stared off out the window. Her eyes didn't seem so flat for a second.

Cyrus poured the liquid mold over one side of the gun and sat back to let it harden. He knew the steps by muscle memory, the measurements trapped in his head, the timing in his heart. After this half, he would make a corresponding mold of the other side, and then carve away the barrel to form the hole. Arrayed on a cold steel table, the instruments seemed torturous and home brewed, as if he were experimenting in taxidermy. Even with the heat turned up the room seemed freezing.

Cyrus had stocked the fridge with steaks and beer and frozen vegetables and attached his music to the speakers, but had not listened to a thing. His stomach rumbled but Cyrus wouldn't eat. He waited for the rubber to dry. The table was situated in front of the great canvas, which Cyrus called *For Cyrus*, not 'For Me,' 'Mine,' or anything else. Nor was it an image yet, though he understood more and more of it as he sat. It depicted a storm, the waves crashing from all sides, the horizon looking for itself somewhere at the middle before water and dark overwhelmed everything else. For Cyrus, huh? What Cyrus?

Beatrice and Harrison came over in the afternoon to see the studio and test his father's collection of vices. “Holy shit!” Homework called from a dark corner, his voice echoing past the other two, wrapped together while she took in the stacks of images. “I feel like I'm in Van Gogh's batcave.”

“They're beautiful, Cy,” she murmured, pulling him towards the dancers, smaller paintings of ballerinas up and around rocks, the sea not far in the distance. Some danced great, acrobatic letters across the canvas. Others lay across the dull stones or sat, watching the viewer; some stood, staring out into the far ocean.

“This was his first collection that sold. It's what made my mom fall for him. He told me I'd made one, I wasn't sure how I felt about it. Maybe it was too obvious. But she saw it and stared at it straight for so long I thought she might have fallen asleep but she told me later that it was a life-changing experience for her seeing that painting.' My mom used to dance, too, and he took a lot of the poses from her. I think some are actually portraits of her.”

“Did he ever make a portrait of himself?”

Cyrus shook his head.

“Are there secret chambers in here, dude? Or cameras, severed limbs or anything? I'd really rather be aware of what I'm getting into before I light this thing.”

“Toke in peace, Homework,” Cyrus called back. He couldn't see Harrison down in the dark, but after a moment an orange dot sputtered awake.

“So, can I see your stuff yet?” Beatrice, now behind him, ran her hand down his stomach to the warmth of his crotch. Cyrus gave her a sour look but took her hand over to the corner where he had shoved the gurney table and showed her the test cast. She gasped when he put it into her hand. “I thought it would be heavier,” she said. Cyrus understood. The expected weight of its past inside the plaster. It should be heavier. Watching Beatrice hold it terrified him, and Cyrus wanted to slap it from her hand and smash it to the ground, but he just watched and thought of how many more he might make tomorrow.

– 15 –

I think Mary's having an affair.

How do you know? I try to control my voice, keep jealousy at bay.

She smells different. Doesn't ever touch me anymore, acts like everything's fine. Ish gets quiet, goes somewhere in himself.

I thought everything was fine. I cannot bear to look at him and see their failure. How dare he be cuckolded.

Maybe I'll kill her. He laughs. I think the thought's crossed his mind.

And Cyrus?

What about him. He'll never know.

What if you get a divorce?

We're not getting a divorce. I cannot understand his face: cold, pitiless. I'm burning, spasming blood and acid, and I hate Mary and I'm scared, and he's a statue. Does he care? He must. He needs to. Either way, nothing vents, and his words come out prepackaged: Maybe I don't pay enough attention to her.

Come on, Ish, why would she cheat on you, huh? The reasons pile in my head.

I should've showed her the studio, maybe. But it's too late now. Maybe she's just bored. She didn't finish college, remember? And Cyrus is out with friends all the time now.

But she wouldn't do that to Cyrus.

I'm not sure she remembers Cyrus exists. Ish looks over at me. I had to remind her to get

him a birthday present, did I tell you? I think she hates him. I light a cigarette and offer one to him, which he refuses. She hates when I smell like cigarettes. I think I'm going to buy a gun. He's kidding. He has to be kidding. There are times I wish I still kept the emergency vial of coke on me: quitting's downside is having to handle any total collapse.

Why do you want a gun, Ish? What would you ever do with a gun?

I just want to shoot something. Remember your air rifle in school?

You're not talking about an air rifle. I finish my cigarette and light another.

No, I want a real gun with real bullets. You know cigarettes are bad for you.

You heard that, too? Stop fucking around, Ish, you're not buying a gun. Ish reaches to his side and presents me with a black shape that looks like nylon wrapping a blacker shape that that sinks into my hand and chills me to my core. The spasms still in the presence of the awesome terror. Jesus, Ish.

It's not loaded, he says. I press the magazine release and check. It's loaded, and I show him his lie before pushing out the rounds. Hey, those aren't cheap you know! I shove the magazine back in the gun. Okay, that's that. It's empty, harmless. May I have it back, please? Nervous eyes dart back and forth from my face to the gun.

I never realized how much of a child Ishmael was until this very moment. I'm keeping this, Ish. I'm worried about you.

Why are you worried about me? I'm very well respected in the art community and at Cyrus' school. Look, I even started working on the big piece again. In spite of my better judgment, I take a moment and look down towards the massive canvas. He's been working on it since Cyrus started painting. It's the only thing he's cared about in just as long, though he keeps

producing, selling like water in the desert. Ishmael takes the moment and tries to grab the gun, but I pull back in time and shove him hard in the shoulder. What the hell, Irving! Don't you fucking push me! We both stand. Give me the gun, it's my gun and you have to give it to me! Don't fuck around with me!

When he's like this, he doesn't give up, he won't, but I have to try: Why do you even want this thing?

Give it to me.

Why?

He holds his hand out. Just give it to me, Irv. Please. He looks me in the eye. I'll give you all the rounds I have. His breath gets ragged and his chest must be pounding. I'll just buy another one if you don't, so just give it to me, Irv.

Jesus, Ishmael, just tell me what you're going to do with it. We look each other in the eyes. For a second we're back to the old days, when my opinion still mattered and he needed me to protect him, when he didn't have a giant room to keep him insulated. Just talk to me.

He's silent for a long time. I just like having it close. Helps me feel like I'm in control.

Control of what, Ish?

I'm not happy.

Are you going to kill yourself? He laughs. He wanted me to go there and ask him.

Gimme a cigarette. Keep the gun, give it back if you feel like. I don't want to be the suicide guy, with you of all people.

I put two cigarettes in my mouth, light them, hand him one. Take a shower before you go home so you don't stink.

He laughs again, smiles at me. You've always got my back.

Irving took a cigarette from the pack and lit it, formlessly proud of motel room protocol defiance, then settled back into squirming anxiety. "Assholes," he muttered, his eyes filled by two smiling faces welcoming him in, baby nestling at the soft white blouse covering soft white breast. It was as if he had discovered he'd been lobotomized. That baby, that whole childhood, gone. Flashed out of existence.

Your life, Irv.

And now Cyrus was an adult, able to struggle away at life by himself. Irving was unnecessary, worse than unnecessary, some relic, some scrap of leather, too worn to be of use, charming for a moment as an artifact but, ultimately, meant for the trash.

If Cyrus had stood to leave, had punched him – if the shit had said his parents were right, that he was glad of it – at least then it would make some sense, cruel but edifying. But Cyrus had accepted him, given Irving a nickname, put him, at least temporarily, into his life. At least long enough to learn the stories of the Young Wolffers.

You're like his bible, Irv.

Irving was happy to take the role of storyteller, but why now? Why couldn't he have placed influence on Cyrus' life, allowed Cyrus to grow with him as a piece, not an absence? How lonely life must be with those two shells of greatness. Those selfish fuckers. Those miserable shits.

That's exactly why, Irv. You're not great and you're not supposed to mold Cyrus. You're the opposite of the molder. They want Cyrus to be precisely, and decisively, without you.

The cigarette crushed in the ash tray – his only addition to the room – and he lit another. He couldn't get out. He couldn't leave the kid be. Can't let him grow up without me. Can't let him be a Wolffer without me. Like Ishmael. "Ish," he quivered, staring out the grim window, past it, into the pale, sapped-color reflection of himself. A ghost of Ishmael lived in him: the failure father, the failure artist, the failure husband, the failure friend, now the corpse, too, pulling the rest into some formless shape, an uncarved hunk of stone that gnashed against him with every step. He saw it in Cyrus, too. It surrounded Mary, made her up; her house reeked of petrification, years of hard calcium encrusting what was once pure grace.

He had dropped the cigarette and the wafting smoke came up in thin, spidery lines: impressions of smoke. Irving lifted his empty hand to his face and inhaled air. As he bent to pick up the cigarette, recognizing he didn't want it, that the air alone tasted far better, he knew the Wolffers were his last choice. There wasn't anything else that he wouldn't do. It didn't matter who got clobbered. The Asshole Wolffers and their cancer Irving belonged, in some way, however horrible, together.

He tied his shoes and scarf and walked out the door, some splinter hoping that, in the end, he would not end up a cancer but something else; a father, perhaps. But there was always cancer somewhere, so at least he'd have a place.

Irving was desperate to tell Cyrus the idea that had been creeping too long, the way to pull them finally together. It had been too long, and he feared Cyrus may be slipping. "So, kid, how's – how's stuff?" he asked innocuously enough, regretting the sobriety of his coffee.

Cyrus laughed. "Uh, yeah, stuff's good, I guess. The casting's going well, I made the

mold, so now I just have to bang 'em out.”

“That's great, kid. Really good news. What do you think you'll do with them?” Irving readied to strike and wow the little Wolffer.

“I don't know. Homework said I should glue them all together when I'm done to make some huge shape. Kind of a terrible idea, but why not, right?”

“Homework?”

“Yeah, uh, he's a friend of mine. I was showing him and Bee the studio yesterday and – ”

“Bee?”

“Beatrice, yeah. Uhm, she's a – ”

“She's your girlfriend?” Jealousy massed in his throat.

“Didn't I tell you about her? Well, yeah, she's really great, actually.”

He didn't tell you anything. He won't. You're the extra man, Irv. You're there out of convenience, just like with Ish. A psychologist mechanic, forgotten when the pieces run properly. “No, don't think you did. Guess you've been keeping secrets,” Irving laughed, forcing out gauzy guffaws. “She sounds nice. She nice?”

“Yeah, she's really – ”

“Why didn't you tell me about her, Cyrus? You don't have to keep things from me.”

He shrugged, eyes turned away. Look at me at least, you shit. “I dunno, I just didn't. Sorry, Plainer.” His words seemed papery and sarcastic.

“I just hoped I would be a part of your life now as your – ”

“As my what? Seriously guy, as my what? What are you, actually?”

“Kid, listen, I don't see why this is such a big deal.”

“It seems like a pretty big deal to you. Fucking huge, actually. Why didn't I tell you about Bee? Jesus fuck man, why does it matter? You don't suddenly have demands over my whole life.”

“I know I don't, Cyrus.”

“Oh that voice, man, that fucking condescending voice. What do you think you're my dad now?”

Irving shook his head. “I know I'm not your dad.”

“Damn fucking straight you're not my dad! You know, shit, whatever. Have a good breakfast.” He stood, tossing a five onto the table, grabbed his coat and strode out the door. Well, you fucking ass, you ruined everything.

“Yeah, I know,” Irving muttered to his coffee. He filled it to the brim with his flask, took a gulp, and pulled in air through his teeth. It tasted terrible. He filled it again.

Irving stumbled up the driveway, tripping on a patch of ice, fumbling with the right words. She answered on the fifth knock.

“Irving? What are you do – are you drunk?”

“Not really, tried, though. I've been seeing Cyrus.” She didn't say anything. He laughed.

“Not like, dating seeing, Mary. Don't worry.”

“Don't call me Mary,” she muttered.

“We ran into each other and, oh, no, okay, I wanted to run into him. Anyway, it doesn't really matter, but I wanted to meet him and talk to him, and don't worry, I've been good. I'm good now, you know? I've been good for a long time, actually, I'm just – okay, I still drink and that's

bad, okay I admit that Mary, but otherwise I'm good, and I'm trying to help him out because he hasn't been happy, Cyrus, he's been really sad about everything, and, well, Ish of course, and his ex girlfriend and, well, you know, the whole college thing, but he's really talented, you know that?" She nodded. "Yeah, of course you know. Oh, god, Mary, of course you know, I'm sorry. He's scared of being good, god Ish fucked him up so much. Anyway, well, he's angry at me."

"You want me to tell him you came by?"

"No, he can come to me if he wants to talk, he knows that. I think he deserves to apologize – "

"You want him to apologize?" he could see the silent glance of a smile.

"We had a fight. Why aren't you more mad about this?"

"I don't see how you could be a worse person for him to spend time with than anyone else these days. Especially me."

"I don't really understand."

"I don't hate you, Irv. I don't really think I ever did. I was just scared, Irv. I'm still scared."

Kiss her, Irv.

"Well. I'm sorry you're scared. It's a tough time, Mary. Margaret, sorry, Margaret. Fucking horrible. Seemed like the end of things." She nodded. "I'm sorry to drop by like this. Pretty terrible I'd bet."

"It's pretty strange."

Irving laughed. She almost laughed, too. "Yeah, well. I think he's getting better. He's a great guy."

"He is."

Irving took a step back, almost stumbled over onto her, steadied himself, gave her a flourishing bow. “Goodbye, Margaret. I’ll see you if I see you.”

He walked back down the driveway, sobering quickly. Should’ve kissed her, Irv.

In the morning Cyrus and Beatrice walked through the main street of Austel Flats, perusing handcraft stores for nothing at all, and he told her about Irving. “Did your dad ever talk about him?”

“I don’t think I ever heard his name but yeah, kind of. He mentioned a friend every once in a while, and I always thought it was weird because Dad didn’t have any friends. Mom either, but I’m damn sure she and Plainer aren’t friends.”

She picked up two carved wooden turtles and held them near her cheeks, each painted with a different blend of colors on the shell, otherwise identical: “Which one?”

“The blue one, your left cheek, definitely.”

She grinned. “Wrong answer, art boy,” dropped them back onto the pile.

The name reprimanded Cyrus for the unfinished project and the bleak studio, but he pushed it aside deftly by grabbing her left buttock in the palm of his hand, cupping the flesh through her jeans. “Seems like a pretty right answer to me.”

“Ooh, you’re really lame. Like, super duper lame.”

“Super duper?” They cackled with laughter, shoving out the store as the embarrassed cashier watched on.

“So, why do you think he suddenly showed up? The Plainer guy.”

“Nothing like a death to bring people together, I guess.” They walked hand in hand and

other pedestrians had to make their way around the couple. “He found the body, actually. Seems like my dad wanted him to.”

“That's horrible.”

“I dunno. I mean, yeah, it's pretty nasty. Doesn't give him carte blanche into my life, though.”

“He seems like a lonely guy, Cyrus, and he just wants to get to know you better.”

“You weren't there. It was creepy. He's not right. I can't explain it, he's just not – ”

“Happy? Okay with his life?”

“Sure,” Cyrus said without thinking, then, after her comment settled: “That's unfair. None of us are okay with our lives.”

Beatrice sighed, turning from Cyrus and signaling the end of their conversation. He thought about his life, if he was okay in that very moment. Following compulsion, he squeezed her hand, and when he saw the smile under her glare, he almost crumbled from happiness. “Come on, Wolffer, we still gotta go to the homemade hippie soap store. It won't solve your life, but it needs to happen.”

Cyrus pulled Beatrice up against him and kissed her hard on the mouth. Her eyes fluttered open after a moment, lost. “Thank you,” he said.

“For what?” Beatrice asked softly. The air around them grew colder as the sun went down, and they huddled against each other to stay warm, their jackets blending in shadow.

“For giving me that blowjob.” She blushed, pushing him away. “I'm being serious, Bee. Wait – ” he held fast to her arm as she tried to disappear.

“Don't, Cyrus, please.”

“Just listen to me. I'll be fast. Really, it's freezing, I promise.”

“Fine. What.”

“Thank you for that, because,” he sighed, “well, it's the first surprising thing that's happened to me in, well, ever.”

“Your dad killed himself Cyrus,” she spat, then “I – shit, you know what I mean.”

“It's okay, and yeah, okay, but that's not what I'm talking about. That you offered, that I said yes – I'm not impulsive. I'm not used to living my life like that. It's helped.”

“I'll see you soon, Wolffer.” She kissed his cheek. “Be nicer to your mom. She's trying.”

Cyrus needed validation of some kind. The expected roles were not fitting. By accepting Irving, Beatrice became complicit in the fashioning of his life and, though he wasn't sure what it was, something was off with Irving, something crawled in him when they had that meal together, and maybe before – no, definitely before, Cyrus thought, I've known it for a while, the whole time probably. If Cyrus let his mind wander too much the ease with which he might accept Irving – that possibility – he had to remain vigilant to protect the bubble of established family safe.

Changing temperatures had iced over sections of road, but hints of warmth softened the glassy crust so a determined step could crush apart the frozen shield. In the still, dry heat of his car, Cyrus listened to the crunch as the road broke apart. Harrison's house was a long drive from Beatrice's and he was in no hurry. Would Homework be a good ally? The problem was how to present it, how to prove that Irving clearly meant bad news.

Rocks popped out from the wheels as he made a sharp curve, fluting behind the rearview

mirror. The comparison between Dad and Plainer was obvious, so expected it hadn't entered his mind. He's more of a father than Dad was, Cyrus thought, then: Jesus, no he's not. He's jobless. He's a degenerate. He's a creep. "Dad's best friend, too. Yay." The road curved up ahead; Cyrus gunned the accelerator, speeding into the bend.

The sky was clear, a sheen of glowing white lacing the sublime, richly crumbled blue sky, lining the trees with a delicate glimmer of sparks. A doe galloped to the road, ears flicking, taking in the peaceful, clear air. A crunch far off, but nothing too close, it leapt onto the asphalt, heading toward the other side.

Cyrus accelerated into the turn, the wheels veering onto the icy gravel. He saw the doe as it turned to gaze at him. Naturally, Cyrus thought, in his single, crystalline second of silence, I would hit a deer. He slammed the brakes, turning the wheel hard left to get out of its way. The car slurred into a screeching halt, shocking up tufts of frozen earth and slicing away the rubber on his tires. Buckling, the left wheels lifted, turning up the car onto its side. Cyrus released his hands from the wheel but his eyes stayed on the deer, now out the passenger window, watching silently as Cyrus waited for life to flash in front of his eyes: watching the horizon extend out to infinity; Madeline kissing him in a field after a butterfly landed on his shoulder; Mom reading against the windowpane; the black box sinking down. He chose those thoughts. They meant nothing at all. He just didn't want to die.

The car landed back on its feet. The shocks sent him bouncing and his head smacked the car roof. The doe stood still, watching. "Oh, fuck you deer," Cyrus shook as he spoke, laughing through terrified hiccups. "Bet you thought that was fucking hilarious, huh. I wish I did hit you." His hands shook they gripped the steering wheel so tightly. Everything was fine. He was alive.

“You're an idiot, Cyrus,” he grinned. The doe stepped closer. Bolstering himself, he opened the door, stepping around to the animal. It followed his hands as if waiting for a treat. “I'm not going to hurt you, guy.” The doe trembled when he spoke. “Come here, deer. I'm not going to hurt you.” Inches from it, he held out his hand. It sniffed at him, then licked his middle finger, blinked, then ran out across the road into a great white field, untouched by human feet but criss-crossed by animal paths stretching out as far as he could see. In the middle of the field a massive stag watched the doe's approach, its horns curling out to the branching tree crown high above its head. The doe turned from the stag, heading alone into the woods. The stag shook its head and Cyrus thought he could hear the rustle of its ungainly crown cutting against the air; following the doe's path, it shot into the woods and out of sight.

– 16 –

“You're awake.”

“Mom?”

“Yes.”

He smiled. He didn't know why, but he was happy to hear her voice. He wanted her to hug him. “Where are we?”

“Your room. I can leave if you want,” and as she spoke she made motions to stand but Cyrus stayed her with his hand. “You haven't been around much.”

“Oh.”

“It scares me when you aren't around.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Of course.”

“What's wrong, Mom?” he asked limply. “Did I miss curfew?” he tried to joke.

“Cyrus, when will you stop hating me?”

He started to respond before he knew he had nothing to say, no story to tell. He could see the dim shape of the ceiling smoke detector, the watching sentinel, gazing down at him. “I don't know.”

“Right.”

“You should have just told me.”

“I know. I was scared.”

“Yeah, well, you should have opened to me.”

“What did I do, Cyrus, that you didn't do right back?”

“You ran! You ran into yourself!”

“So did you! You shot back to school and didn't say a word to me for weeks! Ten second voicemails that you need money. You didn't answer my calls. I had to assume you were alive. And not just after the funeral. For years you've been silent to me – ”

“And this is your revenge?”

“Oh, get over yourself, kid.” Silence descended, threatened to stay. She stood. A footfall, slowly, then another. “I'm sober, you know. I've been sober for over a week.” He hadn't noticed. He had not even thought about it. “You've changed so much, recently, the past year. You feel like a stranger.” He ran the word over his teeth. He couldn't think of her birthday or her middle name.

“Mom?” he called out, nervous to speak but afraid she might leave. “You don't have to

go.”

Her hand ran across his hair and rested on his forehead. “I love you, honey. I’ve been scared, but I’m trying to be here now, okay? I’m not going to go anywhere.”

He said nothing. He lay there with her hand on his head, and let it be warm.

No fair!

Dad gets you lots of presents. He’s allowed to give me one every once in a while.

No, I want a present! She rips the package. It’s a picture of a lady. Mommy laughs. What’s funny?

Does it look like someone you know?

The hair is dark and she’s a big black shape. No.

Really?

It looks like you a bit but weird. You’re prettier.

She rubs her hand through my hair. Thank you, honey. I think it is me, though.

Did Daddy make it for you? Is that why it’s a picture of you?

I think so.

Do you want me to make a picture of you?

Only if you’d like, honey.

You look weird in that picture.

She laughs again. I agree. I look at her and she is looking at the picture and she looks sad.

I don’t like the picture. I pull her arm. She does not look at me. I pull again. Yes, Cyrus?

Why did Daddy make you look weird in the picture?

The house had been cleaned. Mom read in the living room with a glass of water on the table beside her. Bud Powell played loud enough on the speakers so she didn't hear Cyrus enter. Her fingers slid across the side of the page, lifting a single sheave off the pile, arcing it over then, with her other hand, smoothing it flat; turning her head, she rubbed at her neck; so much deliberation in her movements, each graced with purpose. Elegant as a dancer's legs, she picked up the glass, lifting the rim to her lips, and drank. Their eyes met. "Hi," Cyrus smiled.

"You surprised me."

"Do you want to take a ride, Mom?" she nodded. "Great. Can we take your car?"

She studied the space without hurry, with calm determination. Cyrus waited by the entryway, just as Plainer had done with him. She sat on the bed, smelled the sheets. When she passed the kitchen she opened the fridge. After a while she just stared out the windows. "Why did he never let me see it?" she asked, not necessarily to him. She looked over at Cyrus, her face flat, her expression hidden under layers of stone. He was afraid to hear what she invariably asked next: "Why you? Why always you?"

"Dad – he never showed me the studio. I was first here over a week ago."

"Oh," she smiled. "Irv showed you." Once more a child, Cyrus looked down at his shoelace, too embarrassed to respond. Finally he nodded, peeking up at her. She had turned back to the windows.

"You okay Mom?" they were back in the car.

“Your father and I were not happy for a long time, Cyrus.”

“I know, Mom.”

“We weren't always unhappy. I want you to know that. We were so happy once, so unbelievably happy. He used to braid my hair when he woke up before me, and he would hum. He was so quiet but I would always wake up and lay there with my eyes closed while he hummed. It was always really beautiful, what he did. He was so good with his hands.”

“Gross, Mom,” he smiled.

“You know, when you were just a baby the four of us would have picnics on campus. Everyone would stare because I was so young when I had you, and your dad was getting a reputation. It was fun, you know, flaunting everything. And Irv was so good with you. He's your godfather, you know.” Cyrus nodded. “I guess he would have told you. I wish you told me you had met him again. But that's okay, I understand. Take the back road here, the view is beautiful.” Cyrus obeyed, turning onto the scene of his earlier accident. “I wish I still loved him. It would have been better, I think, for everything.”

“Did he still love you, though?”

She shook her head. “I think his work was too much for him to handle. After you started to become you and not just my baby I don't think there was room for anyone else. Irving was just his protection. They both needed each other.”

“Mom?” She leaned over, keeping her eyes out the window. The sun came through the glass of cloud, a soft yolk burning behind frost. “Why did I never meet him? Plainer?”

“He used to hate when people called him that, even Ishmael. He must like you a lot.” The sound of her hands rubbing together drifted between the sounds of the tires and the engine. “I

dated him for a little while, you know.”

“I know.”

She laughed, a single burst. “Of course you do. Well, fair's fair. I wasn't very nice to him about it. He loved your father a lot, and it really hurt when Ishmael took me away from him. He loved me more than I realized. Maybe Ishmael knew.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No,” she scoffed. “I told Ishmael he had, though. I was just scared. I couldn't be around him anymore. It was too much, with you, with him and his drugs, with your father's career,” she dropped off.

“Did you still, you know, love him?” The story unspooled over silence as she would not say another word.

The field rose up in the window, fiery blue in the light. Craters made from the shadows of animal tracks made the field into a moon or some barren heaven, peaceful and mute. Cyrus parked and she got out, holding her coat tight to keep warm. Cyrus stepped round the car to rub her back. She folded into his embrace and, together, they watched the shimmer of day make its necessary way into night.

Mary sits between us at Ishmael's much-coveted Basquiat lecture: He caught an ethos and made it his own, the man says. He shows no slides. Ish looks over her head at me, eyes rolled. Generally that means we leave, but Ish just pulls out three more cigarettes. Mary sighs, toying with her cigarette instead of smoking it, teasing it through her hands. Those hands. Want to actually see some art? I whisper in her ear. A shy smile breaks across her face. I motion to Ish,

and we shuffle up.

My studio's huge so Ish and I share it. Crumbling hunks of plaster shape the center of the room while canvas covers every inch of wall. Ish paints next to the gaping window, while I mess with the pile of crap that breeds in the dumpsters of nearby towns: broken TVs, wire hangers, the occasional stuffed animal, odd materials to use as paint: burnt bone, glitter, glue, hair dye, honey, and, one lucky day, a bag of blood. On Ish's good judgment, I used gloves. Wow, she says, gaping at the mess. She beelines towards a painting of a dancer crumpled on some rocks. This yours? She asks.

No, his, I say. Ish leans against the doorway. He loves watching people look at art. Asshole artist genius, I think. I almost say it aloud, hoping Mary might laugh, but she's in awe of the painting, already bending down so it envelops her face. Ish has been painting with heavy daubs so the painting itself is textured, rising off the surface of the canvas toward her as if the two forces magnetically attract. I glance at Ish. His hand is over his mouth, his head slightly askew. He's in rapture staring at her; I could probably nab his wallet and the fucker wouldn't notice – he's getting obsessed, clear in his every move, in his current lack of movement.

As if suddenly remembering her role, Mary stands and asks what I've been working on. Lost in my own daze, it takes me a second to remember to respond, but I manage to say: Over here! and point somewhere in the direction of my side of the studio. Let her find something great.

Ish keeps staring. I don't think he realized that she even talked to me. Not sure he remembers I'm in the room. In my own studio, where he is a guest. My throat has the caked

scratchiness of a night of screaming and coke. He follows Mary as she ambles towards my Edifice No. 2, a cracked rock with spurts of pigment, spikes and toys vomiting from the top like an offering.

This is really frightening, Irv. Mary's talking to me. I look over and wish I hadn't: crumpled in dismay, she piteously tries to hide her disgust.

Really frightening, Mary, but there's a lot of power in it. The passion tells us there's something else going on, something beautiful we can't see. Next to me, Ish spouts a panegyric about my work – I've never hated it more, but I lap up every single word.

Ishmael Wolffer. Arbiter of my life.

– 17 –

“Whaleman's again?”

Irving pored absently over the face before him. It spoke again: “Care for yer usual? Whaleman's? Or in the mood for something else? Maybe the Skipper.”

Why didn't you kiss her, Irv? Your chance, gone.

“Never any chance.”

“I'm sorry sir, what was that? No change?” Irving grumbled. “Well, that sounds like a Whaleman to me! I'll get that underway and get you some coffee while you wait,” she started walking away. Instinctively Irving raised his hand, hacking phlegm as he prepared to ask for “two mugs, right? Here ya go!” Placed in front of him, she filled one to the brim, gave him a smile, then slowly poured the other. They were identical: liquid at the same level, steam skating

the ambiguous face, crack in the lip. He didn't want coffee. Staying awake seemed pointless; what was there to stay awake for, anyway? He couldn't afford to keep staying at the motel so there wouldn't be a bed for him soon, anyway. There were no jobs he could see, except the gallery idea and that was dependent on a fantasy and Irving was never much good at fantasies.

"It's a gift you're gone, Ish," Irving murmured, unsure whether or not he was being sarcastic. "I'd like to think that's why you pushed him away," he sucked his teeth, wishing the coffee was sharper, "but we both know that's not true, is it?"

"Your Whaleman's, sir! Gave you extra bacon, too, on the house."

"Mmm," Irving mustered as she walked away. She's cute. "Not as cute as Mary, though. We both know that, Ish."

You're talking to yourself, Irv.

"I'm talking to you. Couldn't be happy, could you? Yeah, just had to throw it all to shit." He slathered whipped butter on the slab of sugar-dusted french toast, watching it seep through its heady pores. "All to shit, and now what? Fucking nothing, Ish." People glanced over at Irving's impatient gesticulations. He saw the heads move and ignored them; in reverie, Irving would not stop: "You left your family, and with what? Think you're high and mighty bossing them all around, leaving us all miserable, just cause you're miserable, cause your work is dull and repetitive and you couldn't get hard? Cause your son's better than you? Cause I was happy and you took it away, and for what? To make a shell? Ha!"

Ripping an egg in two, Irving spooned up both halves and gulped them down with the rest of his coffee. "Another, please!" he called out to the waitress. "This Whaleman hits the spot!"

You're making a scene, Irv.

“Irving Plainer, hiding away, getting sloshed when he can to ease the bite. You know the worst feeling to give another friend? Pity. You know what? I pity you, Ish.”

“Sir, is everything all right?”

“No, ma'am, it is not all right, thank you for asking. I have had a really difficult time recently. My friend died.”

“I'm sorry to hear that,” she poured more coffee, having opted for decaf, and glanced worryingly at her other customers.

“As am I. I apologize for making a scene right now. I'm just really enjoying this breakfast. You know, sometimes, when you're eating breakfast, and you just have to say what's going on, what's on your mind?”

“Uhm, well – ”

“I'm in love with my dead best friend's wife. And his kid, too. Not like that, I know what you're thinking, I know what's going on in your mind, no, not like that. Want a slice of bacon? It's really good, my compliments.”

“That's fine, sir, thank you. Would it be possible to just, perhaps, be a little –”

“Quieter, right? Be silent? That makes sense. I'm causing a scene. I'm probably making your job pretty difficult right now.” She did not answer, but looked over at the manager, whose hairy arms scowled into a pretzel by the swinging kitchen doors. “Your boss looks pissed. Okay, you know what? I'm going to take the check, that's what I'll do. I'll eat fast, too. Real fast, just get me the check.” She hurried away.

“Hey everybody!” Irving shouted. All heads, already on him, blinked. “I have two things

to say. First, this Whaleman's breakfast is delicious. Really the best, I mean, fuckin' incredible."

The manager started walking over. Irving pulled out his wallet. "Second, and I promise I'll be brief: don't give up just cause someone else wants you to. So what if they're right, right? You'll never know. Just fucking do it. Here you go, sir," Irving shoved some bills at the manager before he could speak, "you have a great establishment here. Remember what I said though. Dreams may be bullshit, but they're still yours. Don't give them away. Words of wisdom. Now I'm off to prove a point. Have a great breakfast, denizens of the Lighthouse!"

Cyrus picked up immediately. "Hi."

"Hey, kid! Glad you picked up the phone. We had a pretty weird conversation a few days ago so I wasn't sure if you'd pick up now."

"Well, yeah, I did."

"Yes you did, Cyrus. Yes you did. Thank you." Silence on the line. Irving stopped at the corner, pulled out a cigarette, lit it. It tasted terrible, black ash sniping the ribs of his mouth. He pulled it from his lips, snapped it in half, and tossed the pieces into street sludge.

"Anyway, Cyrus, you're probably wondering why I called. I was hoping we could chat, maybe continue our conversation."

"Uh, well –"

"But you're hesitant. Maybe you don't want to. Well, you know what? I'm just going to say some things right now then, okay? I think I am allowed, and if you don't give a shit that's fine, kid, but I think you should listen." Irving adamantly set off down the street, speeding past the huddled bodies. He unzipped his jacket and inhaled the freezing air. "Cyrus, you're a fucking

incredible artist. You're better than your dad, your better than I ever was certainly, you're really talented. But you don't know it. Why? Because your asshole father wouldn't give you any credit and made you feel like a failure. You know why else? Cause you're a spoiled, arrogant teen who likes to think he's terrible because it's easy. Get the fuck over yourself, kid. I've been where you are, maybe I'm there now, but it's tiring as shit and you need to put your energy elsewhere, got it?"

"Irving – "

"Not finished yet, kid. I know I'm not your father, Cyrus. I'm not an idiot. I'm probably insane, but I'm not a fool. I know your father well, better than you did, and I know that we're different people. Why? Because I would never fucking kill myself," Irving screamed.

"Jesus christ, Plainer!" the tinny voice came through. "Stop it, just stop it!"

"No! Not yet! We've been swallowed by this lunatic for over twenty years! Your whole life was enslaved to someone that refused to acknowledge you."

"That's not true, goddammit!"

Irving turned, heading onto quieter roads toward the small estate houses. "And you know what? He's dead and he's still bossing us around! Still! The Ishmael show 'til I die, fucking god, Cyrus, don't you see that?"

No response.

"You're still on the line, Cyrus, I know you are. Just tell me you're on the line."

"Yes," the phone admitted.

"Your mom's suffered the worst, kid. She's the most beautiful person I've ever met, she's a genius too, fucking incredible. She made him great. And look at her man. Look what happened to

her – he ate out her soul, her organs, her fucking heart, and that shell just wants to stay warm.”

Turning again, Irving walked uphill.

“You're scaring me, Irving.”

“Cyrus, if you don't kick your ass into gear I'm going to do it for you and if you push me off a cliff for it, fine, but I'm not giving up again and fuck you if you ask me to.”

The line went dead. Irving slammed on the door, stepped back and, staring up at the house, screamed “Cyrus! Mary!” Nothing. “Cyrus!” he shouted again, “come out here, kid! I won't leave until you do!” The door tore open. Lined with daylight, Cyrus straddled the entryway. Irving began to scream again, stopped, stared at the kid. Seems taller, he thought. “Hey, kid.”

Cyrus took a step forward so Irving could see his face. Red, bulging eyes belayed the uncontrollable shaking that he failed to stop. Irving realized that he'd been shaking, too. “Mom's still asleep. You need to shut the fuck up.”

Irving walked up to Cyrus, held out his hand. “I don't want to hurt you, kid.”

“Yeah?” he was terrified. “Cause you seem like you're about to start shooting. You're insane.”

Irving laughed. “Yeah, I think I am. Sorry.”

Cyrus smiled angrily. “And it's fucking freezing, so if you have anything else to say, do it fast.” He glanced down at Irving's extended hand, but did not move his crossed arms.

“I, well, shit kid, I just needed to – ” he fell forward on Cyrus, half-collapse, half-hug. He shuddered. “Don't hate me, kid, please. I just can't let, fuck.”

Cyrus reached around and gave Irving an awkward pat on the bag. Irving laughed again,

his face tickling; he was crying. "It's okay, Plainer. It's okay."

"I'm really lonely, kid. It sucks a lot."

"Yeah, it all sucks a lot. But it's going to be okay, I think. I think it has to be."

Irving grinned. "You know," he said, hunching over Cyrus' shoulder, "I have an idea. I think it's a good one, too."

"So long as it includes getting off my shoulder. This is heavy and embarrassing." Irving stood, looked at Cyrus. He saw Mary and Ish, but someone else, too. Someone new. "Want some breakfast?"

"Breakfast, huh? I could always go for a bite."

III

THE TIDE

– 18 –

She does not know I'm awake. She rolls the tights until they are short as socks then unfurls the overcast blue over the marble curve of her calf, up to the top of her thigh. Bending, the teeth of her spine rise at a lope; she runs her hands down to smooth out folds in the fabric before standing upright to look out the window.

Her legs are wrapped; a beaded chain, each larger than the last surrounding an eyeball-sized green-gold opal, hangs from her thin neck; the rest is bare. Pale skin, pink splotching against skim-milk. Too thin, her ribs sigh when she does. I shift for a better view and she glances over at the sound then back out at the field beyond my room. A pensive twitch ripples down from her forehead – I take quiet pleasure in recognizing such small disturbances within her.

She walks to the edge of the bed and deftly latches the draped bra behind her back to holster her fragile breasts. She throws on a flannel shirt, mine, and shoves her feet into a pair of large black cowboy boots. I do not know why she's rushing; we were going to lay in bed all day. After confirming I'm still asleep, she grabs her purse and slips out the room.

She's gone before I know she is. A ghost wisping, a phantom playing out a worn-in scene. Not a person. Not my Madeline. The spot on the bed where she had so recently been is cold. I keep seeing her putting on the tights, again and again, as I turn and stare at the colorless ceiling. Over and again, all I have left, strange images that cling as she fades.

I cannot bear her being gone. I've had enough of it. She's just stepped out, I think, stretching over the cold bed. She's coming back.

There's a soundtrack to the changing seasons: the rustle of animals, the shouts of children running outside; the whistle before spring rain; moans of ecstasy, naked breasts heaving, pricked with sweat; the low rumble of sprouting as colors return to their old territory and the bursting, arrogant sun chews through months of cold; running bodies rejecting the weight of apathy, shouting out hope, creating it by force of will. Finally warm enough, Irving and Cyrus opened the giant loading dock, letting it breathe while they relished the fresh air.

Margaret picked young flowers from the garden and put them in a glass of water in Cyrus' room. Once he left for the studio she sat down by his desk with a notebook and started to draw them, humming while she hatched in shadows. She boxed up the papers in Ishmael's office and cleaned it top to bottom, exploring his various souvenirs and reading his vintage editions of Dostoevsky, Thoreau, and Melville. He wrote notes on index cards and stored them in the books, often questions on the text, interspersed with the occasional, assured statement. They were so vapid, some of them, that she would laugh and cover her mouth, embarrassed to be thinking ill of the dead; but she wouldn't stop reading, and every once in a while she would have to quietly giggle at his crude formulations.

Irving slept in the studio. Broke, he accepted when Cyrus and Margaret offered to buy his groceries. He went through Ishmael's hundreds of paintings, noting the date, the series, assessing value. Sometimes he ran into pieces he had never seen before and would stop to take in the work: new secrets to fill into the man he knew, he would think to himself, though after a while he spent less time with each – there were only so many secrets he wanted to know and only so much each painting could say; the more information he gathered, the less it all seemed to matter.

For a week, Cyrus did nothing but stare at the massive painting his father had tried to

make. He didn't get it. At one time it had made sense, but as he spent hours staring its meaning clouded until he stood miles away trying to define an ambiguous shape. I should know, he told Beatrice, curled in her arms. I should know what it all means. He said it's for me and I can't figure it out. How do I not know? She rocked him like a baby and told him that it would make sense, she knew it would. He just needed to grow up, she thought, but she didn't say it.

There were dozens of cast guns now, running up and down the length of windows. As they went down the line, a little piece of each was painted, so that by the end it appeared an ugly black mass and on the other a perfect, matte ivory; in between, a swarm of colors sang out, rising above the white light and the gray room. Irving and Cyrus matched Ishmael's paintings to the guns, taking snapshots of the best paintings and placing them underneath each gun.

Irving watched Cyrus pore over the painting. He looked miserable. He talked to himself, ran his fingers through his hair and bit his lip until it bled. "Fuck, Dad!" he finally screamed, falling to the floor, exhausted by the useless search. Irving kneeled so they were at the same level, staring up at the massive, ugly swath of paint. "It's not as mysterious as it seems. He's trying to capture a moment in every way possible, but it's just a moment, it can't be more than an image." Cyrus watched Irving's gaze as it adeptly climbed the paint. His eye followed strands of the painting, individual stories that Cyrus could not see. "Your dad was never very good at saying what he felt, so he tried painting it instead." He ran his fingers over the lines of dry, earth-dark blood. "Not really that helpful, huh. But that's how it is."

"You should finish it. He wouldn't want it to be left like this." Irving started to protest but there was nothing to say. Cyrus was right. Ish would never want it to be seen like this, even if it was the closest he had come to being, finally, honest. Irving didn't want to see it unfinished

either. He accepted.

He'd never seen Beatrice so nervous; she would not stop shivering the whole drive over, peeking mousily at the trees while Cyrus tapped his thumbs against the steering wheel. That he was not nervous, he only recognized later, was sort of absurd. Mom beamed when he saw them. A flower stuck out from behind her ear and she wore orange clogs. "Hey, Mom," Cyrus snorted, "nice hippie look."

She blushed. Beatrice slapped his arm. "You were asking for it, bucko. Hi!" she turned to Margaret. "I'm Beatrice! I'm sure Cyrus has said very little about me, but it is wonderful to finally meet you, Margaret."

"Margaret? He's gone so far as to tell you my name?"

"After some arm-twisting. He's pretty fond of you, believe it or not." Cyrus, ears red, glared at the women. Not even in the house and his presence was incidental. Hopefully Plainer would drop by and cause some needed havoc.

They ate duck medallions over wild rice, mache greens with sweet lemon dressing, and broccolini, kissed by broccoli rabe's bitterness but overwhelmingly fresh and delicate. Since she stopped drinking, Margaret had been cooking obsessively, starting with recipes and now, off on her own, crafting illogically delicious meals, relishing odd flavor conjunctions, mixing palettes both surprising and comforting. Cyrus had not noticed her sea change until a glass of flowers greeted him one morning when he woke. She used to place flowers all through the house, cultivating the space as if it were part of her garden. It would smell of sweet grass and he'd run through the house chased by her long, tickling fingers. When he saw the flowers his past opened

and hugged him close, rubbing his belly. He thought about those times when they were a family of Wolffers, those small moments between the chasms of loneliness at the dinner table, those endless nights when the flowers were gone and the house smelled cold and mean. Every day that the house blossomed with the warm embrace oven steam and spring's colors, Cyrus nestled further into the hope that it would stay this way, that his mom would be the force he wanted her to be, for the hideous past to wither in the presence of their newfound strength; Irving had even come over – united through a common sadness and common relief at its slow passing, they fell into an unspoken rhythm. It all seemed possible, even destined; when he saw her come home from a jog he didn't think twice, just basked in the rightness of it all. He could not remember any other way, or the possibility that things could circle back.

“No! He did not make that! Oh, it's so cute!” the two women played with a clay sneaker Cyrus had made in first grade, sort of a malformed block with a loop for laces. “Cyrus, I think you hit your peak at six.”

“Haw haw haw,” Cyrus shot back, miserably embarrassed. Mom rubbed his arm but he brushed her off.

“Oh, honey, come on.”

“Dinner was delicious, Mom, really, but I think Beatrice needs to go soon.”

“Nope, not working until tomorrow night. I have all the time in the world.”

“How is that? Working at night?”

“Could be worse, but I always want to sleep through the morning and I really love mornings, so it's sort of alienating. The money's great though. I'm saving up to go cross-country, so I'm definitely not complaining.”

Cyrus perked: going across country? Why was she going? Where? When? “Where are you going?” Margaret asked.

“Heading to California. There are some great schools in the north, and I could get a job, take classes, hopefully open a restaurant in a few years. I know, big plans, but I just need to get out of the east coast. And the produce there, wow!”

“Oh, absolutely, absolutely! That sounds wonderful, Beatrice.” Cyrus nodded. She's leaving. Something else that will end, only this time he could see it coming. He could see life changing but could not make any moves to work the inevitable to his advantage. He always thought the tragedies in his life could be avoided with warning, and it seemed unfair to have to accept that all he had the power to do was wait.

Scraping away layers of useless paint, Irving tried to find the urgent core screaming for release in *For Cyrus*. He knew when he was edging closer to its pinnacle, when he needed to uncover a bit more or start the section over – most of it was already there, just covered over. The areas Irving would have to recreate would be a process of embodiment, of becoming Ishmael and feeling his relationship to the paint. He knew the story of the piece though. He could fill in that much easily.

The scraps became a pile. The pile became a heap. At the end of three days, Irving saw the image he was meant to edit. It was hard to find the ship, covered by so many layers of thick oil, but when he found it everything else shot into place. He could channel Ishmael's desires out of the painting. He stepped back to take it all in: with the body of forgotten paint lying in front of the canvas, it was as though Ishmael's suicide note to Irving – the pool of blood, the sharp

beam of light slashing through the paint to the still body – had been inverted, as though Irving had tapped into the death and brought the faintest glimmer of life from it. He'd almost forgotten seeing the body, it happened so long ago, he thought, but the moment he stepped back it came rushing. He hated the burden and knew he would have to carry it until the end, but, staring at the work, mastering what clouded Ishmael could not, Irving thought he could begin to accept that he did not deserve to shoulder it. It did give him the right, he thought proudly, perhaps defiantly, to scrape and edit: to make Ishmael the tool for once, the thing to be subsumed for the work to be great.

“Wish I had some coke,” he said, hands on his hips. Ah, well. That part of his life ended a long time ago. He would just have to deal with it head-on. A learning experience. “Thanks, Ish. Always pushing me.”

Splayed across the plush layers of Homework's den, Cyrus pretended to disappear. First my spine will suck away, and then everything will follow its wake: my ribs, my ass, my legs and arms, and finally my head, too, will be unable to stay out of the pull and it will be gone and no one will find me and I won't find them and there won't be a single thought in my head because it does not exist.

Beatrice will be gone. Madeline's gone. Dad's gone. Irving will probably be gone, soon. What will Mom be? How can she stay Mom? Nothing sank, merely bobbed, buoys calling out from the fog, more clearly discernible the harder he tried to ignore them. Lifting a heavy hand, he ran his fingers over the small scar from the bong glass, a wound that had healed so long ago he almost forgot it happened. He must have been a child then.

Cyrus glanced over at Harrison as he tread through the carpet dunes of his cave, headphones eclipsing the sides of his head, swinging his hips, elbows rising and falling to the faint rhythm. When he first got back from school Cyrus had come here, too. Every time he was afraid he tried to sink away, nestle in the smoke-hot dark. Harrison looked over and smiled loosely, the pieces not quite forming a whole. His squinty eyes seemed to fade in and out of focus, landing on Cyrus, the wall, maybe nowhere at all. 'Yo,' he mouthed. Cyrus smiled blankly. Always the same thing, over and over. The high ran its course, leaving his mind exhausted but restless. I'm tired of dealing with this, he thought, and not dealing with everything else. Like gum stuck on the bottom of his shoe, tugging with every step – Cyrus was sick of being high.

Beatrice is going to leave and I don't know how to tell her not to. I cannot bear to see Mom happy because what if she's sad again? She'll be sad again, Cyrus thought. That's the way of it. And I won't know what to do. I can't even understand the damn painting and he left it for me. It's all crumbling, everything that seemed right is falling apart. Like those dancers out on the rocks, beautiful, and you're happy when you see them, but soon you just expect them to fall, break their perfect legs on the slippery rocks, and they'll fall into the sea and disappear. Or worse. They'll just fall onto the sand, broken, squawking, waiting to wither, be found, dragged away.

He pictured Dad painting the dancer. He keeps his arm loose, rocking from heel to toe. Dabbing the canvas, he leans until he's about to fall then pulls himself back, terrified. He makes a line, a crude curve. He does not touch what he's made: a leg, caught in fear. He leans back again until his brain gasps, then whips towards the painting, slashing with his brush. The other leg. Both caught in the ecstasy of fear. He had never imagined his father painting before. He just

assumed it happened. It must have been terrifying to watch, the paintings were often so terrifying to look at. Culled by fear, seeking impossible refuge in the ocean. He never made it to the ocean, not really, except as a voyeur. Untouchably beautiful, even for Ishmael; the boat could never be home. Poor Dad.

“I got it!” Cyrus yelled, breaking the room's silence.

“What?” Harrison screamed over his headphones. Cyrus propped himself up on his elbows, working his way to his feet.

“I figured it out,” Cyrus said.

“Yo!” Harrison replied, red-eyed, squinting past Cyrus at the fluttering wallpaper, colors exploding onto one another, forming, ultimately, nothing at all.

– 19 –

He painted quickly, sketching the form. Detail would come later, but the image's essence, the burst of inspiration at Harrison's, needed to be found out as quickly as possible. He worked on an easel Irving had set up for him. He hated the hanging method his dad had used – it seemed like a joke.

Dad had always hated portraits. They scared him, and after a while they scared Cyrus, too. He could never get it right. Too much pressure to capture the person as they would want to be. Or how he would want to capture them. He had tried and tried, and nothing ever came together. When he failed to capture his father, there didn't seem to be any point in trying to capture anyone else.

The eye formed in two clean strokes, the nose in a third. He jotted out the balustrades of the ship, the mast erupting behind the figure, the hollow formed by his collarbone, the thin muscles of his chest and stomach and the hearty build of his arms. The dark, rude jolt of hair. With every line Cyrus knew what would be added next, what needed to take up that part of the blank canvas.

Irving whistled from the other end of the studio. An excellent whistler. He was painting, too. He painted in slashes. Dad probably painted in slashes, too – far too excited to take the time and measure out the lines, unsure of handling the thoughts that could come with that sort of dedication. Similar men, all three of them. It took a long time for Cyrus to see it. He wished he could tell Dad. “Hey Plainer!”

“Yeah, kid?”

“Shut up!” Irving laughed, and Cyrus laughed, too. The sounds mixed as they echoed so that they were laughing as one, fading until all Cyrus could hear was the brush rubbing against canvas, and the impatient sound of his breathing. Then, after a minute, the whistling again. God, what an asshole, Cyrus thought, grinning. Nice to feel protected, even if only by a whistle.

That's nice, Dad always said, when Cyrus showed him a sketch portrait. My nose doesn't really look like that though, does it, big guy? When Cyrus would frown he would say he was just kidding, but of course he wasn't. Cyrus glanced at the nose. Bang on perfect. Wonder if Ishmael would approve? Cyrus wondered, taking in what he'd made, letting his anxious hands have a minute to themselves. Probably not. Ah, well. What does he know? He dabbed his brush against the palette and went back to work.

Painting high still fresh, Cyrus bounded up the stairs to Beatrice's apartment. She greeted him in a daze, hand crinkling a sheaf of papers. He took the cover from her, reading it from behind her as he rubbed against her back. An acceptance letter to UCSF. He turned her round to look her in the face. She had been crying, face the dulling color between excited, blushing pink and miserable, blotching sour-red. He held her, whispered "congratulations, Bee" in her ear, squeezed out the air between them, keeping her attached while he could.

Irving strolled through the house looking for Cyrus. Only weeks earlier, the thought of this allowance was beyond him, the house a distant shadow of hope, a joke to prod against his withered pride. Now, as he ran his hands over the fabric of the kitchen stool and the cool wood banister leading upstairs, Irving felt confident to peruse with impunity.

He expected to feel Ishmael throughout the house. Flecks of him cracking off walls, his ghost rattling the glass, but he was nowhere to be found. His paintings stuck out insistently from the walls, but the images faded listlessly the longer he spent looking at them. Ish had no power here. Instead, Irving was drawn to old pieces by Cyrus. Metal work scattered throughout the corners, crude certainly, but Irving studied each of them, particularly fond of the texturality of the raw materials that had been haphazardly pressed together, bound by still visible splotches of copper, each carefully positioned, probably by Mary, so as to add to their overall impression. The house had been cultivated with care through her strength of will, chipping away at a mass of limestone until a smooth, muscle-bound Amazon remained, proudly standing on the rubble that once held it prisoner.

A clink sounded from upstairs, a single ping announcing human presence as subtly as a raised hand. Irving followed it to the second floor. At each step he heard a new noise: the rustle of fabric, an exerted huff, the shuffle of harried feet. The bedroom door splayed, bathing the hall in a stream of light cut through again and again as a body passed by the unseen window. “Great, Mary, another ring,” the voice inside muttered. Surprisingly masculine, strong and sober, but definitely her. He peeked in the door, careful to stand in the shadows outside and out of sight. The first thing he saw was a massive, clear plastic bag, bloated with bottles; littered around it were cleaners – for wood, for glass, for carpet – sponges, towels; finally, his eyes gathered on her: hunched in gray sweats, Mary rubbed furiously at a stain on the carpet. Her hair hung down over her face in a black waterfall. She sighed, hair fluttering out near where her mouth must have been. “Fuck me,” she said. Irving hadn't remembered how foul her voice could be, before Cyrus was born and she mastered the self-edit. She always assumed an audience, except now, and Irving hesitated to let her see him here. Hiding outside view of the door, he knocked against the wall. “Margaret? You in there?”

The scratching sound stopped. “Irving?” Irving nodded. “Irving?”

“Oh, yes, sorry. I nodded.”

“I must have missed it,” she laughed. Such an unplanned, sweet sound! It spilled over him in nourishing waves. He turned despite himself and stood in the doorway. She was already looking up, expecting it, and gave him a broad grin. “Grab a sponge or get out, Plainer.”

“You too, with the Plainer?”

She laughed again, then threw the sharp-bristled brush at him. “I'm serious. You stay, you work.” Irving nodded, and this time she saw it.

“I don't believe for a second that nothing is wrong. Tell me. Speak, boy,” Beatrice prodded Cyrus in the back, nibbling his shoulder, “or I'll slap you again.”

Cyrus languidly tried to muster a response. “Hmmm,” was as far as he got.

“Okay, so it's probably about that letter today. I've figured that much out. Would it help if I was naked again? She twisted around so that she sat on his thighs, pulling the paper-thin t-shirt over her head. “Pretty great, huh?”

“You're really sexy,” Cyrus mumbled.

“That was the least sexy thing you've ever said to me. I want to give back the sex we just had.”

“I'm sorry, I – ” She bit her lip, more exasperated than cute. Cyrus didn't know what to say. If he said anything, he was afraid his reasons would fade to nothing. She would call him stupid. She would tell him he was an idiot. Then she would leave, but – “You're leaving.”

Her face dropped. “Not right now, Cyrus.”

“But you will. You're going to be gone. Poof, vanished. I know a lot about things being gone. People.”

“Shit, Cyrus, it's not like that,” she said, voice tapering as she turned away.

He wanted to hold her, but was afraid she would shirk from his touch and he couldn't handle that. “I know I'm being melodramatic. I know it.”

“You're being kind of an asshole, actually.” She stood, leaning to grab her shirt, then walked away so he could watch her pointedly stretch it over her back. “I'm not trying to hurt you, you know. You should see that.”

I should see that. I should see that the nose curves differently. The eyes are further apart. Why don't you see those things, Cyrus? He stood, his mind swarming. Stop thinking about yourself, Cyrus. Stop assuming you know it all, Cyrus. Just give it up. "Bee, wait – you're right. Of course you're right. I mean," he sighed, stood, "I'm not very used to dealing with things like this. And I'm scared. And I care a lot about you, more than I thought I could."

"More than you wanted to."

"I didn't think I was really ready to care about people again. After my dad, after, I don't know, my whole family fell apart – "

She turned, glaring at him. "It's a shitty excuse, Cyrus. I'm sorry that your dad is dead, but he's dead. And you're a capable guy, and you've gotten over it. You're just scared of pushing forward."

"But I'm not!" he squeaked.

"I'm scared, too, but I can't just stay here doing nothing!" she bit at him. Staring into his eyes, he felt the resentment she had towards him, sensed the thought out truth in her words. "Not forever. You have your life, Cyrus, but I don't. And it's easy for you, and that's great, but you have to see that not everyone has that. I don't have that."

Thunderstruck, Cyrus fell back to the bed. His body was still, his mind roared nonsense. A touch and he would fall over dead. She took a step closer. His eyes struggled to focus on her knees but they kept slipping, blurring into fuzz and then, back for a second, growing into pure color. She spoke but he could not understand through the thick, woody turf wrapping his head, drying, tightening, choking him down. I have a life. So grossly obvious it made him sick. "I finished a portrait of my father." Her face came down in front of his. He focused on it. It watched

him, the anger gone. Warm again, ready to take him in. "I've never been able to do it before. And I just made it. I think it's really good, too."

She leaned closer to his face. "That's great, Cyrus," she whispered, still looking at him, her eyes open. "That's an accomplishment." He nodded. It is.

"I'm proud of you for getting into school," he said. "You know that?" She nodded. "We'll figure this out, right?" She nodded again. "Would you kiss me if I asked you to?"

"Fuck you," she grinned, pushing her lips against his. She felt so warm against him.

All in boxes, Irving unloaded the fifteen plaster guns in the back room of the gallery. They would go up last, after the paintings, meant to echo their palette and the feel of them. Still, Irving couldn't wait and, slipping a pen knife between the tape, peeled open the top box. Under a wad of crushed brown wrapping paper, a triangular bulge of bubble-wrap lay ready to touch. He lifted it up, squinting to determine which one it was: The Home. Cyrus had named them based on the painting that served as inspiration. Unwrapping the cast, Irving ran a hand over the dimpled handle, the trigger, the smooth slide. The gun casts were not identical; Cyrus made three molds, one with the gun safetied, the other ready to fire, the final, beautifully, with the slide pulled back and the empty barrel visible.

This one, safety on, had striated bands of yolk-yellow running down the barrel, and the handle burst in a sky-blue shock of sunrise. Half-illustration, half renunciation of Ishmael's "House By The Sea," a rare painting of his without water as direct subject. Instead, the house's windows, squared in the center of the frame, reflected crashing waves behind the viewer. A clever painting.

Perhaps a pound, the cast was certainly lighter than the actual, but, still, carried the same heft in his hand. His palm wrapped behind the handle, his fingers slid into position. Something about the shape immediately demanded it be used as intended, not twisted into any other purpose. He spun it on his finger through the trigger guard then, on instinct, lifted the gun to his temple. The barrel bored cold against his flesh. A shiver ran down his spine, melting, reforming over and over, but the rest of his body adjusted to the position without argument, calmly steadying into the position. Irving glanced at a mirror against the far wall. For a moment he could not recognize the face as his own, but the image of a bland man, the gun painfully white against his dark face, tensed his body, excited him, and in a mad rush he tried to pull the trigger.

Nothing. Irving looked away and ripped the gun from his temple. He shuddered loose the desire for the gun or the mirror, focusing on the rest of the boxes, the stacked, wrapped paintings waiting to be positioned on the walls. A real job, something with purpose, something that required his particular expertise. He wanted to cry. “You were some guy in the end, Ish,” he mumbled, bolting out a hollow laugh instead of sobbing. “Ohh, shit.” He rewrapped the gun, placing it under the paper insulator, and walked out into the gallery to start labeling the walls for placement.

As he walked through the empty space, florescent lights basking the gallery in bare, expectant white, Irving renewed his strength and let himself enjoy long-absent pride. A show of the Wolffs, but not for them – not for Ishmael, at least. Maybe for Cyrus. Definitely for me. Nice to be selfish once in a while.

Irving sat on the studio's open loading dock. The day was bright and warm and he wore a

canvas jacket he'd found in a trunk under Ishmael's bed. Flipping the half-smoked cigarette into gravel, he picked up a handful of stones and tossed them, one by one, into the dead, snow-patch covered grass. He'd grown accustomed to this new tranquility. A car pulled into the drive.

Probably Cyrus.

Mary walked in, Cyrus following. Her bright face scanned the room, landed on Irving, turned somewhat friendly. Irving raised a hand to wave. "I'm just going to show Mom a few things, k?" Cyrus called out, showing her around. Irving nodded. A wistful happiness washed against him. He hadn't wanted them to come in, invade the quiet he considered his own, but, as they walked through, Mary grazing the wealth of art by the men of her life, he conceded to a certain delight.

Cyrus had stopped in front of the painting he had been working on, covered for the moment in loose canvas. He had mentioned putting it in the show, if Irving liked it, but had not shown it to anyone. Irving had respected the wish and had not peeked beneath its cover, though every day he had to control his prying fingers. Now Cyrus waved Irving over, took the canvas cover in his hands and, readying for a big reveal, shook his shoulders and flapped his eyebrows at them. He glanced back at the canvas, smile fading into anxious concentration, and ripped it away.

Ishmael hunched against the rudder, naked and pale, green eyes fearfully scanning the sea around him just past the frame's gaze. Bone peeked through muscle at the elbow, in the crook of the collarbone. Sea foam frothed up the side of the boat, crashing off in the distance and, in one corner, a storm brewed over the gash of ocean. Caught in the corner, sun splashed through yellow clouds. Cyrus followed their eyes nervously, occasionally glancing back at the image. Irving

turned his eyes to Mary, who stepped closer toward the painting, pulled in by an unseen force. After a minute expressed in perfect stillness she shuddered, dropping towards the ground. Cyrus cringed as Irving moved closer to grab her as she fell into his arms. Cyrus looked on horrified, but Irving did his best to ease the kid's fears with an exasperated grin: "Don't worry, kid. This is the best review you'll ever get." Cyrus frowned. "It's a fucking masterpiece. Now get your mom a chair and a glass of water. And maybe a cigarette."

– 20 –

Spring came. The show went up. Irving arranged Ishmael's paintings in a loose chronology, each room guided by a theme. A simple, nutty-wood border frame had been built around them, and none were closer than three feet apart. In front of each piece, close enough to be seen together with it but not so close as to obstruct viewing, were the cast guns. Cyrus arranged some of them standing on small bolsters so they seemed on the verge of collapse. Others lay abjectly against the stands.

A photographer came and pictures were taken. A small catalogue would be published. Irving wrote the introduction, the first time he had written anything in years. Mary read it over, editing with a thin blue pen. He would watch her scribble furiously over his page, embarrassed and angry and joyful at seeing her delight in the work. Having treated Mary like a perfect statue, she continually amazed him by the fullness of her ability and the ease with which she humbled him.

Cyrus and Beatrice went on long drives. They would choose a direction and go. They

rarely spoke, gliding over concrete, her hand on his thigh. He thought of a new series of paintings, of rushing lines, the ground slipping away beneath them. He wondered what Irving would think, but decided he would do it anyway. He thought about her leaving for California, and about joining her, and about staying and watching her go. He looked over at her and wondered what she was thinking, and hoped she was happy.

We stand in front of the camera and they place a hand on one of my shoulders. Remember to smile, big guy, he whispers in my ear. It tickles and makes me uncomfortable.

I know, Dad. Mom squeezes my shoulder and it feels good.

The man tells us to smile and look at the light. It buzzes, then flashes white and I look away. I don't think I smiled. Good job guys! Enjoy your visit, and look for the image after you return from Alcatraz!

We walk toward the big ship. Did you smile, Cyrus? Mom grips my shoulder. I don't answer. I don't know. Why does it matter?

Margaret shook him awake. "What Mom?" he asked, grubby with sleep.

"You need a suit. Come on."

He rolled back into the pile of pillows, but was quickly interrupted by a sharp pull on the back of his shirt. "Cyrus, do you really want to prove to me that you're still a little kid and not all grown up as you keep insisting?"

He groaned. "I'm an artist Mom, I don't wear suits. I wear ripped shit."

"Don't say shit. And your clothes are shitty shit, anyway. No style. Trust me. Let's go."

Cyrus inspected himself in the round mirror. "Kind of flashy, Mom."

"You said you were an artist. This is an artist's suit." She walked up, running her hand down his back, admiring the stitching. "Hits your shoulders right. It's a good fit." She stepped back, looking him up and down. "You look a lot like him, actually."

"Like dad?" She didn't respond. She must have been thinking of someone else.

"What color shirt do you want with it?"

He looked over the gray-blue check of the suit, then thought of the portrait he made of Dad. Ishmael would have chosen blue, richly arrogant. It would have been the wrong color.

"Yellow, pale yellow, like a pastel."

She flicked some dust off the shoulder. "Good choice. I'll be back."

"Don't be gone long," he said as she slipped away. He knew he meant it.

We are in one of these pictures, Mom says. All of them look exactly the same. Dad finds one and takes it down to show me. I'm not smiling. I hope he's not angry.

We weren't standing in front of the Alcatraz when they took the picture, were we?

No, we weren't. It's a printed background. Look. He points to a big sheet behind where we had taken the picture. It's a photo of a sunny day and the island where Alcatraz is and the sky is really blue. The real sky is white and gray.

Why did they do that? Now they all look the same.

Mom smiles at me, shrugs. I don't know, honey.

It's so the pictures can all look nice, big guy. Don't you want the picture to look nice?

I guess so, I say. I don't know if I want the picture to look nice. The sky isn't blue today. Mom buys the picture from a fat man. I don't like it. The sky is gray. Why shouldn't it be gray?

He had buttoned all the other buttons but the top proved a little tight. “Okay, fat ass. Come on, come on.” He squeezed the two flaps of the shirt together, folding the stubbly crease of his neck to give enough space. The button kept fingering the hole, teasing then moving away, miserable foreplay. He inhaled, shoved the button through, and released. His neck strained against the material, already reddening. Next, he grabbed the tie and wrapped it around his neck.

An elephant never forgets, Irv. Just relax. Thick side over. Good so far. Wrap it around, under the thin side.

It looked wrong already. Irving started over, making the same motions but more slowly, watching his hands carefully in the mirror. Okay, remember how he did it. Thick side over. Wrap it –

His hands tangled. “Fucking christ!” Irving threw the tie to the floor, where it lay like a dead snake, coiled around itself in a final, trembling death rattle. He could almost hear Ish's cluck of disappointment. Failed again, buddy. Irving put his finger against his head, miming a gunshot, and sloppily grabbed the tie up from the floor.

Again, Irv. Now's not the time to hate yourself. Thick side over. Wrap it around the whole way.

Irving stopped. He could tell he was about to mess up again. Stupid fingers. He closed his eyes, breathed deep, and watched Ish do it in his memory; feeling the silk between his fingers, he wrapped the tie before neatly and quickly knotting it. His hands rested. He opened his eyes. The

knot was fine, good even. Irving smiled, tightened it, dropped the collar into place, and undid the top button. He admired himself in the mirror. “Thanks for that one, Ish.”

Guests swarmed through the gallery, lapping up art and champagne. Though outside the city, Austel Flats carried cache with the downtown NYC crowd, and Ishmael Wolffer, as a name, had its influence. People mulled over the guns, glasses in hand, some visibly upset, others excited. A man in green pants and gold-framed glasses took notes, politely abstaining the hors d'oeuvres offers that came his way.

Cyrus watched the rabid crowd, growing more comfortable in his suit as the night wore on. When people were not barraging him with questions, he grabbed Beatrice's hand, squeezing it, before letting her flit back into the crowd like a knife in her silver-black switch dress.

Mary, untasted glass of champagne flattening in her hand, picked her way through the show. She followed people's eyes, listened to their comments. She shied up to Irving and whispered “it's going well,” in his ear, squeezing his arm, as he talked to a Soho dealer.

Irving passed through the evening in an excited blur, notable moments failing to cut through the beleaguering mass of confusion and giddy, messy nonsense. Finally, needing air, he made his way outside. People mulled about, most still holding their drinks between curled fingers. Irving pulled the emergency cigarette from his pocket and searched for a lighter but couldn't find one.

“Yo, Plainer!” a voice called. He turned. Cyrus and Beatrice sat on a step feet away, passing a cigarette back and forth. Beatrice dangled a lighter at him.

“What do you think of the show?” he asked, lighting the cigarette.

“It's your show, man,” Cyrus grinned. “I'm just in it.”

Irving scratched the back of his neck. Just in it. “I think your dad would have been proud.”

“Yeah, maybe. We'll never know, right?”

“Well,” Beatrice cooed, grabbing his hand and the cigarette from his mouth in one movement, I've proud of you, Cyrus.”

“You have a good one there, kid. Don't lose her.” They both smiled, gazes averted. Kids.

The man in green pants studied Cyrus' portrait of Ishmael. Irving stepped closer to him, curious at his intensity. “How long did he take to paint this, do you know?” the man asked without turning.

“Not long. Few days, maybe. He works very quickly.”

“You can tell,” the man mused. He scribbled something down in his notebook, then stuck it in his pocket. Finally turning, he extended his hand: “Graham Coal, critic. New York Review of Books.”

Irving's throat went dry. “Irving Pl –”

“Plainer, yes, I know. I remember your picture from a show you put up my first year at the Review. Your friend Ishmael, too. You still paint?” Irving shook his head. “Pity. The piece you finished turned out beautifully. Best thing Wolffer had ever made, I thought, when I saw it. Was sort of a relief when I saw you both made it. Odd, two painters, but if it works, it works. Nice placement, too.” The massive painting stood opposite from the portrait of Ishmael, the only two paintings in the room. One gun rested in the center, pure white plaster, slide back, gun

empty. Few people came into the room, focusing instead on the busier, easier fare elsewhere.

“Happy with your show overall?”

“Isn't that your job to say?” Irving stammered.

“Whether or not it's good, I suppose. But are you happy with it? Indulge me.” Irving laughed nervously. “Ah, well. I tried. You did pretty well, Mr Plainer. It's terribly sentimental, the father and son thing, and the guns are trite, you know that I'm sure. They'll sell well though. But this portrait – how old is Cyrus, twenty-one, twenty-two?”

“Uhm, twen –”

“He's going to be good. You were smart, making the show with him in it. Next time keep the dad out.” Irving nodded. “Oh well, I've probably been a little too forward. It's the drive, made me crabby. Good meeting you, Mr Plainer. I look forward to seeing your work in the future.”

Cyrus convinced the gallery owner, Marty Basil, to let him walk through the show on Monday when it was closed to the public. Basil had taken them all to dinner after the show and had presented Cyrus with a check: four of the guns had sold. They drank champagne, all save for Mary, and Beatrice and Cyrus held hands under the table. The check still stuck out from the inner pocket of his jacket and he would rub his chest from time to time to feel its scratching. As he walked through the show he made sure the guns were all positioned the way he wanted, that they made sense with his father's paintings. He had not really seen anything during the opening, and Irving had kept him from the gallery as it went up. Now, looking round, Cyrus could not help but feel disappointed in his work, even embarrassed. The guns were preposterous and cloyingly sentimental. They had seemed so powerful before but now, surrounded by the crashing echo of

his steps, Cyrus could barely look at them. He rubbed the check, reminding himself that he'd done well, that he should feel proud, accomplished, but it was not enough to get past the work, and Cyrus rushed past all the pieces into the final gallery.

For Cyrus: Irving had scraped away layers of paint in patches of varying depth, peeling off years of work in measured increments. Piecing together the various bursts of its unfinished face, he finally made it a real painting, a single experience captured out of time. Cyrus could see that Dad had never wanted that from the painting; he'd sought to capture all of time, its layers of ages, and find in it something complete. But his father saw it would never end and had to bow out. It's why he could never make a portrait, either, not of someone undetermined: they kept shifting, too alive to hold still.

Cyrus did not turn to look at his own painting, the portrait of his father. He could not bear to find it unfinished. He turned and walked out of the gallery, following the shaft of sunlight lining the floor, eyes carefully averted from the images surrounding him. In that moment he wanted to take it all back, tear the check and never make art again, a desire so complete he nearly did it but stopped just outside the front door, sun glaring down on the check in his pale hands. He knew he would not tear it: it was everything Cyrus could ask for. He would make something real, something complete. He would get it right and be happy with it. Putting the check back in his pocket, Cyrus headed home. I'll figure it out, Cyrus thought, enjoying the warmth on his skin. Everything's going to be fine.

Salt-sea drove against the deck, falling back on itself and rocking the ship in idle reverie. Breaks in the clouds brought warm rays to the deck, brightening the wood to a glowing almond.

Gulls cawed in the distance and dove to scoop their meals. Unused to the rocking, Irving and Mary had to grip the railing as stared out at the water, and from time to time their hands would touch. After the show Mary had given Irving a big hug and he had kissed her, and she had let him, and then kissed back. "I'm sorry, Margaret," he said as their lips parted. "I don't know what came over me."

"It sounds strange when you call me Margaret," she had said, "Mary's just fine."

Beatrice left for California to find a place to live and a job before the semester began. At the airport Cyrus held her a long time, whispering I love you in her ear, and when she cried he told her he would see her soon. Now he stood at the boat's stern. The gun – Dad's gun, Father's, Ishmael's – lay unwrapped in his hand. He ran his finger over the slide and down the handle; it wasn't anything anymore. Placing a small stone over the trigger, he wrapped the gun in an old scarf, then glanced aft at Plainer and his mom shyly holding hands while they thought he wasn't looking. The sun made them silhouettes and in the carved emptiness of their black-blue bodies Cyrus saw his parents whole and unblemished.

He turned to look out at the water and up at the darkening horizon. The blue sky blended with blue ocean, forming a single pane stretching out past sight. For a moment he hesitated, worried that something might be forgotten if he lost the gun to the sea. He felt the trigger through the scarf. He'd remembered the blue cracking open as clearly as if it had just happened, the blistering moment when absence split away and Cyrus, just a child then, gasped at something he could not describe, something, he knew now, he would never feel again. The blue was never his to have, never his father's – it had to be mythologized, just like the gun. I just don't need to remind myself of it anymore, he thought, and hoped it was true, that the hell of his father's death

would not come back to haunt him. He had done what he could.

Tossing the package overboard, Cyrus watched it break the sheet of sea, crystal lips flying up, surrounding – then it was gone. “Love you, Dad,” he said, then turned back to the prow of the ship and the bright sun, to his parents, making his way against the waves.