

Fertile *Quinceañera*/ white, *indignant*

by

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Submitted to the Board of Creative Writing
School of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May, 2019

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The stories my dad would tell about fighting had every hallmark of Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey." He'd see failing morals— a boy pushing a girl, lunch money pilfered, someone telling him to return to the jungle— ignore the first call to violence, find the challenge instigated once more, attempt to solve the issue through calm rhetoric, have that ignored, and then, as always, he'd find himself with no other option but to fight.

The fights worked like a video game boss battle. Every bully had a weakness. It was inherent to the trope of, 'bully.' Cruelty beget hubris beget minority supremacy.

"You see, Andres," he'd explain while driving through the potholed highways of eastern Massachusetts, "Paul was taller than me, so I knew to attack his knees. Someone being better than you is as much of a weakness as it is strength." The ancient and wise rock faces that lined the highways, hulking striped figures carved by the confident hand of glacial movement and erosion, observed our stories with silent disinterest. "So, I took a rock the size of my fist and smashed his knee. Then, when he fell, I covered his face in snow until he apologized for calling it a jungle. It wasn't a jungle. I'd tell them that. Over and over.

"One day we'll go. You'll see. It's not a jungle."

My mother hated observing stories flush with violence, but she'd ask me to describe their plots with all the visceral bloodshed included.

"Why are the kids on the island?"

"The school wants them to fight to the death." I'd explain.

"Why?"

"It's a battle royale, those are the rules."

"And they all just die?"

"No, one survives. That one returns to civilization. They're the winner of the battle royale."

"Can't they just leave?"

"No, it's an island."

"...How do they kill each other?"

"Guns, axes, samurai swords, one girl puts ricin in bowls of food."

"Ricin?"

"It's a poison. Makes the kids bleed from their eyes."

"Ick."

"Yeah, it's gnarly, they're screaming and leaking from all their openings. That's just how a battle royale goes though."

"What's this movie called again?"

"Battle Royale."

"Don't know *how* you watch these movies..."

....

....

So who wins?"

I was raised to deeply respect the hallowed act that was 'story.'

I love and loved my parents. Their proclivity for moralizing through anecdote. The time capsule that was their tongue. Their deep insecurity as they felt their tales peeter out. The boredom that engulfed them in silent moments. How more and more silent they grew alongside their work and parenting. A silence that marked the end of new stories, the end of remembrance, the birth of apathetic adults.

I like rhythm, I love the past, I adore my family's little details when they explain the intricacies of working the gas pump in Peru.

I get sad a lot.

I sketch the beginning of old familial anecdotes onto the back of a looseleaf page. Sometimes I dispose of it, sometimes I type it out. Most die in the conversion. Drown in the leap from memory to word, the broke leg limp towards transformation. These are often the best stories. Teaming with winks and inflections that just can't be shown through something as crude as letters.

It is a constant, unceasing battle to make sure I capture what can be. What I think they were. What I hope they did. My talent wavers often, my focus weak. Most days are simply reminders of what I can't say. Most days are filled with absorbing better stories by stronger writers, callused hands molding velvet soft stories; eschewing the extravagant verbiage that I always foolheartedly leap towards, for a vulnerability borne of confident observation. I wish I was better, and I wish I was braver, and I wish I liked editing more, but this is it though. This is what came forth. I can't be angry and I can't be ashamed, this is what the stories were.

The stories in this project are centered around hispanic characters. Characters touched by immigration, people forced to manage the area in between identities. There is a longing for home in all these stories, and along with that longing is a denial. It isn't pessimism, or nihilism, or cynicism; it is just the story.

Space is limited.

For: My family, in all it's shattered grace.

“How heavy my mind is,
filled with the past.
Is there enough room
for the world to penetrate?
It must go somewhere,
it cannot simply sit on the surface—

*

Stars gleaming over the water.
The leaves piled, waiting to be lit.”

-Louise Glück

“Will future people be aware of concept of “demons”?
Will they find our belief in “demons” quaint?
Will “windows” even exist?”

-George Saunders

“Eat cold suppers off frisbees and don't complain.
When the snow falls, dream of beaches and not propane.

In lieu of paying rent, buy a painting.”

-Rory Ferreira

IN ALL ITS AGAPE GLORY

Hole a waits.

Hole is seated all sick-patient.

Hole has been blooming
like poplar trees and pine

needles of blood black-green.

Hole is brown
boy and Jew men;

spanish woman, pockets stuffed
with nothing but torn
and splitting bags of cumin;

Irish families dreaming
of lace curtain, but making

prayers of medicine.

Hole is ship sinking
into land, a dock
is not resurrection; no, a home
will not be kissed and hailed
when land does not deserve

TO BE HALLOWED.

yet,

Hole is also consecration:

spilled wine staining father's fingers airless
purple, amputated bread roll body which mother stuffs
in fat baby's wild mouth; his dark hair and darker
skin, unformed
nubs of teeth
breach clean
flour risen like
mealy meal miracles—

oh, christ—
the baby is hungry again, again.
So parents pray to hole
in perfect child's appetite,
Please be appeased, with
all that we can give, we will

fill you with pig fats and cattle marrow if
there is nothing left to help you live.
Mother and father made love on a water stain
covered mattress. They did so to create warmth,
their home lacked heat– a hot tip:
never pray for propane, seek sun–

Hole is one acre.

Hole is spiderwebbed highway lines,

nine, oh.

I-two,

Hole is home to
cats that howl jazz dreams of
and old dogs

the vagrant
fish skeletons full

dying slow.

Hole is shifting

because once Hole held

cars and the dead men
dancing on home.

Hole knew

Santería

Prologue:

Grandma Maria branded me the instant I breached from my mother.

We're a family of storytellers,— quite the artistic title to designate to liars— and it has been said that at the exact moment of my emergence into the world, my foreign grandmother ensnared me, plucked me ripe new from my mother's womb. So badly she wanted me in this world that the doctor's had to battle and plead just to remove me from her possession—

and sometimes I stop the anecdote there.

Allow my audience to complete the story for me. Go on, see her weeping whilst she swaddles me close in those first fragile moments, her pounding heart pressing love hard through her chest, imbuing me with all the heft of a partially shared family history and heartbreak. I, the beloved infant grandson, first child of her own youngest boy; the new holder of a heritage, a fresh chapter of a new American tradition they could claim their own. Press your ear close to this page, and you can almost hear the ocean salty tears falling, the 'mi amor's' planted soft in my fertile fetal mind. Her, then, tending to my tiny future, building me the first notes of a wonderful Spanish tongue all my own. In the universe of this paragraph, these wistful thoughts, I am the happiest hispanic the world has ever done see. All my childhood birthdays are quinceañera and all my lovers brown. Telling tales of tostones pressed in skilletts from the homeland, sizzling in duck or beef fat, the waft of crisping plantain filling every crevice of me previously white empty. Watch as I live on a separate track, one thick with culture, grandmotherly blessings, soft lulls of

Yo La Tengo's, "My Little Corner of the World." We even got the licensing rights, and you can hear the song playing as the credits roll when my family dies; as we all smile shared, big-nosed, Colombian grins. As the old holds new, I can hear the hearts beating as one.

But then the paragraph ends.

In the real scene, all unabridged and toxic, I burst from my mother violent and ugly. A nineteen year old, mixed race Polish-Peruvian girl, she lies in her hospital bed, near passed out from the exhaustion of creation. And then, like a smash cut, there's Maria, frantic as melting snow, shoving aside the doctor about to deliver me, grabbed me under my stubby arms, and, for a moment, she owned a quivering body still sticky from its mother land's residue. Blood dripping from her hands as she held me high over head, her arm fat hanging, wrinkled brown face screaming demonic. My big dumb cow of a father watched all of it unfold in mute shock, unsure whose side to take, family or family. He chose helpless, watched as the nurses wrested and reached for his mother's thin, elderly wrists.

Father always claimed it was simple, sane joy.

Mother says hospitals don't detain sane woman.

Grandma's voice shrill, she screamed into my face, spat, spat, then taking a needle from her back pocket, attempted to skewer me through the stomach. Dad says this never happened. Mom says, 'who can trust memory.' I do know this, a desperate doctor took a fist to her leathery face, struck cheek, but was only able to deliver a meek gasp from Grandma. Another grabbed her needle bearing hand, crushing her wrist, the needle tumbling with a metallic clatter to the sterile tile. So, weaponless, abuelita clawed and spat, twirled with me in the air, dancing, as an old, dead

language squirted from her lips. There were nurse screams, machine beeps, and a soft chorus of curses from all sides.

A white security guard, indignant, shoved her into a wall, placed a hand around her throat, and choked her blue while a doctor broke two of the fingers on her right hand and three on the left to take me back. Back to the life I truly deserved, the one with promise and confusion. She left the guard with scars from ear down to the right side of his throat. A nurse would sue for lost sight in an eye.

“She was trying to kill you,” mom sobbed to me years later. This on the night she held a knife between her children and my father, demanded he make living arrangements independent from us, transforming him once more immigrant. “And, I swear, if she was younger she’d have been successful...” her cries crack, “but that Santería slaughters you from the inside.”

“Santería?” I whispered. The word like a knife made from infection, a weapon of pestilence. Mom’s eyes glistened as she looked up at me, nodded, a choked sob sending her into shivers, my sister weeping in her arms.

“Osito, it’s time. You deserve to know your curse.”

The silence that follows after thunderstorms is never real silence, but rather a reminder. Simple normalcy can be a land of milk and honey.

I. Tania

Lying in bed after the first time me and your father, Nestor, slept together, the same night as when I first met him, I took his small right hand in mine – his body was always so compact, a sore fact for him even then – and tried to perch the wrist joint on my forehead.

His arm was too taut for me to balance.

“Let it go limp,” I whispered, “pretend it’s not yours.” A gust of air expelled itself from his nostrils in that amused confusion the ignorant cling to like armor.

“Why?” His nose was so handsome. A perfect right angle, a shark fin alerting, a hill that majestically rolled to the horizon of his forehead. The only overwhelming part of him. He traced one of his fingers along my cheek, prodding my orbital bones, two tender digits pressing into the soft give of my mouth. I licked each finger as his eyes stared, unblinking, into me.

It was a cool, August night in Boston. My first semester of junior year at Tufts. It was near nine, but the late sunlight hung drunk in the sky, gave the clouds a look like that of the renaissance paintings I had studied in that one course last semester.

I had never sexed in daylight before, I remember thinking that it felt quintessentially European. The sort of story my foreign cousins in France or Poland would squeal and shiver at. I could even hear the descriptors I’d use when telling them. Words falling into place one by one:

‘His dark, youthful body *glistened* in naked *fury*. *Angry* stubble *peeked* out into the still air, recently shaved but *undaunted* nonetheless. Short, *pitch thick*, *ice black* hair. He looked like the *dying sun* letting its death knells slip through my bedroom window, the very same light swaddling him now, *as if he were borne of honesty and renewal*.’

“Just trust me,” I slurred. His fingers pressing my tongue to speak.

“We just met tonight,” he whispered into my hair, rolling his body over to look at me directly.

“You don’t trust people you’ve just met?”

“No, that’s asking for death.”

“That’s awfully tragic. Awfully masculine.” I fiddled with his wrist some more. My eyes staring at the ceiling, his fingers peeking in my peripheries. He was, and always remained, one of the handsomest men I’d ever allowed into my bedroom. I was giddy, but trying to retain some semblance of mystery, an essence of anything that would make him call me again. He slid his hand from my grasp.

“No,” he grunted, “it’s called being cautious. Like why you didn’t talk to me until the last white guy left the room. Hedging bets.” My naked stomach clenched, a pulsing heat taking residence in my cheeks. However, his voice was devoid of any bitterness, an assured, almost distracted tone taking place instead. I broke from my ceiling staring trance and looked over at him, but he was now staring at the same ceiling I, too, had been enraptured with only moments before. Two rough hands folded over his sternum gave him the appearance of a disturbed body in a crypt. It felt as if I had stumbled onto something immensely private, a piece of a life that was never meant for my own. Slowly, he turned towards me, his face still like a cold glass of water. I tried smiling, but only managed to bare my teeth.

Then, a deep smile appeared on his person, magnetic as a car crash. “Fuck you,” I whispered. The beam widened, his gorgeous molars and dimples making their presence known.

“Yeah?” he replied. I slid my form over his, each of my legs finding its own space on either side of him, my angry eyes bearing into his.

“Fuck you,” I repeated, “You know, I’m not even white! Just half on my mom’s side, but she’s an immigrant! That’s gotta count for something.” He rolled his eyes, my mouth felt dry. “I’ve been with non-white guys before!”

“Oh wow, congrats. Do you get a Nobel prize for each one of us you bag, or is it a one and done sorta thing?” he asked. I snorted, felt anger mix with arousal in a murky swirl. My eyes stared at his face in silent appraisal, equal parts admiring and questioning.

Please don’t take me for some lovesick college junior. He was lovely, but beauty is luxury. I understood this fact young. I knew I was lovely too, I knew he beheld me the same way I to him. How his eyes alighted me when he first entered that party. That deep laugh that kept growing and growing at every joke I’d direct to someone in his vicinity, but never him. How he followed me, from a distance, prowling steady and hungry. The constant fidgets in his legs every minute I spent talking to the tall white boy by the fridge in the kitchen, my hands sliding up and down his green Polo draped biceps. I felt necessary, a requirement.

He didn’t even go to Tufts, but his cousin, Manuel, lived in the an apartment next door to the one me and some college friends rented. We didn’t love-love Manuel, but it was in our best interest to invite him to our parties because he could get weed that was actually mostly weed. Doesn’t seem like much, but my apartment was me, four white girls, and one Asian girl. We didn’t really want to go to dealer’s by ourselves, and when we did, we’d often be ripped off for exuberant amounts. I hadn’t remembered saying he could bring guests, but Nestor was pretty, and pretty boys were always a welcome commodity into our home. Especially the brown ones, my roommates were notorious around campus for their thirst for anything non-white.

It's silly now, but Nestor was so woefully incorrect in his assumptions of that day. My desire never once wavered towards anyone but him. Usually I was the center of our parties, boys loved how I was light skinned, but would then slur drunk Spanish in their ears when I wanted them. But tonight, I was merely background, every girl in the room glancing his way, chattering nothings, hoping he'd lean over to them, whisper about leaving or staying or whatever handsome guys like him did with girls.

I couldn't even fathom ending that night without his total, all-encompassing attention.

So, when the white college boy by the fridge asked if I wanted to, 'have a naughty sleepover,' my tipsiness couldn't stop me from laughing aloud in response, "No, so very sweet, but so very much no." My drunken, attempted to be muffled chuckles, chasing his tall and embarrassed form out the party. He looked like a ghost, a big, ugly fucking ghost.

So, when we were lying in bed, and he made the comment about that exact tall white boy, I heard all the underlying insecurity. A joke blossoming from a place of intense self-loathing, a laugh that was faked so often that he no longer recognized its own phoniness. It held the cadence my father would use when he talked to his white customers: scared, angry, something desperate and cultural to prove.

In hindsight, it was the first shovelful of dirt. The first chunk of my earth removed. A hole that would soon blossom into chasm, the disintegration of all ground between me and Nestor.

His mother dabbled in the underbelly of religion, dunking deep under the dark waters where Christianity wouldn't dare dawdle.

“You’re gonna love her,” he had said in the car. Despite being married for nearly six months we were on our way to visit his folks for the first time ever. He was twenty three, I was nineteen. I didn’t know I was going to be a mom before I could legally drink, but one day I was meeting Nestor, then we were seeing each other for four months, then I was pregnant, and then we were married. Just like that.

Pow, pow, pow, pow.

There was hardly any time to even consider what this all meant.

“I’m sure,” I replied

“And make sure to mention that you’re studying Spanish Literature in college, she’ll love that. Stress the ‘college’ part.”

“That won’t come off as pretentious, will it?”

“No, no, she’ll love to hear that I’m dating a genius,” he said, sight never wavering from straight ahead. I smiled wide at that, my eyes peeking out the passenger side window to watch the Massachusetts highways signs sprint by.

He could be real sweet when he didn’t mean to be.

Absentmindedly, my hand rested on the top of my stomach. I hadn’t begun to show yet, and this felt like a tiny mercy. As if sensing this lull, he took a moment to look away from the road and flashed a smile at me.

“Oh, come on,” I groaned.

“What?”

“Don’t give me your ‘salesman smile.’”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He flashed it again, all teeth, no lips or gleaming eyes.

“You look like you have gas,” I giggled.

“Well, fuck you then.” My chuckles stopped. Nestor simmered, chewing the fingernails on his right hand as his left hand steered. “I’m just trying to make you feel good.” The only sound in the car was the clicking of his teeth with each nail bit. Even though I was smarter than him, well-read, college bound, the one with the marketable future out of us two, he was still the undisputed champ at making me feel juvenile.

I looked at my hands. They were smooth and clean with cherry red on the nail bed. I had them manicured earlier that day in preparation for the introduction. The color reminded me of how my mother once painted her own nails. I remember staring at her hands for hours after every manicure, observing how they had been wrinkled by the time I was born. She had also been married at nineteen, but didn’t have me until she was twenty four. Sometimes I wondered if people aged faster back in her day, or if I was just lucky.

“I’m sorry,” I intoned after several silent minutes. He shook his head. As I watched the cars on the highway, the tender feeling of motion, in all it’s nostalgic solitude, made me tear up. But I didn’t let them fall, promising myself I was just reserving them for when I was alone. My tears always spooked Nestor; he’d begin babbling, walking in circles, hitting his head with his hands, begging me to let him in. These times terrified me.

I wanted him to be happy, always. What young girlfriend doesn’t want that? When Nestor was happy, the world shone a little sharper, life moved a little slower; I wasn’t some kid in college, no, I was a woman who made her own choices, a cool person who ran from a life of

forced respectability, met a handsome guy, won him over, forced her desired world into existence through sheer will and love.

So, to keep the world sharp as his stubble, I had kept the baby, dropped out of college,— just for this semester, I had promised myself secretly— and, because he kept making fun of me for being light skinned, even began speaking Spanish again. I had taken the classes in secret. Sure, I had spoken the language for most of my childhood, but my own dark skinned father had forbade me from speaking the tongue in public, never allowed the words to gain their meanings in the world around me. Despite being a Peruvian man, my father was black as night, but his features and confidence were enough for him to calmly inform people on the regular, ‘Me? Spanish? I’m a Sicilian, you mother fucker.’ He always did love Joe Pesci’s spunk, I think that’s where he got the ‘mother fucker’ from. I found this joke funny as a kid, but that was then. He hadn’t talked to me since I told him I was pregnant.

No, that’s not true, I’m lying. He called me one time to offer to pay for an abortion.

Nestor rolled down his window, stuck his head out to the highway, and spat. Then he spat again. He kept spitting and spitting onto the earth.

“Are you ok?” I finally asked after about the sixth spit. Nestor shook his head hard, mouth curled around phlegm.

He never would say what was going on up in his head, but I’m not sure he could. He had issues speaking. At seven he immigrated to America, a small boy, the baby of his family, he had been slow even picking up Spanish back in Colombia. English never really settled in him, but he spoke it with a simplistic, confident flair. Paired with his piercing eyes, it often fooled people

into thinking he was more well read than he truly was. Perhaps here was a man too lazy to waste his time in conversation with you, perhaps you just weren't enough for him.

I reached over, grabbed his right arm, and pulled it over to me. Wiggling my newly pregnant body, I rested my head on his bicep. It was uncomfortable, but it made me feel loved. I kissed his shoulder twice and rubbed it. The Cure CD he let me play in his car, but only when he didn't want to listen to sports radio, sang muted. "*Whenever I'm alone with you/You make me feel like I am home again,*" Robert Smith whispered.

This would be the happiest I'd ever be with him. This exact moment, not a second longer.

"I love you so fucking much, Nestor," I whispered, my vision on all the road ahead of us. After a few seconds of sitting in the glow of admission, he lightly pulled his arm away, and shifted away from me. My body remained in the position it had just been, but now with nothing supporting me. "I love you," I repeated. He once more remained transfixed on driving. I tapped his arm, trying once more to rankle words from him. "I love you."

"Please don't ruin this for me," he finally responded.

We arrived at their house around six P.M. His parents lead a frugal lifestyle, their house a small two bedroom in Everett, one of the state's poorest towns. Embarrassed, he told me in secret once that his parents rented the other half of the house to people on Section 8, poverty stricken families who needed assistance. The government kick back apparently made it, 'worth it.'

As I looked at the squat, yellow home with its porch rotting from water damage, I reminded myself not to stare too long, or too harsh, or to make a face that could be perceived as

‘bitchy.’ Nestor would always groan when I recalled my New York childhood, that dull time prior to meeting him. He saw it as fake, an unreal wealth that left me at an arm's length from the rest of the world. This was always confusing to me. My family was comfortable, sure, but we were far from rich. We had an apartment, we had clothes, we got educations, and we had food. That was about it though. My father worked three jobs to make it all work, my mother, two.

“Mi hijo!” Out of the house, down the front porch stairs came his father, an exact double of his boy but with grey hair, a slight stomach, and Sasquatch like arms covered in thick white hair. He wrapped his boy in a hug, kissed him on the mouth.

“Papa!” His father then turned to me.

“You are, Tatyana?” he asked in slow English, an almost impenetrable Colombian accent. I nodded.

“So beautiful, my god. You so pretty.” The word, ‘pretty’ stretching on his lips.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“I am, Antonio Cordoba. You are my daughter now, no?” I nodded, my cheeks hurting so hard from smiling. He reminded me of the kind old men that watched me grow up in my family’s New York apartment. The ones who were ninety and still dressing impeccable, holding doors for women, telling children to appreciate their mothers no matter how cruel they could be.

“Where’s mom?” Nestor asked. When he asked this question his adam’s apple shook, his foot tapping the pavement like he was speaking secret morse. His father’s eyes glanced to me quick, but then back to his son.

“She is, uh, enfermo,” the old man snapped his fingers, opened and closed a fist like he could catch the English he was seeking, “sick! She is much sick.”

“‘Very’ sick, dad. It’s ‘very,’” Nestor said fast, looking on at the house looming behind his father. “And, I want to see her.”

We walked into the apartment. Odors of cooking oil and incense unfurled lazy throughout it. All the living room furniture either yellow or brown, the only two shades in the house. Pictures of Jesus were plastered on every wall, his bearded face glaring at my stomach, as if he knew all the pre-marital shenanigans that brought me to this point.

“You hungry?” Antonio asked. He had put on glasses since coming into the house. Thick silver frames the size of dinner plates with little red strings that looped and hung from his neck. With his wrinkled neck, big nose, and large glasses he looked like a well-read bird. It give me an idea of what my husband would one day look like, once his sight failed him, once he became weak. “We got chicken-”

“She speaks Spanish, papa,” Nestor interrupted, his eyes flickering around the room.

“Not very good though,” I coughed, “I actually appreciate the English.” I was far too nervous to attempt to speak anything higher than level two college Spanish right now. Nestor glared, but was distracted once more.

“We got chicken, bread and mantequilla, uh, butter, apples,” Antonio continued talking like he hadn’t even heard us.

“Mama!” Nestor shouted, his eyes now frantic, searching every inch of his parent’s home, “Where the fuck is mom?” His father stopped dead, stared at his boy from over his eyeglasses. Nestor shrunk under his father’s glare. I had never seen him so docile, so energetic,

so scattered. Part of me thought it was adorable, but a deeper part of me vibrated, some deep malice being felt in my marrow.

“Es él?” *‘That him?’* came from another room, one shuttered off by a closed door, the words followed by a hacking cough. “What he want?”

“Mama, I brought mi esposa!” he shouted back. He walked over to the brown door, slow. Knocked twice. “Mama?”

“What?”

“Mama! Mi esposa!” As Nestor’s back was turned to me, I looked at Antonio. He stood still as a light beam through a window, his body being lit from behind by pale sun rays streaming in from the outside, a look of odd tragic pity on his face. When he saw me looking though, he smiled wide once more, the same salesman smile as his son. “Ma, can you let me in?” He was answered with long silence. Nestor knocked again. “Mama, please. You never let me in.”

“She’s sick, Nestor,” Antonio said. His voice heavy and stuttering. Nestor kept knocking, his knuckles tapping wood, the persistent percussion sounding like a drum roll. “Nestor, come. I make chicken,” Antonio’s voice was tender, more full of pained love than I’ve heard from a man before or since. A kind soul weighted by the darkness that swirled around it. “You tell me, Tania. How you meet? College? Nestor say you do college! I go, ‘Wooooow, a, uh, smart lady.’” I wanted to laugh, smile, take the compliment, wrap this man in my arms. Images of my father bubbled up: his dark skin, his fat cheeks, the way he’d howl whenever he’d tell anecdotes.

“No, the fuck she’s not! She’s not smart! I mean, she’s not better than us. She dropped out! She fucking tell you that?” Nestor burst. Something in my stomach shifted, I rubbed an open hand over it and blinked long while inhaling slow. I had seen him get similar to this before, but

this time his eyes were watering. The usual red rage replaced with a shivering childlike timidness. He looked like a boy waiting to be hit. “Ma! Mama! Fuck! Mom!” Nestor turned to the door and slammed his fist against it, the door cracked, he hit it again, it buckled.

“Nestor!” his father was on him in a flash, grabbing him by the arms. I stood, stuck where I was across the room.

“Honey,” I whispered, “it’s ok, she’s sick, it’s ok. We can come another time.” I knew there was no way he could hear this.

“She’s been fucking sick every single time *I’ve* tried to see her for the last five years,” he bellowed, “But she’s seen all the others! Richie said he saw you, ma! Marley, too! In fact, everyone has seen you recently, except me!”

“Nestor, please, stop,” his dad begged.

“I brought my wife. Mi esposa!” he screamed into the wood.

“Leave me alone!” she shouted from the other side. “I don’t need to see you!”

“Mama, she’s pregnant! She’s fucking pregnant!”

The house froze. My feet felt numb, fingers tingling. Antonio’s mouth swung like a weak gate, open, closed, open. His loose head swiveling from me to Nestor. We had promised not to say anything, he had promised me. In this forever frozen moment in linear time, I thought of what good a “promise” could be if it was merely a foreign word promising further foreign words. It felt less like a lock or security than it did a swinging screen door. Like the one my college house had had, the one that always allowed for more and more riff raff to tumble through, more and more drunks, all of the world with all its chaotic anonymity and ignorance to pour past. What could Nestor be if he couldn’t even show his languages respect.

Then Antonio began to cry.

Lumbering over, the old man wrapped me in a hug, my face brushing against his stubble, nose pressed into his neck. He smelled of sweat and motor oil. “A grandchild! Grandchild!” He pulled back, held me by my shoulders, looked me into my eyes. All of his wrinkles looked like smiles. Liquids pouring from his face, covering it in an exhausted looking sheen. “You are going to be a wonderful mother.” He said this firm. Not a single word paused or considered. I swallowed a lump, tried to smile, faltered, and nodded my head.

I hadn't told a soul, but I had booked an abortion for the next week.

But, then, I just kept nodding and nodding. Nestor stared at me from across the room, breathing heavy. “What?” he shouted at my tears.

“I can cry!” I screamed at him. “I'm allowed to fucking cry, Nestor!” My voice was hoarse, throat sore from it all.

“Don't raise your voice-” he began, but his father descended, chest puffed, finger in Nestor's chest.

“Man yelling at his wife?” he said it as if it was unfathomable, an impossibility to him. “Who are you?” He pointed a long finger at Nestor, and then to me all sniveling, tear soaked. “Say sorry to her!” I could only blubber, gasps pouring out of me.

“Dad-”

“Say sorry!”

“I'm sorry!”

“Sorry, what?”

“I’m sorry for yelling, Tania,” Nestor whined, feet lightly kicking the door in front of him. Antonio simply blinked, wiped his face from forehead to chin with a large paw. He took a long inhale, closed his eyes, stood quivering, and then exhaled. Turning to the bedroom door, he held his fist over the wood, but then pulled it back. Quickly, he glanced back at me, then he turned to the door and said a few words in rapid Spanish. There was a pause, then Nestor’s mother said something back in the same language. Back and forth they spoke for a good ten minutes. I was too exhausted, too slow at my own family’s language to understand what was being said. After an especially long rebuttal from Antonio, there was noise from inside the room, a bed creaking, footsteps padding slow, a doorknob whining in metallic turns.

From the shadows, out stuck a small, wrinkled, light brown face. She was baggy looking, used up. Lips thin as the crack Nestor had made in the door, destructive looking. Her hair was knotted up in itself, eyes squinting, the same flickering paranoia I had seen on Nestor’s face too many times. After a moment to get her eyes adjusted to the screaming light, she looked at Nestor. She nodded once at him. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. His lips moved, but nothing sounded. Then her eyes landed on me. As safe as Antonio’s gaze made me feel, her’s made me feel terror twofold. Thin lips parted slightly, a pink tongue poking out as if to taste the air, a slow blink. Finally, after a minute of observation, she mumbled, “Come in.” Nestor took a step towards the door, but she raised a hand. “No, just her.”

It was then I realized she spoke with hardly an accent, her english flawless and icy. Nestor looked at me, eyes wide, jealous, then back downward cast. His mother tilted her head at me, smiled, not salesman like, very uncomfortably real, and then turned around to creep back into the darkness.

My feet were no longer in my control; I floated, as if controlled by sheer fear, into her lair. Not even casting a second glance at either man standing on either side of the door.

It was a small space, much smaller than I had imagined.

The room had three windows all covered by large yellow bed sheets. A faint, ugly glow shimmering, dust dancing through it all. An old, tiny, grey television sat unnoticed on a table across from where she slept, telenovellas playing soft. Her bed was the biggest thing in the room, a massive red monstrosity piled high with comforters and pillows the size of bodies. It seemed like the softest thing in the world, the universe. On the black nightstand next to it sat a candle melted to stump, its dried tendrils reaching across the metal surface. A thick, ancient book sitting on top of that. She limped across the dark room, leapt into her bed with more spryness than a sick woman should probably have, lay her head on a pillow, and then stared at me.

“Do you know who I am?” she asked.

“Nestor’s mother.” She laughed harsh at this.

“Maria! I have a name. Call me by it,” she snapped, my body flinching at the tone shift. Her face sat angry for a moment, then slowly transformed into a macabre grin. “Nestor’s mother.” She said the words as if trying them for the first time. “He tell you that?” I nodded my head in confusion. She smiled, a cold line. “Did you know, I hadn’t slept with his father two years prior to his birth. Antonio was always so busy, work, work, work.” She spat on the floor. I recoiled. “I hadn’t been touched, caressed, loved in months. A woman can’t live like that. We are hungry creatures. Someone needs to satiate us. So I prayed. Did Nestor tell you that I was religious?” I nodded soundless. “What’d he say?”

“He said,” I coughed, “he said you were a devout Christian.” I faltered for a moment, but my curiosity pressed me forward, “I’m sorry, are you saying Antonio isn’t Nestor’s father?”

“No, you mishear me. Listen close, girl. I’m saying, the boy has no parents. I know not what beget him.” She seemed like she was about to say her more, but then she flared her nostrils once, touched her face with a red nail, and her eyes followed something invisible for a few seconds.

“Maria?”

“What!” she shouted. Then she shook her head. “Yes, yes, it’s you. I forgot.” Her eyes trailed off again. Another few moments passed. “Christian!” she finally said, breaking the silence, as if just remembering the word. “No, no, not quite. Do you believe in wishes?”

“I guess,” I lied.

“Tania, could you grant me a wish?” I hadn’t remembered ever telling her my name, but nodded. “I wish to name your child.” It seemed reasonable enough. Up until a few minutes ago, I wasn’t certain I’d even be having this child.

“Ok,” I sighed. Her eyes widened.

“Are you certain? You cannot take back something such as this.” I was exhausted, the room’s pallid lighting was making my head spin, and I wanted nothing more to be out of this house, out of this darkness. So I nodded. She squealed, an ugly sound like pigs being slaughtered.

“I already know the name, too. I wish to call him,” she paused, her eyes going wide, the white popping in the darkness, the telenovela music on the television pumping soft and upbeat, “Frog.”

I'm a kind woman. I tell myself this. I volunteered in college, I gave money to the homeless people that lived on the Boston streets by Tufts, called my sister on a near daily basis to make sure she was doing fine, but this was a moment where I felt simply too tired. The present had been far too long.

I'll admit it, I laughed. Fuck, I cackled. Hard, mean noises that hurt coming up my stomach. Doubled over to my knees I burst and burst. Snickering at the ground it was as if I were chiding hell to take me right then. When I finally looked up, still giggling, wiping the tears from my eyes, Maria stared back, furious.

"Laugh, but you promised," she shrieked.

"No, fuck that. I'm sorry," I covered my eyes with my palms, stole a breath, "I'm sorry, I can't do that. I'll name him something else, but, come on, 'Frog?'"

"There are grave costs for not doing this."

"Maria, you haven't talked to Nestor in five years, you claim he's not your boy, and now you wish to name his child after an amphibian. For my sake, for your son's sake, hell, for my child's sake," I placed a hand on my stomach. It was the first time I called you, 'my child.' It filled me like smoke in a burning house.

You would fill me and we would figure this out together, as it happened. This was what I realized. I would go back to school, I'd work a good job with my good degree, I'd fix Nestor, and I'd once more, through will, build the place I'd rest my head. We'd have dinners and holidays in sweaters and when you'd cry we'd give you baseball gloves and hugs. You'd want for nothing, you'd be normal and happy like every American boy I knew, every boy I had thought I loved.

“I think I’m going to go Maria. This room is making my head hurt,” I said, then turned and began to leave how I entered. Emboldened all of a sudden, strong, aware.

“If you leave there will be a curse!” I froze, my hand on the knob, “The evil eye is real, child! The Gods frown upon those who don’t keep their promises! You think anyone in this country will love you?” The break Nestor had made in the door allowed for me to see a splinter of the outside world. It made me hungry. I could smell food cooking outside, but I couldn’t get myself to believe I could leave.

“Do you think anyone will care for you?” Maria continued, “They fucking eat women like you alive. They ate me whole, they stuck me in this room, they told me I spoke poor and slurred, and that I couldn’t ever return to my home.” Behind me, I could hear the woman begin to weep; her words grew loose, and fizzed like static. “Give me the child, Tania! I– I– I can be the mother to him. Nestor was so small, he was an American baby. I tried so hard to make him mine, ours, but they all took him from me, and…” her sobs began to grow, float through the room, “if you leave, that boy will never be yours. He’ll never be anyone’s. He’ll be a fucking half. A chicken bone in throat! And it’ll be your fault! He’ll be bat blood on a white face! He’ll be feathers dripping! He’ll- he’ll- he’ll always be bleeding, and he won’t even know his fucking blood!” her voice hit a high pitch at this, as if she was shocked she was saying this, like she was speaking in tongues, “Santería will curse him, like they did to all of us, like they do. Like they always will, demons with their moon faces and light eyes. Pilgrim savages!” Then she went cold. I stood at the door for ten minutes, every muscle in my body stiff, pulsating, begging to look back once more. But I knew there’d be nothing I could see, my vision had grown used to the light pouring in from outside.

Nestor and I left the house right after. It was dark then. In the moonlight, Antonio apologized profusely in broken english out in front of his home. I kept telling him it was fine, it wasn't his fault, she was sick. So, so, so much sick.

He hugged me deep and told me to not let this change how I viewed them. That he'd always be there for us. To call him whenever we needed him, if Nestor ever got out of line. Nestor sat in the car during all this, his dark, sad eyes staring at us. After kissing his father on the cheek and hugging him for a long beat, I got in the car, sat in the passenger seat, and buckled my belt across my stomach, feeling my child swimming in nothing. I looked out the window as we pulled out, and Antonio stood there, a sad smile on his tear brimming brown face. I waved. He waved back, the tears now falling. As the car pulled out, he took a few steps after us, for a moment I thought he might chase us, but he stopped only a few feet from home, as if tethered forever. He cupped his hands around his mouth, and in the rearview I watched him shrink into a pocket sized version of the man I had just known. "My grandchild!" he shouted after us. "My grandchild!"

A week after our visit he'd be diagnosed with cancer. He was gone two months later.

II. Baby

She wasn't even supposed to be at the hospital that day.

After that visit we had only seen one another a handful more times, much to Nestor's chagrin. On the last visit, a sweltering Massachusetts August day, I was nearing nine months present. Young and full of a new life, I arrived at Maria's home for the last time before the birth. It was her birthday that day, but you wouldn't know it from the lacking festivities. The backyard was full of only four of her five children— the eldest and richest and lightest skinned and favorite, Ricardo, had said he couldn't be there due to a 'big job' that needed to be closed. Nestor told me in confidence it was a huge heroin deal. I wasn't sure if he was bragging or bitter— widowed and rageful, people no longer had a reason to visit Maria's home since Antonio died. She had nothing anybody wanted.

Nestor and I entered the backyard that day, him walking ahead quickly, excited. The oversized box in his hands, wrapped in expensive gold colored wrapping paper, held a brand new small television in it. Her old one had begun to flicker, making her soap operas stop motion.

As I stepped onto the dying grass in their small patch of land out back, a hand on my back to support my now heavily weighted front, I felt buoyant. Energized. Time had passed since those worse days. Sure, Nestor was far from perfect, still had his bouts of moody rage, lost jobs as quickly as he found them, sometimes said, 'faggot' in front of my friends when he was too drunk, or drinking at all; but at least he was madly in love with me, and warming to the idea of being a father. Nights, he'd hold me close in our tiny bedroom, the heat often off to save a buck, and whisper his plans to one day be a millionaire. He was full of dreams like this. Some days he'd own a gym, other days he'd own a restaurant, once it was even a zoo. That day though, there were no pie in the sky business dreams, he only had his eyes on impressing his mother, finally.

Nestor bellowed, “Whaaaaaas up!?” as we arrived, and, as it often went with him, I tried my best to hide my reddening cheeks. His siblings barely turned as we entered, only the youngest sister– the second youngest sibling, one ahead of Nestor– turned and gave a terse wave. His mother was reduced to a wheelchair at this point, a pair of dark shades making her look like a withered latina Stevie Wonder.

“Wonderful, he came,” she grunted, loud enough for everyone to hear, and turned her wheelchair away from him. She was facing nobody now, but she seemed to prefer that to her youngest. I gave a small wave to the crowd, a few pitying faces vaguely resembling Nestor’s own, nodded back. Everyone held a beer in hand, and at their feet were countless crushed beer cans, the crumbled evidence of an awkward party.

“Anyone got a beer for me?” Nestor asked in a goofy voice, his eyes sadly trained on his mother’s back. Someone muttered something about a cooler by the backdoor. For a while we just stood in a circle, his siblings mumbling low about how bad their mother had gotten, how much they missed their father, wondering who would get the house when she finally kicked it. It was a selfish and beer stricken affair.

After an hour of this, Maria finally grew tired of being ignored, and wheeled back over. We had finally surrendered to sitting, but no one had the energy, or sobriety, to grab chairs; and, so, we all sat on the crispy yellow grass, the individual stalks scraping my hands as I rubbed my stomach, dreaming of leaving.

Then I felt a tap on my shoulder.

Looking up, Maria greeted me with a weak and plaque stained grin. “Hola, Maria,” I supplied politely.

“Hola, Tania. Como estas?”

“Fine.”

“So glad to hear.”

“Glad to hear you’re glad to hear.” One of Nestor’s older sisters snorted and sipped her beer long and heavy. We all sat in silence.

“Any idea what you’re considering naming the child?” Maria finally asked. I had expected this question, she had asked it every time since that first visit.

“Still considering.” Maria pursed her wrinkled lips, squinted her wrinkled eyes. She looked a lizard giving birth.

“Well, I hope you figure it out soon. Because that thing is clearly arriving soon.”

“Thing?”

“Baby, child, yes, yes,” she said with an annoyed wave of her hand.

“You’ve been keepin’ track, ay, ma?” Nestor asked, his voice slurring heavy. “Look a’ her, ove’ da moon ‘bout her grandba- grandbaby.” He wobbled over and tried to plant a kiss on his mother’s head, but she placed an old hand in his face and shrieked like a scared goat. One of Nestor’s brothers took his elbow and yanked him away. Maria smoothed out her top, fixed her hair, and shook her head.

“No, no, nothing like that. I don’t keep *track*. I just know these things,” she sneered. “If you all did the blessings I taught you, then you would too.” The children all looked away, an annoyed sigh could be heard. “But anyways, one does not need magic to see his wife is the size of a hippopotamus.” She smiled cruel under her dark sunglasses, the word coming out perfect, every ‘p’ pronounced with pleasure. I bit my top lip, gave a thin smile, and nodded.

“Well, Nestor, that’s our cue. Let’s go,” I grunted. I tried to stand, but my body was stuck in a sitting position. “Nestor, help me up.”

“Oh, come on, Tania. Shessss kiddin’! You know my ma. Shesh always been a joker. Mama, you devil, tell Tania– tell Tania you were kidding,” Nestor coughed. Maria just stared, the cold smile frozen on her face. I wanted to claw her eyes out, break her teeth, push out of her wheelchair and stomp on her legs until they were shattered. But I couldn’t even fucking stand up.

“Nestor! I want to leave,” I hissed. His siblings raised eyebrows at one another, but no one said a word.

“Tania!” he barked back, “iz my mama’s birfday. Don be a, uh– bitch,” he hiccuped. Maria let out a hoot at this.

In life, one must sometimes sit in their own shit. You create the mess, you clean the mess. Make your bed, lie in it. The clichés are as common as the world’s evil. I had heard Nestor say vile things, nasty things, cruel things, and thoughtless things, but these were always directed at others; and, yes, he could be angry with me, childish, but never had he willfully shoved me under the wheels of his malice in such a flippantly deadly manner.

My vision blurred, a heat rising from my stomach into my head; the blood rush making me woozy, weak. Thousands of rebuttals flew through my head. Cutting him down for his inability to read English well, how his family hated him, his meak ways around white men, how I knew he would do push-ups before taking his shirt off and coming to bed. Instead though, I opened my mouth, curled my fist into the dirt by my palms, shifted my weight, and out came the most piercing scream I ever released as my water broke all across his horrid family’s dingy dry lawn.

You probably know the rest. Nestor too drunk to drive, his siblings perhaps also too drunk— more likely just unwilling— me in labor. Who was left? Fucking Maria. Maria Ramirez: the bruja queen, the monster of Medellín, the creator of all your bad dreams. That's who drove us to your birth, and that's who was the first to lay their hungered hands on your tender, soft, empty body.

Epilogue:

I don't believe in fate, but when you were three I broke an egg over your head, rubbed it into your dark skin. I had read this counteracted pain, curses. So, I did this. Over and over I rubbed the thick slime into you; thinking of chicken feathers, bat bone, white skin, land stolen, my father's cheeks, the way Nestor looked when he loved me, the way he did when he hit you, Antonio's finger protecting me; and I kept crying and crying. And I'm sorry if you remember this. I'm sorry if this all is coming back now, but I had to protect you. I couldn't risk anything. I needed you to survive all of this. My blood's been burnt like yours, scorched and congealed into hunks of red rubber, white heat, blue ice.

But you didn't understand, couldn't. And so you just sat there, scared.

You: bawling, drenched, begging me to explain any of this as I kept scraping at your skin rougher and rougher, your voice kept climbing higher and higher. My heart choking, growing, blocking my throat as you screamed to know if you did something wrong, if you were dirty, if it was your fault.

Informing the Cat

My parents were good parents. They just weren't around. Then again, maybe that's why my memory of them is so positive. No one hates shadows, it's the steady sun that burns.

Sometimes, when home alone as a young child, I'd sneak into my dad's room and steal his boxers. I'd put them on, take my shirt off, and sit in the living room with a beer in my right hand and the television blaring, a little mimic of my maker. I hated the taste of beer, and at seven I was so small that half the can could make me vomit. Most nights were spent doing that. Doubled over, spewing harsh into the toilet, shuttering and bursting the capillaries peppered around my soft face, dirty toilet water splashing back onto my cheeks. This was adulthood, I remember thinking as I'd retch; this was growth, cruel and poisonous.

I used to be skinny as bad dreams, but then I turned fifteen. Almost overnight my childhood ended. My arms thickened, legs sprouted dark hairs over sudden ice hard thigh muscle, chest grew wide as wings, spine stretching to obscene grown man lengths. It was around then that my aunt started coming over to our house to keep me company on random week nights. We'd sit and watch movies while my parents were working. I didn't need babysitting, but it was still nice because I got lonely at night. Most days would end with me crying in my dark bedroom. Yet, as much as I try, I can never remember feeling truly sad, simply lonely; never depressed, but always crying. My aunt was the same. We'd share tissues and sobs over depressing films; her crying from something on screen, me weeping from all that I had seen.

She was my only friend.

But we didn't get to really know each other until she started touching me all over when she was drunk, cooing and giggling like my body knew a secret I didn't, as if youth was one long joke. It wouldn't happen every night, but sometimes, usually after nights where she was sneaking sips from my parents' whiskey or vodka, I'd feel her fingers crawl onto my midsection, her head start to droop into the tender space where vulnerable neck meets hard shoulder. I would sit dead dog still on the couch as she would do this, her cigarette odor filling my nostrils, sometimes her lips brushing my neck. The movie whining in the background as my heart screamed in my chest.

"Mi hijo, do you remember when you were a baby?" she'd ask me, her fingers sliding under the lip of my shirt, hard nails pressing into my spongy flesh. Her lips were fat; neck dripping dark, baggy skin like tears, eyes black. I'd look down at her before responding, one of her wrinkled hands resting on my cheek.

"No," I'd always answer.

“You were such an ugly baby,” she’d then say.

“Lo siento.”

“What for?”

“Yo no se.”

“Ok.” Then she’d go silent, allow her finger running down my collarbone to do the talking for her. In these moments her eyes would go blank; lips pursed as if kissing something far away, something long since forgotten. Some nights she’d ask to see my bedroom. Others she wouldn’t need to go that far. I don’t remember a lot from those days.

Soon after, I was true big.

Huge.

Broad.

Bully.

A hard fuck.

At sixteen, kids in town would pay me to buy beer for them so often that the short, brown, wrinkled cashier of our local 7/11 handed me a pamphlet on binge drinking and whispered, “Don’t feel bad if you need help. It’s hard for... us.” When I tried to take the pamphlet, he held it tight. I looked up at him, his eyes were brown circles floating in a milky film from cataracts. A slight smile flickered on his mouth, then disappeared. I thanked him then never returned.

This was the point I begun cherishing my full beard and how it covered every naked inch of my dark, blatant face.

I was a six foot three slouch, and standing straight I was six foot seven. Children would gawk as I teetered by, fingers pointing like they were baby scientists discovering me, preparing to apply a latin genus to my classification. Mom and dad stopped calling me, 'son,' around the house, and instead used my full name, 'Ramon Nuñez,' like we were work associates. Teachers would flinch when I handed in my tests. My young bones hurt.

It was around then I stole for the first time.

Nothing much, just a bike from a rich kid. A silver and black mountain bike with fifty gear shifts. It was a risk stealing from the rich, but I figured I'd lay low and keep the bike in my backyard until everything blew over. I didn't even have to wait that long though because the day after finding it missing, bike kid came riding into school with a brand new, sleek BMW as replacement, other students flocking in mass around the car like birds to seed. The kid would ride this vehicular based popularity all the way to the title of prom king. That's how it went for some kids. There was never any true death for them, nothing finite. Their traumas speedbumps, hardships tickled them, their parents could made cadavers walk. I waited until fourth period before sneaking out and keying a white dollar sign into the black car's passenger side and pissing in the gas tank.

I was undead those years. Not alive, undead. My feet felt stitched together. Moving was mere momentum. I choked on the stench of cigarettes every inhale. School was frost, home was bite. I couldn't take living in nothing but the space between burns, and one early morning, three A.M. to be exact, after taking a thirteen hour detour to avoid home and all that came with it, I

found myself staring at a faded want ad plastered to a dirty window. Three days later, I had the job.

From then on, everyday after school, I'd ride my stolen bike to work as a janitor at an animal shelter two towns over. There were two routes, one with roads open-beer flat– I hated that one– the other stuffed to the gills with sharp hills baring ninety degree slopes. This was my path.

To distract my brain from the pain of performing my daily summits up those elevations, I'd picture someone at the other side, waiting for me, someone far away, and I'd imagine them standing far below with clasped hands, worried eyes searching. Maybe they'd been standing there for weeks, maybe just hours, perhaps a lifetime, but one day, like a large locomotive howling from a distance, I'd appear to them in full. Pedaling until my swollen knees rippled with lactic acid bursts, barking airless gasps that sounded like muted screams, sweat stains growing steady on my chest, wet hair sticking to my forehead. I'd be monstrous when they saw me, but no matter who they were, or what I appeared to look like, they'd be smiling. Smiling to see me.

My main job at the shelter was cleaning the cat cages. The cages were stacked five high, one on top of another, and the metal had started to rust from years of nothing to drink but cat piss. It was a cramped, non-ventilated room with headache inducing, buzzing fluorescents. It could hold only about forty cats max, and, sure, they were small, but they still shit like any other grown animal. It still stung to smell. The underside of my fingernail beds always bore brown by days end. Every corner caked with dry, hair filled feces.

I'd wear my collar over my nose while cleaning, huffing and lightheaded from the stagnant stench. Some days there were paw prints of blood splattered throughout the cage,

evidence that there was a menstruating cat inhabiting the space. These were nasty days, but made worthwhile when the cats were sweet; mewling all lovelorn whenever I stuck my fingers through the bars in greeting, coming up to rub their soft heads against my chest when I cleaned their temporary homes. These moments of brief affection made my sacrifices seem saintly.

They weren't all like this though, some were clearly left out in the hard world too long, body parts gone missing in dust-ups, quivers replacing curiosity. These ones would squat in the corners furthest from the exit, their bodies tense and reflexive, always facing me head on. I kept jerky in my back pocket for these cases. Whenever I'd watch one of these scared few, with their little pink mouths debating taking the free meat from my outstretched hand, missing eyes downcast, tails flickering with suspicion, I'd feel a bitter vindication swell in me. As if even cats understood the shame that comes with charity.

A few times every month, I'd open a cage to find a cat curled in the corner and all the bags of cheap beef jerky in the world couldn't coax them close. These were the cats that would stretch every inch of their body away from me, pressing their bodies flat to the metal cages, willing themselves tiny. Hissing at me, they'd bare claws and fangs, spitting and squawking at me simply for being in the vicinity. I never allowed anger to enter the equation when dealing with these tiny creatures, but I couldn't help but feel disrespected by their disgust. Sometimes I wouldn't feed these cats. Then a week or two later they'd look at me, rows of ribs now jutting out of their scrawny forms in sharp angles, and I'd stare back, whispering, "You did this, not me. Never slight the only hand that feeds you."

Mike McGeehan, my boss, was an older Irish man with thick fingers, a thinning hairline, and a stomach that was always the first thing to enter a room. He called me, 'Señor Skyscraper,'

the first day he met me, and the sheer amount of times he used it on a daily basis seemed to dictate that it was one of few genuine points of personal pride he possessed in his dull life. However, to call him racist would be a gross simplification of his hatred for me, Mike didn't possess the worldliness to understand terms such as, 'microaggression,' or, 'stereotype,' or, 'tact,' or, 'empathy.' He was as Bostonian as a Fenway Park minstrel show. He wasn't some special magical bigot I just stumbled upon, no, this was just how life went; wherever I sprouted signaled the birth of a pecking order that we had all had been unconsciously bred into; a caste system of my apparent creation; a space I had intruded at birth with my baby limbs and melanin. He didn't hate me because I was brown, he hated me because my existence was a reminder that he also had a label; my body a dark mirror for his whiteness.

"Señor!" his voice would rip through the dingy shelter's front to its musty back room, "Señor Skyscrapah!" An ugly Boston accent would often drip into his mouth when he'd shout at me, and, like his raised voice, his accent was exclusive to his interactions with me.

"What?" I'd shout back over the distance between us.

"Don't, 'what,' me. You, 'what,' your pops?" I pulled my collar down from my mouth before answering this time.

"I've said, 'what' to my father before, yes." There was a pause after my response, and in the precious few empty seconds, I looked at one of the cats above my head today. This one was a little brown kitten with splotches of white around his throat and face, and big green eyes with gold peeking around the edge. It let out a quiet purr when I opened the gate before immediately clamoring over to my large hands awaiting him. I pulled him close like he was a baby, cradling him in the nook of my elbow and bicep, dangling a long pointer finger over his fuzzy face.

“What did I tell you about holding the animals?” Mr. McGeehan shouted as he walked in from outside the backroom. He hadn’t even entered yet, but he knew that this familiar sight of me coddling a cat would be greeting him. “One of these little fuckers is gonna give you cat scratch fever.” The young creature pawed at my finger, I pulled it out of reach. “Are you listening to me?” I nodded, but continued to stare at the cat. Mike reached a pale hand into my arms, grabbed the kitten by the scruff of its neck, and tossed it back into its cage like a filthy sock into a messy drawer. I kept staring at my hands. “Can you just *not* do these things? I swear, you go out of your way to make yourself seen.” He looked me up and down, taking in my body with hungry eyes. Sometimes I wondered if he housed envy in those muddy irises, but mostly I just wished he would shut them forever. “It’s pretty fuckin’ rude to not respond to someone, y’know?” My head nodded, but my face remained stoic. Mike sucked in his cheeks, once again pulled his pants over his wobbling stomach, and then began to leave the room. “I look forward to when you get sick. Knock you off your goddamn high horse.”

“You’re the only person here who’s ever got cat scratch fever,” I whispered to his back. There was no quick response meant by this, no witty banter, just cruel air floating in the space between the both of us. It was true though, out of the five other employees that worked here, including Mike, he was the only one to contract cat scratch fever. He’d done so a whopping seven times.

“What was that?” he asked back, shattering the cold energy, his voice barely loud enough to hear over the whining cats. Mike’s large body rotated at a painfully sluggish rate, like a planet attempting orbit around some self satisfied star. I sniffled under his gaze, then shook my head. “No, no, I wanna hear what you said. It sounded so funny. Fuckin’ enlighten me.” He closed the

distance between us fast for a human of his heft, a mean finger sprouting into my chest. The constant cat based infections had reduced his hands to constant red lumps of painful, swollen masses that had thin raised lines running down them. They looked like shredded catcher's mitts.

"I'm sorry." I tried to turn away but he caught my arm.

"I didn't ask for an apology, I wanna hear what you just said," he seethed. I smelled black coffee and nicotine on his breath. I opened my mouth, but only air funneled in and out, my words laying out of reach, shoulders shifting from side to side. "Hey," Mr. McGeehan whispered, his voice gaining a gnarled edge to it, "Look at me. Kid, look at me. Eyes up." He curled his finger into a fist and then sunk his knuckles into my sternum, but, still, I kept my head hung low.

"All I said was that you're the only person here that's contracted cat scratch fever. I didn't mean anything by it."

"You think this is a joke? You think it's funny that I get sick, huh?"

"No."

"What was that? I can't hear you when you're staring at the ground." I wiped my nose on the back of my hand and sniffed. Mike's fist kept kneading my front, making concentric circles like he was marking a bullseye on me. "No answers down there, Señor." He paused and placed a small sneaker clad foot in between my larger feet. "One of these days you're gonna hafta look up, and we'll see how tall you feel then." Then he pressed hard into my front, allowing his weight to be carried by his fist into me, but I didn't budge. My heels dug into the floor, my body holding us both upright.

We stood there, like middle schoolers slow dancing, our hands unsure what was vulgar and what was beautiful to touch. The sinewy muscles in me twitching and sore from disuse. His

breathing quickly growing labored, a contest had been born in his mind, or maybe there was always a competitiveness between the two of us. He let out a choked gasp, and at this I looked up.

Mike's face was covered in a thin cover of perspiration; his pale face, fat and shiny, baby smooth cheeks looking like a glazed donut. For a beat longer, his soft fist shook against my chest, grinding up and down my front, but then he uncurled. We shared a tender moment of mutual disgust, his hot breath loud enough to cover the room's buzzing fluorescents, and then he stormed off, leaving me alone to listen to him mumble bitter slurs to himself as he slammed a few of the empty cages shut. The metal collisions echoing and creaking.

The cats sat in silent apathy, watching. A mute audience despite all I did for them.

"We're going to have to put some of your little buddies down soon!" Mike announced the next day, "And, knowing how much you love doing that, I told the other employees to save the small strays for you."

I choked in response. We were standing in the front of the shelter, him behind the old metal desk and me at the front door. It was pouring this day, one of my feet already out the precipice as he told me this, rain engulfing the lonesome shoe. My knuckles flexed and unflexed, hands burning from the bleach I used to clean the cages that day despite being all out of rubber gloves. Mike was wearing a big yellow smile under a dirty Patriots knitted cap. His hands, black from filth, shoveled onion flavored potato chips into his gaping mouth.

Despite countless petitions from animal rights activists in the area, picketed march after picketed march lead by the local middle schoolers, and even a local celebrity's tear choked plea

that was shown on grainy public access, we had staunchly remained a kill shelter for the last twenty years. Mike viewed this as a grand accomplishment. The protests hadn't been completely for naught though. A new local law was passed banning the euthanization of canines in the county. So, the dogs stopped coming to us, instead being sent to a shelter the town over.

And, as for the cats, they still very much remained our speciality.

“As it stands now, we're going to need to put down at least eight cats, maybe more,”

Mike informed with a bored tone.

“I'm busy,” I responded, my eyes peering out the door to the nasty day unfolding outside.

The rain was slick and alien looking as it flowed in thick black swaths down to the gutters.

“I didn't even say what day it would be.”

“Well, what day will it be?”

“This Thu—”

“I'm busy.”

“Let me finish!” he snarled. “Don't forget how this relationship works, there's a numero uno,” a meaty finger pressing into his pillowy chest, “and a numero...” he froze at this, desperately trying to bring to mind an insult of Spanish origin, before finally sputtering, “and a numero not boss. You got that”

I stuck a hand into the outside world, felt it get submerged in the steady stream, and then, dripping, I brought it back into the shelter. I nodded like this was a groundbreaking discovery; water is wet, how exciting. Finally, I looked back over my shoulder at my boss. “Clear as day. No problemo—”

“Whawhawha,” Mike blurted, his crusty hand mimicking a mouth moving, “I can’t understand you when you start spewing that Mexican shit all over here, good lord.”

“I’m... not Mexican?” I said, slow. “You do know ‘problemo’ isn’t spanish, right?”

“Ok! God! I get it! Jesus, feels like I’m watching an episode of the news everytime you speak,” he muttered as he massaged his temples. I felt bad for making him strain like this.

“Anyways, as I was sayin’ the cat killin—” he cleared his throat, “cat *euthanization* is this thursday,” Mike finished.

“That’s tomorrow.”

“By God, the boy knows his days of the week.”

“Well, either way, I’m busy tomorrow. School and the such.”

Mike laughed, but didn’t smile, it felt like watching a chimp mimic emotion. “You know, Señor Skyscrapah, I did some thinking, and I realized something. You are always *so* busy on Death Days,” he said slow, “it’s almost as if, oh, I dunno, you’re lying about your availability. You do know that goes against the code of conduct, right?”

“Since when do we have a code of conduct?”

“Read the sign,” he said, pointing to a piece of torn loose-leaf paper taped at an angle above the doorway to the backroom. I tilted my head to parse it. ‘No Bullshittin’!!’ it shouted in slanted, blocky scrawl that leaked off the bottom corner of the page. The first half of the scribbles too large, chasing its smaller second half off the paper.

“When did that get there?”

“It’s *been* there, always has,” he informed me, “not my fuckin’ fault you never look up, I did warn you.” He tilted the crinkling bag of chips up to the ceiling, mouth agape; allowing for

the flavored flakes to rain into his mouth, covering his face in a film of crumbs. Chewing with his mouth wide open, a paste of spit and potato coating his tongue, he grumbled, “You can fulfill your promise to the company, or you can fuck off, Señor. You’re a dime a dozen. Common as rain clouds.”

“I’m a janitor, I don’t deal with the animals,” I responded, a rising fear in my words, “that was our agreement.”

“Agreements change. It’s called goin’ above your pay grade. Bein’ the bigger man. Doin’ the tough shit.” The man’s got a phrase for all seasons.

“What if some cats get adopted?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Sure, if between now and five P.M. tomorrow eight cats get adopted then you can have a nice easy day of simply cleaning cat shit. How’s that sound? Don’t thank me too hard, now.”

We’d never even had as many as three cats adopted on the same day.

“You know, I’m done discussin’ this, Señor. Good bye. Adios.” He balled up the chip bag and threw it in the vague direction of a trash can. It landed at my feet. Mute, I watched as it slowly unfurled itself, the folded corners stretching like shiny fingers towards the dimly lit ceiling. As if even simple garbage could somehow understand that somewhere better alluded it. A howl rose in the backroom from one of the cats.

I rode home the flat way.

I hadn’t even taken my keys out when my aunt opened the front door to greet me, her loose body sloshing in a purple robe. “Hola, hello, hola-” she slurred, her head striking the door frame. I didn’t see her much these days, my job giving me an excuse to break off our burgeoning

relationship. She reached out for me, a finger catching my collar, but I slid past, dragging the dripping bike through the hall, streaks of water marking a path to my room. She reached out once more, fingers begging for an inch of me, and I pushed her away, hard. “Where you off to sweeth-” her words cut off by a slam and a whimper. I threw an unconcerned look over my shoulder, surveyed her collapsed figure— brown legs and arms sprawled out like a squashed spider— and continued towards my bedroom down the hall, closing the door loud behind me.

It was half hour later, when I was lying on my bed, staring at my partially leaking ceiling, when my door knob finally began to shiver. “Ramon...” her drunk voice trickled through my old broken door. “Osito... Where did you go? I miss you. I miss you so, so much.” I closed my eyes and swallowed, her words were muffled and echoed slow.

Droplets fell soft and steady from the roof above to all below.

The room was dark, my light bulb had gone out four years ago, and I’d been allowing slow growing shadows to decide my bed time since. “Come watch a movie with your tía. Para mi.” Her voice was so full of lonely love, spilling in a froth out her mouth. Images of syringes crawled through my brain; long, dark plungers pressing thick, clogging substances into furs.

A cold drop struck me on the forehead.

Tails shivering, bodies seizing, hands clamping muscle as they went from spastic to stiff. “What happened to my little friend?” Babies drooling and cooing, mothers cradling little armfulls of gold, fuzzy faces peeking past pale blue blankets. “I love you.” A pair of shoes too tight for me, fires baking bodies black.

Water rolled down my nose.

“Oh, fuck you!” Her fist struck the wood again, and then again, a heavy noise floating through a wet room. “Fuck you!” A brown face with white climbing up its neck and chest, big eyes, little bones being pulled longer than they had any good being. The door sounded like it would explode. It was only dead wood, I thought, it couldn’t possibly be expected to stand up to living rage. Each pound echoed in my ribs, my hands covering ears, small green eyes blinking, a low cry, rainwater filling my throat.

“I’m just tired,” I shouted, words wavering. “I’ll come and see you soon, but I just need you to leave me. Please, tía. Para mi.” My voice cracked ugly. The pounding stopped.

I woke up a few hours later, my body shuttering, a deep fear in my chest from the sudden pitch black of night engulfing me. To my left, a soft blue light crept under the base of my door. A fan like glow flooding across my room’s floor, shimmering then shrinking. With a hesitance, I opened the door, head peeking around the opening, afraid my aunt would leap out of nowhere. There was nothing.

Feeling like a timid child again, I snuck out of own room, tiptoeing through the dark and musty hallway of my home. The alien blue blinking slow across the walls surrounding me.

The light continued to grow brighter as I came closer to the end of the hallway. When I reached the end, I turned to my right to observe its origin, the living room television. Clothed in the soft glow, I leaned my head in to identify the viewer, the arms of the old red couch from my childhood slowly coming into view. At its center, sitting firm, eyes tethered to the flashing screen in the front, was my father. An empty silence reverberated in the room. Finally dad shifted, coughed to break the silence, and shook his head lethargically.

“Ramon Nuñez,” he sighed, eyes focused away from me, but somehow still aware of me, “always skulking, skulking, skulking. You just love living on the periphery.” He tapped the side of his face as he muttered this. His slim fingers looking skeletal in this light, his gaunt profile even more hollow than usual. With a tilted head and a slant grimace he continued, “It’s funny, I just– I was just asking your mother the other day if we had any other tall members of our lineage. Something, anything that could explain you. But, no, no. In Colombia we were all pretty small. Your mother said the same about Peru.”

At this point, I looked at the screen in front of us; static filled it, an electric snowstorm that crackled violent across the glass screen.

A thin memory filled my mind of a late night years ago, my father coming home to find me and my aunt on the couch. Freezing and shirtless I had stared at him, his eyes bloodshot, wrinkles engulfing his prematurely ancient face. Her mouth was on my collarbone, drool rolling down my chest. Shivering, my lips parted, tongue came loose, and I had said–

I closed my eyes to remember.

I had said–

“Growth like we never knew,” my father suddenly snarled, “what a gift. To be a weapon of change.” At this, he turned to me. His face was buried in more stubble than I ever recalled seeing on him, but somehow still patchier than my own black hair buried cheeks and jaw. His once thick hair was thinning now, eyes drunk but alive.

At his feet were empty bottles, a half filled mug of yellow liquid like a streetlight guiding someone home. “Do you ever provide thanks, Ramon Nuñez?” he spat. “Does a part of you even consider what it means to have home? Family? Meals?” An emotion began to rattle in his throat,

and I feel the same thick sensation settle heavy in mine. His eyes, two dark holes, like the ends of tunnels covered, bore into my own, making me feel dizzy and cold. “You forget how to speak? I’m asking a question.”

“Yes,” I rasp, “I’m so thankful, dad, I– I’m sorry, I say prayers every night, I swear, every night, I thank God–”

“God?” he coughs. “God? Jesus, I raised the kid ungrateful and stupid.” With a shaking hand he reached for his mug, the fluid fighting in its prison as it’s delivered to his lips. The drink is removed, he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, then inhales hard. With flickering eyelids he sizes me up. “Come over here, sit,” he said with a gesturing hand. My shoulders quaked ever so slightly, but I remained still. “Come. Here.” I wish I could respond, even just a whisper, anything. My mouth remains closed. “I can fucking drag you over if you want?” This jars me, and as if in a lucid dream, I feel myself appear at his side, sit next to him, my body falling into the couch, the cushions devouring me once more.

He had a tongue pressing against the inside of his cheek, bulging like a brutal injury, eyes screwed into a deep searching squint. It feels like I’m on the wrong side of a jury. “Do you know what we did back home? What caused us to leave?” he asked. Silence responds for me. He nodded. “I didn’t think you did. My father, your grandfather, he bred birds.” He paused and watched the nothing on TV for a moment after saying this, his breathing slow and labored. Then he started up again, “I don’t know if you know this, but Colombia has the most species of birds out of any country in the world. More than Europe and fuckin’ America put together, but they’ll *never* tell you that.” Dad stopped again, this time to grin at this, eyes affixed to an imaginary South American sky on our musty ceiling. “All so beautiful, too... Parakeets, hummingbirds,

albatross, parrots..." My heart thumped hard in my chest. "The color— Ramon, when an animal is where it's meant to be, it flourishes. It's nature. The birds here? They don't want to be here, they want to be in Colombia. It's backwards. They wish they could travel those oceans, return to the world as it was meant to be. They dream of it in fact. Are you following me?" I nodded. "What the fuck's that shit, give me an answer."

"Yes," I coughed, "yeah, uh, yeah I follow."

He sneered, but continued, "Well, dad use to breed this one bird, the Quetzal Crestado. He'd keep all of them in the backyard, hundreds of cages, each one with a small quetzal sitting beautiful and adored for. They had these red chests, almost looked bloody. It was as if some animal had sunk its teeth into its heart and now all the little thing could do was bleed down its front." He reached over and ran a finger down my chest, I flinched and tried to lean back, but he pinched the material at the front of my shirt. He pulled me closer, his sour breath glowing with shallow life on my face. "And, Ramon, their emerald wings— so, so green. The greenest green. Those quetzals loved being held and stroked; but, at night, they'd sit in their cages and make this— this sound." Dad's eyes glazed over for a moment, as if he's falling asleep, but then he closes them deep, eyelids quivering from force, and he shook his head before pushing through his exhaustion. "They'd make these whistling noises, soft and sad. Sounded like a baby crying. Imagine a whole backyard full of this, a whole flock of hundreds of tragic calls. That was our home. Describing it can't do it justice, you had to have lived through that. Feel it." He ran a hand through his hair, it shook all the way to the back of his head.

"I'd ask dad, why are the birds crying? And he'd always say, 'It's their song, son. They sing songs of tragedy.' I was young though, a small child at the time. I couldn't believe

something so full of life, so beautiful, could feel such potent loneliness.” At this, a wetness began to appear around his pupils, but he ignored it, winced, and rubbed his large nose. “We didn’t have much back then. Most of our money came from my father selling these birds to wealthy families looking for cheaper versions of the beautiful birds they wanted to keep, and my father always would warn me, ‘We take care of those birds like family, better than family. They are all we have, Antonio.’

“I loved them, Ramon. I loved those birds more than anything when I was a boy. Every morning, I was right there with my dad, feeding them, washing them, cleaning mites from their feathers, emptying their cages of shit; it was how we existed, and it wasn’t always pleasant, but love, genuinely appreciative love, means you’ll do anything to help a creature.

“Now, after awhile, around a year of helping with the birds, my father decided I was old enough to be trusted to do tasks on my own. That’s how I was put in charge of feeding them. Dad only had one rule about this—a law really—don’t *ever* get the bird seed wet. Even if the bird seed dries after getting wet you can’t give it to them. You wouldn’t know this, but the issue is the fungus that grows in these seeds the moment water touches them; a fungus that will fill their tiny lungs, smothering them from inside out.

“One day, right as I finished feeding the last bird, some boys from my town came over to ask if I wanted to play soccer. Having done my task for that day, I grabbed the birdseed, threw it into the shed, and closed the door. We played soccer until dusk that night, hours upon hours of nothing but running, and dribbling, and panting. We would’ve probably played under the stars too that night, but as if a lever was thrown, a sudden and angry rain began to fall. I remember

standing in it for a bit, savoring the cool water on my arms and head, laughing hard with the children.

“The next morning I got up to feed the birds as always— dad would put up a tarp to protect them whenever rain began to fall— but as I go to the shed, I realize the door is slightly open. I couldn’t quite remember if I had closed it fully or not, and when I went inside to check on the birdseed, I noticed the bag was just the slightest bit damp. Now, I knew my father’s rule, but I also knew that this was a brand new bag of feed. And I swear, when I felt the bag, it wasn’t that wet, just a little damp. So, I fed the birds, made sure they were given water, and then I went on with my day.

“Things went like that for the next few days, feeding, cleaning, repeat. Every night filled with sad songs lulling me to sleep. But then, one night, right as I’m drifting to sleep, something hits my ear flat. Not a physical force, but this— sound. And it jolts me right away. I crawl out of bed, creep through our small house, open the backdoor silently, and enter the backyard.

“I swear, I can see that night as if I didn’t live it myself, like I was some kind of mute observer, unable to do anything.

“The stars were all out over head, a whole heaven in pinpricks, and there were over a hundred of these birds chattering in cold dark cages around me. Their squawks a tangible force smothering me.

“Then, I heard the sound again. I followed it slowly, stepping lightly, moving with rise and fall of the sound. Every beat bringing me closer until I reached the very back corner, right by the shed where I left the birdfeed. There, I heard a gasping song, a grating wheeze. A tiny bird, maybe the smallest we owned, was lying on its side on its cage floor, little chest shivering with

exertion. I hold the bird soft, placing two fingers lightly on its red chest, feeling under my fingertips the creature strain and shake with each breath.

“I kept tabs on the birds those next few days, praying this was an isolated incident, but every night another tiny voice wavered. I started to panic. Losing more and more sleep nightly. A routine began where I would take the birds I noticed were sick, too sick to help, and simply toss them over the fence, stashing their cages in the trees a mile from our house. Some flew off, but others hit the ground and sat there, staring at me. I had to pick those up and walk them down the road before placing them on a fence post, hoping something would take it.

“After two weeks of this, my dad asked me if the backyard was sparser than usual. If it seemed like we were missing cages. The coldness that ran through me when he asked that. I knew what needed to be said, but there was no room for honesty, I had waited too long. It would be like putting a band-aid over a severed arm. Something extreme had to be done.”

My father went silent, his non-stop vocal barrage going dead. His eyes wide and staring into the TV, like it held some solution to his long dead past.

“What did you do?” I asked. I had forgotten I was in the room with him, transported to a country I had never known, a childhood that had never been told. Dad nodded his head a few times, swaying back and forth, the fizzing light splashing across his face in bursts.

“I,” his voice grown elderly, as if he had literally re-lived all this once more, the years piling onto his shoulders. “I went outside,” he shook his head, “and, we had these matches in the kitchen for when we would light our stove,” the room trembled with a malice, “so I brought them out, gathered a few sticks, and placed them in the corner of the backyard. I had thought, I’ll light a small fire, let it spread a little; and, yes, I’d have to kill a *few* birds, but I would wake my father

up before it spread too far. I pieced together a thin explanation centered around the claim that this was the handiwork of some local troublemakers, gangsters jealous of his flourishing business that wanted a cut. We had been casually threatened from time to time, and we were probably due for some kind of warning. I can still see my plan as it played out in my head: dad would come out to my shouting, I would breathlessly scream, ‘The birds! The birds, papa!’ He’d see what was happening, grab the bucket from under our sink, fill it up, and slowly, the two of us would work to put out the fire. And we’d be fine. We’d all be fine.

“As for the sick birds, dad had always said that, in nature, if a bird was caught in a forest fire, it wasn’t simply the flame they had to escape, it was the smoke. Their lungs, so small, so fragile, just couldn’t take inhaling the heavy smoke. He’d think that’s what was killing his beautiful animals.” My father’s voice wavered, and I found myself beginning to fall into a stupefied daze.

“I started the fire under a corner, under the cages of the sickest birds I could find. They stared at me the whole time I was moving them, those little red eyes watching me, chests vibrating in that horrible grating pitch. I kept apologizing to them, over and over; explaining that I wasn’t a bad person, and they weren’t bad birds, but sometimes bad things happen. Sometimes mistakes are made, and sometimes they grow.

“And, so, crying the entire time, at eight years old, I struck the match, dropped into the dry kindling, and watched as I began to burn the only way of life my father ever knew.” Dad’s mug had fallen from half-filled to empty in a trembling brown hand. The outside darkness had thickened over the course of the tale, a blanket of clouds shrouding the moon. He rubbed his ear, swallowed, and looked down.

“Those birds shrieked the entire time, Ramon. Roasting in their wire cages, voices growing distorted as their lungs sealed shut from the heat.

“I still feel as if they were singing those songs for me. I was just a child, but I was still a coward, and that meant it must’ve been bred into me. Children don’t do what I did, Ramon. Children don’t kill to save themselves, but I thought I could even the scales with a sacrifice. I was fucking eight. And, I just stood there. The fire growing and growing. A wall of heat and leaping flame surrounding me and my father’s birds. Devouring every inch of our backyard, every cage, every animal. Their songs growing louder and louder. Filling me, vibrating inside of me.

“At some point my father came out, the smell of smoke likely jolting him from his sleep, and at some point he must’ve extinguished the flames, but by then the backyard was no more than a smoldering pit. Just a dirt patch of empty cages holding blackened birds.

“He was ruined.

“We were ruined, and he just kept shaking my shoulders, screaming to know how this happened, but I couldn’t say anything. There was nothing I could say.”

He said the last words slow and individual, focusing on each syllable, before going quiet for a moment. A surprised look played on his face, as if he was shocked by his own ending, and then he slowly rose. His frail frame filled the space in front of me, and it was as if I was reliving the moment with my aunt all over again, him standing over and observing me like I was something that just existed, outside of his sphere of influence. “Now you know, Ramon Nuñez. Now you know why you’re here, right now.” He rocked back and forth, head lolling from shoulder to shoulder, breath heavy and broken.

“Ok,” I mumbled, looking at my feet. I could feel my father’s eyes burrow into me, hungry and suffocating. I looked up and met them. A heat rose from my feet to my head, my teeth gritting against each other, palms itching. He blinked and smiled sad.

“We’re bystanders, this is what our choices have reduced us to. This is what I have brought upon all of us.” As the words left his drunk lips, the blurry memory of that night shook into focus. Scared, young, and all alone, I has asked him, my father, why my aunt was doing this.

And he had just stared at me.

Like I was singing some sad and beautiful song. Smoldering.

In the present, dad hiccuped, closed his dulled eyes at me, and then dragged his deadened body out of the room. I looked at the mess he had left. The beer across the floor, a bottle broken, a small trail of blood from when he must have stepped on shattered glass. I inhaled slow, there was a rainfall still falling steady against our roof, the sound a steady percussion that matched the pace of my racing heart. Images of static and my aunt jostled my brain. I blinked. The cats back at the shelter screamed. I coughed. Mike smiling with crumbs all over his dirty mouth. The downpour echoed. Dad as a boy being shaken, screamed at, his eyes weeping, his mouth blubbering, their future rising into the air in dark black plumes.

This is growth, I thought, painful and necessary.

true growth

bigger

brighter

imprisoned

burning

Capable.

Fifteen wet minutes later, soaked through to my soul, I threw my bike to the muddy dirt in front of the animal shelter, covered my fist up to my elbow with a plush towel I had brought with me, and plunged my arm into the solid glass of the front door. It burst, glass and rain falling down the front of my shirt, my eyes screwed shut to avoid shards. The hole I left was dark as a dog's throat.

Unlocking the door, I entered the building slow, my steps echoing on the dusty floor. Surveying the damage I caused, the barrier between shelter and world destroyed, I noticed Mike's chip bag still sat there. Gently, I bent over and plucked it in between thumb and forefinger, and placed it in the trash can a few feet over. As I turned around and walked through the front space, body all but already in the backroom, I caught a flash of the white sign hanging over the door frame. Like a cat seeing the glimpse of a bird, my head swung to the sight of Mike's code of conduct. It stared down at me.

'No Bullshittin'!!'

In the anonymity of reality, this kingdom of afterhours, it looked timid. I didn't have time for indecisiveness. My huge hand slapped it directly over the center, and I reduced the despotic squeal into a memory. Then I headed into the back room.

The cats had already heard me.

Flicking the lights on, I took in all of their little faces. All of them, even the ones that hated me, were pressing their heads to the cage fronts. A symphony of howls filled the heavy odored air. Long, unbroken, human sounding groans that hung in my ears. "You want out?" I

shouted back at them. The words were hardly human, coming out in a frenzy of spittle and mania. The cats replied in kind. Rattling at the metal, claws unsheathed, eyes wide like hunters. Wild and hungry they gnawed and scratched at their fetters.

I yanked latch after latch, the cages creaking open, cats screaming with delight. The healthy ones leapt past me, skidding across the linoleum floor like it was ice, and bolting to their rainy freedom. The older ones, the sick ones, I placed on the floor. These ones looked at me with tender and tired eyes before ambling slow and stunned out into the night; their patchy coats and nubbed tails dragging out the shelter. Some of the cats paused in the inbetween of outside and inside, sticking their noses out the doorway and into the air, inhaling the night air deep. Then, they'd crawl out into the street light lit road, before disappearing into the unlit space that lay far ahead.

Before long, I had opened all the cages. Standing in the center of the now silent room, long yellowing walls loomed around me. The smell and dull lighting giving me a dull headache. I rubbed my eyes, a tired weight filling me from the inside. Behind my eyelids, images of flames danced for a moment, a small body outlined in their pale orange light, the frame growing closer and closer to the back of the person's head, a rising choke around my throat.

All shattered by a sharp whine.

Startled, I opened my eyes to find the brown kitten with white splotches staring from a cage directly in front of me; the door open, but the cat too small to push it open the rest of the way. I opened his cage with a game show host flourish, my arms pointing towards the door as if to say, 'Show him what he's won, Bob!' The cat took a step towards freedom, then sat down, and licked its nose. "Go!" I yelled. It stared at me with a cocked head. Impatient, I reached for it, but

it swatted a small, sharp paw my way. It caught the edge of my hand, slicing and leaving a thin red line.

“Don’t fuck with me,” I grunted, my injured hand in my mouth. “This is all for you guys.” It mewled back, but unlike its fellow escapees, its throat made no desperate sound, only a soft tone. I looked into its eyes. They shone back, big and green. There wasn’t a hint of wild passion in them, just helpless wonder. “It’s honestly better out there for you. This isn’t a home, it’s a– fucking cat purgatory.” I sucked on my wound, spit stinging the small cut. The kitten let out a tiny meow, then a hiss when I leaned forward towards it again. I tried reaching my other hand out slow, holding it low for it to sniff, and for a moment it twitched its whiskers close enough to my palm that I could feel the bristled ends glance across my skin. “That’s it, come on, baby. Let’s get out of–” Then the cat scratched the other hand too.

I leapt back, hand flailing from a loose wrist. “Real slimeball move, dude. Kinda shit I’d expect from a dog!” I shouted, the words simmering from my chest.

Stepping back from the cages to assess my injuries, my foot blindly stepped onto a patch of wet and disappeared from under me. My body tumbled hard, back slamming against the cold backroom floor. A combination of feline urine and water soaking into the seat of my pants and lower back. I lay there for a moment, my hair hanging in heavy ropes in front of my eyes.

I could feel reality beginning to set in, in all its foulness. Maybe this awful cat was right, maybe this was the best place for them, caged and fed, playing the odds until their number came up. I felt ridiculous, stupid for believing that this was the way to go about taking a stand.

As I sat up and shifted on the floor, a bulge in my back pocket pressed against me. Reaching back, I removed the bulge, and sighed. The bag of jerky. Tired, I opened the packaging

and placed a hard piece in my mouth. It was slightly mushy, wet, but it felt good to eat, to take a moment to breathe. I began to take out a second piece when a rustle sounded from above me. Looking up, I was greeted by two small and furry ears poking from over the bottom lip of the cage. I made a light kissing sound. A pair of eyes followed, peering over at me. I waved the piece at them. “Hey, you want this?” A pink nose and whiskers made themselves seen. “You must be hungry. Come on, I don’t need it.” The tiny creature looked me up and down for a moment, grinning at its curiosity, I spread my arms wide. “I’m a little bigger than you, I know, but I swear I got nothing but good intentions, my friend.” It crouched over, leaned down, my hand nearly touching its nose.

Then it leaned back into the cage, its head disappearing completely. I sighed.

“Don’t know if you’ve ever been told this, but you’re kind of a dick, honestly,” I informed the cat. “This was all very vulnerable of me, breaking in here, risking my good name, admitting my size, sharing my meal. I don’t really do stuff like that usually, you know. Not exactly the kind of thing in my ‘wheelhouse.’ But hey, I ain’t your dad, can’t tell you how to live.” Gradually, my knees hurting from the fall, I stood up. “Figured you’d want out, but I guess, you do you—” without warning a furry mass leapt into my chest. The small kitten lodging itself in my hands and arms.

For a moment, we both just stood in silence. The kitten placed two paws on my chest, little nose sniffing the jerky in my hands only inches away. Before I could even offer it fully, it leaned over and pulled the entire piece from my hand. I stroked its body as it gnawed on the meat with a zeal far exceeding its stature. The treat was soon gone as quickly as it had been taken, and the cat was immediately mewling for more. “Got no more on me,” I admitted, rubbing its brown

head. “We can get more though?” A pair of ravenous green eyes shone back. “We gotta go somewhere else though, somewhere different. Is that ok with you?” The kitten didn’t answer. I nodded at it. “We have had quite the sordid relationship, haven’t we? Twists and turns galore.”

With a slight limp, I made my way towards the awaiting exit, baby cat in tow. When we reached the doorway, I paused, standing in the dirty doorway for a moment, luxuriating in the smell of fresh rainfall. Together, we listened to the cool spring rain pound against the shelter’s cold slate roof, it was another wet day in a long line of many.

The Clothes Stole

You stole the Red Sox jacket at your prep school's annual quasi thrift store for the elite. Rich parents come and drop off the clothes that their child no longer cares for, and in their mind, is no longer worthy of their space.

It takes place in one of your school's gargantuan gymnasiums right at day's end. The empty space you usually go to wait for your mom to pick you up is now filled with the stink of leathers and performative kindness. Rows upon rows of designer clothes hanging from ugly metal racks. An area with stacks upon stacks of brand new video games for brand new systems being sold for three dollars, the same systems you silently desired but never even bothered asking for.

The center is filled to the brim with burgeoning bodies. A sea of frothing white, soon-to-not-be-children, crawling and climbing over and around one another like crusty rats in a sewer. Bumping and shoving and shouting for you to remove yourself from their path. The white mothers watching from tired registers on the sides of the gym, gossiping and wringing diamond studded hands, cautious-complementing one another on only the most superficial of substance. Real kindness is a luxury exclusive to their little baby boys and yoga instructors.

It's a garbage dump for guilt.

Charity for the minority few mixed in with the elite blood.

You never take part in this spectacle, buying anything feels like a betrayal to all you hold dear. 'The clothes make the man,' is a refrain that makes your brain boil. You're happy the little naked savage you are, a cheap beast with poorly stitched sleeves.

But it's here you'll find a Gucci sweater for fifteen bucks. Polo being tossed out, common as winter shivers. A beautiful Armani suit that two tenth grade boys wear at once, each one of their arms sticking out a sleeve, the silk shoulders stretched and creaking. Adults cackle and beg them for photos, and the kids mug it up, scratching one another's chins with their own arms. It's like a 'Whose Line Is It Anyways?' sketch grew sentient and privileged. The bit ends when they try to do the conjoined twin 'Nae Nae' together and the suit sleeves sling too far, seemingly in rebellion to this hilarious act of commodification, and one sleeve tears straight off. You ruminate about the time your mom wept when your grandma bought her a cheap suit. The boys collapse in a fit of cackles. A mother stomps over and removes the once beautiful blazer, wags a finger, but eventually dissolves into 'boys will be boys' emotionless chuckles.

Then the boys go to their parents.

Their parents rub their heads and mutter words you can't hear because your headphones are on high as high can be. The blistering, screaming lyrics making your head hurt and numb.

Your parents couldn't make it, and it feels like you're the only kid whose parents couldn't make it, but it's been like this since your daily three hours late pick-up from elementary school. 'Work kept me, y'know. Work shit. Was working. Had work,' you can hear your dad mumbling in his reflex laden grunt of a daily greeting to you.

You're not complaining though!

It sucked then, but who wouldn't kill for freedom at this blissful age of fifteen? Zero supervision, judgements, or guidance.

You recently started watching porn, you now get no sleep because of this pubic development, and you keep pawing your bruise colored eye bags. Sometimes you rub them long enough that you start to see white sparks moving snake slow through darkness, and your knees shake with anxious energy, excitement for this secret world you've peeked at. You feel childish again, baby boy buoyant at the prospect of seeing things ill, slimy, and crass. The vulgar videos remind you of train rides to Boston by yourself, sneaking into rated R art films, stealing comic books down your pants, sitting in parks and watching college kids laugh and tan.

Your heart clenches at the mere scent of people now. Any of them could be naked at any time. Any of them could be bulging, and flush pink, and yowling to their God for release from such jamming and dripping pleasures.

Last night's porn had this Italian looking man in it, he was very tall, his abdomen looking cicada shell in its rippled and defined beauty. His hair combed and trimmed, all businessman confidence, and you wondered in awe if he went to a good college. You wonder if you'll one day go to a good college. Have cicada abs. Get a haircut. Ask a girl, "How good are you at *handling personnel*," in a way that is both educated sounding yet lustful. Maybe a man will ask you that one day? Maybe you'd kinda like that? Nights have been very confusing as of late.

The Talking Heads song, "Psycho Killer" comes up on shuffle. Your hands shake.

Your dad first showed you this song in the car when you were nine. He explained, "This is what you'll feel when you're eighteen." But he lied, you're only fifteen and you feel it every

time you wake up now. There's such rage in these mornings where your sweet mother drives you, and your glowering face, towards the good school twenty frigid minutes away from home.

Sometimes she'll start conversation. She's always distracted by something though. She has been since she started dating again. On Thursday nights you'll watch NBC sitcoms together, a tradition started once your dad moved out, and it was wonderful at first. She'd laugh very hard; she loves to rewind scenes to memorize them, and then quotes them back to you over meals, winking. Just a cutesy joke between pals. As if you were long time chums, college drinking buddies, Gene Wilder and Cleavon Little in Blazing Saddles. As if you're not some deeply distant mother/child partnership strained by years of male abuse and lower-lower-middle class, doggy-paddle cyclical, wobble water treading.

However, after years and years of her working sixteen hour days at any place that would hire, she's all of a sudden been given a momentous gift, this incredible stroke of ultimate luck, this social class shattering impossibility. This miracle comes in the form of an offered position as assistant manager at the local Bank of America. The pay is average, and it's blowing your entire family's mind how much 'average' can buy. Name brand cereal, conditioner for your sister's hair, dog food, fish food, teenage boy food, a used Xbox 360, the appearance of acceptance when your sister's friends come over for sleepovers. You've become the quintessential American dream, a first generation immigrant starter pack, complete with a non-existent father and the bone-chilling task of self actualization.

The new job also gives her the incredible privilege of seeing you and your sister in daylight hours. You wonder if she forgot what you guys actually looked like, always shrouded in the ignorant glow of the moon from overtime soul suck and shadows of your father.

But who cares!

All of a sudden there's steady income!

You can buy fucking happiness now!

Depression can't own you if you keep paying its mental rent. Lavish luxuries insulating from the night time nasties. The momentary monetary muting of malicious thoughts that clang about with their yellowed nails and jagged teeth in your deflated skull. Your prep school financial aid finally not feeling like a flickering candle of a gift to be blown out at any mere moment by the universe.

It's all so weird.

What exactly? Do you dare name the queer? Domesticate your terrors with titles?

Is it the fact you finally have your mother around? How you're slowly learning to love your mom, shit, know her? Have a friendship with her? Talking to a woman? Breathing that soft new self-designation that once sounded more like a prayer, 'child of divorce.' Speaking to child therapists. Having tall white men ask, "Hey, treat your old lady alright for me, ay?" Having money for a food delivery left on the table since it's date night. Having money left for you at all. Eating pizza twice a week when date night blooms into a twice weekly activity. Googling your dad's name and the phrase, 'obituary?' and not really sure what answer you want. How you secretly hate how your mom dresses now, all suited up and pleasant like she's actually content with all this. As if this was always the goal, simply fitting in and getting loved again. The sounds

of sex that sometimes leak from the upstairs down to your room, soft growls of passion from men who eye you wearily for simply ambling around your own home. The way your dog yowls for you when you leave in the morning, how it makes you cry sometimes, how your mom will then ask why you're crying, how you then simmer snap and eloquently respond with, 'fuckin, ahhh, fuck you. I'm sorry... it's, it's- it's just that I hate you? I'm sorry, I didn't get sleep. I want the dog to be happy, and he won't- ah, just fuck you.' All of it. Is. draining.

"How has your week been," she asks, chewing her lip, cautious. The words prodding with tender touch at your soft and far too vulnerable shell. The frost on the windshield melts slow and timid. It makes chilled spider web looking creations across your plane of vision.

"Fine, mom."

Perpetual cloud cover overhead this time of year. The last time you saw a scrap of sky – two months ago, now – you had followed it across town, eyes glued to the infinity upwards, a lost smile flickering at your face, and only finally looking down after walking straight into the bright green aluminum 'Now Leaving Winchester!' sign at the edge of your hometown. The carelessness of half-hearted escape awarded you a wicked black eye, all nasty and bulging, looking like a hardened purple mollusk over the left side of your sight. It was gnarly enough to even grab the administration's attention, and they sent household reconnaissance in the form of a tender, old, white school psychologist adorned in a fuzzy red sweater that boldly declared in green glitter, 'Grandmas: Santa's Greatest and ONLY Rival!' You had thought it bold for a sweater to so smugly spit in the face of a canonized figure.

The old woman had looked at you, eyes displaying degree trained comfort, a smile that was simply muscles flexing, and then point blank spat the leadingest of all leading question,

“Everything good at home, honey? Do your parents ever do things that upset you? You understand that just because they may say something’s ‘a part of their culture’ doesn’t make it ‘right?’”

You laughed so hard at the pretend question.

So hard that you had to leave the therapist’s office and sit down in the middle of the preparatory school hallway in your little suit and tie to catch your breath. Kids walking around you, stepping over you, kicking your outstretched legs. Your books sliding from your grasp and scattering around you like piles of snow, tears beginning to leak out the dark, violent, clamshell of your half-muddled vision.

“How are your friends,” your mother wonders aloud to the frozen car. As if you’re not even there, as if not directing the query grants it infantile innocence, a baptism by indifference.

“I dunno!” you choose to respond, “Probably shooting up and dying young. It’s a fucking jungle out in these god forsaken rich streets. I got jumped by a fucking stockbroker the other day, mugged me for me entire 401k,” you mutter, eyes pining over some white high school kids walking to school together, laughing, comfortable.

She shoots you a glare.

You put your head against the passenger side window. A headache dissolves into a numb chill at the temples. Your uniform, a too large suit and a bright red tie your father left by accident – the only time he emails your mother is to ask for it back – are stiff and overheating the puberty stricken chest and underarms that you constantly forget to apply deodorant to.

“Yeah, Massachusetts: home to the real ‘gangster’s paradise,’” she giggles. Silence responds. “You know... like that Coolio song?” Of course *you* fucking know, and her insistence

on understanding how much *you* know – as if random trivia is somehow all you are – just pisses you right the fuck off.

“Don’t quote me shit that I show you. It’s not like you even seek out good stuff. You’re just, like, in the vicinity of good art,” you say, your hand waving in the empty space around her. She blinks a few times. Then inhales with intensity before pretending to have an itch on her face.

“Ok, fine, whatever. Fuck me,” she announces to the road.

“Cool,” you say.

“Super cool,” she responds.

“The coolest.”

“I know that! That’s what I just said!” she’s only thirty three, and bickers with her fifteen year old child with the feathered touch of a pissy, college big-sibling returning home. “We don’t have to talk.”

“I’d love nothing more, mom.”

“Awesome, so we won’t.”

“Fuckin’ faaaaaantastic.” A light turns red and she rolls to a stop.

The car tension has grown swollen and tenuous, like a distended stomach on a pregnant stray.

Then, without warning, she turns and looks at you; her thin hands, following her line of sight, shoot across the cold vacuum of the car to snatch your pudgy cheeks between sharp red nails, snapping your sight directly her way. Stunned, the two of you stare into the others shared brown eyes. Your cheek bones cold at her touch. Lips bunched together in a forced pucker by your mother.

It amazes you how often you forget that, under her constant frowns, she still salvages a few fragments of her old youth and beauty. Her face like a dry crumbling leaf pressed between the pages of the monolithic tome that is the American 9 to 5.

Here she is, Christmas red lipstick circling her pouting mouth, wavy brown locks resting in crests along her shoulders, her ambiguous olive complexion playing tricks with the light. Look one way and see Polish Ashkenazi rage, look the other and see the Peruvian Indigenous exhaustion. A cultural Gestalt switch like the Rubin vases that become faces for baseless reasons. You imagine her arms and their light beautiful color running to her fingertips uniform, all until it hits your dark, ugly, scowling face. So many shades browner and madder.

Her chest rises in violent heaves, nostrils flaring like small wings flapping in desperation, an angry smile that shows no mercy but all her canines. She's breathing violent, the way she looks when she comes home from runs. All she's missing is the signature baggy, grey, alma mater hoodie; the only thing she wears during runs around town, the one declaring her 'Tufts Tough,' the one you know she washes by hand every night starting a year ago when the 'T' in 'Tufts' started peeling.

Her eyes blink slow as she holds you, your breaths filling the car with a white air that mingles before growing stale.

Finally, a sour sounding car horn barks behind you both, screams for attention. The spell is broken. You tear your head away, shake it clear, reach into your pocket desperate for distraction, and rip out your walkman. Your dad got it years ago, left it behind as well. The car shutters into motion again.

“Yup, silence,” she intones, “just what I desired for my morning. A change of pace from my usually chatterbox of a child. Yup, my motormouth mini-man. My braggadocious baby boy-” You put headphones in your ear, staring at her; her vision on the road ahead, but her mouth moving like you still share the moment. She’s kinda joking, maybe. You don’t know if she even knows what she feels anymore.

You put the music volume on so loud that it makes your nausea flare up. In response you open your window despite it being four degree winter windchill and snowing softly. The music’s drums pound in rising volume as the icy outside air openhand slaps your neck and ears. It feels fresh, clean, correct.

You follow an impulse and stick your head, and then your entire neck, and then whole top half of your body out the moving car. Between the speeding vehicle going headlong into the storm and the faster falling flakes, the snow pockmarks your face in tiny crystal cuts. You’re a little prep school dogboy. A suit clad snowman. Massachusetts’ exclusive enfant terrible with his porn aided la petite morts in the dead of night.

Per usual, you’re already devising the excuse outline for this newest outburst, and it reads: Mom, hear me out,

- The Red Sox lost ‘a real fackin hahtbreakah’ last night.
- The dog pissed on my bed sheets.
- Classism? New York Times says economic anxiety affects us all in deeply person ways.
- Only got twenty five minutes of sleep.

- In that scant slumber time I dreamt of putting my head through stained glass. The shattering of transparent, pale, and European beauty.
 - The white Jesus that chastises from the roof of our local church;
 - the one five minutes away from the new apartment we moved into, after the divorce,
 - to save money,
 - so now I sleep subterranea in basements that mewl mildew odors, and every inhale leaves a faint fungi kiss on lips-

“Pull your fucking head back in this car this fucking moment! We are not living in your coming of age drama!” You have a witty, precocious, leading man dashing, teeth gnashing, ‘I’m over all this life being passive,’ generational clashing, ridiculing retort on the ready. Something to settle your mother back into her place, to explain to mother that side characters should never go meta, and to remind mother that the audience no longer wishes to see her plotline that went stale a good fifteen fucking seasons ago.

However, just as these cruelties lick at your gums, you gag on them. Persistent nausea finally tiring of simply being accessory, now trying to outfit you in all its foul rage. You begin to spit up your daily oatmeal onto the road like some lap dog with a penchant for puke. Vomit – oat colored sludge that appears visually verbatim to how it did a few hours ago – trickles to the moving ground and is gone in a flash. Your eyes follow it, and you watch the lumps make neat, apple-cinnamon smelling trails in the snow. You imagine it will one day lead paleontologists from the distant future to your eventual destination, some eventual far fate.

This thought elicits chuckles, small simpers at first that are soon followed by raw and throat stripping barks. You continue to cackle as your mom tugs your arm like a lost child, the flakes falling on your cheeks feel like tender reminders of joy, the car wind rushing and beating your face cold and alive, headphones crowing a chorus that sounds more like a crushing credo than just *some song*; and far above, somewhere in a soundless void, a Massachusetts morning sun threatens to make itself finally seen.

“Psycho killer/Qu'est-ce que c'est.”

You stand in the gym, Talking Heads garbling in your ears, quietly scribbling the words, “discuss something brown,” on your hand. Over and over again you doodle the words until it fills your palm like psalm verse in a Gutenberg bible of brilliant brown gold. Just a little quote from Jackson Mac Low on the low to take the edge off your soul.

You found the poem in a collection this morning, placed left of a poem by Sherman Alexie. In it, Shermie has talked about being passed out in a bathroom, and you nodded your head while reading, tucking your chin into your dress shirt. He calls his mother and weeps about the father/husband they'd both lost months prior, you chew on your collar. Every morning though she still puts the father's morning coffee out, Sherman still feels lost, and at poem's close you felt a scalding, dark force detach itself from the inside of the anthology and affix itself to the back of your sternum. It burns and awakens.

You needed to catch a fucking breath, and did so by grabbing a George Saunders collection and stuffing yourself silly on sci-fi sitcom styled, your laughs echoing throughout the room's emptiness, microscopic endorphin bursts running criss-cross over the folds of your brain,

and all these moments happen at 6 AM, when the library should be closed, but you know how to shimmy in through a window in the back; you just had to stand on the rusty dumpster, get your shoes filthy, reek for hours. You've always been good at finding hidden entrances to places.

After a few moments of mouthing the three words on hand, a student's shoulder slams into yours, your eyes fly up, and realize you've wandered into the coat section of the gym sale. Surrounding students rifle through the racks with a rapid boredom, one that causes the metal coat hangers to shriek from frenetic friction. Their little blonde manes all identically long and quaffed, sinister red ties doing tap dances against their early developed chest. A young, dark haired, Filipina mom working the area smiles at you. "Do you need help? Looking for something specific?" Of fucking course you're searching for specificity.

You don't want to smile, but it's a mixture of well learned respectability and an odd feeling of familiarity for the woman that wrenches your gums into a fang baring grimace of a grin as you give an apathetic shrug. There's a wince on her part, but you watch as she finds a way to accept what you are in all your brown-skinned, snaggletooth glory. Figuring you did more than enough conversational justice for the morning – a half-shrug and a smile – you wiggle your headphones deeper in your ears to signal, 'Let's lose the yakety-yak, ma'am, this right here's a busy boy with busy boy business to attend.' Alas, the move is ignored as a small manicured hand grasps your arm hard and stops you dead in motion.

Your head swerves in shock to face her – did she *not* see the headphone wiggle? – and a pair of jade green eyes with pupils the size of nickels stare back. You look around in vain for escape, shoulders rotating rapid, tie flapping over each shoulder in your

existential-conversational horror. Students flow and press by you, a few whisper and look at the scenario you're now embroiled in, some have on about six different layers of luxury clothing.

It is then, as your terrified eyes scan the room for any potential opportunities for escape – a sympathetic eye, an exit in sprinting distance, a tall piece of driftwood you can whittle into a longstaff, a feral wolfpack seeking a new brown boy alpha perhaps due to a well-managed canine-run affirmative action initiative – that you realize the extent of this woman's lonesomeness. She's somehow all alone in this huge gym, the only person placed in charge of a station by themselves, and of course it's the one section smackdab in the epicenter of the room. Both too far to speak to the white other mothers roving in clothing slinging packs, but close enough to be watched by them and ridiculed. This poor woman has been sequestered to the very center of everything.

Noticed by all, seen by none.

So starved for an interaction, with anything, she looks like she's one brush-off away from spending the rest of her morning talking weather with comically low-priced designer dress shirts. A soft sigh escapes your lips, you scratch your forehead, and then lower your music by two clicks before nodding at her in recognition to spew her pitch. "It's coat season!" she begins, "Do you habe-" A trembling accent peaks its head out for the middle of, 'have,' and you watch her lips and brow grow tight in focus.

You smile in support, she takes a deep breath, clams her eyes shut, and tries again. "Habe-" Her bottom lip folds into her mouth as she grimaces in disgust with herself. The original hand that grabbed you remains clinged to your sleeve as if the two of you are drowning together. Unsure of what to do, you try to comfort her by patting her hand, but after a few pats you look

down and realize you've been actually just patting your own hand. You pull your hand back, feeling comforted. The woman's eyes remain sealed, her lips moving around the same words over and over; you look over your shoulder and catch a few sweater clad mothers glancing, grinning in your direction.

They got on their great big, toothy, 'how ya been?' smiles on. The one's adorning their face when they ask all Splenda sweet, 'how ya been,' since your, 'dad had the cops called on him/mom got fired/dog died/body began blooming. Well? How ya been?' Chomp, chomping on sticky gossip marrow with their pink faces.

A crackling blue flame rises and snaps in your chest as you place a quivering hand on the nervous Filipina's left shoulder. "It's not really a big deal," you whisper. Despite it being a plutonic act, you still can't help but let your hormone drunk mind think of the late night skin flick from nights prior; the man in that, too, had placed his hand on the woman's shoulder right before informing her that, 'There's a *rising issue* that needs a *delicate touch*.' Images flash in mind, and, with a wince, your hand slides off her shoulder. Contact is disgusting; human touch, what a curse; spiders on the inside of your skin. You're a fucking deviant, you fucking monster, it's called self control why can't you have a goddamn shred of self-control, you're such a perverted fuck, just another man-

"Take all the time you need," you say soft. The voice that comes out of you sounds like nightfall in your childhood bedroom; a swaddling void that never showed sympathy, supplying beautiful, heavy nothingness in the place of mercy. Sometimes you'd lie in the anonymous dark for hours, eyes open, exhilarated by the frank lightness of it all. Never knowing where elbows

ended, shadows began. Getting to be just a form, for once. Embracing the confusion in all its unrequited love.

The woman blinks at you. You once more place a hand on her shoulder, but then remove it just as quick, smile. “They don’t wanna see us succeed,” you say with a stern squeak. You heard Kendrick Lamar say that in an interview once. He definitely was talking about you, specifically. “It’s a broken system,” you add with a tragic head shake.

Damn, you’re such a good person. An ally.

‘I know why the caged bird sings,’ you think.

Wow, on this day, one young, brave, boy– nay, hero– changed the devil-white face of American race relations forever.

Obama, Jesus Christ, that guy who wrote *The Boondocks*, and You.

Visions of a small activist and his Filipina comrade arm in arm, treading over torn American flags, their brown brethren trailing in confident hope for uncountable miles, heading into the inky heart of entropy with people who could help, and guide, and foster, and teach, and protect you-

“What are you talking about?” she asks.

“Uh, I’m saying, take all the time you need.”

“For what?”

“Just to speak- get words to sound- I don’t care that you have an accent!”

“I don’t have an accent, you have an accent,” she says back in her accent.

“What, I don’t have an accent! I speak english good!”

“And, I don’t?” You look at the mothers, then back at the Filipina woman.

“I’m just saying,” you sigh, “it’s, like, don’t sweat it, we’re on the same team,” you gesture your hands between you and the woman, pointing at her, then you, then her, then you; winking so hard your eyelid might fly away, “ya get me?”

Ah, there’s nothing quite like connecting with a, uh, ahem, non-white person. Maybe, once all this confusion is cleared up, you guys could even wear matching biker jackets like the Hell’s Angels used to do.

Weren’t the Hell’s Angels racist though?

...

Hmmm....

Probably, but still jackets are jackets. A jacket can’t be racist. Unless it was like a Nazi jacket, that’s hella racist.

“You play on a team?” she asks.

“What? No!” you groan. Throwing your arms in the air, your giant, floppy blazer sleeves come unrolled and cover your hands, making it look like you’re a boneless baby. “Y’know, there are good guys,” you say slow with a wink and sleeve wave to Filipina, “and bad guys,” –head nod to the crowd of confused caucasian mothers now openly staring. The woman’s face nods as if she understands while simultaneously transitioning to pity.

Are you blowing this? How are you blowing this? What the fuck, man. How does one even go about this? This is a normal thing for fellow minorities to do amongst each other, no? Call themselves a, ‘team’ in public. Is there some codeword you’re unaware of? Like, if you say, ‘double consciousness,’ or, ‘imposter syndrome,’ will her eyes suddenly fill with tearful compassion?

“Is everything alright here, Sarah?” a white man who sprouts directly next to you two asks, causing you to leap in shock. He’s a short, squat, glasses clad, buzz cut with greasy facial stubble; an oversized tie that has a worrisomely accurate portrayal of the D-Day invasion sitting on his round stomach. Little American men getting gunned down run along the fat, sand colored bottom of the tie. Fake blood from real deaths dripping down his chest. The words, ‘Forever in **THEIR** Debt,’ running in red script along the middle.

This is David McGloin, head of the underclassman, the physical embodiment of white mediocrity, as milquetoast as he is repressed.

He’s an older guy. Maybe not, ‘I backed Reagan’s War on Drugs as an informed adult’ old, but definitely, like, ‘I backed Clinton’s Crime Reform Bill as an informed adult’ old. Everyday he wears a different tie recalling a different war. Yesterday was World War I, the day prior, Iraq. One week he wore five variations on the Revolutionary War. He literally cried when talking about the last one, too. Claimed, ‘George Washington is –*choked sob*– a father to all you young men.’ You asked if that was because we were all descendants of the slaves he raped. He responded with pursed lips and a call to your mother.

You have no clue where he gets that many ties, or that there were even so many goddamn wars that deserved to be flaunted as victories merely because they occurred. The guy would probably fuck a war if given the chance. To be honest though, ninety nine percent of American men probably already view their sex as a small war.

“Jesus, where the fuc- can you knock next time?” you snap. He looks around the three of you, then around the immense room, not a door in sight.

“Knock on what?” he asks.

“It’s called a metaphor.”

“No, it’s not.”

“David-”

“We’ve had this conversation, it’s Mr. McGloin.”

“Dave,” you mumble with a scratch to your eyebrow. This *fucking* guy. “*We’re* fine.”

You roll your eyes and shake your head. Filipina woman, Sarah, says nothing.

“You’re not bothering this lovely lady, are you, champ?”

“We’re fine,” you repeat, “you know, Dave, I think I saw some discount war ties at the bottom of some bucket over there. They had some real tasteful depictions of Vietnam war atrocities, images of innocent villages being burned right where the noose would go, it seems right up your alley.” McGloin opens his mouth to rebuttal.

“He’s going to buy a jacket,” Sarah blurts. McGloin closes his mouth.

“Is that so?” he asks, looking directly at you. You stare back, eyes hiding under your overgrown hair.

“I was just about to show him, um, this one,” she turns to the rack and grabs the first coat in her sight, before shoving it into your hands.

Of all the coats, on all the racks, in all the years this event has been running, and she grabs the one item of clothing that looks like something you’d actually afford or own. It’s an old, water stained, muddy-blue, Red Sox warm-up jacket. The words, ‘Red Sox,’ pounded across the chest in oversized lettering. You take it from Sarah’s hands, smile at McGloin, and slip it on, one arm at a time, before zippering up. It was impossible to tell while hanging, but when worn you realize what a behemoth the thing actually is. The sleeves are nearly double your arm length, the

zippered stomach folding and bulging as you try and pull it above your knees. When you put your hands in the pockets, they go right through two fist sized holes and touch your thighs. It smells like a wet sponge.

You fucking adore it.

McGloin stares like a dull cow. Then he dissolves into peals and cackles of laughter. Sarah frowns, timid eyes flitting from you to McGloin. “What are you, some stupid rapper?” he howls. The gym goes silent, heat rises in your face, shame and rage rear up like battling stallions in your headspace.

Here’s the thing about McGloin, he really doesn’t realize how much you hate him.

Or that you even dislike him at all.

As the head of the lower classman, he thinks you two got some tit for tat type, ‘will they won’t they,’ Tom and Jerry, ‘Daddy hits me cause he loves me,’ class clown vs well meaning figure of authority, bullshit relationship that is built on painless, jokey, mean barbs. You see it as a forever fistfight to earn your spot at a shrinking table.

He sees nothing wrong with anything, ever. Everything is always, ‘funny, I don’t see it like that,’ or, ‘hmm, interesting but I think you’re alone in that one, champ,’ or, ‘why don’t we focus on what *you* can change, little man.’ You’re always ‘champ,’ or, ‘little man.’ Everyone else is ‘Brian,’ ‘Kevin,’ ‘George,’ ‘Mike,’ ‘Liam,’ y’know, like, their actual names? One time you asked if he could call you by your first name from now on. He had smiled, looked up from whatever busy work he did to make himself feel relevant, and with a smile like icicles, replied, ‘hear you loud and clear, little man.’

“Yeah, I really love that guy’s work, ‘some rapper.’” you mutter, “Dave, can you even name a single rapper?” Your cheeks are flush, curled fists being carried under the cover of this extra layer of charity clothes.

“Obviously, I can name a rapper, champ,” he responds once his laugh attack subsides. “Tons of rappers.” He shakes his head like he can’t believe you’d dare even ask such a ridiculous question. Like the dude spat cyphers in between photocopies and ass-kissing rich parents for donations, some Notorious D.A.V.E.

“Well, don’t let me stop you. Regale us with your hip-hop intellect, Rap God.” He squints at you. Sarah is trying to shuffle away, but he turns to her, then points to you as if to say, ‘can you believe this, lil spitfire? What an absolute riot! I’ll murder him for making me look ignorant.’

“Well... Kiddo...”

“You’re stalling.”

“If you give me a second-”

“I will literally give you all the money in my pockets right now if you can just give me the first name of any black artist, ever.” You hold up a handful of dollar bills in your balled up big sleeves. “This doesn’t seem like much to you, but I’m a young person with zero disposable income. I’m willing to bet my financial ruin that you can’t even guess a rapper’s first name-”

“Furious Freddy!” he blurts out, “Happy?” You look at Sarah, then your head swings to Dave, slow. A lewd smile plastered to your face.

“Furious Freddy,” you repeat, tasting each letter, savoring the vein bulging in his neck. “That like a stage name... or, was his Christian name, Furious?”

“I don’t know, it’s like Madonna, who knows,” McGloin growls, trying to step away from the situation, a slight blush rising up his neck.

“Well, no, her actual name was very much Madonna, sooooo...?” Shoulders lift into a humble shrug, you flap your sleeves around like a smug bird.

“I think there’s a mom calling me,” he mumbles as he tries to push past young kids to the outer circle where the registers are.

“Huh, much like Furious Freddy’s music, I didn’t hear it, but go ahead! Go get your work done, champ!” you shout to his back as he leaves you with Sarah. “And send me a link to one of those Fast Freddy, or whatever songs! He sounds super good and also very super real.” Sarah stares at you, unblinking. “Thanks for the coat.” Her mouth remains sealed. “Score one for the good guys?”

“That was very rude,” she informs you. A black kid walks by you two, one of the few minorities here; you tried to befriend him once, years earlier, but he thought you were annoying. ‘Too frantic,’ he had kindly put it. He does a double take at your coat.

“Who’s wearing who?” he asks with a grin before walking by. You unzip the coat, shuck it off, and ball it up in your hands.

“No, it wasn’t,” you finally say in response to Sarah.

“I’m not trying to be your mother-” she begins.

“Then don’t be.” She bites her lip, looks you up and down, then sticks a long finger in your face. At the end of this weapon of mass emasculation, you suddenly feel like a bug caught trying to steal a taste of something sweet.

“You are not above the rules,” Sarah says. “You made that man feel bad.”

“I feel bad all the time, it’s called the human condition.”

“So you continue the cycle of mistreatment?”

“Hey, don’t make this some golden rule thing! There’s a power dynamic at play! He talks down to me! He made me feel bad!”

“You made me feel bad when you said I don’t speak english well!” You mouth opens to rebuttal, but then slams shut immediately. Sarah frowns, shakes her head a slight bit, and sighs. “My son acts like you, too. Mad because he thinks he’s not an American. I tell him, ‘What do you think you are then? You were born here weren’t you? Grew up here? Pledge the flag everyday? What else would you call yourself?’ He says, ‘Oh, but I’m Filipino, mom. I’m not like these white kids, they don’t get me.’ Please, I came here twenty years ago, I was fourteen. That was hard,” she pauses to gather herself, “He has every opportunity I didn’t have, and still finds a way to whine! Why are you kids all so angry? So, so, so ungrateful! What do we do when nothing’s ever enough for you!” She’s shouting by the end.

You’re crying by the end.

You’re shocked that it’s happening, only notice when something wet hits your cheek. Some small little tears sneak out your eyes and you angrily smear them with the back of your hand. Would Wu-Tang Clan cry? Come on, you fucking child. Would Kanye cry? You steel yourself, shake your head, attaboy.

It’s all going good too, tears are staunched, breathing steadied, but then you flip your hand over to rub your eyes fully dry, and your little message from earlier stares back at you.

‘Discuss something brown.’

It's smeared beyond comprehension, only you can understand what it once said. For some reason this makes the tears flow harder; kids are glancing your way, mumbles growing, bits of your name can be heard on their lips. You're not sad, you don't know what the fuck is happening. It feels like someone's straining you dry, running their hands along your spine, twisting and cracking the moisture loose.

Sarah's mouth opens and closes, little choking noises escaping. "I, I, I'm sorry." She puts her hands to her mouth. "I'm so sorry. I- it's been a long day- just, here, do you need a hug?" Her arms try to hold you snug.

Your body reacts like a kicked cat, limbs flailing, shoving, anything to not be held.

"Don't fucking touch me!" you shout, "I don't know who the fuck you are! Who the fuck even are you?" The noise in the room fades from a crackling roar to a dull rumble at your outburst, kids necks craning to see the creator of disturbance, adult faces choked in smiling reverence for this gleeful Gallows Humor. The room sits on a cliff, leaning over a pit, and the pit is forever, and ever, and you fall daily, every day is a new way to fall, every fall is a new kind of lonely.

You open your mouth to hurt her, to attack with clear words, hobble with a tongue twisted by the hands of teachers who never knew you; maim her with your mouth that always floats right over your face, a ghost of the body it loates.

Sarah's head shakes, her shoulders pinch up.

You want to break, snap into two parts, become a different thing, but right at this moment. Want skin to peel and burst, out to crawl a beautiful, lithe, white moth, and for it to fly high over its old self. So high it'll never know where it once lived, resided.

But, you are man. And man don't pupate.

With shaking hands, you place each earbud in your ears. Sarah's mouth is moving fast, her teeth chomping on hastily exhaled apologies. You click the music's volume louder and louder as your chest rattles with each breath, flipping through song after song, praying you find what you're looking for, the crowd staring. A hand is put on your shoulder, and suddenly a white mother is standing by your side, her finger chastising at first Sarah, but then you. You just keep trying to find a song to play yourself out.

The woman's mouth is mad, nostrils flaring; pissed at your disinterest in what she has to say, she reaches for a headphone and you slap her hand away.

"Don't touch my music," you snip, "Ok, I don't come to your house and fucking lick your Armani couch, or fondle your Gucci TV. I'm a student here, ok. I have every right to be at this event," you say the words, but can't hear them over your music. You wonder if it sounds like yelling to them.

"Don't say I'm being loud either!" you shout, "A minute ago, everyone here was screaming and no one cared, but I tell someone to 'fuck off,' and I'm some terrorist." When you wheel around, finger pointed to your chest, looking at everyone surrounding you, you notice that most people aren't even looking at you. They're looking at the floor, or the ceiling, or their hands. "Listen, I'm not trying to bother anyone, okay? I just wanted to be left alone. I'm going to find my music, and then I'll leave." McGloin is wading through the crowd, sprinting at you, round arms waving, disgusting tie flapping.

You realize it's time for you to split if you want to avoid another meeting with Furious Freddy's biggest fan. So you call it quits, play button hit, turn, and sprint— Red Sox jacket still in

hand– to the exit. Chum by Earl Sweatshirt pounds with each step you skip down the staircase, the air bending around your form, the outside doors growing closer and closer quick, and then you're through, and it was like you were never even behind them, never homesick.

“Something sinister to it/Pendulum swinging slow, a degenerate moving”

It's nightfall when mom picks you up. You're wearing the Red Sox coat. It feels ridiculous on you, baggy and hungry. You keep thinking about what that kid had said, 'who wears who?' And then you think, 'who stole who?'

The clothes stole.

“Where'd you get that jacket?” she asks when you open the passenger side door.

“I found it,” you mutter as you buckle up. Some white frost sprinkles off your shoulders and onto the floor mats. You had stood by the school's gates outside, in the snow, waiting two hours for her. Your walkman died after the first hour.

“I'm sorry I was late,” she says about five minutes later. The drive had been silent thus far.

“I didn't notice.” She laughs at this. You're surprised.

“I did. Manager Matt kept asking me to count my drawers over and over again. They do this to me every fucking time I say I have to pick up my kids.” She shakes her head, nibbles the right side of her cheek. You realize that's where you got the nervous tic from.

“Wait, drawers? Isn't that where the tellers work?” you ask, “I thought they made you assistant manager?” The snow falls through the headlights, you watch straight ahead as you speak.

“They did. Matt doesn’t care though. Keeps saying how, ‘While I’m very happy for you, Tania. I can’t help but feel that perhaps better candidates were passed over for this job. I think we should keep you doing your old work for now and then I’ll transition you once I feel like you are better properly prepared.’” She says this in a nasally voice. You giggle. “And I’m like, yeah mother fucker, I bet you really wish the other candidates were chosen. You wanted one of your shithead buddies to get the job.”

“You said that?” you ask in awe. She signals, waits, and then cuts off a car who wasn’t going to let her pass.

“Well, not like that exactly,” she tries hard to suppress a grin, but it springs back at the corners, “What I really said was, ‘Matt, while I appreciate your concern, I think my skills could be better deployed in areas of need at this moment. It’s funny actually, the higher ups mentioned they were very worried about this branch’s performance over the last few quarters, something about a potential change, particularly in the realm of leadership, but don’t worry, I told them, *it couldn’t be Manager Matt you’re talking about. He’s such a good, fair leader. But... if I see anything that could be altered, I will let you know, right away.*”

“And what’d he say?” You’re shouting now.

“He gave me that little rodent sneer and said, ‘Oh, Tania, I appreciate you looking out for me. Means a lot to know I can trust my subordinates. Trust is so valuable, one can’t work alongside those they can’t trust’ And I said, ‘One can’t work alongside incompetence and the worst numbers in the state either. One has mouths to feed and needs this job.’” You’re speechless.

“Mom!”

“What?” she asks.

“That’s like the coolest fucking thing you’ve ever done!” You feel stupid even saying it. You wouldn’t tell Superman, ‘that was, like, great flying, superb really.’ She nods, her smile no longer on her face. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. There wasn’t a *need* to say all that. It was stupid ego shit. Didn’t do me any good either. Matt still made me work the teller position because he can do that; he still made me have to wait to start my new position until he wants me to because he can do that; he made me two hours late to pick you up-”

“Because he could do that,” you finish.

She nods, lays into the horn as a car nearly hits you guys at an intersection, fishtails across an icy road, waves her hand in the air like she’s casting some wicked spell, then says with a flourish, “And the motherfuckin’ pattern holds!”

She pulls into the house. Headlights illuminate your apartment’s screen door, a cat runs out of the light and into the street. Car is put into park, she looks over at you, and tilts her head so you can see just her eyes through a shaft of pale street light hitting her face. The two of you stare in the darkness. You don’t know where your elbows end and where she begins. “I’m sorry if I was pushing you this morning,” she says, “I just don’t like when you get silent. Scares me not to know what you’re thinking, all that maternal bullshit. It’s not my business though, you’re a teenager, you’re allowed to have secrets-”

“Stop, it’s fine. I was a lot today, I’m sorry.” She seems a little surprised at this apology, and the shock makes you feel awful.

“I like your new coat,” she says, touching the fabric lightly. “It smells a little though.” A small frown fills your face, you try to break it into a fake smile, but it holds. The coat feels like it’s swallowing you whole in its jaws.

You want to say so much in this moment.

You want to beg her to forgive you for every outburst, every shout, every cough. To ask if you could go back to when you were silly and small with her; when things hurt more, when things were bigger, when things made less sense, when everything made the most sense. Ask why it’s been so exhausting the last few years, if this is just your life from now on or just a rough time in the plot. Where does dad sleep now? Who does she sleep with now? What was it like with her parents? Does she like being a parent? How come you can never quite say the words you want to say, but you know they’re there; and how come she always knows hers, uses them so deftly, so bravely, so precise? How come most days you feel like a fucking shotgun with a jammed trigger? Just firing over and over, apologizing and firing, crying and exploding, burst, reload, pow. You’re just a mass of frayed wiring in a bathtub; sure, you’re shocking all the surrounding, stupid, unaware, placid water, but you keep getting caught up in your own bursts.

But none of that is said. All you manage to do is whisper in a shaking voice, “Don’t I just look like some stupid rapper though?” She leans back, her eyes wide.

“Never thought I’d hear the day you’d call rappers stupid.” Her joke hits stale air, smile evaporates.

“I feel so fake, mom,” you mumble, voice cracking, wiping your nose with a sleeve. “I get so excited by these ideas and thoughts, but none of them are meant for me. They’re for people who hurt more, or people who hurt less. I just wanna wear my coats like everyone else.”

The car holds your voice in it, the lack of light absorbing every creak and shift, you imagine it all echoing forever through dark corners.

“You can’t,” she replies, “it doesn’t work like that.” The houses all down your block still all have their lights on. You can see families in some of them, in others you just see people milling about. They’re all white though.

You remember the first time you moved here, when your mom sat you down and told you it wasn’t going to be easy for the next few years, that her parents were loaning just enough money to make it in a decent town, that way both you and sister could get educations, the educations that would help you rise high, high over the old bodies. So high you would never know where you once lived, resided. And she apologized for how dangerous this would be, how you could get lost here, and you didn’t know why she said that because it was a small, nice town, and who ever heard of someone getting lost in small, nice towns?

“Can you wash this for me,” you croak, the silence breaking around you.

“Are you going to wear it?” she asks back, her thumb and forefinger rubbing small circles in the rough fabric hanging off your arm.

You nod.

“Then tomorrow you can have it, and it’ll be new, and it’ll be yours. And that’s going to be enough.”

I'd like to give thanks to my mother for supporting the notion of being anything more than just another man. To my sister Kat for being the best artist of our family and putting up with my perpetual angst. To my little brother Nik with his toothy smiles and inability to pronounce my name. To Wes for being a father to my brother and a loving husband to my mother. To Professor Monica Ferrell for running the program and helping put together this senior project; you got me to both use less words and write more. To highschool Professors David Leonardis and Fran Kirby for finding and promising a purpose in me that I often still can't see most days. To the countless incredible teachers and professors that had the care to help me out even at my most lost: Dennis Kronenberg, Harry Frazee, Christopher Butler, Tyson Trautz, Dr. Kara Buckley, Professor David Hannigan, Professor Mariel Rodney, Professor Usha Rangoo, Professor Shinelle Espaillat, Professor Lee Schlesinger, Professor Mehdi Okasi, Professor Catherine Lewis, Professor Gaura Narayan, Professor Natalie Eilbert, Professor Kathleen McCormick. To Charlotte Fenton for surviving every awful poem I write and asking me to explain the parts they don't get with a care that is so genuine it strips the bitterness right out of me. To all the artists that keep the lights on in my head. To my dogs dead and alive. To the Red Sox. To the homes I left, the new families that inhabit them, the children residing in what was once mine. To Nestor in all his chaotic loneliness.