Mighty Fine

by

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mighty fine

Max Krafft
a true story
Prelude
We’re sitting in my basement, Chris and I, talking about love. It’s late at night – or very early morning, now – and the only light in the room is from the blue numbers on the stereo’s display. They’re bathing his face in this ghostly glow, turning his indigo eyes electric, illuminating all the single strands of his silvery hair. He looks so beautiful, so magical – like a figure from another world, like a vision in a dream. “I’m eighteen and I’ve never been kissed by anyone but my mother,” I tell him, smiling shyly and looking into those unearthly eyes. “I’m not sure if I know what love is at all.”

The stereo whirs and clicks as it shuffles through a few CDs, settling on “Exit Music,” another sad Radiohead song. We listen to it quietly. “Now we are one,” its ending goes, “in everlasting peace. We hope that you choke, that you choke.” The chiming guitars fade out as the whispered vocals draw to a close. Chris and I are almost touching, sitting on that dilapidated couch side by side.
“That song is really pretty,” Chris says, “but so tragic, you know? Like, there’s this passion that’s turned bitter, this love that’s just too much to bear.”

“It’s about Romeo and Juliet,” I say, drawing closer. “It was on the soundtrack of that movie version from a couple years ago, played over the closing credits. I think it would be beautiful music for a wake in real life, though.”

“Yeah. It would be perfect,” he says. “I know exactly what you mean.” He turns his head to look at me. “I think it’s the music that I’d want to die to.”

We’d graduated earlier that Thursday evening, Canton High School class of 2001. Chris was seated in the bleachers to the right, while I sat on the stage and waited to give the salutatorian’s address. My parents were both there – my mother had given me a ride to the ceremony, and my father had flown in from Washington State that day – but they sat separately, at either end of the first row of folding chairs. He was sitting next to my physics teacher, and she was next to the English Department head. My younger brother AJ hung out with his middle school friends by the stone wall that ran behind the crowd, and my friend Peter was there, too, standing off to the side with a couple of other juniors that we knew. He snuck up behind the bleachers to whisper something to Chris while the band was warming up, and they both waved when they saw me looking their way.

Everyone was clapping when my turn to speak finally came – after the Catholic priest from St. John’s gave his benediction and the Principal and Superintendent spoke pedantically and at great length – and above it all I could hear Chris and Peter’s raucous cheers. I took my place at the podium, looked out over the crowd, and smiled. I hadn’t actually written a speech, but I knew exactly what I was going to say. “I fainted at the
doctor’s office today,” I began, and then waited while the audience clapped and laughed.

“I was standing at the desk paying for my check-up,” I went on, “and the next thing I knew I was staring sideways at the carpet, regarding with great curiosity all of these rapidly approaching shoes. ‘What happened?’ I wondered as I lay there, and I’ve been thinking about that question since.” I held up my hands in consternation. “Maybe it was dehydration. Maybe going running, skipping breakfast, and getting blood drawn – in that order – was not such a great idea. I guess my point is that as I was making those individual decisions this morning I had no idea that they were connected, that they would lead to me lying unconscious on the waiting room floor. Now, standing here in front of all of you, I’m struck by a similar sense of curiosity about the incomprehen-
sible wonder of the world. How did I get here?” I asked, sweeping my arm over the crowd. “What decisions did I make – did we all make – to bring us together here like this?”

“In retrospect, all of the choices I’ve made in my life seem so arbitrary,” I con-
tinued, “the outcomes so unpredictable, complicated chains of cause and effect that are impossible to understand.” I started ticking examples off on my fingers. “Did I only meet my best friend Chris because of assigned seating in homeroom during freshman year? Or my friend Peter because he grew up a couple houses down the street? Would I have bought a bass and started playing music if Chris hadn’t bought a guitar first? If I hadn’t been encouraged to write poetry by my English teacher freshman year, would I have started writing songs? Would I have taken a math or science elective sophomore year instead of a creative writing one? Would my GPA have been better or worse? Would I be heading to a different college to study engineering instead of the arts? Would I be salutatorian at all?” I held out my hands to my sides. “In each of these instances I’m
happy with how things have turned out, but there’s no way of knowing if – had I chosen differently – anything could have been better or worse.”

I paused for a moment, leaning forward on the podium, listening to the hushed murmur of the crowd. “The choices that end up deciding the courses of our lives are not always the obvious ones,” I said. “There is an ineffable importance in the details; whether or not we think about it, every passing moment is another choice. This can seem overwhelming, this sense of omnipresent possibility, of uncertainty, of unpredictability. Our fear of this can freeze us in a state of illusory indecision, but embracing it can free us to simply make our choices and let come what may.”

“Let’s take a concrete example. What would happen if I took a chance right now? What would you think of me if I showed you who I really am?” I took off my green graduation cap and raised it aloft, showing the audience the neon pink paper triangle I’d stapled to the top, and I could hear the sound of a collectively in-drawn breath as the moment of recognition dawned, the same expressions etched into all of their faces: shock and awe. I held the cap above my head as the cameras flashed, and those few seconds seemed to last forever.

My mother started clapping first, calling out my name, and Chris and Peter immediately joined in. The scattered applause grew steadily louder, spreading through the crowd like a wave, rolling across it like thunder. I stood there staring into the lens of the local cable station’s television camera, seeing myself reflected in it, shoulders back and head high, gown flowing behind me like a cape, like I was Superman. I stared into that camera as it broadcast my voice and body all across that conservative little town and asked, “How would things be different if I came out to you all?”
I looked over at Chris and he was smiling; I could see the glint of tears in his eyes. It felt so good that I couldn’t help but smile, too. It felt so good to be alive. I waited for the applause to die away, put my mortarboard back on my head, and carried on. “You and I,” I said to my classmates, “are the first graduates on the new millennium – as has already been noted numerous times today – and we have an infinite number of futures spreading out before us. Every second will send us down different paths. We don’t even need to make any conscious choices – it wouldn’t be a matter of life passing us by, but of life sweeping us up, of random chance sweeping us away.” I held up my hands again. “All we can do is try our best, play our hunches, make an educated guess, and in doing so change the world even as the world changes us, and I guess that that’s more or less what people mean when they close their graduation speeches by summing up and saying something trite and simple like ‘seize the day.’”

Everyone cheered, the valedictorian spoke, and the band began to play. My classmates in their green and white gowns and caps began to walk across the stage, their awkward teenage bodies becoming suddenly majestic when accompanied by the endlessly repeated strains of “Pomp and Circumstance.” Chris looked especially handsome, even in that silly polyester robe, and as he ascended the platform he broke out of line, walked over to my seat, and hugged me fiercely. “I’m so proud of you,” he whispered in my ear, “that was the bravest thing anyone I know has ever done.”

Peter found me behind the stage after the ceremony ended and stuck a dandelion behind my ear, and when Chris joined us Peter picked a flower for him, too. My mother came over and kissed me, crying joyfully. “That was wonderful. I’m so proud of you,” she said with her arms around me, “my Mighty, Magnificent, Marvelous…”

“Mom,” I said, blushing and smiling as I wriggled free, “cut it out.”
AJ wandered over after a few minutes and congratulated me, and the captain of the football team clapped his hand on my shoulder and said that it was a pretty cool thing that I’d done. My physics teacher shook my hand and told me that he wished I was going off to study science, but he knew I was going to change the world, and my English teacher gave me an effusive card that closed with the final lines of my favorite poem – Tennyson’s “Ulysses” – “One equal temper of heroic hearts, / made weak by time and fate, but strong in will / to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

In the golden sunlight, everything and everyone was so beautiful. My mother took picture after picture, group photos of me with her and AJ, and with my friends. Nobody said anything about my father, though. I looked around for him hopefully. For once, I was ready for whatever awkward thing he might have to say about sexuality; whatever rational thing he might have to say about causality. I looked over at his seat, but it was empty. I scanned the crowd, but he was nowhere to be found.

A hint of gray pre-dawn light is creeping up along the bottom edge of the basement windows, Friday morning bleeding out of the remains of Thursday night, the end of May transforming into the first of June. Chris excuses himself to use the bathroom and I get up to stretch and pull the dangling string to turn on the overhead fluorescent lights. He comes downstairs a few minutes later and sits next to me on the couch again, so close that I can feel the heat from his body, that I can smell the toothpaste on his breath when he smiles. “I guess it’s too late now,” he says.

“Too late for what?” I ask, pressing my trembling hands into my thighs.

“With the light on it feels so much more like the morning than it did before. It sort of kills the romantic mood.”
I can feel my face begin to flush. “What do you mean?” I ask, wishing that I could just will the lights back off, that we could be enveloped in darkness together.

“You said you didn’t know what it was like to kiss. I was going to ask if you wanted to find out.”

My face feels so hot, and I can hear my heart thumping in my chest. I look down at my hands, clasped, white-knuckled, in my lap. “Yes,” I want to say. “Yes. I do. Yes.” I look up into his deep blue eyes as he smiles and reaches his hand to mine. I am too scared to say anything. I am terrified.

“I don’t know,” I say at last, so softly that he has to lean in to hear, his face only inches from mine, my shallow breaths dancing in his hair. “I don’t know,” I say again, even softer now, hoping that he’ll hear the pleading in my voice, that he’ll lean in just a few inches further and convince me with his lips. I want to tell him yes. I want to say it so bad; I will say it with my body, I–

“It’s okay,” he says, leaning back, turning slightly away. “It’s fine.” He looks over at the stereo. “Let me know when you’re ready, you know? Maybe some other time.”

We sit there for a few moments longer, listening as the last CD comes to its end. It’s quiet except for the sound of our breathing and the first few birds starting to sing in the trees outside. “Man, I’m tired,” Chris says, yawning and looking at the clock. “I’ve got to go to bed.”

“Yeah, me too, I guess.”

He gets up and puts on his socks and shoes, and I turn out the light and follow him up the stairs, through the kitchen, and to the door. “Well,” he says, hands in his pockets, leaning back against the jamb, “goodbye.”

“Yeah,” I say, “I’ll see you later.”
He smiles and gives me an awkward little hug, then turns and descends the concrete steps.

“Yes,” I whisper as I watch him walk down the driveway to the road, wishing that he would turn around and read it on my lips. “Yes. Yes.” He keeps on walking though, never looking back, a dark gray figure in the leaden early morning light, silhouetted against the rosy fingers of the dawn rising and reaching up, grasping at the rapidly retreating black and purple sky.

I was lying on the couch in the basement, sleeping, when my mother came down the stairs. I’d gone back there after Chris had left and sat gazing at our green graduation gowns and mortarboards still lying intermingled in a pile where we’d tossed them, laughing, on the floor. I had curled up in the spot where he and I sat, trying to feel the warmth of his missing body in the cushions, closing my eyes and searching for his fading scent in the stagnant basement air. I was dreaming of him when my mother woke me, sitting next to my chest, resting her hand gently on my sleep-tousled hair. The light was off, and at her touch I thought that Chris was there again, that he’d come back to me, that my dreams had come true.

When she saw that I was awake she spoke to me, and her voice was so low, so sweet, and so sad that the sound itself was almost enough to break my heart. She had just spoken to Chris’s mother on the phone, she said. He hadn’t been in bed that morning. He had never made it home. There had been some kind of accident. She was so, so, so, so, sorry. He was dead.

I closed my eyes and pressed my head back into the pillow. I covered my face with my hands. I wanted time to stop. I wanted the darkness to take me. I wanted the ground to open up. I wanted the earth to swallow me whole.
Only a few hours ago he’d asked me to kiss him. Only that morning I’d held him so briefly in my arms. Only a moment ago I’d dreamed he was lying beside me.

He was the first boy I ever loved.
You wake to the sound of the earth being torn asunder; a sudden avalanche of terrible noise – so incredibly loud – like buildings crashing down, like continents grinding against each other. You roll off your bunk into a crouch, khaki sheets tangling around you as you twist and fall. Kneeling low to the floor, you hold your breath and wait to see if whatever apocalypse this is will pass.

After a few minutes, you get up, open the door to your room, and look around. From the landing everything looks washed-out, black and gray and tan, wan in the faint light of the crescent moon. There’s a low fog curling along the ground, reaching up toward the tiny windowpanes that dot the corrugated metal walls. Everything looks like it should, like it had the night before. Everything looks the same. The metal steps feel cold and hard beneath your bare feet as you descend the stairs to the bed of crushed stone and sand at the bottom that still stretches out smoothly to the unbroken horizon.
A wedge of light spills out from behind you, casting your figure in eclipse onto the fog. Up on the landing, Specialist Ryan is poking his head out of his door. “What the hell was that?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” you say, “but it sure sounded like the end of the world.”

You both stand there for a few minutes longer, waiting to see if anything else will happen, or at least to find out what already has. It’s dark and quiet and the air feels wet to the touch. You’re cold and confused, but obviously still alive, so eventually there’s nothing to do but go back to bed. You’ll figure it out in the morning, perhaps.

Your C-130 touched down on the airstrip here at Camp Anaconda just a few hours ago. This is your first night in Iraq.

It’s barely light out when you wake again, and outside the nighttime fog has just begun to lift. You put on your camouflage pants and jacket, pull up your green socks and tan combat boots. You shrug into your body armor and strap your Kevlar helmet down onto your head, shaking it back and forth to check the tightness and fit, adjusting the goggles strapped to its front. You wrap the belts of the canvas carrying case for your chemical protective mask around your thigh and waist. You sling your M16 over your shoulder, a 30-round magazine tucked into the nylon holster attached to its stock. You slide the other six magazines into the ammo pouches on your chest. You check yourself in the mirror, turn off the overhead light, and pick up your bass guitar.

Ryan knocks on the door between your rooms as he cracks it open and sticks his helmeted head through. His chinstrap is unbuttoned and he has his ballistic sunglasses on. “Breakfast?” he asks.

“Rock and roll,” you reply.
It’s a short walk from your bedrooms to the parking lot, past rows of identical prefabricated trailers stacked two-wide and two-high, but the wet weather has turned the fine sand into clay that coats your boots immediately, your soles collecting a new layer of mud and rocks with every step. The rest of the band is already lined up by your vehicle – an bizarre-looking oversized van that Ryan calls the “Hajji Bus” – and the Sergeant Major is standing in front of the formation, scowling, with her hands on her hips. She says something to Sergeant Long, and he turns to glare in your direction. “Waiting on you,” he yells.

You look at Ryan, sigh, and break into an awkward jog, boots sticking stubbornly into the mire, the heavy-duty bass guitar case lurching in your hand. He follows close behind you, his muttered curses mimicked by the sound of your rifles bouncing up and down, clattering dully against the Kevlar-covered ceramic armor on your backs.

After breakfast, the six of you ride the bus over to the airfield to retrieve the gear that you left sitting there overnight, while Sergeant Long follows behind you in a two-and-a-half-ton military transport truck. You load the heavy cases and drive back across the base – the band’s rehearsal space is on the other side of Camp Anaconda, in an unfinished room below the stands at the track where Saddam Hussein’s Olympic athletes trained, the ones his son Uday motivated through the threat of death. Beyond the high concrete blast walls that surround the stadium, a short distance from the road and hidden in a stand of trees, sits a fenced-off set of huts that housed Saddam’s chemical weapons program, run by his defense minister and cousin, “Chemical Ali.”

The Sergeant Major watches as everyone unpacks the equipment and sets up the speakers, amplifiers, mixing board, microphones, and drums. Ryan runs a power cable through a ragged hole punched in the white plaster wall to a generator outside.
“Power up,” he says.

“Got it,” you reply, as you flip the main breaker switch and the lights on the mixing board flash on.

There’s a strange tingling in your fingers as you push the faders up, a rippling, like water flowing upward through your veins. You let them rest there for a moment, until your fingertips feel like they’re about to burst, then you yank them away, shaking your hand and staring at it in wonder.

“Ow,” you say.

If you touch the mixing board again, turn to page 20.

If you start the rehearsal, turn to page 21.
Tentatively, you reach your hand out toward the mixing board again. You can feel the hairs on your arm standing on end. Everyone in the band is watching you, hushed and curious. The speakers hiss and the air seems to crackle with current, a silence alive with white noise.

You close your eyes and touch the metal surface.

Your hand whips back instinctively with the snap of an electrical arc.

You hold up your hand and examine it closely. It looks normal, but you can feel it tingling still, as though it’s imbued with residual power, like a capacitor or a battery.

Ryan taps the mixing board gingerly with his fingertips, then reaches out and rests his palm on it. He stares up distantly toward the ceiling for several seconds, as though listening for some far-off thing, then he looks over at you and smiles. “I don’t feel anything,” he says.

Everybody laughs.

“All right, Electro,” the Sergeant Major says, “let’s get this show on the road.” She’s standing over in front of the speakers, arms crossed before her chest.

You shake your head and eye the mixing board warily.

“Let’s rock the house, Band,” Sergeant Long says.

If you touch the mixing board again, reread page 20.

If you start the rehearsal, turn to page 21.
“Why don’t we start with one of your songs?” Thompson says to you. “It might be your most energetic performance ever.”

“It’ll be electrifying,” says Romero.

“Powerful,” Ryan adds.

“Seriously,” you say, fiddling with the tuning knobs on your bass, dropping the E-string to a low D, “shut up.”

You’re covering a song by the band Drowning Pool called “Bodies.” You’d never heard it before you enlisted, but it’s obviously an Army favorite, used by soldiers as a soundtrack to homemade videos of fighter jets, attack helicopters, and tanks, of roaring machine guns and exploding bombs. Drill Sergeant Snow played one of them for your platoon during briefings at Basic Training, and you watched another again with the band when you were getting ready to deploy. This song is going to be your band’s opener. The crowd is going to go wild.

It starts with a whispered growl. “Let the bodies hit the floor.” You close your eyes, lips pressed against the microphone. “Let the bodies hit the floor.” The speakers amplify your sharply indrawn breath. “Let the bodies hit the floor.” The strings of the bass hum beneath your fingers. “Let the bodies hit the –” Then everybody comes in.

The drums and bass kick up clouds of dust from the concrete floor and the distorted guitar and your shouted voice bounce back off the walls. The sound is enormous in this tiny room, each part indistinguishable from the others, just a roaring wash of noise. “There’s nothing wrong with me,” you yell, barely able to hear yourself. “There’s nothing wrong with me.” You wish you’d remembered your earplugs. It sounds like hell.

A dark-skinned man in a light-blue janitor’s jumpsuit and red and white checked headdress watches the band from the other side of a window that faces out to the track.
He stares directly at you as you begin to sing again, and you close your eyes for the final chorus only to open them and find that he is gone, disappeared like a pop-up target on the rifle range snapping back down to the dirt.

Sergeant Long’s voice cracks singing the first line of the next song, and you can hear him straining to hit the rest of his notes. He waves you off with a cease-fire sign halfway through the chorus, his open palm waving up and down in front of his face, and the band lurches to a stop. “I’m done,” he says.

“All right, get some rest,” the Sergeant Major says, “I guess we can call it a day.”

“Awesome,” Ryan says, as he flicks off his amp and unplugs his guitar. Romero sings some R&B to himself as he powers the speakers down. You reach over to turn off the mixing board and a spark jumps to meet your finger. The lights in the room flicker.

“Goddamn it,” you say. Holding up your tingling hand as a faint, numbing vibration pulses in your arm. You feel your face turning hot and red.

The Sergeant Major just shakes her head and laughs.

There’s no direct route back to the trailers that anyone knows of – the interior of the base is all sectioned off, a maze of unnamed streets dead-ending in access gates and security fences – so Sergeant Long drives the bus along the ring road around the camp’s perimeter, the one road in Camp Anaconda that you’ve been forbidden to walk on. The inside edge of its packed dirt surface slopes upward into thick earthen berms, from the top of which rise twenty-foot tall, sectional, reinforced-concrete walls. The outside edge is lined with a chain-link fence with a double spiral of razor wire along the top. At regular intervals, cement guard towers capped with machine gun nests stand beside squat, gray, metal boxes – about refrigerator-sized – with what look like satellite dishes attached to their sides, pointing into the surrounding fields. You try to count the
towers as they pass, but lose track once they start to repeat themselves. The base itself is probably only a mile or two across, but this road seems like it goes on forever.

You sit on the edge of your seat, leaning forward, holding your rifle at the ready, staring warily through the bus windows at the fence. Up ahead, there’s a group of Iraqis walking toward you along a path that runs parallel to it less than ten feet on the other side. The men are herding sheep and walking slowly, close together, talking to each other without looking up as they pass through the shadow of a guard tower. Their children follow along after them, chasing each other, playing in the waist-high grass. One of the boys looks through the fence at you and waves, smiling broadly as the bus rolls past.

Sergeant Long parks the bus, everyone climbs off, and your boots sink into the mud again. It’s raining lightly; the cold drops drip down off the rim of your helmet onto your nose. You’re about to head back to your room when the Sergeant Major waves everyone over to her and says, “All right, Soldiers, bring it in.” You join the band in a semi-circle around and almost over her, even the shortest soldier – Romero – standing half a foot taller than she does.

“Listen up,” she continues. “You all probably heard whatever it was that happened last night. Now, I don’t know what happened, but we need to have a plan in case it happens again.” She looks around at everyone meaningfully. “They don’t have any kind of warning system set up here, so here’s what we’re gonna do: the moment anybody hears anything, we’re all going to armor up, get out of our rooms as fast as possible, and make for this set of bunkers.” She indicates the structure behind her, an elongated, hollow concrete rectangle with an opening at either end. “Now, I don’t want to have to send somebody searching for any of you, so there’d better be no lollygagging. Don’t stop to get your CD-player, or anything; just grab your rifle and get your butts down here.”
She pauses for a moment and you hear the faint but unmistakable wail of a warning siren sounding somewhere in the middle distance, oscillating high to low. “Excuse me, Sergeant Major” you say, just as she opens her mouth to speak again, “but isn’t that a siren going off right now?”

She cocks her helmeted head to the side and listens as the siren trails off and a loud voice comes booming over a nearby intercom, its words bouncing back and forth, echoing off of all the metal trailers and concrete walls, repetitive phrases forming complex sentences that are then repeated over and over again, overlapping, unintelligible.

“Ah, I can’t understand what the hell they’re saying,” the Sergeant Major says, turning back to us, talking over the voice as it drones on in the background. “So what I’m saying is this: I know these damn PDAs we brought don’t work here either,” she gestures dismissively to the plastic holster beside the pistol on her hip, “so I can’t call you, and I don’t want to have to drag you out of bed myself, so when shit starts going down I want all of you to get down here ASAP. Everybody got it?”

“Hooah, Sergeant Major,” everybody says.

“Alright, let’s form-up back here at five-thirty for dinner. Sergeant Long, they’re all yours.”


“Hooah,” everybody replies.

“Fall out.”

He heads off after the Sergeant Major, and you and Ryan walk across the muddy
wasteland to your rooms, eyes down, watching out for puddles on the ground. A half-hour later, as you’re heading back to the parking lot, you hear the giant voice again. “All clear,” it says. “All clear. All clear. Remove your armor, exit your bunker, and return to duty. All clear. All clear. All clear.” You look at each other. Ryan smirks, you sigh and shake your head, and both of you continue trudging toward the bus.

You wake the next morning to the sound of machine gun fire, a long burst from something loud – an M60 or a 50-cal. – followed immediately by an explosion that shakes the floor and rattles your bed’s metal frame. You lie on your back and wait, listening to the softly ringing silence, and in the blurry gray pre-dawn light everything feels so strange and far away. “How did I get here?” you wonder. “How did it come to this?”
Chris died today, sometime this morning, the first of June. You were the last person to see him alive. He walked away from your house and down to the tracks, along the river and across the viaduct. If you close your eyes, you can see him following the gently curving rails, tracing out his final path, sketching his last escape route, drawing a line of flight. The engineer could never have stopped the train in time, if he had even seen Chris at all: a skinny blond boy standing there, looking up and smiling so sadly that your heart would break from the tremor running along the fault line of his lips. In that split second, as the engineer’s hand reached for the brakes, he would have merely glimpsed some pale figure drifting toward him: a faint and fleeing spirit captured by his headlamp’s beam, a brief flash of light becoming a shade.

The police found what was left of Chris’s broken body smeared across the tracks. “There was blood everywhere,” a man quoted in the next day’s paper said, running
down the raised bed of stones like wine or water, and the other riders on the Commuter Rail were sad and angry and late for work. The police collected the evidence and the examiner filed his autopsy report. “The cause of death,” he said, “was suicide.” All they had to show Chris’s mother were his red and black shoes. All they have to show you is his dull silver casket.

You walk to the high school around two o’clock. It’s a blazing hot afternoon. The metal stage is still set up from the graduation ceremony the day before, looking out over rows and rows of bone-white folding chairs arranged like a field of virginal tombstones, their upturned faces waiting for your valedictory epitaph. The sun beats down on the field, and the midday heat rises in waves from the asphalt-covered ground. You squint and keep your head down, wiping the corners of your eyes. You can’t bear to look up again. You don’t want to know the color of the sky.

Peter is slumped in a chair in the principal’s office, crying, alternately covering his face and pulling at his curly light-brown hair. You sit beside him and hold his shaking hands in yours as he reads lines from a sad love song over the intercom. The two of you grew up together. He was Chris’s second-closest friend. You wrap your arm around him as he doubles over in his seat – the principal graciously looks away – clutching his stomach and saying that it hurts, that it hurts so bad. He leans against you as you walk him home, staggering like a gut-shot movie soldier struggling to hold his insides in.

You stand on the stoop at Peter’s front door, holding your arm awkwardly after dropping it from his side. His mother yells at him from inside the house, telling him to close the damn door, that he’s letting all the cold air out. She strides into the entryway and stops mid-shout when she sees you, smiles sweetly, and says, “How are you?” and
you wish that you could vanish, become insubstantial and drift away, escaping with the air-conditioned air.

“Mom,” Peter says, softly, but what you hear is “Please, please, please.”

“What’s wrong?” she asks, then looks at you and asks again, but Peter is crying uncontrollably and you can’t think of a single thing to say.

Your mother is waiting on the porch for you when you get home. She walks down the steps to meet you, reaches out her arms and hugs you tightly. Her face is red and wet and as she presses it into your shoulder you wonder if and when you will feel like crying, too. She calls AJ at the middle school, and he comes straight home to make sure you’re okay. You hide from him in your bedroom in the basement, burying your face in your pillow when he knocks on the door. You pretend he isn’t there, waiting for him to give up, to leave you in peace. After a few minutes you hear his footsteps creaking on the stairs, followed by the sound of him sobbing above you in the kitchen, accompanied by the indistinct melody of your mother’s voice, speaking to him in low and soothing tones.

Your father calls that evening from his engineering office in Richland to apologize for leaving so abruptly the night before. He was sorry he hadn’t stayed to congratulate you and to shake your hand. “It was just such a shock,” he says, “such a radical, political act. I wish you’d told me beforehand so we could have talked about it.” He speaks a little softer. “There have been times in my life when I’ve felt something similar, you know? When I’ve had these feelings.” He pauses, as though waiting for you to say something. “But I think it’s the sort of thing that’s best kept private,” he says. “There’s no need to upset everybody, to call attention to yourself. It’s personal.”

You can hear him breathing over the line, ragged and slow. Does he think that
he can repair your relationships like he would fix a malfunctioning machine? That if he simply puts the right words together in the correct sequence everything will run smoothly again? You imagine him at his desk, performing some emotional calculus, plotting these new points along a curve, a progression over time. When you don’t say anything he goes on. “I love you,” he says, “and I always will. And I’m sorry for any times I’ve hurt you. I’m sorry for doing it again. I just wish we could have a relationship where we can both talk freely, one man to another.”

You put the phone down on the counter. How could he possibly have felt anything similar? He doesn’t feel anything at all; even his anger is detached, clinical. Everything is impersonal, or everything is too personal to him. You don’t tell him about Chris. You don’t want to add to his little engineering problem. You don’t ever want to talk to him again.

They bury Chris on Sunday. It’s a pleasant summer day, and the late morning sunlight glints softly off the rounded corners of his casket as it’s lowered slowly into the ground. The same portly priest who gave your class’s graduation speech is presiding over the funeral. He gives a short and formulaic eulogy, then he says those paltry farewell words: “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

“He was a fucking atheist,” Peter mutters, as you both walk up to pay your last respects to an anonymous metal box before the groundsmen cover it with spoil, a fitting word for that dark and loamy mound of earth, since everything above ground is spoiled for you. You stand with Peter at the edge of the grave while he whispers something too quiet to hear, and as the first shovelfuls of dirt strike the coffin’s lid, you imagine Chris lying down to sleep in his new bed in the soil, drifting away from this lonely, white waking
world. For a brief moment, his frail body is whole again, and you’re glad for the closed casket: had it been opened he would already be dead, but instead you can savor this last moment of uncertainty before the possibility of life collapses and reality crashes down like so many clods of earth striking metal and reverberating. “Goodnight, Chris,” you say as the darkness envelops his eyes. “Sweet dreams.”

Peter comes over to your house after the funeral, and you spend the afternoon and evening together, sitting next to each other on the same couch where you and Chris had sat just three nights before. The light is off and the room gradually darkens as the sun goes down, but neither of you get up to turn it on. He reaches out his hand in the shadows, and you take it in yours and hold it tight. When he asks if you want to move to your bedroom you say yes. When you say, “I love you” as you climb in bed he doesn’t say anything at all. He takes off your clothes quickly, pulling your shirt up over your head and yanking your pants down over your stubborn heels. He turns you over and you hear him unbuckle his belt and unzip his jeans. You have no idea what’s coming, but you need it.

After he fucks you, you lie in bed beside him quietly. Is this what you wanted? Is this all there is? He gets up after a few minutes, pulls up his pants, and leaves you there. He doesn’t kiss you and he doesn’t say goodbye. You pull the covers up around your naked body and lie there with your eyes open, thinking of Chris. It was your first time.

The rest of that summer passes like a hazy flashback sequence in a movie, like a nightmare just bordering on a lucid dream. Time collapses on itself, twisting and inverting until the days stretch out for decades while the months disappear like sunlight before a sudden storm. Your move through it like an actor in a silent film, disjointed,
sped-up and herky-jerky, while every moment is slow motion, different playback rates refusing to sync up, either too many frames per second or too few. Everything feels scripted, too, like you’re reenacting your memories, like the things you perceive as the present are already in the past.

You barely leave the basement. You wear dark colors and avoid the light of day, wrapping grief around you like a cloak, a blanket that smothers you and holds you close. You go out walking around midnight every evening, down your street and to the tracks, along the river and across the viaduct, streetlights flickering off above you as you pass, consoling you with shadow, offering their silent condolences for your loss. You want to lie down and use one of the cold steel rails for a pillow, to make the cross ties and the ballast stones your final resting place. Sometimes Peter’s bedroom light is on when you pass his house. You stop to look for a moment, then turn around and walk home to hide in the basement again. You can’t wait for this terrible season to end. You wish that this awful summer would last forever.

You don’t see Peter again until late in August, at the going-away party that your mother throws for you on the evening before you leave for school. She invited everyone that she thought that you were friends with, bandmates, classmates, and casual acquaintances alike. She was probably trying to cheer you up, you think, and they probably are, too, but you haven’t spoken to any of them since the funeral, and you have no desire to. They gather in groups around the house, talking and laughing in the front hall and the living room while your mother mingles and brings out plates of food. You sit at the kitchen counter, by the door to the basement stairs, saying hello as people wander past and wishing them well when they come to say goodbye, but everyone looks so happy that you want to scream, and the sound of their pleasant conversation grates on you.
You walk downstairs to your bedroom around midnight – the party is gradually breaking up, but there are still a few people lingering in the dining room, the soft shuffling of their feet drumming on the floor, raining dust down on you from the exposed wooden boards. You pick up your bass guitar for the first time in months and turn your amplifier on. Setting the volume down low, you start playing an old traditional song, a version of it you heard recorded by Mr. Wright and Mr. Wrong. They played it angry on the record, but you sing softly, bitter and lonely and sad. “I’m going down to the graveyard. Gonna buy me a tombstone. Gonna leave this town. Lived here too long.” You choke up on the last few lines, whispering the final chorus to the floor. “He’s gone,” you say, “but I don’t worry, ’cause I’m sitting on top of the world.”

Peter is standing in the doorway watching you. He sees you looking and smiles, a strange gleam in his half-shadowed eyes. His skin glows with a healthy summer tan. His gray t-shirt clings to the contours of his chest. His delicate hands rest on his narrow hips. He’s wearing dark blue, slim-fitting nylon running pants, the kind that button up the side, the kind that you can just rip off.

He’s walking toward you, bending down, lips reaching for a kiss. He guides you down onto the bed gently, takes off your shirt and straddles your chest. He pulls his t-shirt over his head and your bodies press together as you draw him down. There’s this energy stirring inside you, like tiny flashes of light flickering through your veins. Your pants are down around your ankles and his are slipping off. He shifts his weight back between your legs. “Yes,” you say to him. “Yes.”

You open your eyes and walk toward him. He’s still standing in the half-open bedroom door. The air between you is electric, and the tingling in your body grows as you draw closer, moving from attraction to repulsion – like magnets brought toward
each other at matching poles, like ionized atoms smashing together – until you’re finally held static as though by a force field; the strain of moving even inches closer would be enough to tear you apart.

“I just wanted to say goodbye,” he says, shifting his weight uncomfortably, meeting your eyes briefly then looking away.

You look from his face to your hands. What can you possibly say? Even if you could make your words mean anything, it would be too late for them to make a difference now. You’re floating somewhere in the darkness high above. You’re looking at him from someplace far away. You’re separated from each present, past, and passing moment by an unimaginable distance. You’ve left this town already. You are gone.
Your dorm room at Wesleyan University is halfway between wardrobe and war zone when you and your mother arrive: it looks like someone’s Technicolor suitcase exploded just moments before. A couple of plastic trash bags lie torn open in the center of the floor, piles of brightly colored shirts, pants, underwear, and socks radiating out from them like shockwaves, draped on the metal bed-frames, blue twin-sized mattresses, and the wooden desks and chairs, scattered haphazardly across the linoleum tiles. There are notebooks and toiletries, pillows and magazines, and a pile of stuffed animals presiding over one of the beds as well. You shake your head, drop your first armload of stuff by the cleaner of the two desks, and are just heading out the door when you see someone bounding down the hall, barely noticing him in time to brace yourself as he leaps into your arms.

“Hey Roomie,” he says.

Autumn Leaves
You totter backwards and hold him awkwardly, trying to push him off. He steps back, grinning madly as he looks you up and down. He’s dressed completely in yellow – shirt, pants, and running shoes – all in different, clashing shades. He’s wearing yellow, square-rimmed glasses over his light blue eyes, and he has bleached blonde highlights in his spiky hair. Your mother is smiling warmly.

“Hey Matt,” you reply.

He’d contacted you over the summer, sent long hand-written letters in block print with big circles dotting the i’s. He was from Los Angeles, he told you, or, as everyone there called it “LA,” and was really excited to come to school in New England, having never traveled East before. He wrote that he was gay and that he hoped that didn’t bother you, and that he really wanted to be your friend. Now, he offers to help you bring in the rest of your belongings, so you trail after him as he charges down the stairs to finish unloading your car, yelling back at you over his shoulder about how excited he is to be here and to meet you at last.

You follow him to all of the orientation events like his shadow, his silent partner, meeting classmates who immediately remember his name and forget yours. Every one of them has a slightly different story, but they all bleed together after the first day, especially since all of the conversations start the same: “What’s your name? Where do you live? Where are you from? What’s your name, again?” You’d felt pretty special when you got your acceptance letter from the admissions office in the spring, and you’re sure your classmates must have, too, but how can this many people – identically dressed in trendy shirts and designer jeans, and from a handful of New York City private schools – all meet each other and still think that this is true? When asked, you tell people you’re from a public high school outside of Boston, figuring that’s close enough.
You start to feel almost comfortable around Matt as he drags you to the late-night dance party, the outdoor movie viewing, the activities fair, and more. His enthusiasm is infectious; his limitless energy is enough to overcome your inertia, lifting you up, like an object in a physics problem, from the bottom of your potential well. So, while you never find an appropriate time to tell him about Chris, as the days pass it doesn’t seem as important that he never thinks to ask you about your life. In your bedroom the night before classes begin, you watch him dance in only his socks and underwear and glasses to some obnoxious pop song that Peter used to listen to, shaking his scrawny hips as he sings about believing in life or love in an atrocious falsetto, and for the first time in months the flat line of your lips curls just slightly upward toward a smile.

The rest of the student body returns the first week of September and the semester starts. You’d registered for a bunch of large lecture classes – Intro Physics, Intro Chemistry, Intro Biology, Intro Astronomy – selected not only for their size, but for their subject matter. When you left Canton you had decided that you were done with poetry, with music, with the arts. You wanted to quantify everything, to reduce things to their basest elements in the hopes that some pattern could be found there, to construct a diagram that would encompass all of the materials, principles, and forces that were conspiring to shape your life. But you realize now that Chris’s death isn’t something you want to diminish, that his life would be best remembered not in numbers, but in songs and stories and poems, and in a burst of optimism you sign up for a music and a creative writing class, as well.

You and Matt stay up late together that Sunday night to watch a recent Star Trek movie, sitting beside each other in his bed, playing it on his laptop screen, and you smile as you remember how you used to watch the television show every Sunday evening with
your mother and AJ when you were a kid. Afterwards, as the credits roll, he tells you which actors he thought were really hot, and names all the cute freshmen boys he’s met that week. You laugh as he tickles you and tousles your hair, and lie down next to him on the narrow mattress as he holds your hand. When you finally get up to go to bed he whispers a cheerful “goodnight,” and as you lie down on your identical mattress across the room, you feel like things might actually be all right.

Your creative writing class meets for the second time on Tuesday morning. The first assignment is due later in the week. It’s supposed to be autobiographical; you’re going to write a kind of prose poem about Chris. It’s a short walk to class from your dorm room and you’re a little early, so you pause for a moment at the top of Foss Hill and look over the campus laid out in repose below. Van Vleck Observatory is to your left, a stately building of ivy-covered brownstone bricks, its telescope sleeping beneath a white-painted metal dome. Andrus Field stretches out at the base of the hill, bounded at the far end by College Row, and beyond that, down past Main Street and the sleepy center of Middletown, the Connecticut River sparkles in the sunlight, winding gently through the valley. The air is clear and bright, and from the top of that hill you can see everything.

You turn to go inside the observatory to your classroom, and as you walk up the short set of concrete steps a girl stumbles out of the door, red-faced and teary-eyed, another girl steadying her, holding her arm. You stand aside and hold the door as other students come out looking sad, angry, or confused. You have no idea what’s going on. Inside, Professor Rhodes looks ashen, her sparsely applied makeup tear-stained and smudged, the soft lines of her face deepened into furrows. She barely says a word as she
leads you and your classmates down the stairs to a small room in the basement where you crowd around the building’s only television set to watch silently as the second World Trade Center tower falls, collapsing in a cloud of black and white and gray.

You walk back to your room in a daze. The campus feels strangely deserted, empty, though you hear people crying everywhere. They’re huddled in groups as though trapped together under rubble, feeling the weight of buildings bearing down. Something is burning in the distance; you can smell it on the air, an acrid scent like metal and plastic mixed with fallen leaves. The metal handle of your dorm room door sparks when you touch it, sending a dull tingling up your arm, the sensation reaching you faintly, delayed, a tremor from some explosion a hundred miles away.

“Oh my God! Did you hear what happened?” Matt says, jumping up from his bed as you enter, running his hands through his hair. “Oh my God! Doesn’t it seem so bizarre?” He’s almost giddy with excitement as he grabs your arm, his eyes glinting behind his glasses, filled with this frightening intensity. He jumps up and down and shakes you. “It’s so weird! Oh my God! Oh my God!”

He starts to laugh hysterically, his hand beginning to tremble on your arm as his laughter transforms into sobs. You hold his quaking body, standing with him in the doorway while he whimpers and whispers softly “Ohmygodohmygodohmygod,” then you lead him over to his bed and sit down beside him, his head buried in your shoulder as he cries, his heart beating, syncopated, along with yours. You want to lean your head against his, to hold his hand and say that everything will be fine. You want to lie beside him until his crying stops, to kiss his trembling lips until they’re still, and then, and then, and then. But your eyes are open, staring out the window into the fragile, crumbling distance, where you can see the towers falling, again, and again, and again.
You both stay posed like that for hours, still as statues, until you have to leave for class. He curls up beneath his sheets, facing the white cinderblock wall, and as you close the door you hear him start to sob again. The other students in the jazz orchestra are seated when you get there, the horn players with their instruments half-assembled in their laps or still in cases at their feet, the drummer staring at the sticks in his hands, the pianist with his head down on the grand piano’s lid. You reach for the acoustic bass in the corner and shudder as you brush it with your hands. Its metal strings and wooden body are dead to you.

Professor Haggerty comes in, looks around, and says, “All right, I know there’s all this stuff going on out there, but we need music now more than ever;” he holds up his hands like a faith healer and closes his eyes in prayer, “we need to put some positive energy out there into the world.” He waits for everyone to pick their instruments up, snaps his fingers to set the tempo, and counts off the first tune, the perennial standard, “Autumn Leaves.” The pianist struggles to play the opening riff along with your bass line, his hands crashing clumsily on dissonant clusters of keys. The saxophones come in with their melancholy padded chords, the trumpets limp through the melody up to the point where the first solo is supposed to start, but then everything falls apart, everyone playing listlessly, out of time and out of tune, the lead trumpet player cracking half his notes, the trombonist letting his phrases trail off unresolved.

The professor stops the band, apologizes, and dismisses the class, turning his face away from everyone and wiping his eyes. As the rest of the students file past you tell him that you don’t think you can play in this ensemble after all. While you’re walking back to your room from the music studios you decide to drop your writing class, too. You should have known better than to think that notes or words were worth a single thing.
The campus is quiet for days after the attacks, as though a moratorium on all sound has been passed. The wind absents itself; the birds cease to sing, and the mournful bells that toll the hours are unusually subdued, their subtly dissonant tones reverberating off the brownstone buildings, carrying faintly across the field, down the hill, and into the valley, dissipating into the early autumn air.

The United States invades Afghanistan in October; you and your hallmates watch President Bush announce it on the TV in the dormitory lounge. Everyone knew that this was coming – the newspapers had been building it up for weeks – but you feel uneasy all the same, like you’re feeling the last shreds of sympathy harden inside you, like you’re watching everything you thought was good about your country become deranged. The invasion that was Operation Infinite Justice has been renamed – in nominal deference to Muslim protest – Operation Enduring Freedom, as though collapsing towers and falling bombs were the legacies of freedom, something not to be fought for or celebrated, but endured or suffered through.

On television, the invasion plays like a scene from every war movie, like a stage in any first-person video game. Missiles launch from planes and ships, while flags and fancy graphics flash, accompanied by a generically martial soundtrack of stirring horns and swelling strings. You imagine all those invisible dying people as the president speaks, the ones that you will never see, the ones that no one will see again. How would they look to the bombers flying high above through their night vision scopes, if they bothered to look for them at all? Would their faces just be little light green dots caught looking up, transfixed, as the bombs rain down like falling stars? It must be easier to kill someone you can’t see, whose life you can’t imagine, who you can’t even imagine being alive, not a person but a target – a transient, pixilated abstraction on a computer screen.
“The battle is now joined on many fronts,” the president says, looking as serious as his perpetual smirk will allow. “We will not waver; we will not tire; we will not falter; we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail.” Tinny applause pours from the television speakers, a couple of people behind you begin to cry, and one of your hallmates mutters, “War is peace.” Maybe he’s right, or Orwell was; maybe you’ve been living in Oceania all along. President Bush thanks his audience and his image disappears, replaced by live feeds from cameras staring down onto murky, foreign mountainsides, a distant nighttime darkness punctuated by explosions of artificial light.

The rest of the semester passes quietly. You wake up weekday mornings and go to your lecture classes where you don’t have to think or write at all – every piece of information is delivered to you in bullet points, once on screen and once again as handouts that are just facsimiles of the slides – and on weekends you sleep as long as you can. At night you lie awake in bed and stare at your science textbooks sitting in a dusty pile on the shelf, full of numbers and formulas, but lacking any useful answer key. If only you could use them to discover the specific weight and density of sorrow, to construct a periodic table of the emotions and find melancholy’s proper place along the bottom there. What is the half-life of sadness? How long will yours take to decay, to transform? What other radioactive element will it become?

Matt is upset more often now – he laughs less, and when he does there’s a slightly manic edge to it. There’s this friction between the two of you, this constant tension in the air. Outside, students are protesting constantly – shouting slogans and waving signs in front of the campus center, setting up information tables and hanging banners in the cafeteria, passing around petitions in class – you know it’s something about the war, but you don’t bother asking anyone what or why.
Your mother writes you a letter right after the attacks happen but you don’t write her back, and your father sends you postcards from Washington State from time to time. You don’t hear from AJ, and you chat online with Peter once, but he’s distracted and quick to sign off. You’re grateful, in a way; all you have in common now is loneliness, but that’s all anyone seems to be feeling these days. It’s like in your astronomy textbook – you, your family, your friends – all these cold and empty planets loosely bound together in elliptical orbits, spinning alone through the vacuum of space, all those distant galaxies light-years away, their present forms no more than an illusion, an image projected eons ago by stars that have long since died.

You’re sitting in front of the tree in your living room in Canton on Christmas Eve – you, your mother, your brother, and Matt. He’s staying with you over winter break because he didn’t want to see his family; his mother is overbearing and his father doesn’t know he’s gay, which sounds like a familiar story to you. Your mother dims the overhead lights and AJ reads from a nativity pop-up book like he’s done every year since he was a little kid, though he’s too old to do it earnestly now. He makes funny voices for the wise men and the owner of the inn, and your mother laughs as he moves the little toggle spastically back and forth sending the guiding star careening wildly across the paper sky.

Your mother calls the directions next – a vaguely New Age ceremony that she probably made up herself – lighting a candle at each corner of the room. “We look to the North,” she intones as she lights the first one, “to the Earth, and the power of stability. When the inevitable events of life seem as though they would sweep you away, remember: you are the Earth.” You shake your head. In time, the Earth will get swept away, too. She continues through East, South, and West, describing their corresponding
elements and powers: air and acceptance, fire and intensity, water and flexibility. At the center of the table is the final candle for the Ethereal Heavens, the power of understanding, the Healing Light of Love. She lights it and says, “In the course of daily strife that would lock you into the futility of ignorant individualism, remember: You are the Ethereal Heavens. You are capable of anything.” Then she asks you all to take your neighbors’ hands while she calls blessings down upon everyone, offering thanks to some mystical force that you can address by whatever name you choose.

Matt is sitting beside you the couch, and you glance over at him as you hold his hand in yours. He was laughing earlier while your brother read, but now he looks bemused. Your mother asks if you’d like to get out your bass and play a holiday song like you’ve done in years before, but you’re embarrassed – with Matt watching, this ritual seems pathetic, and what do her self-empowering platitudes have to do with all the violence and sadness in the world? You almost wish you were a child again, sitting with your father at Midnight Mass – his fingernails leaving red marks on your shoulder as he squeezes it to keep you from falling asleep – where at least the absurdity of the ceremony has been transmuted over time into a kind of somnolent majesty, where every high holy day is a celebration of death.

AJ hands out the presents from under the tree, holding them up to read the tags by the soft rainbow glow from the strings of multi-colored Christmas lights and giving one to each of you in turn. You hadn’t asked for any gifts, but your mother bought you a few trinkets anyway, and there’s a package from your father, too. He’s been mailing you his presents every year since he moved away. This year he’s given you a fancy-looking silver pen and a black paperback-sized journal with the Wesleyan logo embossed on the front. There’s an envelope with your name on it with a card tucked inside the cover.
“Merry Christmas,” it says, in your father’s precise penmanship, “and congratulations on finishing your first semester at school. I hope you can use this diary to record your thoughts while you’re out there making history.” There’s no mention of your last conversation with him, but why would there be?

The front of the card is a poorly made collage masquerading as a family photo – your father has been making these since the divorce, too. He can never get a real picture of everyone in the same place, so he has you send your individual ones to him and he cuts and pastes them together. In this one, you’re in your graduation cap and gown, captured mid-speech, staring out and gesturing at the audience while AJ and your mother crowd around you on one side and your father on the other, all shown from slightly different perspectives, in different lights, and from different times, huddled around the podium like it’s a dinner table, arranged as though you’re saying grace and breaking bread before eating your last supper. You put the card back in the envelope and slide it between the journal’s pages. You put the journal away. You don’t have any use for it: you don’t want to write anything anymore, not your family’s story, and certainly not yours.

December 26th is your birthday – you were born just minutes after midnight, and your mother has always said that you were the best Christmas present she ever received. You’re not having a party this year, but Peter comes over that evening anyway, uninvited and unexpected, his cheeks glowing red from the cold, a light dusting of snow in his hair. “Happy birthday,” he says, smiling shyly. You haven’t seen him since last summer, and he’s more beautiful than ever: it’s all you can do not to stare. There’s something magical about him – his eyes, his smile – it’s like Chris has come back to you at last.

You bring him down to the basement where Matt is sitting in the dingy chair in
front of the water heater, wrapped in blankets, pulling them tighter as the rumbling oil furnace against the far wall kicks off. Peter sits next to you on the couch across from Matt, his hand resting on your arm.

“That’s a nice sweater,” you say to him – it’s gray and white and powder blue, the color of electrical smoke and sparks, and as it brushes against your body you can see the hairs rising toward it on your arm, the shrinking space between you imbued with a static charge.

“Thanks,” he says, preening, “it really brings out the blue in my eyes.”

“You don’t have blue eyes,” you say, looking up into them. They glint like crystal in the shadow. They look so familiar and strange.

“I got colored contacts,” he says, laughing. His eyes are deep blue, almost purple, dark like the ocean and glassy like a mirror, both reflective and opaque. They’re the same color that Chris’s were.

Matt gets up, still swaddled, and stretches as theatrically as the blankets will allow. “I guess I’ll go to bed,” he says, and walks into the makeshift bedroom next to yours, separated from the little sitting area by a flimsy white sheetrock wall your father built, a Radiohead poster covering the ragged hole his fist left in it years ago. You turn off the overhead light and sit back down, and in the silence you can hear everyone breathing, inhaling and exhaling in slightly different rhythms like the voices in a fugue. The furnace kicks on again, drowning everything out with its dull roar; and you shiver slightly. Peter puts his arm around your shoulders and the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end. He leans his head in closer and whispers, “Do you want to go to bed, too?”

You wake up alone in bed the next morning, and Matt is sitting at the kitchen table when you go upstairs. His bags are packed and piled by the door. “I decided to re-
turn to campus early,” he says. “Will you walk me to the train?” You look out the window toward the road, at the barren ground and the pine trees crusted with snow, all glowing white in the sun, blinding you like the headlamp of a locomotive bearing down. Everything is dead and cold.

“No,” you whisper, after several silent minutes pass. He gets up without saying anything and walks into the living room. You go back to the basement and your mother gives him a ride to the station that afternoon. You stay down there for the rest of the vacation. You dread returning to college, but you have nowhere else to go. There is nothing for you here. There is no one waiting for you anywhere.

Matt doesn’t look up from his computer when you enter your dorm room three weeks later, and he doesn’t answer when you say hello. His face is awash in pale blue light, his glasses reflecting the monitor screen. You stand there for a couple of minutes. Neither of you say anything.

He has created a rigorous plan for this semester that he calls his “Constitution” – you find it lying on his desk one afternoon – mapping out his every action, scheduling each day in 15-minute blocks of military time. He draws up a list of foods that he won’t allow himself to eat – peanut butter, ice cream, frozen yogurt, granola bars, cereal bars, fruit and nut bars, and other treats – and what he can consume varies according to the time of day. He writes out a mathematical formula governing the length of his naps that he posts on the wall above his bed. He reorganizes all of the clothing in his wardrobe by color, red on one end and violet on the other like the spectrum of visible light. He exercises for hours every morning in the middle of the room, doing countless push-ups, sit-ups, crunches, jumping-jacks, and squats. Afterwards, he stands in front of his full-
length mirror in his tight-fitting underwear, flexing and posing, twisting and turning side-to-side. As the weeks pass, you see his smile turn haughty. You see his lithe and hairless body turning hard.

You’re watching him one evening in April, staring surreptitiously over the top of your computer screen. He takes off his shirt and pants and flexes for the mirror with his yellow underwear on. He doesn’t look over at you, but you know that he knows you’re watching. He’s doesn’t say anything about it, though. He hasn’t spoken to you in months.

You close your eyes and he turns toward you, walking across the room and sliding his briefs down casually with his hand, running the other one through your hair. He cups your head gently and pulls it toward his body, thrusting forward with his hips. You moan as he silently forces himself on you. It hurts so much. It hurts too much. It will never hurt enough.

You open your eyes. He’s still standing in front of the mirror watching himself watching you in it, like you’re both objects in his fantasy.

You blush and look down at your monitor, at the paper you’re trying to write for your only literature class, “The Epic Tradition,” which you took because the subject matter seemed as far removed from your life as possible, because both the books and the class itself seemed large enough for you to get lost in, because it was entirely focused on the past. The page is blank except for the date and your name. You haven’t done any of the writing assignments yet. You haven’t written a single sentence since Chris died.

Your essay is supposed to be about The Iliad, which the class has just read and discussed, but about which you have no particular opinion. You start typing aimlessly, and out of nothing a strange argument grows about how Patroclus is an arbitrary character with no definite lineage, vaguely “Zeus-descended” but not favored by any gods,
only “not disliked” by them as long as he was Achilles’ friend, only significant in the action his death inspires. It’s after midnight and you’re almost finished, rounding out your conclusion with a particularly bitter turn of phrase, when it occurs to you that the same argument could be made about you and Chris, that it was chance that led him to be your friend, that his life was only important to you, that his death was only special due to circumstance. You stop typing. Your hands shake on the keyboard as you stare at the screen. “No,” you whisper. “No. No. No.” It can’t be true.

You highlight your last sentence and delete it. You begin moving backwards up the page. You wish that time could be reversed like this, that each mistake could be so easily illuminated and erased. All those black hours forming daylong sentences of loss, each week another paragraph of regret – if only you could go back to the end of that chapter, find that fateful line, turn that period into an ellipsis or surround that phrase with parentheses. Everything could have been different: with a little revision, everything would have been fine. What was the moment? What other path could you have chosen? What other story could you have told? You had the chance to save Chris’s life, but you were too weak to do it. You couldn’t tell him that you loved him, and it’s your fault that things happened this way. It’s too late now: your life is over. Every choice you’ve made has been wrong. You highlight another sentence of your essay and delete it. One by one, as the gray dawn rises, you delete them all.
You move back home to Canton after you drop out of Wesleyan, and spend the rest of April sleeping, or trying to. Your mother brings your meals down to you in the basement and takes the almost untouched plates away. It’s not simply that you have no appetite, but that the world has lost its savour and its sweetest fruits are like ashes in your mouth. You sleep later and later into the afternoon, your schedule slowly shifting until you find yourself waking up around dinnertime, just as the sun has begun to set. You lie in bed thinking of Chris on these inverted mornings, as you watch the shadows lengthen across your room. You wish he could have lived to see these sunsets with you. Twilight was his favorite time of day.

You paint the unfinished stone walls of your room black on the anniversary of his death, and you paint over the squat, ground-level windows too. After that, you don’t watch the sunsets anymore. Your already fair skin grows pallid as you cower in the shad-
ows, nocturnal, like a character in the role-playing game that you, Chris, and Peter used to play on long high school evenings and weekend afternoons – *Vampire: The Masquerade* – seated on the couch and chairs in your basement, proclaiming melodramatically how you loved the darkness and hated the day. Now the role seems natural to you, as you lie on your back, hold up your hand, and trace the pale blue veins below your deathly skin, breathing in the cool and musty air. You may as well be some malignant, accursed, undead thing: all life is anathema to you, and all that you love you destroy. You can’t stand the heat and light of the spring and summer. You wish that it were winter all the time.

By mid-June, your mother has started leaving a copy of the local paper on the table along with your evening meal, folded open to the classified section, all the nearby listings helpfully circled in red, and you search through those for any late shifts you can find. There’s an opening for a night watchman at an office building a couple of towns away. The supervisor there barely glances at your résumé before offering you the job, and he issues you a cheap-looking gray blazer, black slacks, white shirt, and a red and gray striped clip-on tie, but no nametag, or identification of any kind. You look at yourself in the bathroom mirror before your first night of work, picking a couple of stray threads from the patch ironed onto your jacket’s sleeve, the company’s logo, a stylized shield with “AJAX” emblazoned on it in some roman font. You sigh. There’s no escaping the epic tradition after all.

That night you sit in the guardroom – a small alcove off the hallway by the loading docks with a small wooden desk, metal chair, and white cinderblock walls – and click through the surveillance feeds on the computer idly – the parking lot, the front gate, the atrium, the stairs – stopping short when you see a seated figure, blurry and gray, peering intently at a monitor screen. You zoom in, but you can’t bring it into focus, its edges re-
main staticky, its features indistinct. The figure’s eyes are hooded, the white lines of its cheeks receding into empty black patches of negative space like the gaping sockets in a grinning skull, a Tötenkopf. You can’t tell whether its eyes are open, or whether they’re even there.

You leave the monitor tuned to that channel as you pick up your father’s old black briefcase that you’d claimed as a graduation gift. It wasn’t, really: it was just something that he’d left behind. You lay it on the table and take your paperback copy of The Stranger out, holding it reverentially in your hands. It’s an old edition Chris gave to you for your birthday when you turned 18, the year before last, the year before his last. Its pages are yellowing, browning; getting ragged from rereading and separating from their binding, threatening to fall out like leaves, and the gray faces on the cover stare up at you with beady and unreadable eyes from below a blinding yellow sun. You hadn’t thought too much of the novel when you’d read it first – the main character was too detached, too self-obsessed – but lately it has become an instruction manual for you: a how-to guide for dealing with meaninglessness, a catechism of anomie. Out of the corner of your eye you can see that gray figure swivel in its chair, open a book, and begin to read along. “Mother died today,” the novel begins. “Or, maybe, yesterday; I can’t be sure.” You stare at the page for a moment, then take the journal your father gave you from the briefcase, open it to the first page and make your first entry, writing Camus’s opening sentence down.

You go out for your first patrol with your headphones on, the rod-shaped tracking device that records your progress in one hand and your CD-player in the other. The album you put on is by NoMeansNo, and you chose it because the first song seemed too apropos to pass up, almost like it was written for you. “I like the graveyard shift,” it’s tit-
ular line goes, “It’s quiet, I can read all night,” but it’s the chorus that best describes how you feel right now: “You will never be the same,” it goes, and you sing along. “You will never change. It will be a long time.” It’s like so many other sad and angry choruses: another fragment of the story of your life.

Matt sends you a postcard in early July with a picture of the Grand Canyon on the front. He bought a cheap car at the end of the school year and is driving across the country back to California, taking the long way home. “I’m sorry for not speaking to you during spring semester,” he writes. “I didn’t feel comfortable. You were so distant – I had no idea where you were coming from. I couldn’t understand you at all. I hope that you’ll write to me” – there’s a little drawn-in smiley face – “I want us to be friends.”

“I’m in Arizona right now,” he goes on. “America is really weird and beautiful out here. I think you should spend some time in the desert. I think it would be good for you.” He signs it at the bottom inside a little heart, “Love, Matt.”

You set the postcard aside and open The Stranger to the beginning again. What can it teach you about friendship? Mersault agrees to be “pals” with Raymond because it’s the easiest thing to do, but he doesn’t care about it one way or the other. You find the appropriate line and transcribe it in your journal. “I replied that I had no objection,” it goes, “and that appeared to satisfy him.” You keep Matt’s postcard as a bookmark, but never write him back. If he wants to be friends with his memories it doesn’t bother you. If he wants to delude himself, that’s fine.

You’re increasingly tired at work each night, and you begin to close your eyes to the surveillance feed, ignoring the eyeless gray figure sitting back in its chair on the screen. One night you wake up with your head on the table, your silver pen still in your hand. In the increasingly illegible lines of your patrol log you can trace your mind’s de-
scent into unconsciousness, but you can’t remember what or whom you might have en-
countered there, and the few words you can read are incomprehensible to you. One
night you fall asleep while walking, drifting off in the hallway during your patrol, totter-
ing sideways toward the wall. You wake up to the sight of carpet stretching out before
you sideways and you lie there for a moment, hoping to see the receptionist’s shoes, wait-
ing for your doctor’s running feet, wishing that everything between then and now had
been a dream.

On the evenings you’re not working, you’re unable to sleep at all. Your nighttime
walks around Canton stretch out forever and go nowhere, your footsteps tracing some
abstract image, writing your pointless story onto the streets. The streetlights still shut off
for you, like they have since the day Chris died. At first it’s just one or two flickering as
you pass, but as the months go by it happens with increasing frequency until you can al-
most smell their metal contacts burning around you all the time, the silver scent of ozone
clinging to your desiccated body like perfume. Cars accelerate by you with their high
beams on, and your few fellow somnambulists cross the street to get out of your way.
Stray dogs snarl and snap as you approach them, then whimper, turn tail, and run away.

Christmas comes the same as always, and you sleep through most of it, and most
of your 20th birthday as well, hoping that they would just pass by unobserved. Matt is
probably in California and you’re not sure if Peter is home from college. You don’t ex-
pect to hear from either of them, nor do you want to. You get out of bed only when
your mother brings a cake down to the basement singing “Happy Birthday,” AJ following
behind her, joining her in song as you blow the candles out with a sigh. There’s some
festive music playing somewhere upstairs. It’s the most wonderful time of the year.
When you were younger – when your parents were still married – your birthday was part of a long holiday that stretched out for days and days after Christmas Eve. The strings of colored lights would stay up through the new year, the plastic Christ child would remain in place in the crèche set, lying in his manger with Mary and Joseph kneeling at either side, as the plastic wise men made their way on camelback across the room, following the star-guided course of their kingly progress, out of their own Eastern narratives and into the Nativity. Now, however, the holy bonds between the two have been dissolved, and this celebration feels like an afterthought, an echo.

Your father is spending the holidays with his parents in Alexandria – he has the week off from his assignment in Washington State, where he works at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, designing a plant that will process the several hundred million gallons of radioactive waste from the military’s nuclear weapons programs that have started to seep into the river bed there. It’s to be a sealed-off facility, operated entirely by machines, turning toxic slurry into giant glass rods and encasing them in steel, making millions of cylinders that will then be buried forever in some lonely mountainside.

He had asked if you and AJ wanted to come down and celebrate Christmas with him, but neither of you did, so he mailed his presents up again, instead. You open yours now after your mother and AJ leave. It’s a framed family tree of your father’s side, a complex diagram spread across the page with every name assigned its place and time, a dense tangle of interrelations made transparent, a once-living history crystallized. You can imagine him in an empty, white apartment in Richland after work, poring over faded photos and dusty books, trying to make sense of it all. You drop it back into the pile of wrapping paper. It is meaningless to you.

AJ comes back downstairs and stands beside you, regarding the genealogy with
disinterest, a second piece of birthday cake on the plate in his hands. You look up at him from the couch. “Pretty boring present,” he says, picking it up. “It’s sort of like that chapter in the Bible, the one that’s just a giant list of who begat whom.” He laughs as you take it from him and put it down on the table again. “I guess it’s your fault for not telling anyone what you wanted.”

“There wasn’t really anything,” you say.

He takes a bite and chews it slowly. “You’ve been moping pretty hard for a while,” he says after a moment, “and since you got this job you’re barely even around. What’s the problem? You’re really making Mom upset.”

You look down at your hands. “It’s Chris’s death,” you tell him. “It was my fault.” The final words barely make it past your lips. You’ve never said them aloud.

“Don’t you think you’re being a little melodramatic?” he asks, almost gently. “It’s sad and all, but it was just an accident, like Mom said, and . . .”

You cut him off. “The papers said it was a suicide.”

“Look,” he says, an angry edge creeping into his trebly voice, “I’m tired of feeling sorry for you, and of you hiding in this basement feeling sorry for yourself. Okay, you’re feeling suicidal: that’s fucking fine. But you’ve been acting like you’re dead already. So, whatever.” His voice is breaking and he turns to leave. “If you really want to kill yourself, maybe you should just do it and get it over with.”

You lower your head to the tabletop, your forehead resting on the genealogy’s metal frame, and wait for him to walk away. “Acting depressed,” you whisper as you close your eyes. What role are you playing? Which act are you in? The first? The third? The fifth? You should have killed yourself right after Chris died like in a real tragedy, fulfilling some suicide pact, rather than letting the scene drag on for this long, letting all
these extras get dragged in. How many lives are you ruining through inaction? AJ’s?
Peter’s? Your mother’s? Matt’s? Doing it now won’t bring Chris back, but it would keep
you from poisoning anyone else. If you had killed yourself that summer then maybe
none of this would have happened. If you had killed yourself last winter you wouldn’t
be here right now.

You open your eyes and the names of your ancestors on the page before you
blur together, illegible and indistinguishable from each other. You regard them for a long
time, and when you finally get up to put your uniform on you don’t feel any better, but
different, somehow strange. The seemingly bottomless wellspring of sadness inside of
you has run dry, revealing a bottomless abyss.

The United States invades Iraq on the 20th of March, 2003. You follow the
opening salvos idly on the monitor on your desk at work, listening to President Bush
stutter and bluster about honor and duty like some bargain-bin Agamemnon, leading
the troops to glory just like his father did. You should probably feel more upset by it, or
at least a little concerned, but it feels abstract and far removed. Maybe you’ve just gotten
used to it, inured yourself to it, as violence has become your country’s precondition, its
steady state. The desert landscape looks barren on the screen, ruined and empty: it looks
like it’s dead already. You wonder what the Iraqis think, if in their imagination any of
this makes sense, if the explosions somehow become magical, their curling, calligraphic
flames spreading across the land, illuminating another Arabian night. But maybe they’re
tired of these stories, the ones in which they play both the villain and the victim of the
West. Maybe this is all as underwhelming for them as it is for you – a day like any other
– and they’re resigned to living in a constant state of wartime, too.
You’re driving to work a couple of weeks later through a freak late-winter storm when your car’s alternator gives out. The snow is falling thickly along Route 95, and you can barely see the road ahead of you even before your headlights flicker, your dashboard lights go dim, and the engine’s vibrations begin to fade beneath your hands. You have no idea how fast you’re going; you have no frame of reference to measure your own motion against: everything is pale and featureless outside.

A semi trailer roars past on your left, throwing a sheet of snow onto your windshield that’s too heavy for your failing wipers to clear away, leaving you in darkness. Everything is so quiet that you can hear the individual snowflakes falling faintly on your roof, and their whispered descent on the wind sounds so bright and distant and cold, like stars softly falling through the universe. You let go of the wheel and close your eyes; you take your foot off the gas as the darkness swells and bears you up like water, as the emptiness becomes infinite, as the heavens open unto you. You sit back in your seat and let yourself drift off of the road – floating up, away into nothing.

Everything goes white as the airbag explodes. The car slams into the median barrier and spins back across the lanes, sliding over the shoulder and coming to rest in a drift of driven snow. You open and close your eyes a couple of times as you sit there for a moment, dazed. You’re full of potential energy – your hands are shaking and your face and arms feel like they’re on fire. You rest your hands on your knees and feel your whole body humming, and you sit and wait for the police to come as the waves of raw power gradually die away.

A wrecker truck comes to tow your car, and you call your manager from the garage to let him know you won’t be able to make it to work that night, that you won’t be coming in to work again. “There’s been an accident,” you say.
“I really sorry to hear that,” he says, “Are you all right?”

You think about that for a long moment before you answer. “Everything is fine.”

You’re out walking one evening in early April around sunset, following Washington Street through the center of town. The weather is a little warmer and the last of March’s snow has almost melted into the slowly thawing ground. You have your headphones on, but nothing is playing. You’re not going anywhere.

A car drives by slowly and pulls over in front of you, nosing into a driveway and idling there, angled across the middle of the sidewalk, blocking your path. It’s a nondescript gray sedan – blandly familiar – it could belong to anyone. The passenger side window rolls down. “Hey,” the driver calls out to you, “how’s it going?”

You take your headphones off and look in the window at him: his face is blandly familiar, too. “Not bad,” you say, noncommittal, “You?”

“Outstanding,” he replies, “What are you doing these days?”

“Well, going to school for a little while,” you say, leaning in toward the window, resting your hands on the door, “but that was last year sometime.” You shrug. “Just working this security job since then.”

“Security, huh? Roger that.” He takes off his mirrored sunglasses and lays them on the dashboard. “What were you going to school for?” he asks.

You look at him more closely, still trying to figure out where you might have seen him before. His hair is close-cropped and black above his handsome sun-tanned face and silver eyes. His sturdy hands grip the steering wheel lightly and he’s got a slim-fitting black jacket on. “Physics,” you say, “or astronomy. Or chemistry.” You pause for a moment. “Or music.”
“Oh yeah? What instrument do you play?”

“The bass guitar.”

He smiles and you know that it doesn’t matter what he asks you next, that you’re going to end up inside his car. You can already feel those rough hands on you, his calluses scraping your naked skin, your muscles clenching as he fucks you. You want your worthless body to be his.

“Well,” he says, still smiling, devouring you with his eyes, “how’d you like to play bass for Uncle Sam? You can tour the country, see the world, maybe play for President Bush at the White House, too. We could use a musician like you in the Army band.”
You stand dumbly for a second trying to figure out what, exactly, is going on. You’re still staring into his eyes, and it’s only when you look away that you notice the dark green of his pressed polyester trousers, the little gold insignia pinned to his jacket’s lapel, and the finely traced lines on his seemingly youthful face that betray the steel behind his hungry, toothy grin.

You wanted to give up responsibility for your actions, to give up agency, to lose control, so the most obvious choice is not to make a choice at all. Let yourself be swept up. Let yourself be swept away. Living in Canton has been bad and you don’t think anywhere else will be any better, but maybe it could get much worse and maybe it should; maybe you would be happier if every aspect of it was destroyed. They say the Army breaks you down and builds you up again, and there’s nothing you want more than to become a stranger to the world. Maybe they’ll even send you off to war, load you onto their hollow ships, and send you across the wine-dark sea on an adventure from which you’ll never return – an Iliad, not an Odyssey.

“Why not,” you say at last.

He just laughs and says, “Get in.”
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“All right, retards, rise and shine!” your Drill Sergeant yells, as all the fluorescent lights in the barracks go on. You climb down from your bed and look around blearily at the 59 other trainees that share the bay as they stir from the bunks that ring the room like boxes in a warehouse, tumbling out of them in various stages of wakefulness and undress. It must be morning, but you can’t tell – it’s completely dark outside. “Don’t just stand there,” Drill Sergeant Snow shouts – you can see him now, a compact figure in green and brown, down by the far end of the broad open area that stretches across the middle of the polished tile floor, the Kill Zone – “Get your fucking clothes on and get downstairs.” He looks at his watch. “You have two minutes. Move.”

He puts his wide-brimmed hat on and walks toward the doorway, pauses, and turns to survey the room. His shadowed eyes meet yours. “Can I get a ‘Yes, Drill Sergeant?’” he asks. You shout the response to him along with everybody else and yank
open your wall locker door. You slept in your exercise clothes like you were supposed to, so you just grab your yellow reflective belt and your two-quart canteen, jam your feet into your running shoes and sprint toward the exit. You can almost hear the seconds counting down as your rubber soles strike the metal stairs.

Drill Sergeant Snow is waiting in the assembly area, a concrete expanse above which the barracks squat, supported by the red brick pillars that line its sides like an insect’s legs or the trunks of some grim fairy-tale tree. He’s standing with his hands on his hips in front of a set of four parallel red lines painted on the ground about three feet apart, one for each of your platoon’s four squads. You run over to take the first open spot in the second rank. The concrete plaza contains three other areas like this one – identical aside from the colors of their lines – one behind you and two off to the other side of the stairs where other drill sergeants are waiting for their soldiers, too. Four sets of four lines arranged in the four corners of the square assembly area for the four platoons that make up Delta Company.


You drop to the ground, kicking your legs out behind you – feet together, knees locked, back straight, supporting your weight with your palms – as everybody else does the same. “Down,” Drill Sergeant Snow says, and you all lower yourselves, elbows bending out, holding yourselves inches from the ground. “Up,” he says after a couple of long seconds, and you all push yourselves up again. This goes on for several minutes, as he waits for the stragglers from your platoon to arrive. He makes everyone do a couple more, yells “Recover!” – you all jump to your feet – then marches you to the exercise fields, calling out a simple cadence – “Left. Left. Left, right, left.” – before breaking into
song. “Oh hail, oh hail, oh Infantry,” he sings. “Queen of Battle follow me. The Army life is the life for me. Because nothing in this world is free.”

You arrived at Fort Jackson, South Carolina one week ago, and were assigned to Drill Sergeant Snow’s platoon last night. The reception process is finally over. Basic Combat Training has begun.

Your recruiter had driven you to Boston to take the Army’s aptitude test – the ASVAB – and a few days later you took a musical audition, too. After that, he took you back in for a physical exam, where they made you strip and duck walk, jog, and touch your toes, then you put on your clothes and stood with your right hand raised in front of the flag. You swore the oath and signed your name, and your body was theirs at last.

Your flight to South Carolina got in late, so you and the other new recruits didn’t see much of the base that night, just rows and rows of metal bunks in a couple of dingy, white-walled rooms. You all were woken up at sunrise on your first morning here and assembled outside in sleep-rumpled, day-old civilian clothes. There were many more of you that morning than had been on the plane the night before – two hundred in your group alone – and there were still others massing in front of an identical building across the street a couple hundred yards away. A sergeant arrived and called out your names from a list, putting you in four alphabetically ordered lines, and then marched you to the cafeteria down the street for breakfast. You could tell from his bored expression that he did this all the time.

You got a haircut that morning, along with everybody else. The barber didn’t speak to you as sat down in his chair, just ran his electric clippers close against your skull and let the attached vacuum suck your hair away. You watched in the mirror as it hap-
pened, as blades scraped across scalp, as little drops of blood welled up from pale blue-white skin. You searched that reflection for some semblance of yourself, but you barely had time for introspection before the barber kicked you out and you were outside on the pavement, blinking in the sunlight, back in line and moving again.

The sergeant marched everybody to CIF next – the Central Issue Facility – to get uniforms fitted and to be issued your basic set of gear. You took a shopping cart from against the warehouse wall when your turn came and headed to Station One, where a civilian stood on the other side of a long, wooden counter, boxes and crates of equipment piled from floor to ceiling behind him. He glanced at you to size you up as you approached, and checked the appropriate box on your inventory sheet before shoving camouflage clothing into your hands and hustling you down the line.

When everybody had made it through, you all went outside and laid out your new equipment on the ground, then stuffed the items into your green canvas duffel bags one at a time as the sergeant read the list out loud to make sure that everything was accounted for: 2 duffel bags; 1 barracks bag; 8 pairs boot socks, black; 10 pairs underwear, brown; 2 jackets, woodland camouflage, hot weather; 1 pair pin-on rank, private first class, brass; 2 pairs pin-on rank, private first class, subdued; 1 weapon belt; 1 sleeping mat; 2 one-quart canteens; 2 pairs combat boots; and on and on, all itemized by model, quantity, and cost, a list three pages long. Finally, the sergeant marched everybody back to the barracks to stow the gear and get changed, then he had everybody take out their last civilian belongings to be locked up, which for you was a backpack with one set of clothes, your silver pen and black journal, and your battered copy of *The Stranger* tucked away inside. With your heads freshly shaved and your new combat uniforms on, everybody in the company looked pretty much the same.
“The three acceptable responses to my questions,” Drill Sergeant Snow shouts at your platoon on the first day of training, “are ‘Yes, Drill Sergeant,’ ‘No, Drill Sergeant,’” and ‘Hooah, Drill Sergeant,’ do you all understand?” You never really figure out exactly what “Hooah” means – it seems, at times, to be both a question and a response, an exclamation demonstrating morale, an interjection implying support, an adjective describing the total embodiment of Army doctrine, a word that depending on its intonation and context can imply comprehension, obedience, uncomprehending obedience, condescending disobedience, or any other combination of the above. You yell it back to him, however, along with everybody else. You don’t say much in Basic Training, but you shout it all at the top of your lungs.

The Army doesn’t merely have its own lexicon – it’s almost a language unto itself, spelled out in capital letters with a grammar and syntax all its own. The names, titles, and designations you learn in Basic are built around familiar-sounding words that expand comically and then contract, phrases folding in on themselves to form new words that feel, at first, like blunt and unfamiliar weapons: short, ugly, menacing, and strange. You don’t exercise in the morning; you go out for Physical Training, or PT. You don’t buy your toiletries at a pharmacy but at the PX, which stands for Post Exchange. You don’t eat at the cafeteria, but at the Dining Facility, or DFAC. Soldiers don’t wear camos or fatigues, but Battle Dress Uniforms, or BDUs. GIs no longer ride in jeeps, but in High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles – HMMWVs, or “Humvees.” You address everyone in the Army by their titles or ranks – Sergeant, Drill Sergeant, or Sir – tacking them on to the end of your every greeting or reply, and the model numbers of your pieces of equipment – the M7, the M40, and the M16 – likewise become their proper names.
Your own name is “Private” or “Soldier” now, and your body becomes a foreign object, growing hard, becoming a machine; Galvanized Iron or Government-Issue: a GI. Its new movements and positions are made up of abrupt jerking motions and right angles, and are described by an entirely new set of terminology. You learn the basic facing maneuvers in the first week of training – left face, right face, about face – and all the acceptable methods for standing still. At the position of parade rest you stand with your feet facing forward, shoulder-width apart, hands crossed behind your back, shoulders square and chin thrust out. At the position of attention you keep your feet together, knees locked tight, your fingers fully extended and your hands flat against your thighs. At all times your eyes look straight ahead, staring steadily at some imaginary point on the horizon a thousand meters away.

The position of front-leaning rest is, Drill Sergeant Snow explains, a little Army joke, although he’s the only one who smiles when he drops your platoon into it, as another “smoking session” begins. Sometimes he has you all do push-ups in cadence, shouting out numbers in unison, rhythmically, as you rise up to the starting position from the ground. Sometimes he has you do them slowly, calling out at intervals – like on the first morning of training – “Up” and “Down.” Sometimes, especially when it’s just one or two soldiers that “are all jacked-up” – eating something in the DFAC they weren’t supposed to or falling asleep in class – he sends them to the corner, tells them to “Grab some real estate and do push-ups until I get tired.”

If your life in Canton was slow motion, then everything is in fast-forward here. The only speeds your platoon marches at are “quick time” and “double time” – the first being a fast walk and the second a fast jog – and you’re on your feet from 4:30 in the morning until lights-out, which is usually around 10:30 at night. The first time he sees
you slowing down, Drill Sergeant Snow yells at you to “move with a purpose,” and when he notices you a second time you find yourself in the front-leaning rest again, so from that point on you try to blend in, to camouflage yourself, and everywhere you’re ordered to go, you run.

Summer descends on South Carolina early – it’s barely May and the temperatures are already reaching 95 degrees. The grass is lush and green, the dirt is sandy and red, and the rain rakes the pavement on humid afternoons with the force of a tropical storm. The air feels thick in your throat, like you have to swallow it rather than simply breathe it in, and simply standing in the sunlight in your BDU’s is enough to make beads of sweat form and evaporate on your gradually reddening skin. The nights are hot and sticky, so most of your fellow trainees eschew their green woolen blankets and sleep in their underwear instead of their PT uniform, even though doing so is against the rules. The thick blanket of fog that settles over the assembly area overnight burns off every morning as you and your platoon form up and run off, double time, as the pink and gray dawn rises over the gently sloping hills.

Your bunkmate’s first name is Simon, he tells you, smiling widely as he shakes your hand, but nobody here calls him that, of course – instead he’s “Private,” “Soldier,” “Retard,” “You,” or, less frequently, “Jones.” He’s a thickset, blond-haired, blue-eyed Baptist from Nebraska, and you’ve never met anyone as stereotypically American as him. He’s less than a year out of high school and only just 18, and he decided to enlist the moment he saw the Iraq War starting on TV. He does push-ups beside his bunk after the training day is over and scuffles with the other guys in the Kill Zone at night, shaking his opponent’s hand and thanking him after their bout, his nose bloodied and eyes bright, like he’s undergone some sort of second baptism, like he’s really in the Army now.
As you watch him wipe the blood from his smiling face, you realize that the Army is just a bunch of children acting out their boyhood dreams, but that those dreams aren’t even their own – you’ve watched all of these scenes before. Everyone here has selected a role, playing a part from every war movie they’ve ever seen. It’s not just the new recruits, either, but the drill sergeants and veteran soldiers, too, strutting and posing like they’re on camera, shouting and swearing heartily like they’re chewing their way through a script. Drill Sergeant Snow barely needs to reprogram his trainees at all – he just needs to act as a shepherd, guiding his flock from fantasy to reality – everybody came here at least partially prepared to kill, if not to die, so he’s just helping you all dress yourselves for self-sacrifice.

Even when it comes to practical things like firing rifles and throwing grenades, Hollywood seems to have already gotten everyone at least partially prepared – you already know what the trigger, the safety, and the pull-ring do, even if you don’t know how to use them properly and are unfamiliar with their proper terminology. You play along like it’s another violent role-playing session with Chris, like you’re a kid again playing in the backyard with Peter and all your little G.I. Joes, and it sweeps you up with everybody else, drags you across the screen like a two-dimensional character in a side-scrolling video game, through the various levels and stages – the three three-week blocks of the “Red,” “White,” and “Blue” phases of Basic Training – from start to end. If it weren’t for the boring parts where you do nothing but sit around, Basic would just be one big cinematic training montage where you enter Boys and exit Men.

They issue you an M7 bayonet and a hard, black, rubber dummy rifle and Drill Sergeant Snow marches your platoon to the practice course where he demonstrates the
proper methods of attack – the butt-stroke, the thrust, the slash – then he drops his rifle, screams some obscene battle cry, and leaps onto the practice mannequin, clawing and biting, foam dripping down his chin from a piece of Alka-Seltzer that he slipped into his mouth. You stifle a laugh as he tears off a chunk of the target’s head with his teeth and spits it out at the first rank’s feet.

You think about his antics as you wait your turn by the course’s starting line, kneeling down to fix your bayonet, removing it from its scabbard and clicking it onto the metal lock nut below the fake rifle’s muzzle. The soldier in front of you charges at the first obstacle screaming incoherently. This is ridiculous, crazy even, but you’re caught up in it inextricably, like in *Catch-22* – you can do it as theatrically as possible now or half-ass it, have to do a lot of push-ups, and do it again with more feigned enthusiasm later: you have no choice but to play along. You stand up and ready your rifle, dropping into a sprinter’s crouch. “Oh well,” you mutter, as you toe the line with your boot and wait for the signal to begin, “what the hell.”

“What the hell are you waiting for, Private,” Drill Sergeant Snow yells, “an invitation? Go get some!” You charge your first target madly, shouting, “Kill!” just like he told you to. You stab and bludgeon the foam rubber figures, using the heel of your boot for leverage to rip the point of the bayonet out when it gets stuck in their pitted chests. You hold the dummy rifle tight to your body as you crawl under barbed wire, clamber over walls, and slither through the mud, hugging it close, the bayonet’s blade almost kissing your face. “There are two kinds of bayonet fighters, the quick and the dead,” the Drill Sergeant Snow shouts as you come running around the last bend in the loop, muddy and sweaty, gasping for air, “and which kind are you?”

“The quick, Drill Sergeant!” you yell eagerly as you cross the line, “the quick!”
When everybody breaks for lunch you read the placard placed by the head of the obstacle course. It’s dedicated to a soldier who served in World War Two, killed in battle against the Japanese in the Pacific Islands, struggling on after all his fellow soldiers were cut down, until all his ammunition was spent. He fought on, the sign tells you, with his bayonet, killing and wounding several more of his enemies until he was finally overwhelmed. He was only 18 when he died, and they awarded him the Medal of Honor, of course. You sit down in the dirt beside the sign and tear open the brown plastic package that contains your lunch – a Meal, Ready-to-Eat, or MRE – and dump its individually packaged contents on the ground. How much of that story really happened besides his death, you wonder, as you sort through the packets for something edible, if not good. How long was it before the Army bagged up his body – wrapped in plastic – and sent it home?

They issue you an M40 Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical – or NBC – protective mask, and everybody practices donning and clearing it when Drill Sergeant Snow makes the hand signal, sounds the alarm, or starts yelling “Gas! Gas! Gas!” He marches your platoon to the Gas Chamber, a one-room wooden building standing by itself in a clearing that you come to after a 45-minute slog through the muggy, muddy woods. Your platoon waits in formation outside as he sets it up, then he comes out and orders everybody to put their masks on and takes you inside, one squad at a time.

The interior of the building is dark and the air is filled with CS gas that rises in wisps from an iron brazier in the middle of the floor, and Drill Sergeant Snow breathes in the heady fumes unmasked, seemingly immune. The whites of his wide-open eyes appear bright green in the smoke, and they’re staring deeply into yours. You hope he’s about to start speaking in tongues, prophesying like the oracle at Delphi, spelling out...
your doom in riddles, the story of your final hours. Instead, he just tells everybody to lift off their masks, then replace, reseal, and clear them, being careful not to open their mouths or eyes. Everybody does it, and nobody is coughing too badly, so he says to take the masks off again, open your eyes, and recite, in unison, the Soldier’s Creed. “I am an American soldier,” it begins. “I am a warrior and a member of a team.”

You try to make it through the whole stupid thing without taking a breath, but your eyes start to sting and you draw a shallow one a couple lines from the end and choke your way through the closing words. You pull your mask on the moment Drill Sergeant Snow says you can, yanking the straps back to tighten it and blowing the gas out as he walks over to the exit and starts letting your squadmates leave the room after a final test, one soldier at a time. When it’s your turn he stops you and says, “Take off your mask and sing me your favorite song.”

Your mask is already lifted away from your face before you realize you have no idea what to sing. You keep your mouth and eyes closed as your eyelids and lips begin to tingle. The last thing you can remember hearing was the stereo in your basement that final night with Chris. “I don’t have a favorite song, Drill Sergeant,” you gasp.

“Sing me something, Soldier, or you’re not getting out that door.”

You take a breath in as you prepare to sing and immediately begin to cough. The gas fills your lungs and panic takes you – you can’t think of anything – so you try to produce whatever notes you can, eking out a random melody between your shallow, choking breaths.

“That’s fucking terrible, Private,” Drill Sergeant Snow says. “It’s not too late to switch to the infantry, you know.” He stands there for a moment, whistling a few bars of a marching tune as your red face turns redder, then he says that you can go. You stumble
out the door into the sunlight with your eyes streaming stinging tears that hiss and smoke as they roll down your cheeks.

They issue you an M16 – along with a cleaning kit and seven 30-round magazines – and Drill Sergeant Snow says that as long as you memorize its serial number you’re welcome to give it any other nickname you like, but he doesn’t want to hear it. “Little Susie Rottencrotch back at home is already sleeping with Johnny from down the block,” he says, “so forget about her – your rifle is your only girlfriend now.”

Your platoons trains with the weapon for hours, assembling and disassembling it, then lying still in the grass, propped up on your elbows, sighting down the barrel, cradling the rifle lightly in your hands. Drill Sergeant Snow explains that Army marksmanship means aiming “center mass,” setting your sights on the torso, not the head, because you’re more likely to incapacitate your enemy that way. In close quarters combat he tells you to look at your target’s hands and not their eyes when deciding whether or not to fire – “You don’t know anyone in Iraq, Retards,” he says, “you don’t have any friends there; there’s no one you’re gonna recognize.”

On the first firing range you’re supposed to zero your weapon, adjusting the sights to your eyes – moving the front and rear ones respectively up and down and left to right – so that whatever you bring the front sight post to bear on is where your bullets go. On your first attempt, however, you put all three rounds in the bulls-eye easily without adjusting your sights at all, as though shooting the rifle was a natural action, as though the weapon was made for you.

Drill Sergeant Snow nods his approval as he checks your target out. “That’s outstanding, Soldier,” he says. “Did they make you at the rifle factory, or something?” He pulls your target off the wooden frame, scrawls “Go” in the corner and hands it to you.
“Your personal zero on the M16 is the same as the mechanical one: remember that for the rest of your career. If someone gives you a new rifle on the battlefield, just return the front and rear sights to their center position and you should be just fine.”

On the rifle qualification range you lie in the dirt and fire at plastic, man-sized pop-up targets, placed between 50 and 300 meters away. They spring up from behind their red earthen berms one or two at a time and you take aim and knock them down, breathing slowly in and out. With each gentle squeeze of the trigger the gunshot cracks, the target falls, and the rifle jumps in your hands, then you draw it close and prepare to take aim again. The smell of gunpowder fills your nostrils and the hot smoke and gas from the chamber sting your eyes. It feels good. You pull the trigger. Another target goes down. It feels good to you. Your rifle is alive.

Drill Sergeant Snow issues you two ten-pound dumbbells, one set for everybody in the platoon, to keep at the bottom of your wall lockers, beside the shelves full of your precisely rolled and folded clothes. When he decides that interminable push-up sessions in the assembly area aren’t enough to smarten you retards up or straighten some jacked-up soldier out, he brings you back inside the barracks to grab your weights and stand on the line around the Kill Zone while he stands in the center of the floor. You lift the dumbbells along with his commands, holding them out, straight-armed, in front of you, then lifting them up and holding them over your head, then eventually lowering them to your sides until they’re perpendicular with the ground again, over and over, until gravity overcomes your muscles at last.

One day late in the seventh week of training, Drill Sergeant Snow gets so angry that he makes you all lift weights with your NBC protective suits and masks on. The session stretches out for two hours – after one, everyone is already sweat-soaked in their
heavy, charcoal-lined outerwear and gasping for breath – then he takes the platoon outside and has everyone run up and down the hill outside the barracks, rifles held above your heads, until finally the company’s sergeant major takes him aside tells him to stop before he kills someone. You stand there with your muscles burning. You leave your gas mask on and draw a long and ragged breath. You wish this punishment could go on forever. You barely remember what it was for, but you deserved it. You deserve it.

Jones passes out just as the sergeant major is leaving, crumpling to the ground next to you. The exposed skin on his hands is clammy and pale. You step back as Drill Sergeant Snow sprints over and rips off his mask, and checks his breathing and his pulse before stripping off his heavy protective suit and dragging him over to the shade. You sit down on the grass as the rest of your platoon mills about, and watch him take off the big Nebraskan’s blouse and stick him in the arm with an IV. You hear someone whisper that a trainee in another company had died of heat stroke during training just last week.

Your platoon is already down two soldiers. The first was a high school football player who broke his leg fighting too hard during hand-to-hand combat instruction in the second week you were here. He lingered in the barracks for a couple of weeks before they finally sent him home, and you were down to 59. After that your platoon didn’t practice hand-to-hand combat anymore. The second was just a week ago, during a nighttime live-fire exercise, where you had to crawl through a hundred yards of sand while imitation mortars exploded all around and three machine guns fired overhead. Drill Sergeant Snow had said that all you needed to do was keep crawling and keep your head to the ground, but one young soldier panicked, jumped up, got shot, and almost died, and you were down to 58. From the grim expression on Drill Sergeant Snow’s face as he tends to Jones, it looks like you might lose one more.
An ambulance arrives and Drill Sergeant Snow helps the paramedics load your bunkmate onto a stretcher and carry him to the truck, climbing into the back with them before they drive away. The training day is basically over after that – your platoon leader tells everybody to head back to the barracks, change into fresh uniforms, and form up for chow. Drill Sergeant Snow returns that evening after dinner without your bunkmate, bringing with him a few short videos for everybody to watch instead. The first is from his time in Afghanistan, a clip of a couple of Taliban fighters being gunned down in the street, full of the rapid stutter of gunshots and his infantry buddies’ excited shouts, both distorted by the camera’s crappy microphone. The next is set to Middle Eastern music, grainy and dark, with Arabic text along the bottom of the screen. It’s a long-distance shot of some anonymous road through a desert. A couple of cars zip past and nothing happens, then an American convoy appears and the screen explodes.

He turns on the overhead lights and looks around at everybody – you’re all seated in the Kill Zone around the TV – and he sits down on the front of his metal desk. “I know you think I push you too hard, Soldiers,” he says, taking his hat off and setting it down beside him, “but listen up: It might be a few weeks, a couple months, or a year, but all of you are headed to The Sandbox, either Afghanistan or Iraq.” He looks around the room at all your upturned faces. “The last time I was over there, I was riding in the back of a Humvee through Kandahar when our side door window splintered; I looked over and my buddy had this huge hole in his chest. There was blood everywhere.” He stops for a moment and closes his eyes.

“The gunner started firing the Ma Deuce,” he says – the M2, a fifty-caliber machine gun – “and I yelled at the driver to get us the fuck out of there. I took off my buddy’s armor, and I fixed him up as best I could. He barely made it, but all of us came
back from that patrol alive.” He stands up, puts his hat on and pulls down the brim until you can no longer see his eyes. “This is my Army,” he says softly, and his voice has never sounded more human or more dangerous before. “I’m just trying to train you retards well enough that you don’t get me or my fellow soldiers killed.”

Does he blame himself for what happened to your bunkmate that afternoon, to the soldier at the range the other day? Was the punishment he gave your platoon meant for himself, as well? Maybe he thinks that by bringing you all to the brink of death he can somehow keep you from it, inoculate you against it. Or maybe he regrets his actions and inactions, and thinks that if only he had done something differently that none of those other young soldiers he’s sent overseas already would have died. Maybe he just regrets everything, like you.

Your platoon stays seated on the floor for the daily mail call as Drill Sergeant Snow leaves the room. He comes back after a few minutes with the milk crate of letters in his hands, looking more composed, stoic, almost unreadable again. He sits down on the desk, takes the top letter from the pile, reads the last name off on the envelope, and flings it at the appropriate soldier seated to your left on the floor. He picks up the second one and does the same. “Osbourne,” Drill Sergeant Snow says, looking around and settling his gaze on you, chucking a letter at your chest. You catch it and pass it down to Private Osbourne, who’s sitting a little bit behind you and to your side. You’re seven weeks into basic and your drill sergeant has no idea who you are – just one of a group of vaguely similar-looking soldiers that he doesn’t bother to tell apart. “Davis,” he says, looking around a little before frowning and throwing the next letter at you as well.

Some soldiers get letters every day – from their girlfriends, family, or buddies back home – but you haven’t gotten any: you never gave anyone your mailing address.
You were tired of stories; you had hoped that in the Army you wouldn’t have to worry about reading and writing at all. In Basic Training that proved to be true at first – especially since all books other than the Initial Entry Training Manual (or, “Smart Book”) and the Bible were forbidden – but at some point Drill Sergeant Snow had decided that simply smoking your platoon wasn’t punishment enough, so in addition to countless push-ups, he started assigning you essays to write as well. The first one was only 500 words, but the following assignments were of steadily increasing length. That night after mail call he gives you your final one, a 3000-word essay on your favorite Army Value – Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, or Personal Courage (or, LDRSHIP) – due before the morning formation the next day.

You assumed from the start that no one was ever going to read these essays, and since you had no opinions worth stating and no desire to write, so you simply copied the requisite number of words out from your Smart Book. Tonight, however, you can’t stop thinking about Drill Sergeant Snow and his dead comrades and maimed trainees, about yourself and Chris, the second anniversary of whose death has just passed. When you sit down on the floor by your bunk that night – a sheaf of notebook paper in your lap, a pen in hand, a red-lensed flashlight in your mouth – you pick up your unused Army-issue copy of the New Testament – forest camouflage and pocket-sized – write “Loyalty” across the top of your first sheet of paper and transcribe, as your essay, the first chapters of the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and Mark.

A fine gray mist hangs above the ground on the morning of your last day of training as you form up in the assembly area below the barracks with your platoon, taking your place in the second rank at the head of the file, the first in the squad, and wait
for Drill Sergeant Snow to arrive. Your bunkmate had taken over the squad leader position early on – after the first one broke his leg and got sent home – but he was transferred to another platoon two weeks ago to start Blue Phase over, having missed too much training while recovering from heat stroke at the medical center, and the position fell arbitrarily to you.

Drill Sergeant Snow walks slowly down from the landing, his highly polished paratrooper boots ringing the metal stairs like kettle drums, like cannon shots, calling you to the field of combat. He’s wearing his green dress uniform – the “Class A” – which you and the rest of the trainees in the platoon are also wearing for the first time. Your patent leather shoes are freshly edge-dressed and gleaming; the creases in your dark green polyester trousers are crisp. The gold thread on the newly sewn-on PFC rank on your jacket sleeves glints as the sun rises and the fog begins to burn off. The Army Service Ribbon – your first award, for the completion of Initial Entry Training – is pinned above the expert marksmanship badge on your chest. It’s a narrow rainbow band, thin bars of color moving toward the center from either side: red, orange, yellow, green, and blue, and when you’d checked your uniform out in bathroom mirror that morning, someone had called out, “Nice gay pride ribbon!” at you.

Last night, before inspecting everybody’s uniforms and distributing the last bundle of mail, Drill Sergeant Snow announced that he was being removed from his instructor position at Fort Jackson and assigned to a combat unit that was headed overseas. He made his way around the room – you were all standing at parade rest on the Kill Zone line – and you snapped to attention when he came to you. He yanked on your jacket to test its fit and took out his ruler to check the positioning of your nametag, badges, and the ribbon on your chest, leaning in to pluck a speck of dust from the in-
signia pinned to your lapel. “Outstanding, Soldier,” he said, looking you in the eye, “PFC.” He inclined his head and held out his hand. “I hope to see you in the desert someday.”

Now he stands before your formation for the last time, surveying you proudly as you all stare straight ahead, unblinking, as intently and distantly as you can. “Attention!” He yells at last, his own heels snapping together. “Right face!” You all pivot, as one, to the side. “Forward, march!” Your left feet all shoot forward, and he steps off, striding alongside, counting out “left, right, left.” He starts to call a cadence as you leave the assembly area, your shoes crunching on the gravel road – it’s one you’ve never heard before, and you’ll never hear it sung this way again. He calls it out so slow and sad – climbing through the root, the minor third, the flatted fifth – his notes bending and breaking like the blues, that it feels like you’re part of a funeral procession, not like you’re marching to your graduation, but like you’re heading ceremoniously into your final battle, like you’re trudging nobly toward your grave.

“Hey, hey, Captain Jack,” he sings.

“Hey, Hey, Captain Jack,” you all reply.

“Meet me down by the railroad tracks.”

“Meet me down by the railroad tracks.”

“With that rifle in your hand,”

“With that rifle in your hand,”

“I’m gonna be a killing man.”

“I’m gonna be a killing man.”
In the Army

The bus driver drops you and eleven other soldiers in front of a schoolhouse on the Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base – a seven hour drive from Fort Jackson, up near Virginia Beach, at the Southern edge of the Chesapeake Bay. You climb down to the sidewalk with your two bulging duffel bags and look around. It’s a Friday evening, and almost all the lights in the brick, three-story building are off, but as you walk closer you can see a young, red-haired guy sitting at the front desk in the building’s lobby, wearing a powder blue uniform with an insignia on the sleeves that you don’t recognize. He looks up from the music stand beside him as you open the door, setting his flute down on the desk. He smiles as his mottled blue eyes meet yours, and says, “Armed Forces School of Music. Welcome aboard!”

You drop your duffel bags by the wall and walk over to the desk, signing your name on the sheet where he indicates with his slender hand.
“Next time, Specialist” he says, “make sure you use the other hatch. That one in front is only for visitors and staff.”

“The other what?” you ask.

“Hatch,” he says, taking back his pen. Then, helpfully, “It’s on this deck, down that passageway by the ladderwell.”

You cough, raising your hand to cover your involuntary smirk. “Hatch?” you say. “Deck? Ladderwell? Right. Thanks, um. . . what rank are you, anyway?”

“Seaman,” he says, blushing slightly as one of the soldiers behind you snickers, “Second Class. And in case you dumb grunts can’t figure it out, that would be ‘door,’ ‘floor,’ and ‘staircase,’ respectively.”

“Oh,” you say, stepping aside to let the next soldier in line come forward, “Sorry. This didn’t look like a ship from the outside.”

He laughs, and you walk back to your bags and wait, standing at the corner watching him as the rest of your group signs in. The vocabulary in the Army may be convoluted, you think, but at least it has a purpose: all those ugly acronyms so compact, dense with meaning – quick, efficient, and concise. By contrast, Naval terminology is ridiculous, more like play-acting than anything else. What’s the point of calling something a name that it obviously is not?

The sound of music being played on several instruments carries down the hallway to your right – a guitar, a drum kit, a trumpet, and something else, maybe an oboe – all playing different scales or tunes. You look down the hall to see a couple marines coming out of one of the rooms; they’re dressed in camouflage trousers with their jackets off, their tan undershirts stretched taut across their pecs, short sleeves showing off their biceps.
One of them sees you watching, turns to the other, and grabs his ass. The other marine smiles and hugs him back, then the first leans in for a kiss. Their lips almost touch before the second one squirms free and jumps back through the doorway, while the first turns his head and winks at you, then walks casually away down the hall.

“Dude,” says a soldier standing next to you, “what the fuck was that?”

The sailor behind the desk has been watching, too. He puts his hands on his lap, and looks at you. “Don’t mind them,” he says, “they’re just playing Gay Chicken.” The rest of the soldiers look at each other uncomfortably, and he smiles. “I guess that must be another Navy thing.”

You sigh as you heft your bags and walk down the hallway to look for the back door. You had just gotten used to taking the Army seriously, but it’s obvious that all of the tragedy and drama of Basic Training is going to be transformed into travesty here.

The sailor calls out to you to hold on a second, saying that his shift is almost over, and that he’ll be happy to show you to the barracks, since he’s headed there anyway. His replacement – an Army private – arrives a few minutes later, and the sailor collects his flute case and folding stand and tells you to follow him. His slim cut shirt bulges slightly above his belt, and his hips sway suggestively as he walks. A tag with his last name on it – Emmanuel – is stitched above the back pocket of his tight, dark blue trousers, right above the gentle curve of his behind.

The barracks are down the street about a half-mile away, past the football field, a McDonalds, and a bunch of anonymous brick buildings with white sans-serif numbers on their sides. Emmanuel chatters constantly as he walks you there, while you concentrate on not dragging your heavy bags along the ground. “The Navy and the Army live in separate buildings,” he says when you reach DMOD – the little glass-walled lounge
in front of the barracks – and the rest of the soldiers file in to find the NCOIC (the Non-Commissioned Officer either In Command or In Charge), “but I’m sure I’ll see you around sometime.”

You meet your new drill sergeant the next morning. He strides over – impossibly tall and thin and gawky, his arms swinging loosely at his sides, his broad-brimmed hat tipped back jauntily on his head – to where you’re standing in line with the other new arrivals on the barracks lawn. “All right, what have we got here” he says, his scowl threatening to crack into a goofy smile, “another busload from Relaxin’ Jackson.”

He walks up and down the line, doing his best General Patton. “My name is Drill Sergeant Slaughter,” he says, finally stopping to face you, placing his hands on his hips, “and before you ask, no, I’m not related to the wrestler, or to the G.I. Joe. But y’all should watch out for me anyway,” he wags his long forefinger in your direction, “because I am one bad-ass dude. Do ya follow?”

“Hooah, Drill Sergeant,” you say, fighting the urge to roll your eyes.

He orders you all to dump your bags out at your feet and poke around in the piles of clothing briefly to make sure that you all still have everything you left Basic with the day before. He collects a copy of everyone’s orders and looks them over, probably checking to make sure you’re all in the right place, too – the United States Army Element, School of Music, or USAESOM – before addressing everyone again. “Well,” he says, “today’s Saturday, and the next formation isn’t ‘til Monday morning, so y’all have a couple days off. I suggest you take ‘em to straighten out your rooms and get your gear all squared away. Everything in your closet should be dress-right-dressed, and those uniforms should be so freshly pressed that I can see my face in ‘em.” He screws up his lips and stares at you more sternly than before. “Hooah?” he asks.
“Hooah, Drill Sergeant,” you all reply.

“Drill Sergeant,” one of the soldiers beside you asks, “how do we know where and when the next formation is?”

Drill Sergeant Slaughter smiles and gestures vaguely with his hands. “More to follow,” he says at last.

“My name’s Jimmy,” your new roommate had said when you moved in the night before, “Jimmy Justice,” and held out his stumpy-fingered hand to shake yours. He’s blond with blue eyes, of course, and the only personal items of his you saw as you unpacked your bags in that small white room were a Bible on the bedside table and a small black-and-white TV. He’s from Kentucky, he said, and got here from Fort Jackson a week ago. He looks like he’s about the same age as you. He plays clarinet and saxophone, he told you as you stretched out your white sheets over your single bed, tucking it under the edges, lifting the corners of the mattress up from the metal frame, and he likes jazz a lot, but when you asked he said he’d never heard of Monk, Mingus, or Miles Davis before.

“Private Justice,” you mutter now as you walk up the barracks stairs to your room, “Drill Sergeant Slaughter.” What is it about their names that draws these people to the Army Band? It’s as if their identities are overcompensating for their profession’s questionable masculinity, or as if fate has conspired to make a mockery of them.

Justice is lying half-dressed on his bed as you change into your civilian clothes, wrinkled and musty from being locked-up in your luggage for the past two months, and he tells you that he probably won’t be your roommate for too long, because he’s planning to get married soon. “She’s my high school sweetheart,” he says, showing you a picture
in an ornate silver frame. You glance at it – long blond hair, blue eyes, big smile – and
hand it back. “She’s coming to see me tomorrow if you’d like to meet her. Maybe the
three of us could go to our Baptist church together.” You take The Stranger from your
bag and put it on the shelf part of your combination dresser/desk. “You do go to church,
don’t you?” he asks.

You look at the dog tags you just took off, lying in a pile on the shelf, “No Pref-
erence” stamped in the space below your blood type where religious affiliation is sup-
pposed to go. “Not recently,” you say.

“You’re not Jewish, or anything, are you?”

“Catholic,” you say, “or used to be.”

He nods, as though that explains everything.

You wake up at 4:30 Monday morning, shave, and put on your PT gear, then
you and Justice head downstairs and follow the crowd of soldiers making their way to
the football field. Drill Sergeant Slaughter arrives just before 5 o’clock, calls the company
to attention and leads everyone through the standard Army stretches, each introduced
by their proper names – the Overhead Arm Pull, the Bend and Reach – then the actual
reply. After 15 minutes he takes the stopwatch from around his neck, orders you all to
fall out and move to the track, where you run laps around the field until he gets tired.

After you both shower and change into your BDUs, you and Justice walk to the
DFAC, which, unsurprisingly, is called the “Galley” here. You get a mound of grayish
oatmeal, partially cooked potatoes, a slice of bread – breakfast is almost as bad as it was
at Fort Jackson, you think as you poke it with your fork, but at least you now have longer
than seven minutes to eat it, or to try to. By 7:30 you’re formed into ranks behind the
schoolhouse with the rest of the soldiers, filling in the smaller squads in the two platoons. Drill Sergeant Slaughter returns to make sure everyone is present or accounted for and to give you the “plan of the day,” which consists of “All right, get your butts inside. Formation back here at seventeen-hundred hours.”

You get assigned to a 25-person class that’s scheduled to start the course of instruction this week. It’s made up of the rest of the soldiers who came with you from Fort Jackson, a couple who’d arrived with Justice the week before, and an assortment of sailors and marines, including Seaman Second Class Emmanuel. “I’m glad you got here,” he says when he sees you, “I’ve been waiting to class-up for weeks. I can only work the front desk shift and sweep the hallways so many times.” He takes the seat next to you at the two-person desk in the back row in music theory class, and you avoid Justice’s gaze as he walks past you to the front and sits down by himself.

At 1630, after hours of ensembles, a private lesson with the bass instructor, theory, sight-singing, and Individual Practice (or “IP”) time, everyone is released from class and you meet up with your new squad for your daily work detail: cleaning the staff bathroom, which, depending on who you ask, is either “the head” or “the latrine.” You scrub out the sinks and the urinals and wipe the pubic hairs from the showers, and as you work the members of the staff come in and mess everything up again.

At 1655 you go back outside to line up with platoon and wait for Drill Sergeant Slaughter. He marches up to the formation carrying a clipboard with a stack of papers on it, and he’s trying to look as mean as he can. “All right Soldiers,” he says, shaking his head, “I did room inspections today, and y’all will never guess what I found. Wall lockers unlocked, trash not taken out, window blinds not properly drawn.” He flips through the stack, tossing the offending sheets of paper to the ground. “Dirty shoes, messy showers,
sloppy beds – somebody even left half a chicken in their microwave.” He looks around.

“Those barracks are filthy. They’re disgusting. Do ya follow?”

Nobody says anything – you’re all still standing at the position of attention, he hasn’t put you at ease. You follow him as best you can without moving your eyes as he paces back and forth. Is this really what he does all day?

“There’s no excuses,” he says, “so, listen up: We’re all gonna go square those barracks away right now, no exceptions,” he says, “and nobody’s leaving for supper until it’s done.”

He snaps to attention and gives the command to march, and as he steps off he begins to call a cadence that Drill Sergeant Snow had sung, but now, instead of sounding masculine, it sounds more like musical theater or a campfire sing-along. Drill Sergeant Slaughter smiles as he sings, and swings his arms, his voice cracking just a little as he hits the high notes in his range, and when all the trainees reply it is – unlike in Basic Training – in unison, in tune, and in time.

“They say that in the Army, the training’s mighty fine.”

“They say that in the Army, the training’s mighty fine.”

“Last night there were 10 of you and now there’s only nine.”

“Last night there were 10 of us and now there’s only nine.”

“Oh Lord, you wanna go.”

“Oh Lord, we wanna go.”

“But I won’t let you go.”

“But Drill Sergeant won’t let us go home.”

“They say that in the Army, the pay is mighty fine. . .”
July and August and the first few weeks of September pass. You’re almost halfway through your 6-month course at the SOM, and the routine never varies: each week is a simple, cyclical chord progression, ii – V – i, where each temporary resolution – the weekend’s minor “one” – becomes the next week’s “two,” and the cycle begins again, each month following this standard and endless pattern of rhythm changes. It has long since started to wear on you. You feel aimless, like an ancient mariner drifting through the doldrums, or run aground on the shores of Ilium during the dog days, watching as raging Sirius rose with the sun, waiting for this lingering summer to be over, for fall and winter to come.

You feel tired constantly again, and struggle to stay awake in music theory and sight-singing class. In rehearsal, your usually metronomic sense of time contracts and expands measure to measure, so bebop charts slow down like ballads in their bridges and pop song choruses take off at punk rock speed. Real time, meanwhile, becomes musical, all meandering rubato, individual hours alternating arbitrarily between allegro and adagio.

You leap from bed one morning – you’ve overslept, you’re late for PT – it’s still completely dark outside. You rush to the bathroom to shave, feeling each of the individual little hairs being caught up as the razor blade scrapes across your papery skin. You yell at Justice to get up, sit down on your bed, and start putting on your shoes.

Justice rolls over in slow motion, rubbing his eyes and glancing groggily at the clock. “What time is it? One-thirty?” he says. “Dude, you did this twice last week. Just go back to bed.”

You look at the clock and can’t read it; the digits are all backwards, shifting, and strange. You lie down and close your eyes, seeing yourself lying in bed watching the bed-
side clock in the third person, recursive, waiting for the alarm to go off. The dream You gets out of bed. The dream Justice says to go to sleep. To bed. To sleep. To dream. To dream forever.

The alarm rings.

You come back to the barracks late on the evening before your midterm musical audition, having just spent several hours in the practice rooms. Justice is lying in bed, telephone in hand, still in the uniform he wore to class that day, boots on his feet and beret on his head. He’s talking to his girlfriend again. He doesn’t look up when you walk in, so you pick up your book and your journal and lie down, too. He’s not going to pass the audition tomorrow, but you don’t care; he’s barely touched his instrument this past month, and it’s been almost as long since he last spoke to you.

“I have to go,” he says after a moment, “my roommate’s here again.”

You find the passage in The Stranger in which Marie declares that she will come to hate Mersault. “To which I had nothing to say,” his reply goes, “so I said nothing.” You slip Matt’s postcard in to mark the page, open your journal, and write that sentence down. Justice glances over at you blankly. You say nothing.

“I love you, too,” Justice says. “I’ll see you soon.”

You pass your audition the next day easily, and Justice looks almost relieved when he tells you that he failed his. He’s already spoken to Drill Sergeant Slaughter about his new assignment – he’s being shipped out at the end of the week. He’s headed to Fort Knox to be retrained as an armor crewman. It’s the closest Army post to Shepherdsville, his home.
Justice leaves that Friday morning, and that evening a new set of soldiers fresh from Basic Training move in. You run into Emmanuel that night at the school – you both stayed late to practice by yourselves. He waits for you while you put your sheet music away, and you walk back to the barracks together, instrument cases in hand. “What are you doing this evening?” he asks, as you stand outside of DMOD where a group of marines is doing pull-ups in the doorway while they wait for their pizzas to be delivered. “Do you want to hang out for a bit?”

“Why not?” you say, and invite him up to your room. Justice’s bed is empty; his wall locker and desk are mostly bare. The detritus of his life is scattered around the various surfaces, pieces of lint on the desk, piles of dust on the floor, his old TV on the table, scraps of paper with cryptic numerical scribbles – chapter and verse – lying in the half-open bedside table drawer. One day you’ll come back to find that somebody else has moved in, and all this empty space won’t be Justice’s anymore.

Emmanuel wants to see what’s on television, so you turn it on and sit down on Justice’s bed, setting your bass guitar aside. He flips through the channels for a few moments, then comes over and sits down beside you. The show he picked is Star Trek: The Next Generation – the opening credits are just coming on. “Did you ever watch this?” he asks. On screen, the camera is drifting slowly through an infinite, beautiful, and nebulous universe, accompanied by that voiceover you’d heard so many times: “Space, the final frontier.”

“Yes,” you reply, and you put your hand on his.

“I don’t want to play right now,” he says, laughing, picking up your hand and dropping it in your lap. Your feel your face reddening, and he looks over at you and sighs. “I’m sorry,” he says after a couple of uncomfortable minutes pass, “but I’m not
interested. I was just, you know, being nice.” He stands up. “I thought that you could use a friend; you seem like you’ve probably been picked on your whole life.”

He turns toward the doorway, pauses in the entrance to the hall, and looks back. “I don’t want this to be awkward,” he says, “we should still hang out. Maybe you’d like to play music together some time? We could use a decent bass in my church’s choir.”

You look down at your hands. They’re clenched into fists, knuckles white, almost incandescent. The pale blue light from the TV flickers across your faces, each turned sideways to the screen, half unreal and half in shadow. “Why not?” you reply.

He stands there watching you for a moment, and every passing second increases your desire to wipe that insufferable, benevolent, condescending smile off his face. You hear the hallway door latch shut and Emmanuel’s footsteps slapping on the stairs. “He was a fucking atheist,” you whisper, remembering Peter’s graveside words. “He was a fucking atheist, and so am I.”

Justice was right to leave, to go home and get married, to train for combat, to become a man. You can’t stand this place. You pick up your bass and try to pretend that it’s your rifle, holding its body to your cheek and sighting down the strings, aiming at some distant target, center mass. An unloaded M16A2 rifle weighs 7.78 pounds without its sling, or 8.79 with a full 30-round magazine. Its muzzle velocity is 3,100 feet per second, its maximum range is 3,600 meters. The basic combat load of ammunition for a rifleman is 210 rounds. All these arbitrary details used to be a matter of life and death. You wish you hadn’t joined the Army to be in the band.

Chief Lambert visits the school the following Monday; your bass instructor introduces you to him as the commander – the bandleader, head officer, and conductor – of the 389th Army Band. He smiles kindly as he puts you at ease, all the creases deep-
ening in his leathery face. He reminds you of your grandfather, only slightly younger and less stooped. “PFC, we need your help,” he says, “my show band is deploying in less than a month, and our regular bass player is out on maternity leave. How would you like to get out of here early and see the Middle East?”

“Why not?” you reply, like that’s the refrain of this chapter of your life. After your instructor nudges you with his elbow you add, “Sir.”

He laughs and claps you on the shoulder. “That’s what I like to hear.”

You snap to attention and smile grimly. You can already feel that rifle in your hands. You’re going to join Drill Sergeant Snow in The Sandbox. You’re going to be a killing man.

You’re standing by yourself that Friday morning at Norfolk International Airport in your BDUs, duffel bags in hand and brand new Specialist rank on your lapel, free of training forever, part of the real Army at last. You stand a little taller and look around, watching the civilians around you with disdain. You’re heading somewhere they can’t imagine, into something too real for them to comprehend. You turn to stare out the windows overlooking the runway to the west, dead-eyed and distant just like you’ve been trained, and the conversations of all those passers-by wash over you like water, meaningless babble in a foreign tongue.
Specialist Ryan picks you up at Baltimore/Washington International Airport – BWI. He’s waiting for you at the curb outside the baggage claim, leaning against his red Mustang, cupping a lit cigarette in his hand. You recognize him from the SOM. He was a guitarist who graduated just a few weeks after you got there, and your only memory of him is of how he showed up for PT every morning driving that same red sports car from his apartment off post where he lived with his wife, an identical cigarette in his mouth and the same sardonic, self-satisfied smirk on his lips.

“Man, you’re fucking crazy for coming here,” he says, as you stuff your bags into the tiny trunk of his car, “life at the school was easy: you just had to play music every day. I’d go back there in a second if I could. Hell, I’d stay there my whole career.”

“Yeah, well,” you say, “Chief Lambert asked.”

“What?” He shouts. “You weren’t even ordered? You’re telling me you seriously
volunteered?” He slaps himself on the forehead with his palm. “Don’t you know we’re about to be sent off to war?”

You slam the trunk, look at him, and smile. “War is swell,” you reply.

The band occupies a squat brick building on the edge of a run-down post in the decrepit end of Northern Maryland – the Aberdeen Proving Ground (or APG) – that’s home to the Ordnance Training Center, the Army Research Laboratory, and the Chemical Weapons Destruction Facility as well. The band hall sits in a patch of overgrown grass with its back to the Chesapeake Bay, the dull red paint flaking off its trim and its shingled roof sagging inward, falling gradually into disrepair. A herd of deer are grazing on the weeds beside the building as Ryan pulls his car into the driveway, and they glance over with disinterest as the two of you get out, as though they were the subjects of this story and you were just another pair of indistinguishable, insignificant figures walking past.

“Is this it?” you ask.

“Yeah, man,” Ryan says, unlocking the door, “but you should see the rest of post: it’s even worse. Nobody’s mowed the grass since the war picked up and money started running out. They had to hire civilians to guard the gates last month – all the useful soldiers got sent to Iraq.”

“Except the band,” you say, picking up a pen from the desk and signing in.

He laughs. “Wait until tomorrow,” he says. “You’ll see what I mean.”

Chief Lambert introduces you to the band at formation in the main rehearsal hall the next morning. There are about 35 other – mostly older and overweight – soldiers there, divided into two platoons. “I want you all to say hello to the new guy,” he says and looks at you. “Get up here, New Guy.”
You run to the front of the formation, come to attention before him, and salute, like you were trained. He returns it with a goofy smile, and says, “New Guy here is from Boston, isn’t that right New Guy? Are you a Red Sox fan?”

“Hooah, Sir,” you say, and half of the formation boos.

“Red Sox suck!” somebody yells.

“Well, New Guy,” Chief says, holding up his hands to quiet everybody down, “we’re so happy that you’re here that we got you a little present.” He holds up a Yankees cap and puts it on your head to raucous applause. “Now lets do some Yankees push-ups. On my count.”

Everybody in formation drops lackadaisically into the front-leaning rest position, and you do the same with Chief right next to you. “I love!” he shouts out, as he bends his arms, lowering his torso toward the ground. “New York!” he shouts as he pushes himself up. “I didn’t hear you, New Guy.”

You shout along with him this time, as does everybody else, although half of them are replacing “love” with “hate” or “New York” with “Red Sox,” or whatever other teams they want, so Chief pretends to get angry and makes everyone do it again.

“Sir?” says the short, middle-aged woman standing beside him, after a few more repetitions have gone by. She has lightly graying, close-cropped hair, and her lipstick-less lips are pressed together into a thin, roseate line. Her name, naturally, is Sergeant Major Steele. “May I?”

“They’re all yours, Sergeant Major,” Chief replies, clambering to his feet. She calls the platoons to attention as he turns to go, and he gives you a big thumbs-up, looks back into the hall and says, “Rock the house, band!”

You meet the members of the show band after formation, when everyone breaks
up into their smaller groups. It’s a small contemporary music ensemble with Sergeant Long on lead vocals, Specialist Ryan on guitar, Specialist Thompson on drums, and Private Romero on the keys.

“What can I say?” Sergeant Long says, as he shows you the lengthy set list they’ve devised that’s filled with songs you can only dimly remember having heard on the radio before, “I hope you’re good at learning songs by ear. We’re leaving in a couple of weeks, and we’ve got a ton of Pre-MOB to do on top of rehearsals.” He claps you on the shoulder. “We’ve got to get you squared away.”

At the medical center, you get immunized against a trio of respectively unlikely, old-fashioned, and unthreatening diseases – anthrax, smallpox, and the flu – and fill out a Pre-Deployment Health Assessment questionnaire. The doctor says to be honest, and the Sergeant Major says “Hooah” to that, but everybody knows from past experience that the best way to avoid uncomfortable and time-consuming discussions about your answer to “Do you currently have any questions or concerns about your health?” is simply to check the box marked “No.” From the phrasing of the preceding question about your mental health – which, rather than asking if you have any problems, only asks whether you’ve sought counseling for them or not – it seems obvious that the Army wants to avoid unnecessary conversation as well. You check off “No” to every question. You barely read the form at all.

At CIF, you all line up at the end of a long wooden counter like at Basic Training to be issued first aid kits, body armor, and NBC masks, suits, gloves, and rubber overboots. The Sergeant Major orders everybody to have a second pair of dog tags made and, just in case, orders you all to write your blood type in permanent marker on your
boots as well. You take the equipment back to the band hall, where Sergeant Long re-trains everyone on how to bandage wounds, apply tourniquets, and don your NBC equipment, pairing you up with Ryan, who’s supposed to pretend that he’s a wounded soldier that you’ve come across on the battlefield. The acronym for evaluating a casualty is RBBSFBH – for Responsiveness, Bleeding, Breathing, Shock, Fractures, Burns, and Head injuries – and as you approach him where he’s lying on the floor, you recite the mnemonic under your breath, “Really Bad Boys Should Find Better Hobbies,” but Ryan is making faces at you and whispering, “Every Good Boy Does Fine Always.”

You kneel down beside him on the floor, shake his shoulder with your hand, and ask, “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay,” he yells, clutching his stomach and then, remembering that he’s supposed to have been shot there, his arm. “What the hell does it look like?”

At the armory, you practice disassembling, cleaning, and re-assembling your new M16 and M9 – a semiautomatic pistol – then you all take your weapons out to the firing line, where the Sergeant Major reminds everybody to keep them clean and treat them like they’re loaded at all times, then promptly drops her own pistol in the dirt. You spend the rest of the day sending round after round downrange, emptying endless magazines into paper targets until your barrels smoke, so hot to the touch that your fingers burn and you have to set your weapons aside. You walk out to collect your last target from its wooden frame and hold it up, staring through the clusters of little holes at the white wafer of October sun that’s pasted in the sky. “Circle Maker,” you whisper, as you lift your rifle with your other hand, bathing it in that dappled light like you would with holy water at a christening.

At the security and intelligence office, you get a packet of information describing
the safest way to travel inconspicuously overseas, with such helpful advice as “Don’t travel in your Army uniform,” “Don’t show people your Army ID,” and “Don’t wear articles of clothing that depict Army insignias or the American flag.” The head of the office, a sweaty, overweight civilian with slicked-back black hair, sits you down around a table in a conference room and says, “All right, ladies and gentlemen, what can I help you with?” Ryan looks around the table at the six of you and whispers, “Ladies?” The Sergeant Major says, “We’re about to deploy to Southwest Asia.”

“Outstanding,” the man replies, making a check mark on a blank sheet of paper. “Now, ladies and gentlemen, I don’t know where you’re going…”

“Southwest Asia,” the Sergeant Major interrupts.

“Right,” he replies, smiling. “Okay. Great.” He puts another check mark down. “Well, wherever you’re going, ladies and gentlemen, believe it or not, there are few things you want to keep in mind. . .”

Ryan starts coughing violently to cover his laughter, and the Sergeant Major glares at him. The man waits for him to finish then starts again and Ryan mutters, “Military intelligence my ass.”

At the chapel, you get another set of pocket-sized Bibles, though these are covered in desert-colored camouflage. The Sergeant Major writes her name in permanent marker on the front of hers, and Ryan whispers “I wonder if she’s going to tell everybody to write their blood type on that, too.” The Catholic chaplain calls you into his office one at a time. When it’s your turn, he shuts the door behind you softly, like he’s closing the curtains at a confessional. He sits on the corner of his desk and smiles as you sit down, and says that it’s important to stay close to your loved ones in this difficult time. You nod, and his smile spreads as he uncrosses his legs, stands up and walks behind you,
puts his hands on your shoulders and begins to massage them gently. “Of course, my son,” he says quietly, his breath stirring in your ear, “everybody needs a loved one to be close to.”

At the legal office, you review your life insurance policies. They’re good for $400,000 dollars in the event of loss of life, and less, in varying amounts, for grievous bodily harm, depending on the particular loss of limb, each part of you given a specific value, like the other Army-issue items on you CIF list had been. When he sees your pen hovering over the “main beneficiary” line, Ryan elbows you and whispers, “Put me down,” so you do. The Sergeant Major makes everyone fill out a form giving a “loved one” power of attorney, and you pause for several minutes while filling out that form as well, and eventually put Chris’s name down. Finally, you’re offered the opportunity to write a will, which you, having nothing to give anyone and no one to give anything to, decline.

At the band hall, you rehearse your songs, Thompson counting them all off too fast, Romero faking his way through all the keyboard parts and adding them in where they don’t belong, and Sergeant Long singing every song in the same booming, flat, Midwestern voice, as though every genre – Pop, Country, Rock, and R&B – were the same. You’ve memorized most of your parts by the end of the second week, and the songs all go smoothly enough, but they sound like garbage, and Ryan – playing the guitar parts exactly as recorded – winces the whole time.

Chief and the Sergeant Major sit in on your practice that Friday afternoon, your last rehearsal of the week. According to Ryan, they don’t care what or how well you play as long as some of the songs you’ve chosen are patriotic and none of them are explicitly profane, but that it doesn’t really matter what you choose, because they’re too
old to understand the lyrics, anyway. “All right, Band,” Chief says as you’re tuning, giving you all two thumbs-up, “looking good. Except you, New Guy.” He whistles when Sergeant Long steps up to the microphone and the Sergeant Major shakes her head. If you’d met him anywhere else – and earlier in your life – you might have liked Chief a lot, but you’re glad that he’s not coming with you to Iraq.

They clap when you finish playing, Chief says, “You guys are awesome,” and the Sergeant Major nods curtly and says, “All right, everybody, bring it in.” You all form a semicircle around her and she hands out a photocopied packet of papers. “Here’s the basic SOP for our deployment to SWA. Sergeant Long, I need you to keep tabs on your soldiers: let me know ASAP if anyone is still amber on their pre-MOB or MedPros – we’ve only got a week left before CRC to get everybody green. We don’t want anyone to be a No-Go when we get there.” She crosses her arms and looks around. “We’re shipping out our gear on Monday, so make sure it all gets packed up before COB today. Specialist Ryan, I need that manifest with all the weights, dimensions, and serial numbers on my desk yesterday.”

“I emailed it to you last week, Sergeant Major,” Ryan says.

“Hooah, hooah,” she says, nodding, “just print it out for me anyway. And double-check all the weights and measurements again, too. Now the last page here is your packing list – we’re going to have a shakedown next Friday at 0700 hours. Does anybody know that they’re missing something? Is there anything here that anybody needs?” Nobody says anything, so she claps her hands. “You know what to do. Let’s make it happen. You got anything else for them Chief?”

“Be cool, Band,” he says, pointing at himself, “Think of me.”

You help Ryan out afterwards, unpacking the sound equipment, measuring and
weighing it all, packing it back up and putting it away again. The new figures are identical to the ones you both recorded last week, so after a couple hours of sweaty labor the spreadsheet looks exactly the same. “Eventually, you resign yourself to the Army’s institutionalized stupidity,” he says, as you lock the band hall door and walk over to his car. “It doesn’t matter if you’re correct if you’re not in charge, which only the dumbest fucking morons ever are. Even when they’re obviously wrong, they’re right.”

He drives you over to the enlisted barracks on the opposite side of the base, speeding down the main street so that he can drop you off and get off post before 5 o’clock when the loudspeakers sound “Retreat,” so he won’t have to stop the car, get out, and salute in the general direction of the flag as it’s lowered, folded, and retired for the night. You stand on the sidewalk by the parking lot after he drives away, the dust from his squealing tires hanging in the air, making the shafts of fading sunlight tangible. The pre-recorded trumpet sounds from several speakers, echoing off the barracks and the ordnance school across the lot, one melody becoming many, a clarion call becoming a round. You hold your salute silently until the last notes of “To the Color” fade, and watch the sun descend toward the horizon. Twilight was Chris’s favorite time of day.

You walk up the concrete stairs to your bedroom – a single room containing a kitchenette, a couch, a bed and a desk, all surrounded by bare white walls – and lie down on your bed, shuffling through your meager stack of books: a Bible from Basic Training, your journal, *The Stranger*, another Bible from the Chaplain here. You put them down and stare at the ceiling, watching as the shadows from the setting sun overtake your room. Everything that’s ever been written is the same, you think, one universal story of love and loss and coming of age, and every happy ending is a lie: Any life that goes on long enough inevitably becomes first a tragedy and then a farce. Mersault was right to
accept his execution. Jesus was lucky to die so young. You lie in darkness until the loud-speakers outside sound “Taps,” its stark and mournful melody decaying into the distance, dying away into the rustling and chirping of the indifferent rural night.

It’s around midnight when you leave your room to roam the base, walking along crumbling cement sidewalks, past the weed-choked fields and blocky, anonymous buildings that are all shuttered and dark. A fox runs across your path and disappears, and a family of groundhogs burrows blindly into their hole in the earth. The deer look up as you pass the band hall, their eyes glowing green in the pale moonlight. On Main Street the traffic lights are all blinking on and off, stop and go, overlapping in impossibly complex polyrhythms, and you walk into the center of an intersection and turn toward them. They stretch away from you in a straight line down the street, curving gently down into the ambiguous horizon.

You raise your hands as though you were a conductor, and feel the power flowing up from the earth, through your feet and legs, up, up into your torso and out your arms. It’s like the meditation exercises your mother led you and AJ through when you were a child: “Breathe in to the ‘I,’” she would say, as you tensed your muscles one by one up from your toes. “Breathe out to the ‘Am.’” You breathe in and your fingers are tingling, like lightning is about to strike, and you let your breath go out so measured and slow. You repeat your mother’s mantra as you watch the fractured patterns of pulsing lights coalesce, flashing along to the insistent beating of your heart. They’re red and gold like the fallen autumn leaves that line the road, fading as you watch them, decomposing; becoming dead and dried and brown.

The Sergeant Major puts you in charge of communications after reading over your ASVAB scores, despite the fact that you haven’t said a single word to her yet, and
have barely even spoken in her presence at all. “Hooah, Sergeant Major,” you say when
she tells you. It makes as much sense as anything else. She takes you to DOIM, some
official computer place, where they issue you each a PDA to wear in a plastic holster on
your hip, just slightly above and to the left of the place where your pistol is supposed to
sit. You use yours that night to check your email for the first time since you left for Basic
Training. There are messages from your mother, your father, AJ, Peter, and Matt. You
leave them all unopened. Everybody is better off this way.

On your last Friday afternoon at APG, The Sergeant Major takes you across the
base to review the operation of the SINCGARS, the portable radio unit that’s mounted
in the dashboard of every Humvee. Drill Sergeant Snow had tried to instruct your pla-
toon on how to use them in Basic Training, but none of the ones there worked – all left-
overs and castoffs from 30 years ago, from the war in Vietnam – so that part of your
training was mostly make-believe.

From the outside, the motor pool is just another anonymous, white-numbered
brick building, its slow collapse barely contained by the rusting, barbed-wire topped
chain-link fence that rings it and the massive parking lot to its rear where weeds push
through the asphalt to overtake the rusting hulks of tanks and jeeps and anti-aircraft
guns, climbing over them like vines, pulling everything to the ground. You wander with
the Sergeant Major through its white, labyrinthine, cinderblock hallways like you’re
trapped in a boring, pointless version of Theseus and the Minotaur.

It takes ten minutes of searching behind various unmarked wooden doors before
you find the NCOIC. He’s leaning against a water cooler – a sergeant first class – sipping
from a styrofoam cup and slowly stroking his small, gray mustache as he looks out the
back window over the parking lot and the fields. The Sergeant Major coughs, and he
notices you at last, greeting you both affably in a low, twangy voice, shaking your hands
and smiling before he asks, “Now, Sergeant Major, what did you want to see me about?”

“We want to have a look at a SINGGARS unit, Sergeant,” she replies, “We’re
getting ready to head to SWA, and we were wondering if you could show us how they
work, maybe run us through the Dash-Ten.”

“Well, now,” he says, looking at his hands, “I wouldn’t know too much about
that. I’m a radio repairman, not a radio operator, you see?” He grabs another styrofoam
cup from the windowsill. “But I’ll take you down and show you one – it’s about time for
me to feed the fish, anyway.”

You look at the Sergeant Major with your eyebrows raised. She’s nodding to her-
self, so you shrug and follow them both down the stairs. The sergeant leads you out the
back door into the parking lot, where the derelict vehicles are clustered to your right
and left, with a stand of forest green Humvees across a broad asphalt expanse, against
the fence on the far side. He walks toward the center of the lot, where a rust-eaten metal
railing surrounds a rectangular chasm in the ground, a bottomless pool full of this murky
liquid, its oily surface shimmering in the sunlight, burning green and blue and white.
The railing opens on one end where the asphalt slopes gradually down to meet that
black abyss, and you stare into it like Orpheus, transfixed, contemplating the entrance
to the underworld.

“This here used to be a vehicle repair bay.” The sergeant says. “Only problem
is it drains straight out into the Chesapeake, and the folks at the EPA said we couldn’t
have all that oil bleeding out into there. So they plugged it up a few years back, and me
and the boys put a couple of goldfish in.”
He reaches into his styrofoam cup and tosses a handful of fish food down and the black water comes alive, exploding with light as hundreds of goldfish rise from the depths – red and gold and orange – bursting like fireworks in the evening sky; blooming like sunflowers at dawn. You watch them silently for a moment, awestruck, until the sergeant clears his throat and says, “Well, I guess I’ll show you one of those radios, then.”

He leads you and the Sergeant Major over to one of the Humvees and lets you in, and as you sit down in the driver’s seat you can already feel the radio humming, hissing and snapping as you hold out your hand. You listen to the roaring static as the sergeant walks back to the pit and leans against that rusted railing, the cup of fish food in his hand, staring solemnly down at the water, watching the fish dart across the surface of the pond.

You shake your head. There’s all this extraneous detail; there’s so much stupid, useless beauty in the world.
Your flight drops below the clouds onto a brown country. The mountains are little more than piles of dirt, and the dirt itself stretches out as far as you can see. It looks less like a foreign land than an alien world – you’ve never been to the desert before. The captain interrupts the in-flight movie, addressing everyone over the intercom. “It’s a nice, clear day down there,” he says, “slightly cloudy with a temperature of 85 degrees. Sit tight, keep your seatbelts fastened, and we’ll have you on the ground real soon.”

You put your headphones back on and open The Stranger, searching for your last sentence, dragging your finger down the page. The businessman next to you rolls onto his side and begins to snore. Outside the window, the ground drifts up to meet you, a runway at an airport on the outskirts of a dingy city squatting on the edge of a muddy river, the Rio Grande. The last stage of your pre-deployment preparation is here at the Continental United States (CONUS) Replacement Center – CRC – in El Paso, Texas,
at Fort Bliss, which sounds strangely cheerful for a place whose purpose and appearance are so resolutely bleak. The plane touches down gently and you start to gather your things, slipping your book into the cargo pocket of your BDUs.

You disembark before the rest of your bandmates and wait for them at the end of the jetway, standing against the wall to let all of the civilians stream past. A few of them nod in your direction, but mostly they ignore you. Ryan is the first of your group off the plane, his short, raggedly cut hair tousled from sleep, an airline blanket draped across his shoulder and a couple bags of airline peanuts in his hand. “How was first class, asshole?” he asks.

You smile. The handsome flight attendant had thanked you for your service when you moved up to the front cabin after another passenger had offered you his seat, and he had smiled later as he served you a couple of extra glasses of complimentary wine. “Nothing special,” you reply. They say that in the Army the living’s mighty fine.

The Sergeant Major joins you next, fixing Ryan with a steely glare that he ignores. Sergeant Long follows close behind her and tells him, “That’s a No-Go, Specialist. Take that damn towel off.” Thompson and Romero come down the jetway a few minutes later, the former flipping through the in-flight shopping catalogue, the latter with his big pair of DJ-style headphones on. You wait another five minutes and the Chaplain comes out at last, shaking hands with the handsome flight attendant as they both step out of the hatch. He’d told the Sergeant Major that he was joining you for the deployment at the last minute, and she agreed that having him along would be good for everyone’s morale. “Let me know if you ever want to talk about anything, my son,” he said to you as you’d waited for your flight to board at BWI, putting his hand on your knee. “I’m always happy to help young soldiers like yourself get things straightened out.”
You all head into the terminal together to collect your duffel bags from the baggage claim. There are soldiers waiting for you there at a sign-in desk who direct you onto the bus to Fort Bliss that’s waiting for you outside. You heft your bags and follow the Sergeant Major out the door to the bus and pile on, like you’re headed to your first night of Basic Training at Fort Jackson all over again.

On the first day of CRC – Monday – the seven of you mill about outside the barracks in the morning along with the other soldiers who’ve filtered in over the weekend, about 100 in all. The buildings that ring the courtyard are adobe with red clay tile roofs, and across the parking lot you can make out the ruins of the Alamo. The CRC NCOIC half-apologetically addresses the crowd, wheedling the various captains, colonels, and sergeants major – who technically outrank him – into letting him take command. He lines everybody up in alphabetical order, forming two rough platoons, and you end up standing next to a slim and handsome young PFC whose nametag reads “Kamus.”

“Is that pronounced like the author?” you ask, and he blushes but doesn’t respond. “I guess you probably get that all the time.”

“Yes, Specialist,” he says, “but not so much since high school.” He looks over at you, pursing his delicate lips, his finely structured cheekbones sweeping gently down below his limpid blue-gray eyes.

You follow him onto one of the buses in the parking lot, and watch him as he sits by himself at a small table in the DFAC while you eat breakfast with the band. He lifts his coffee cup daintily to his lips; he pours milk in and swirls it dreamily with his spoon. His movements are too effeminate to be accidental. His close-fitting uniform of
green and brown and tan is barely adequate as camouflage. He sees you looking at him, turns his head slightly in your direction, and gives you a tentative little smile.

You spend most of the day beside him at SRP – the Soldier Readiness Processing center – moving slowly from room to room. There’s a line of chairs that snakes through the building against the walls, starting with Medical – Station 1 – and leading all the way to the hearing and vision test at Station 10. You sit down next to Kamus at the starting end, and as each soldier is called in to the room you both stand up, shift one seat over, and sit down again. In all those hours of waiting to fill out paperwork that you’ve already filled out once or twice before – your Pre-Deployment Health Assessment, your life insurance policy form – the two of you barely say a word, watching each other furtively out of the corners of your eyes.

For lunch they serve you MREs from a stack of cardboard boxes set out by the smoking area outside, and the Chaplain comes over while you’re pouring water into the green plastic sleeve that holds the chemical heating element, about to slip your brown plastic main course pouch inside. “How’s the food this afternoon, Specialist?” he asks, and looks across the table at Kamus, “and who’s your friend?” You see him watching the two of you throughout the afternoon, and at dinner the Chaplain sits down with him, instead of you.

You know where Kamus sleeps in the barracks. You could follow him there after the evening formation and order him to take off his clothes. You can find a secluded corner, or a slow moment in the communal shower. You can see him naked before you, but not defenseless though, struggling at first, wrestling you for control. You overpower him, however, or maybe he’s just finally overcome. You make him feel the electric power of your passion. You make his tanned and supple body submit to your will.
Kamus is gone the next morning. The space next to you in formation is empty, and you shift one space to right to fill it when no one calls his name. Nobody mentions his absence through the afternoon – as you go to CIF to get your final load of equipment: goggles (in case of sandstorms), atropine injectors (in case of nerve gas) and desert camo DCUs (in case of the absence of trees) – and by the evening you’re barely certain that he was ever there at all. If you close your eyes you can almost see him, a shimmering figure of heat and light disappearing into the desert as you draw closer – your outstretched arms closing around the empty air – a memory; a mirage.

On the third day the buses take you into New Mexico, to a facility just across the state line. The desert stretches out all around you, endless, and the outpost looks like a ghost town, its gray prefabricated sheet metal buildings clustered around the intersection of the base’s only two dusty streets. The roads meet in an x, the arms of which diverge into the otherwise directionless distance like an unmarked compass rose, marking an arbitrary spot on a featureless map, defining the absolute middle of nowhere.

The white sun is hanging motionless in the empty sky, and the dirt and sand are brown and red beneath your brand-new desert combat boots. You spend the morning at the firing range, peering at your targets through the iron sights as the figures drawn in black on white waver in the haze, the waves of heat radiating from your rifle barrel bending the light from the sun. You close your eyes and let the rounds all find their targets, neat circles blooming downrange on the dark figures’ chests, clustered together over each of their hearts like funeral corsages.

That afternoon the platoons are split up into squads of six or seven, and you’re told to get all of your equipment on: your body armor, helmet, and rucksack; your weapon belt with your canteens and ammo pouches attached and its straps that run up
like suspenders over your chest that hold your flashlight, compass, and first aid kit. Your DCUs and boots are brown and tan, but all your other equipment is various shades of olive drab and forest green, so your makeshift squad of Ryan, Thompson, and four others looks like a troupe of fools in motley, blending in with nothing but each other, camouflaged for no landscape you’ve ever seen.

Ryan is busy goofing off—drawing obscene pictures in the sand with his rifle barrel, then calling Thompson over to look at them—so you take charge, giving each of your new squadmates a job: Thompson becomes your radio operator, an older PFC becomes your medic, Ryan becomes your point man. You instruct them to fan out in a wedge, and once they’re all in their proper places you say, “Move out,” motioning them forward decisively with your hand.

“Down!” you yell, as gunshots ring out from your left, throwing your body to the dirt, rolling behind a little mound and scanning the horizon through your rifle’s sights. There’s a figure in Arab dress crouched in the scrub brush halfway up the rise, so you take aim at him, center mass, and fire. He goes down. “Cover me!” you shout, rolling to the side and crawling quickly through the sand, taking cover behind the next obstacle—a low wooden wall a few meters up the hill—listening to the rapid “pop” of blanks being fired from Ryan and Thompson’s rifles. You pull yourself over the wall and there’s some barbed wire to crawl under next, then you take up a defensive crouch and wait for the rest of your squad to make it to the top of the dune. When the last man arrives you say “Status report.” And when everyone’s equipment is accounted for you reform the wedge and begin your patrol again.

You’ve been walking carefully for a few minutes, rifle at the low ready position—buttstock tucked into your shoulder, barrel at a 45-degree angle to the ground—scanning
the brush for enemies, when you hear the mortar fire. “Incoming!” you yell, and your face is just buried in the dirt when you hear the rounds explode. You jump up to see a couple CRC sergeants stand up from the bushes and tap Ryan and two other soldiers on the shoulders, instructing them to lie on the ground. Ryan flops over dramatically and begins rolling around in the dirt, clutching his stomach and yelling, “Ow! My neck! My back!”

“Medic!” you yell, running over and kneeling beside him. “Get those other casualties prepped!” then, to Thompson, your radio operator, “Prepare to transmit a MedEvac request!” You shake Ryan’s shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Ryan looks up at you, laughing. “Dude, chill out,” he says.

On Thursday there are a few briefings to sit through in the morning. The first is on the Geneva Conventions and the laws of war, and the officer presenting it explains your rights and responsibilities should you be taken prisoner and tells you not to shoot at schools, hospitals, or mosques unless you have no other choice – “but if the bad guys are using them as hideouts, then shoot the fuckers, of course” – and that torture of enemy combatants is, strictly speaking, against the rules, but it’s never exactly clear from his description whether the Iraqis have the same rights as you. The second lecture is on suicide prevention, and when the instructor says that one of the warning signs of a suicidal person is their decision to give away all of their worldly belongings, Ryan leans over to you and whispers, “Dude, can I have your stuff?” The last class is on recognizing Improvised Explosive Devices – IEDs – bombs hidden along the highways, like the ones Drill Sergeant Snow showed you blowing up Humvees in those videos in Basic Training, disguised by rubble, guard rails, corpses, paper bags, soda cans: any piece of trash you see along the roadside in Iraq could suddenly explode.
Ryan and Romero sneak out of the barracks that evening in civilian clothes, the former with his earrings in, the latter with his short black hair slicked-back. “Yo, we’re going to Juarez,” Romero says when they run into you on the stairs, “You wanna come? My cousin runs this really dope bar over there.”

“Yeah, man, let’s go get wasted,” Ryan says, adjusting the gold-colored watch on his wrist and rolling up his cuffs. “You want to get some pussy with us, or what?”

“No, thanks,” you say.

Ryan smirks. “We’ll fuck an extra one for you.”

They saunter out the door and you climb the last few stairs, head into the 60-person sleeping bay, and lie down in the bunk you selected in the far corner against one of the white cinderblock walls. Your combat boots are still on your feet, and the chain from your dog tags digs into your throat as you stare at the springs holding the mattress up above your head, all of these pieces of metal intertwined. The overhead lights flicker off around midnight as the last of the soldiers slowly filter in from emailing their loved ones in the computer room downstairs.

The soldiers lie down in their beds, settling in loose clusters around the room, their faces illuminated in profile by the soft light from the screens of their cell phones, elfin silhouettes in pale blue and white and black, like Chris’s face beside you in the basement, bathed in your stereo’s light. They’re speaking to their loved ones in passionate whispers: “I love you,” over and over again, the faint sound of their incantations carrying across the darkness like air kisses, drifting from their lips to yours. Loved ones. Loved ones. Those words are all you hear. You lie awake and watch them until the last lights are extinguished and the last of the soldiers goes to sleep, waiting for dawn to break along the dun-colored horizon to the stirring sound of trumpets playing Reveille.
CRC ends on the fifth day – Friday. There are only a few final presentations to sit through and pieces of paperwork to sign. You ride the bus to the SRP site where the employees are all in costume: in one room all the men are wearing dresses, and all the women suits and ties; the chief medical officer is dressed up like the doctor from *Star Trek*, Beverly Crusher; the chaplain’s assistant is a skeleton. They each hand out candy to put in your DCU cargo pockets as they sign off on your final checklist, and you follow the line of chairs again from room to room through hallways hung with cobwebs, while somewhere a CD of “spooky” music plays. You look at the calendar on one of the drag queen’s desks. Today is Halloween.

Is this supposed to feel like Carnival, like Mardi Gras? A brief moment of comparatively wild and topsy-turvy celebration before the dry Lenten season of sacrifice, one last feast before the months of fasting? The contrast would be sharper if the past few months hadn’t made your uniform seem like a running joke; if your band hadn’t been in costume this whole time. At least now you’re counting down your final hours until you join the rest of your country’s dearly departed martyrs, all those saints and souls, journeying through All Hallows’ Eve to reach the holy land. You smile as you empty your pockets of candy at the barracks that afternoon, dumping it all into the trash. You put your armor on and pick up your duffel bags and rifle, bidding the CRC and APG and the SOM good riddance. Today your farcical life is finally ending. Tomorrow the days of the dead begin.

Your flight departs at sunset. A chartered jet waits for you on the runway of the fenced-off military landing strip, surrounded on all sides by the looming mountains and the darkening sky. You follow all the other soldiers single file across the tarmac, M16 slung over your shoulder, M9 and PDA holstered at your hip, and bass guitar case in
hand. The commanding general of Fort Bliss is standing by the stairway leading up to the entry hatch, dressed in his Class A uniform like a priest in his ceremonial vestments, with a chaplain and a sergeant major standing to his side, three men bestowing their blessings on your recessional.

“We’re proud of you, Soldier,” the general says, as he shakes your hand.

“The Lord be with you,” the chaplain intones, making the sign of the cross.

The sergeant major takes your hand and grasps your arm, looks you in the eye, and says, “Don’t do anything stupid, Soldier. Make sure you bring your buddies back alive.”

You climb up the steps and into the plane where a flight attendant greets you warmly and directs you to an empty seat. You stuff your backpack and guitar case in the overhead compartment, place your rifle on the floor, and reach into your cargo pockets for your books.

There’s a colonel sitting across the aisle from you, and he looks over as you take your notebook out and put it on your lap. “Hey, Soldier;” he says, gesturing toward it, “where did you get that?”

You look where he’s pointing. “This notebook?” He nods. “At college, Sir;” you say.

“You went to The Tech?” He asks, then adds, “Beta. Class of ’81.” He reaches his hand across the aisle and tries to give you some complicated handshake that you don’t understand.

“Excuse me, Sir;” you say, “you do mean Wesleyan, right?”

“Good old WesTech,” he smiles ruefully. “How is Middletown? I hear the Tech’s all faggots and liberals these days.”

“Wesleyan University,” looking at you more closely, at the copy of the *The Stranger* in your hand. He shakes his head and mutters incredulously, “What the hell are you doing *here*?”

You look at the cover of your journal. What are you doing here? Haven’t you been wondering that all along? You lower the tray table from the seat-back in front of you and place the two books next to each other on it, opening them both to their first page. The opening sentences in both your journal and *The Stranger* are the same.

If you leave both books open, turn to page 119.

If you close *The Stranger*, turn to page 120.
You turn your journal to a fresh page and start to read *The Stranger*, holding it open with your left hand as you transcribe it with your right.

“Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can’t be sure.”

You regard those familiar lines for a moment, considering the precise weight of Camus’s words – all that disaffection, that disconnection, that profound and selfish lack of concern; the mother who is not just gone but forgotten; the death that goes almost unnoticed and completely unmourned.

You wish that your life could transform into fiction, that you could be this gray figure drifting between the bars of black and white, through the prison of the text, free forever from thought, care, and remorse. Heartless. Loveless. Lifeless. Deathless.

You look up out the window at the measureless, featureless desert to the side as the plane begins to taxi down the runway. The sun has begun to go down before you; the little stones that mark the landscape cast short shadows across the ground. You continue your transcription, moving through the novel and filling the notebook with your precise script, the bottom of your page coinciding with the top of Camus’s fourth paragraph, so that its first two sentences become your last two lines.

“I took the two-o’clock bus. It was a blazing hot afternoon.”
You turn your journal to a fresh page and start to read *The Stranger*, holding it open with your left hand as you transcribe it with your right.

“Mother died today. Or, maybe, this morning; I can’t be sure.”

You regard those familiar lines for a moment, considering the precise weight of Camus’s words – all that disaffection, that disconnection, that profound and selfish lack of concern; the mother who is not just gone but forgotten; the death that goes almost unnoticed and completely unmourned.

You wish that your life could transform into fiction, that you could be this gray figure drifting between the bars of black and white, through the prison of the text, free forever from thought, care, and remorse. Heartless. Loveless. Lifeless. Deathless.

You look up out the window at the measureless, featureless desert to the side as the plane taxies down the runway. The sun is going down before you; the little stones that mark the landscape cast lengthening shadows across the ground. You continue your transcription, moving through the novel and filling your notebook with your precise script, the bottom of your page coinciding with the top of Camus’s fourth paragraph, so that its first two sentences become your last two lines.

“I took the bus to school at two o’clock. It was a blazing hot afternoon.”
You turn your journal to a fresh page and start to read *The Stranger*, holding it open with your left hand as you transcribe it with your right.

“My friend died today. Sometime this morning; I can’t be sure.”

You regard those familiar lines for a moment, considering the precise weight of Camus’s words – all that disaffection, that disconnection, that profound and selfish lack of concern; the lover who is not just gone but forgotten; the death that goes almost un-noticed and completely unmourned.

You wish that your life could transform into fiction, that you could be this gray figure drifting between the bars of black and white, through the prison of the text, free forever from thought, care, and remorse. Heartless. Loveless. Lifeless. Deathless.

You look up out the window at the measureless, featureless desert to the side as the plane finishes taxiing down the runway. The sun has almost gone down before you, and the little stones that mark the landscape cast long shadows across the ground. You continue your transcription, moving through the novel and filling your notebook with your precise script, the bottom of your page coinciding with the top of Camus’s fourth paragraph, so that its first two sentences become your last two lines.

“I walked to school around two o’clock. It was a blazing hot afternoon.”
You turn your journal to a fresh page and close *The Stranger*, slipping it into the seat-back pocket with your left hand as you begin writing with your right.

“Chris died today. Sometime this morning; when, I can’t be sure.”

You regard those familiar lines for a moment, then cross them out, turn to a fresh page and start again.

“Chris died today,” you write, “sometime this morning, the first of June.”

You look up out the window at the measureless, featureless desert to the side as the plane slowly turns around. The sun has gone down behind you, and the little stones that once marked the landscape have been swallowed by the shadows that engulf the ground. Everything is suddenly unfamiliar; you are a stranger in this foreign land. You look down at your journal and reread the pages and pages of repeated words. When did everything become recursive? Where did quotations become paraphrase? The blazing sun and the molten sky, the heat and light and sand, the unseen body lying in the coffin: Is this Camus’s story, or yours?

The plane lurches forward suddenly, rolling down the runway, and the wind screams around its body and wings as it quickly picks up speed. Outside, the general, chaplain and sergeant major snap to attention, raising their arms in a salute as you thunder past. You feel the ground release you as you climb into the darkness, a pale skeleton of electricity and metal disappearing into the darkening sky.
Your flight from Texas to Kuwait traces an arc from West to East, a mirror image of the sun’s path across the sky, an inverted metaphor stolen and translated, transubstantiated like the moon’s pale fire. You make three stopovers to refuel at airports in foreign cities where you aren’t allowed to leave the plane, pauses in shadow countries whose identities you can only guess – Newfoundland? Iceland? The Netherlands? – their buildings all shuttered and dark and lightly covered with ashen snow, necropolises whose ghostly citizens lie in wait to greet your army of the night. Finally, you spy Kuwait City from far off and far above: a neon oasis from which lighted highways reach out into the darkness like tendrils, like arteries: electric desert vegetation pulsing with the lifeblood of capital. It is as it should be, as all the bedtime stories say: shining like a jewel nestled in sable, imbued with Oriental magic and dusky mystery.

America, Fuck Yeah
You wake up in a tent the next morning, walk to the entryway, open the canvas flap, and look out over the gray and barren sand, and you can’t say how much of last night’s vision was merely hallucination, how much of that beautiful city was a dream.

“Man, this place is ugly,” Ryan says, as he opens the tent flap beside you and looks out. “Oh, God.” He grabs his nose. “It smells fucking awful, too.”

You sniff the air and gag a little bit – the faint smells of slimy, rotting seawater and burning human waste are mixed with so much dust that the air feels gritty as it slides into your lungs. You look down the packed dirt road toward the camp, but it’s obscured by the sand that’s rising up and taking shape as the desert becomes a storm. Ryan pokes his head back out of the tent – he’s got his helmet at his NBC mask on. “Let’s get the fuck out of here,” he says, and you lower your goggles and follow him.

Camp Arifjan is huge. You and Ryan find the nearest DFAC only after what seems like hours of wandering past an infinite number of tents identical to yours, green canvas with rigid metal frames, wooden floors, and air-conditioning and heating units squatting, attached by several silver wires and hoses, outside. The tents are laid out in rows of 40, doubled-up, back to back, with sandy avenues in between, and both in front of and behind each of those are double rows of 80 more, stretching on and on, forming a giant grid of moss green on brown, like some strange colony of vegetation, some rectilinear kudzu springing up to overtake the sand. If only your enemies could look down on it from above, then maybe your own mix-and-match equipment color scheme would be good for something after all.

Your rifle and pistol live in the armory here, and your armor lives under your bunk. You and your bandmates live at the DFAC, the chapel, the PX, the library, and the gym. There are pool and ping-pong tables in the Morale, Welfare, and Recreation
— or MWR — building, as well as a movie theater complete with popcorn stand, and Ryan and Thompson hook up a small TV at one end of the tent, while Romero sets his keyboard up at the other so he can play his smooth jazz and R&B. Every morning, the Sergeant Major goes to battalion headquarters across the camp with Sergeant Long, who drives her in the band’s requisitioned SUV.

Days go by and there’s still nothing important for you to do: your first performance is almost three weeks away. For now, you may as well still be in Texas — the only thing anyone is killing here is time. You go by yourself to the PX to buy some extra “high-speed” equipment — an ammo pouch for the buttstock of your M16 so that you can load it more quickly when the time comes, a combat sling that allows you to wear the rifle across your chest like the guys in the infantry do — and bring it to the armory to put it on. You go there regularly to hold your rifle, to feel the metal on your skin as you clean it on lazy afternoons, waiting for a chance to use it, for it to come alive again. The second week is halfway over before your sound equipment finally arrives, and the Sergeant Major orders everyone to form up at 1300 hours to draw your weapons from the arms room for the drive to pick it up from the airfield at Ali Al Salem.

The air base is located a short drive away — almost attached to Arifjan, which is halfway between Kuwait City and the border of Iraq — but you have to drive outside the perimeter and across the desert to get there. Through the window of the SUV you can see a long line of rusting metal hulks stretching to the West, the slowly disintegrating wreckage of Saddam’s tanks and trucks and personnel carriers caught fleeing from American forces during the first Gulf War, all destroyed, disabled, or abandoned and left here to decay, a failed escape route fixed in place and dissolving like a stone wall, falling slowly back into pieces to be reclaimed by the earth.
You enter Ali Al Salem after the Kuwaiti guards cheerfully wave you through the first checkpoint and the surly American ones stop you at the second, making you all get out of your vehicles so they can check them for explosives and so you can clear your already empty weapons, pointing them into metal barrels, cocking them, and pulling the triggers back to make sure no rounds have mysteriously appeared in their chambers through some act of spontaneous generation. They seem a little over-zealous – poking around in your back seat for hidden bombs and glaring at you through opaque sunglasses – given that there hasn’t been any action in Kuwait for years, but you can’t really blame them for wanting their job to be more serious than it is. You certainly wouldn’t want to be stuck here.

Past the gate, there are ruined tank treads laid across the packed dirt road for speed bumps and tents ringed with small rectangular cement missile shelters in case of incoming Scuds. Giant Air Force hangers huddle together in pairs like camel humps – trapezoidal, truncated concrete pyramids with their ceilings staved in, as if smitten by some divine blow from the heavens. The rubble from a decade ago still lies in boulder-sized pieces on the ground, remainders from the last war, reminders of the past. Your bandmates take pictures of the ruins. You look at them incuriously. They have nothing to do with you.

Your first rehearsal in Kuwait is on Friday morning that second week, and almost everything goes wrong: Thompson’s kick drum has a crack in it that you have to duct-tape over; Ryan plugs his guitar effects pedal into a 240-volt wall socket and it instantly fries; and the generator you’re supposed to use dies the moment that you step on the stage. Ryan shakes his head and asks, “How soon before we can declare this a complete disaster?” You walk over to the generator and stare at its gauges and switches
dumbly, and its panel lights flicker slightly under your gaze. You think he’s just talking about the rehearsal, but you can’t be sure.

“Come on, work,” you whisper, as you reach out your hands, laying them on the instrument panel on the generator’s faceplate.

“You need any help over there?” Ryan calls over from the stage. “Should I get one of these Durka-Durkas to come and turn it on?” He points to a group of Arabs watching you silently, dressed in black-and-white checked headscarves and light blue janitorial coveralls. That nickname is from the way the Islamic terrorists talk in a movie you and your bandmates watched at the MWR cinema last week, *Team America: World Police*, in which, instead of Arabic, all of their dialogue is different permutations of, “Durka durka, Mohammed, Jihad.” It was supposed to be a satire of American ignorance and militarism, but nobody seems to have gotten the point, or are too impervious to satire to care, so now Ryan has started using that phrase both to describe and to address every Middle Eastern person he sees.

You ignore him, muttering, “Oh, ye of little faith,” and flick the switches up and down, but nothing happens, so Ryan goes to find the Navy maintenance crew – the Sea Bees – and the rest of you wait for them to come. The group of Arabs is still watching, their expressions unchanging as the sailors arrive, glancing in your direction impassively, as though you all were blocks of stone or dead trees or some other lifeless things. One of the mechanics fills up the generator with gasoline and presses a button. It starts up immediately.

You unscrew the guitar pedal after practice to take a look, though there’s no way it will be as easy to fix as the generator was. The circuit board inside is scorched – irreparable – so the Sergeant Major orders you all to find a replacement downtown. That
afternoon, you, Ryan, Romero, Thompson and Sergeant Long all draw your pistols from
the armory and put on your only set of civilian clothes. Your bandmates are almost pass-
able as tourists in their slacks and jackets, but their Army haircuts – crew cuts, fades,
and high-and-tights – give everything away. You shake your own close-cropped head.
You’re trying to look as inconspicuous as you can, but there’s really no reason to. There
aren’t any generic Arab terrorists lurking in Kuwait City, anyway.

Thompson sits across from you on his bunk staring at his pistol as you take the
9mm bullets from the plastic baggie the armory gave you and slide them into your two
magazines one at a time. “It’s sort of like, who was it, Chekov,” he says, “who said that
if a gun appears in act one, scene one it has to be used by act three, scene two?”

“Yeah, something like that,” you reply.

You tuck the pistol into the waistband of your jeans, reach into your backpack,
take your notebook out, and stuff it in your back pocket. You rummage around for The
Stranger, but you can’t find it. You hold the bag upside down and shake its contents out
onto the ground. It isn’t there. You must have left it on the plane. You stare at the floor
for a few minutes before you stuff everything into your backpack again. It doesn’t matter
one way or the other; you know that entire story by heart.

The black SUV rolls away from the gate with Sergeant Long behind the wheel.
Ryan rolls the windows down, puts a CD in the stereo, and soon you’re roaring down
the access road toward the highway blasting the theme song from Team America, with
Ryan and Romero singing along. “America: fuck yeah!” they sing. “Comin’ again to save
the motherfuckin’ day, yeah!” Ryan takes out his video camera and starts to record, but
when he points it in your direction you look aside, staring out the window into the dis-
tance through the clouds of dust and gravel your tires are kicking up, until he turns the
lens on somebody else.

“Isn’t this a little strange?” Sergeant Long asks, as he pulls into the parking lot of a Burger King where the access road and the highway intersect. The familiar colors of its neon sign spell out its name in both English and Arabic, reading across from both directions – left to right and right to left – meeting at the center like a palindrome. “Why are we meeting this guy out in the open like this, again? Who the hell is this guy, anyway?”

“Shit, you’re right,” Ryan says, “Fucking Durka-Durkas. We’re totally about to die.” He looks at the camera in his hands. “This is going to end up as one of those training videos. They’ll show this tape in Basic and some dumb-ass drill sergeant will say, ‘this footage contains the last images of these soldiers alive.’”

“All right, you two in the back,” Sergeant Long calls to you and Thomspon, “keep your eyes on this guy as he gets in the car, and keep your weapons down below the seat. If he starts doing anything funny, light him up.” You look at the pistol in your hand, thinking of the notebook in your pocket. Which act are you in, again?

Across the parking lot, a dark-skinned man gets out of a beat-up sedan and walks toward you. Sergeant Long yells “Halt” out the driver’s window, then pauses for a moment, trying to think of the next official-sounding thing to say.

“Who the fuck are you?” Ryan yells, instead.

“Haroon, your guide,” the man replies. “May I get in?”

He climbs into the middle seat next to Romero, and Sergeant Long pulls the SUV back onto the road. “Take this exit,” Haroon says, pointing to a sign.

“You mean ‘King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques’ Highway?” Ryan asks.
“That would be the one,” Haroon replies. Your gun is lying in your lap and you have your finger on the trigger, muzzle pointed at the Arab’s back. You quietly flick the safety off. The sunlight should really be in your eyes, but the sun has already set; you can see him too clearly, or not clearly enough. It really should be quieter, too. If only you were on a beach, caught between the sunlight and the sea. If only it were still the afternoon. He would never see it coming. A little round hole would blossom in his chest and the butt of the pistol would jump slightly in your hand. Is that really all it feels like when you kill a man? Haroon turns to look at you and smiles.

You flip the safety on again and lay the pistol on the seat beside you. You take your pen and notebook out and write the following sentence down: You could shoot him now or shoot another one later – it would come to the same thing.

Out the window, white and blue-striped water towers shaped like inverted chemistry-class beakers loom on the horizon like copses of some fantastical fruit-bearing desert tree, and large canvas structures strung with multi-colored Christmas lights dot the sand starting a couple hundred yards out from the road. A car swerves suddenly off the highway in front of you and tears off across the desert toward one of them, following some invisible path across the plain. “What are those things?” Thompson asks.

“Ramadan tents,” Haroon replies. “The Kuwaitis like to think of themselves as a desert people – they live in the city and come out here on the weekends.”

“I thought you were a Kuwaiti,” Sergeant Long says.

“I’m from Pakistan,” he says, “I studied engineering there, then I moved to England, but I left because I couldn’t stand to drive a cab. I’d rather be a second-class citizen in Kuwait than a third-class one in the UK.”

Thompson looks surprised. “Are they very prejudiced here?”
Haroon smiles. “They tolerate people like myself because we’re useful to them. It would be worse if I were a woman, though: they have even fewer rights than we do here. Although,” he winks at Romero, “at least they aren’t required to wear a burqa like they were in Pakistan. I always thought those poor women looked a little too much like, how do you call them,” he draws his hands in line across his eyes, “Ninja Turtles?”

“We’ve been calling them Durka-Durkas,” Ryan says, and everybody laughs, except Haroon, who looks confused. “It’s from a movie,” Ryan explains, neglecting to mention that he’d just been calling Haroon a Durka-Durka, too.

The band’s first show is on Thanksgiving, a concert at the DFAC during Arifjan’s celebratory holiday meal. There’s turkey, stuffing, and mashed potatoes; sparkling grape juice and virgin eggnog; pumpkin, apple, and pecan pie; festive decorations and prepackaged fruitcake logs, but for most people here the thing to be thankful for is being in Kuwait and not Iraq, except for soldiers like you. Everybody else called their loved ones before dinner from the phones at Headquarters, and Sergeant Long had been surprised when you didn’t come along. “Dude, aren’t you going to at least call your mother?” Romero asked. You shook your head. You haven’t spoken to your family since you enlisted. You never told them you were going to deploy. You wanted to be rid of sentimentality. You want to leave that life behind.

You set up your instruments in the corner, while on television President Bush is actually serving the troops for once, smirking for the camera as he slops holiday food onto their plates. You watch him as you tune your bass – from his face you’d think everything was hunky-dory, that the war was already over. It has been almost half a year since he declared the mission accomplished, but more soldiers are dying in Iraq every day.
The intensity of the fighting there is increasing, or so you hear from the combat and transportation troops that come through Camp Arifjan, and they still haven’t caught Saddam. You hope they’ll still be fighting when you get there. You hope that you and Circle Maker will get to shoot somebody, or that somebody there will get to shoot you.

You stay in Kuwait for over a month, and your few concerts are sparsely attended — sometimes just the Sergeant Major and the Chaplain come — aside from the ones in the DFAC, where the music is usually ignored in favor of whatever is on TV. More popular are the weekly dance and DJ nights — Salsa on Wednesdays, Country on Thursdays, Hip Hop on Saturdays — where dozens, sometimes a hundred, soldiers strut their stuff.

“Fuck, Dude,” Ryan says, the first time you walk by one of those teeming throngs, having played a concert on the same stage to a crowd of less than 10 the night before. “What the hell are we doing here? We should have just sent a CD-player over instead.”

You shake your head ruefully. Sergeant Long had been flat again for the entire concert last night, and Romero had started two songs in the wrong key. But even if you played everything perfectly, why would these soldiers want to sit still and listen to a glorified cover band that, in trying to put together a set-list to appeal to every taste, has ended up with something satisfying to no one.

The date of your departure finally arrives, and you ride with the Sergeant Major, the Chaplain, and the rest of the band to Ali Al Salem again, all suited up for battle, armor, helmet, and ammo pouches on, with an empty pistol on your hip and a still-unloaded rifle in your hands. You get there in the morning, load the equipment, instruments, and your heavy duffel bags onto a metal shipping pallet, then head to the passenger terminal, a dingy one-story building a few hundred yards from the runway where a couple of massive, olive-drab cargo planes — C-130s — wait. At the desk inside,
a limp-wristed and lisping Air Force sergeant tells the Sergeant Major that, for security reasons, he can’t tell you when your flight is scheduled to depart. There’s cheerful Christmas music playing over the intercom. The Chaplain sidles over to chat with the sergeant. The Sergeant Major walks away from the desk, sighs, and shakes her head.

In order to get to the sitting area, you have to pass through security first – a single metal detector like at a civilian airport, next to an x-ray machine. After you’ve all been standing around for 15 minutes doing nothing, the sergeant finishes his conversation with the Chaplain and leads everyone over as a group. “Fall in!” The sergeant shouts, and giggles. The Sergeant Major glares at him. “I always wanted to say that,” he says.

She puts her bag down on the conveyor belt and walks through the metal detector, which – not surprisingly – goes off. She looks at the sergeant and he shrugs, so she takes her bag and walks into the waiting room. When it’s Ryan’s turn he smirks and puts his rifle on the conveyor belt after his backpack goes through. “Let me know if you find anything dangerous in there, dude,” he says. The metal detector goes off and the sergeant stops him on the other side, giving him back his rifle, but keeping the pocketknife and cigarette lighter that were in his bag.

“I’m sorry Specialist,” he says, smiling sweetly, “but hazardous items such as these are not allowed on Air Force flights.”

“This is fucking retarded,” Ryan says.

You stand outside the terminal, waiting, looking out over the airfield at the desert, barren aside from the distant line of disabled tanks on the horizon. The sun is almost setting, and you can see your breath escaping from your lips. Kuwait has been colder than you expected, and it seems like no colors occur in nature here: a dead land, a wasteland made of dirty shades of brown and gray. “God-forsaken,” you whisper to yourself.
During the day, things that should be brightly colored are all bleached, washed-out—the sun is white as bone and the sky is the palest shade of blue—and the evenings are swallowed by emptiness. When Matt said that you should go into the desert, what did he think you’d find? It isn’t awe-inspiring, and its desolation is neither savage nor sublime, just endless sand and meaningless sky.

Thompson joins you outside with his camera and you watch him take picture after picture of the sunset—a faint and mottled haze of pink and orange and blue—like it’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen, which, if he’d only ever seen the desert, it probably would be. Your bandmates all have cameras with them all the time, holstered in their ammo pouches, all pocket-sized and point-and-shoot. They take aim at these banal landscapes intently, like they’re sighting down their rifles, capturing the Middle East. You spit some cruddy gray mucus onto the dusty gravel, fingerling the pistol grip of your M16 with your gloved hand. Thompson takes another picture of setting sun and you mutter, “That happens every day, you know.”
The C-130 swoops down into Afghanistan from the stratosphere, and you rise from your seat, floating – the red straps straining against your chest to hold you in place – as whatever force was keeping the plane aloft suddenly falls away. The lights in the cavernous cargo bay are off, and you imagine yourself falling, like Icarus, into the background of some inconsequential landscape. This is the wrong time of day again, however, the wrong time of year – not to mention the wrong era, genre, and century. If only you hadn’t been born several millennia too late. If only you hadn’t been created non-fictionally.

The pilot pulls up hard at what must have been the last possible moment, and you can almost feel the ground rushing by under the thin metal skin beneath your feet. The plane touches down and the crewmembers take their night-vision goggles off and swivel away from the tiny porthole windows as the red overhead running lights come

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on. The rear lift gate swings slowly downward as the plane taxis down the runway, and
the stifling heat in the cargo hold melts away, sucked out into the frigid darkness. An ap-
propriately epic landing: the C-130’s official model name is, after all, the Hercules.

The crewmembers gesture at you wordlessly as the plane comes to a stop, and
you see the Sergeant Major moving her mouth, but you can’t tell if any words are actu-
ally coming out. From the moment you approached this huge propeller-driven plane on
the runway at Ali Al Salem, the deafening roar of the engines has been all that you could
hear. You have your Army-issue earplugs in, and the crewmembers are all wearing
heavy-duty headsets to block out the noise, speaking to each other when they need to
through integrated microphones. The movies definitely had not prepared you for how
loud the Army is.

You think the crew wants everyone to get up and collect their bags – mostly be-
cause they start unbuckling the Sergeant Major’s seatbelt and helping her to her feet –
but it’s a difficult maneuver; you’re packed into the cargo hold with your bandmates
and a several other soldiers along with two large metal pallets of equipment (probably
8’ x 8’, and about five feet high), with the gear taking up most of the room, while all of
you are crowded onto seats made of cross-hatched red nylon straps attached to metal
frames that fold down from the bare metal walls of the plane, one on either side with
another double row down the center, so close that you and the Chaplain – who’s seated
opposite – need to fold your knees together, a couple of teeth in a zipper that runs down
the narrow aisle. He puts his hand on your knee as he pushes himself to his feet, and for
a moment his crotch is mere inches from your face. He looks down at you, his face in
shadow, as though obscured by a monastic cowl, and you feel, rather than see, his smile.
A sergeant is waiting at the end of the loading ramp. The crew members direct you off the aircraft, and he leads everyone across the tarmac at a jog—the C-130’s turbines are still thundering, stealing your breath away in gray contrails—to a partially bombed-out earthen-brick building with sheets of plywood patching the gaping holes in its roof and sides. Inside a big-screen television arranged against one bullet-riddled wall plays static to an empty room. There’s a shelf with a handful of trashy paperbacks and the useless remnants of unwanted care packages, and in the far corner stands the most depressing Christmas tree you’ve ever seen. A paper sign above the makeshift reception desk reads, “Welcome to Kandahar.”

You’ve barely dropped your gear by your newly assigned bunk in your canvas tent—green on the outside, white on the inside, the same as in Kuwait—and started to remove your boots when the sergeant from the airfield pushes open the door. “Gear up,” he says, “Your helicopter is leaving within the hour. We’ve got to get you to the Fob.”


“All right,” Sergeant Long says, “You heard the man. Let’s get hot.”

Ryan looks at you, confused. “Fob?” he whispers, “What the fuck is that?” You shrug and start to retie your boots.

Nobody told the helicopter pilots about this flight either, it turns out, so you all unload the equipment from the truck onto a patch of gravel next to one of the CH-47 Chinooks and wait until they show up. Everybody but you has a camera out, taking pictures of each other, the helicopter, and the equipment pile against the sunrise breaking across the mountains, a soft pink blush spreading up the sky. Eventually, the helicopter crews arrive. They’re wearing slim-fitting olive drab jumpsuits, and the door gunner who helps you in has pale blue eyes and tawny hair. The Chinook’s dual rotors start to
spin, lumbering at first, their tips dipping toward the ground, gaining momentum and lifting themselves up, rending the air.

The inside of the helicopter is deafening. The door gunner reaches over and adjusts your harness without speaking, jerking the red straps down over your shoulders and up across your hips, buckling them and cinching them tight. He smiles at you, his handsome face half-obscured by his helmet, eyes masked by his goggles’ black reflective glass. He turns toward the door, almost brushing into you as he bends and twists through the cramped cargo bay, bracing himself as the aircraft rolls forward slightly and lurches upward, banking to the right, leaving the ground behind.

You’re over open country when the pilot banks slightly to the right and a crewmember test-fires the gun on that side. The helicopter levels off and the blonde-haired gunner reaches over and undoes your seatbelt, puts his hand on your shoulder and motions you to his door, guiding you forward gently, placing your hands on the M60 machine gun and pointing out at the barren, rocky plain scudding by below. It’s all brown dirt and rocks like El Paso, only sparser: there’s nothing living down there. He bends over beside you and feeds the ammo belt from the canister into the gun’s feed tray, caressing the bullets with his gloved fingers, then moves behind you and places a hand in the small of your back, tapping your helmet with the other hand.

Your trigger fingers jerk back, and you fire a long burst at the ground, the handles of the machine gun are almost level with your thrusting hips. You tremble as the vibrations shake your body, as the power courses up into your hands – this beautiful violence, this exquisite little death. It’s over in moment. The last of the brass bullet casings bounces on the helicopter’s metal floor, while the final rounds strike the brown earth in a line, strafing the ground impotently, each piece of copper-jacketed lead becoming merely an
evanescent puff of dust. He smiles, gives you a thumbs-up, and straps you back into your seat, and you take out your notebook and write everything down.

Your helicopter comes in for a landing fast and low at a cluster of wooden and metals buildings huddled atop a larger-than-average mound of dirt ringed with a chicken-wire-wrapped rock wall that stands sentry over the surrounding plains. The pilot pulls up sharply and hovers for a moment over the gravel landing pad, lowering the aircraft with a dramatic flourish as the wind from the rotor swirls the dust aside like a curtain opening to reveal an empty stage. The only other structure you can see as you descend lies a couple of miles out: the dun-colored ruins of an ancient fortress, the outer limit of the empire of Alexander the Great.

“Welcome to FOB Lagman,” a captain shouts, striding over toward you across the gravel – FOB, you can see from the sign behind him, stands for Forward Operating Base – “it’s great to have you. We don’t get much in the way of entertainment out here.” He shakes the Sergeant Major’s hand, and looks around at everyone – you’re all wearing your armor and carrying your rifles. “We were sort of expecting the USO. What are you soldiers doing here?”

Most of the real soldiers stationed there are away on a mission, it turns out, and the rest of them leave just after you arrive, so your performance during dinner in the DFAC that evening is attended only by the few of them who stayed back to hold the fort. They watch with disinterest – only the Captain seems amused – as Sergeant Long poses like a washed-up rock star wannabe, running up and down the impromptu stage. They perk up only as you play your final song, looking up from their food as those first distinctive, discordant bass notes ring out – a low D, staccato, three against two, followed by the same rhythm up an octave on the minor 9th. You walk to the microphone sneering
as the guitar and drums kick in. “This is a song by Rage Against the Machine,” you say, and of their mainstream radio hits it’s the most anti-authoritarian of all, but you know that the soldiers in the Army – like the football players in your high school – will like it un-ironically, anyway.

The rhythm becomes more insistent, building until the instruments come to a sudden stop, and in that silence you shout, “Killing in the name of!” The guys in the audience stand and sing along, filling in for you when – for the Sergeant Major’s sake – you leave the closing profanity out. “Fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me,” they all chant as one. “Fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me.”

You all pose for pictures with the Captain afterward. You stand in back and the Chaplain stands next to you, placing his arm around your shoulders. “Nice shooting today,” he whispers as you wait for everybody’s cameras to get passed to the front. “Nice singing, too. I had no idea you were such a feisty one.” You remember the gunner’s hand on yours, glove to glove, guiding your fingers to one of the M60’s triggers. You shrug the Chaplain’s arm away. You don’t want anything to do with his paternal love. You want to feel that destructive power once again.

You wander around the deserted base that night, feeling your way between the wooden buildings and along the rock wall. There are no cities nearby to illuminate the sky – only the two quiet encampments facing off across the centuries – and all the exterior lights in the FOB are out in an attempt to keep mortar attacks at bay. The darkness is absolute, so opaque it’s almost physical, like a shroud.

The camp, barely a hundred yards across, expands infinitely even as space and time seem to buckle and contract, folding inward around you, the wooden hooches crowding in on all sides, dark masses implied only by the faintest outline, black on black.
Distance is meaningless: you are becoming massive like the landscape, undifferentiated from the night. You unsling your rifle and chamber a round as the shadows reach their tendrils toward you, penetrating your body, pulling you toward the event horizon of that nether world, expanding you into that claustrophobic emptiness.

Your finger is on the trigger and your thumb is about to flick the selector level from safe to semi when you hear a deep humming sound. It’s vibrating deep inside your body, so beautiful that you want to lay down your rifle and drop to your knees, so terrible that you clap your hands over your ears. It’s like pieces of metal scraping together, panes of glass rubbing across their edges, thick sheets of ice breaking along a single splintering line. It is the sound of dark matter stretching throughout the universe forever, of the planets moving in polyphonic song, the music of the spheres. You look up, finally, and the night sky swells to incandescent white – its black canvas pierced with innumerable burning stars – and your shadow retreats from the light of your radiant, celestial body.

You wake up in your bunk the next morning as though nothing had happened, and you and the band return to Kandahar Air Base that afternoon and settle in for the remainder of your month-long stay. “Afghanistan is a little like the Wild West,” the Captain at FOB Lagman had said, and it only takes a couple of days “in country” for his meaning to become clear. The soldiers treat it like it’s a lawless land, like they’re the heroes in some black-and-white cowboy movie charged with subduing the restless natives, living the way of the gun. In Kuwait, your rifles had stayed in the arms room unless you were going out on a mission, and had remained unloaded even then. In Afghanistan, however, your M16 is fully loaded and on your person at all times, and not a day goes by that first week without something exploding nearby, the mortar shells arcing into camp at sunset as punctual as church bells. You’re going to like it here.
You’re sitting with Ryan, Thompson, and Romero in the DFAC eating lunch during your second week in Kandahar. It’s a Saturday, and you’ve just finished another mealtime background music gig and broken down your gear. A couple of televisions are playing against one of the walls, and most of the soldiers spent your concert watching them instead of you, cheering inexplicably at seemingly random times. You hadn’t been able to see the screen from the stage, so you had no idea what was going on – if past experience is any indication, it was probably a football game.

The DFAC is almost empty now – just the four of you and the Pakistani cafeteria workers sitting down to their own meal. You’ve piled your plate with produce – one thing which the mediocrity of the kitchen staff can’t negatively affect – which, given that the only things you’ve seen growing so far in Afghanistan have been dirt, rocks, and sheep, is miraculously abundant in the salad bars here. You eat ritualistically, each bite another ceremonial sacrifice, each meal solemn and self-aware: any supper could be your last.

Thompson regards your pile of fruit for a moment, then says, “I like those seedless watermelons, but I’m worried about the hormones they put it them, you know? Like, if there’s something in them that makes their seeds shrivel up, what are they going to do to yours?”

You nod haltingly, and he peers at your food again and goes on. “Sometimes you see these little white seeds in there,” he points at the slice on your plate, “those are the hardy ones, the ones that survived. Notice how they only get rid of the black ones, because they’re evil, of course, like black olives.”

“I thought olives were, like, a vegetable,” Romero says.

“No,” Ryan says, “they’re a fruit.”
“Yeah,” Thompson says, nodding sagely, “they’re like a big seed pod. Though when you remove the pit it sort of changes their classification a little.”

“Man,” says Romero, shaking his head, “there’s gotta be a better way to classify this shit.”

“Like what?” Ryan asks, “Nutritional value? Taste?”

“Yeah. Like, tomatoes: vegetable; avocados: vegetable; corn: vegetable. . .”

“Corn is a grain.” This might be the dumbest conversation you’ve ever heard.

“Whatever, dude,” Romero replies. “It tastes like vegetable to me.”

“What about a pineapple?” Thompson asks as he watches you take a bite.

“I guess that has seeds,” Romero says, “so it’s a fruit, right?”

Ryan looks at him. “I’ll give you a hundred fucking dollars,” he says, laughing, “if you can show me the seeds in a pineapple.”

“They’re just, you know, really small.”

“Oh yeah? So small that you can’t see them with an electron microscope?”

Romero shrugs. “Maybe they been, like, genetically engineered, too.”

“They grow out of the ground on stalks, you know,” Thompson says as he looks back at you, “and they pile up this dirt between them and cover it with black plastic that makes a nice berm to crawl behind when you’re creeping into a field to steal them.” He smiles. “Before Maryland I was stationed with the band in Hawaii, and we used to drive a deuce-and-a-half out to the nearest clearing and load it up. One time we must have fit a couple thousand pineapples in there. We could take them without any problem, of course, since it was okay with Bob Dole.”

“Is he really from the same family?” Romero asks. You shake your head in disbelief. Ryan wasn’t kidding about the Army. This is ridiculous.
“Oh yeah, they go way back. They’ve been slaughtering natives since the 1700s, taking them out with their firewater and boomsticks. They got in early, you know? If you want to be successful at something like that you gotta get in early.”

The television – tuned to the Armed Forces Network (AFN) – cycles back to its lead story at the top of the hour. A haggard picture of Saddam Hussein appears on screen. “Captured this morning,” the voiceover drones, “hiding underground in a farm near Tikrit by members of 4 ID…”

“Fuck yeah!” Ryan shouts, standing and giving first Romero then Thompson a high-five, then holding up his hand to you. “We got the motherfucker.” Romero jumps up, too and shouts “Holy shit!” and Thompson grins stupidly and shakes everybody’s hands. You stay seated and take another bite of fruit and let the feeling of futility settle in. The war might as well be over. You didn’t do a damn thing.

“Oh, well,” you whisper to yourself, “what the hell.”

The Sunday before Christmas the base commander opens the weekly bazaar – the one that locals hold outside the gate – to soldiers again. It had been off-limits since you got here, prohibited once someone figured out that the same Afghans who were selling trinkets to soldiers during the day were using their American dollars to buy the weapons with which they would then attack those same soldiers’ convoys at night. The fact that it’s open again says something about the perverse interaction of the respective spirits of capitalism and the holidays – with mammon as the point of intersection between two supposedly identical but opposing Gods – but the irony of this situation seems to escape everybody, too.

You ride the bus to the gate with Ryan, Romero and Thompson. The Chaplain
goes separately with Sergeant Long. You’ve all got your loaded weapons with you, of course, and everyone – per the Sergeant Major’s orders – has their helmets and body armor on. You didn’t want to come, but you didn’t care enough to resist when Ryan dragged you along. The rest of the soldiers there are in soft caps and DCUs, joking with the locals as they haggle over prices for bootleg DVDs of American movies and TV shows; Persian carpets of various sizes and styles; antique-looking pistols, swords, and daggers; and, at one stall in the corner, camel rides. Your rifle rests across the front of your body armor, while the rest of your bandmates have them slung over their backs, their cameras held at the ready in their hands.

You walk with Ryan through the throng of soldiers, fending off Afghans as they take you gently by the arm and try to drag you into their stalls. “Hello my friend,” one of them begins, giving you a gap-toothed smile, “how are you? Please come into my shop and look around.” His silent associate has meanwhile started unrolling carpets at your feet, one on top of another, rapid fire. “Real silk,” he says, “made in Afghanistan.” But you know you saw the exact same things for sale in Kuwait as well, and remember reading the “Made in Pakistan” tags on their undersides.

A child approaches Ryan as he’s distracted, reaching up and pulling on his combat gloves. “Gift?” he asks, and smiles.

“Hell no,” Ryan replies, jerking his hand away from the boy’s.

The boy looks at him tearfully, his lips trembling as he turns and runs away. You take out your journal from your pocket and write that expression down.

It’s almost nightfall when you cross the fence back into the base and get on the bus back toward the tents. The sun is going down behind the abandoned terminal of Kandahar International Airport, the first of the evening’s incoming mortar rounds are
just starting to land, and you climb out of the bus into the sunset just as the dust rolls
down the street like fog. A garbage truck – lavishly painted and decorated in the local
style, all dangling, jangly pieces of scrap metal and multi-colored geometrical designs –
passes, a soldier leaning off the back gate, calling out “Ho, ho, ho!” and throwing
brightly wrapped packages into the dirt, each filled with an assortment of porno mag-
azines, bootleg action movie DVDs, and “Hooah Bars” taken from the DFAC or
poached from MREs. “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas,” Ryan sings, a bundle
of magazines in his hand. You watch the truck rumble off, listening to muted explosions
in the distance, feeling the soft shaking of the ground beneath your feet.
The distant gunfire barely wakes you that second morning in your trailer at Camp Anaconda, and the resounding explosion that gently shakes your bed is only an echo of the one the night before. The shockwaves soothe you like a hand rocking your cradle, while the sirens softly wailing in the distance sing you back to sleep like a lullaby. The sound that finally rouses you is just your bedside alarm clock going off. You sit up and rub your eyes, pulling your rifle with you from the tangled khaki sheets. Ryan knocks on the door between your rooms, and the two of you head down to the parking lot to meet the band for breakfast, after which you all go to rehearsal, break for lunch, hang out at the MWR for a couple of games of pool, and go to the gym to work out before dinner time. You keep your head down and go about your business. You survive your second day in Iraq.

It’s not until you’re waiting in line at dinner, looking at the date on the DFAC menu, that you realize that your birthday was two days before: you are 21 years old. It
had passed as you were finally leaving Afghanistan, after the dust storms had kept you there for two days longer than the Sergeant Major planned. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day had dragged by in that depressing terminal in Kandahar as you waited for the weather to lift and the planes to leave, those two nights spent in uncomfortable slumber on the chapel pews, your tents and bunks having already been reassigned (“No room at the inn?” the Chaplain had quipped). Christmas and your birthday had been linked inextricably for so long – with no occasion to celebrate the former, the latter must have been pushed from your mind. Everybody at home has probably forgotten about it, too, or they’d be better off if they did. The Arab man working the dinner line slops a pile of off-white food onto your white plastic plate. You should stick a candle in it. This is about as celebratory as it’s going to get.

Camp Anaconda is also known as Balad Air Base, depending on which side of the installation – Army or Air Force – you’re on. The airmen call the soldier’s half “The Dark Side,” and you rarely join them on theirs. They have the flight line, hangars, and cargo area, along with their own DFAC (or whatever they call it) and rows and rows of tents, while you have your shoddily constructed metal trailers, the food court with a coffee shop and Burger King, and the trash-burning pit by the fence with its stream of noxious, oily smoke billowing into the sky. There might be some validity to that nickname after all. You barely understand the layout of the place – you travel the perimeter road to get to the DFAC in the mornings, and toward the center to get to headquarters and the rehearsal room by the MWR, but everything beyond those few well-worn paths is a mystery.

Your stay in Iraq starts out slowly, occasional explosions aside. It’s not as cold as it was in Afghanistan, but it rains every day that first week, and the sand, which would
ordinarily be a fine silt, light enough that a slight gust of wind could send it swirling, becomes a gray mud that coats everything it touches, staying wet throughout the day then caking as it begins to dry in your room at night, forming sedimentary layers on your boots that are impossible to scrape off. By the end of this tour you’ll be able to read a geological record in the dirt and rocks plastered your soles, a diary of clay.

You play a gig on New Year’s Eve, at the MWR building on the Army side. It’s a large building – hangar-sized – the main open space of which is a combination pool hall and TV room, with smaller spaces down the hall that house the library, movie theater, and internet café. You’re playing in the corner of the big room. A few small platforms have been set up for the band to stand on, and the television has been pushed slightly to the side. The stage faces a rectangle of folding chairs, set up like they were for your graduation speech, and each has a party hat and noisemaker resting on the seat.

The concert attracts a little crowd, a bunch of combat soldiers in their shirt-sleeves sit in the front row, whistling and catcalling as you take your place on stage. Sergeant Long greets them with a hearty “Hello Camp Anaconda!” and they laugh and take long swigs from their green plastic canteens. The television against the side wall is on, but nobody’s paying attention to it – the ball won’t drop on Times Square for hours yet, so as far as the TV is concerned it’s barely New Year’s yet at all. Instead, everyone’s eyes are on the stage as the band launches into its first song, and it feels like you’re playing a real concert, for once. They’re all good and drunk by midnight, and when you play Auld Lang Syne, everybody joins in. All you can think about, however, is Peter, Matt, and Chris – the old acquaintances you wish you could forget, your own mistakes that you can never forgive, the cups of kindness that turn sour in your mouth, all of the choices that you regret – so everybody sings along but you.
Sergeant Long is about to end the concert after that, but you step up to the front of the stage. “There’s one last song,” you say to the crowd, and the rest of the band looks at you, confused. “It’s a love song.” At least, it has become one to you. “Let the bodies hit the floor,” you whisper. “Let the bodies hit the floor. Let the bodies hit the floor. Let the bodies hit the…” And then everything kicks in.

The audience is on their feet; their fists are pumping in the air. You see Drill Sergeant Snow in the back, and Privates Jones and Justice are there as well, or seem to be, their faces and bodies look like every other in the crowd. The moment you’ve been waiting for: the second verse, in which you transform the lyrics from the first, and instead of singing, “There’s nothing wrong with me,” sing it like it is: “There’s something wrong with me. There’s something wrong with me.” But nobody notices. Or nobody cares. They’re all too busy singing it themselves; filling in whatever words they choose, making the lyrics about themselves instead of you.

It’s cold outside after the concert, and the air feels heavy and wet against your skin. Your boots, which after an evening spent indoors had almost begun to dry, sink immediately into the mud and are soon soaked through again. You left Ryan and Romero by the stage, talking to the soldiers in the front row about where to find girls and booze. Thompson and Sergeant Long have already gone back to their trailers, and the Sergeant Major left well before midnight to go to bed. You step into the shadow of the blast wall that rings the building and stare up at the stars, letting their cold light burn into your eyes. They’d seemed so magical just a month before, but they look two-dimensional now, little spots of negative space in the inky paper background of the sky. A few small tears well up and run hot down your face, mixing with the moisture in the air and dropping, frozen, to the ground where they shatter into nothing. “Happy New Year,”
you whisper to no one, and turn to walk back to your trailer along the perimeter road.

The spotlights are all pointing out into the fields beyond the fence, and the generators powering them hum louder as you pass, as you skirt the edge where light and dark come mingle and collapse. You feel someone watching you, and look up to see a gray figure standing on the far side of the fence, indistinct and featureless but so familiar, an outline of an almost recognizable human form. It stands there motionless, a mirror image made of shadow.

You raise your rifle as its hand rises to point at you, gesturing cryptically as it whispers something in a language that you don’t understand – speaking slowly, backwards maybe, in words forged from imaginary letters, a system of sounds belonging to another dimension that you can dimly perceive but cannot comprehend. Your rifle’s muzzle is up and level with the figure’s chest. Those hooded eyes, that death’s-head grin. Your nerves are singing, and the light is glowing brighter around the edges of your eyes. You are surrounded by a field of static; engulfed in white noise. The sound is more than you can stand.

You close your eyes as the rush of power engulfs you, but this time you stand your ground. You feel its full weight upon you – dark and massive and bright and empty at the same time – and your rifle comes alive in your hands. Your ears and eyes are burning as the noise and light crescendo and the stars fall from the sky, drawn inward by the abyss that opens up inside you, a jagged mouth devouring the world. You open your eyes to total darkness. Silence swallows the air. Your boots barely skim the surface of the earth as you run toward your trailer, away from the fence and the road. You glance over your shoulder. The gray figure is no longer there.
You play a gig at the Field Hospital DFAC on New Year’s Day. It’s just a jazz concert, so the Sergeant Major and Sergeant Long don’t bother to come, and you, Ryan, Romero, and Thompson head over together a little early to get a tour of the facility before setting up the stage. You’re still jittery from the night before, full of nervous energy: you haven’t slept at all. Ryan, meanwhile, looks suspiciously hung-over, and he and Romero are both sluggish and stumble a little as the head surgeon, a colonel, leads you all around the maze of interconnected tents.

“Our job is to stabilize the casualties as they come in,” the colonel explains upon entering the ICU, “and then send them back to the States to heal, but sometimes things don’t work out that way. We had an APC get hit and catch fire with 6 soldiers trapped inside. They brought them all here and we operated on them all at once, got ‘em stabilized, and sent them off through Germany to hospitals in the States where they all died.”

The rooms in this ward smell like spoiled meat. A couple of fat flies buzz lazily through the air. The Colonel pauses before the bed of an unconscious Iraqi man, his skin is sallow and his stomach is distended, swollen and split open like an overripe fruit – or vegetable, perhaps, depending on whether pieces of shrapnel count as seeds – the tiny wounds that dot his torso looking almost like the dark spots speckling a rotting banana peel. A black surgical sponge is taped in place inside the gaping wound in his abdomen, from which a clear plastic tube drains his red-brown blood away.

The doctor is about to explain the patient’s story when an orderly sergeant barges in. “We’ve got two MedEvac birds about 10 clicks out,” he says, “four casualties, two urgent, one expectant, one delayed.”

“Get ORs one through four ready,” the colonel says, before turning back to your group. “We’re going to have to cut this short, though if any of you are interested in see-
ing field surgery firsthand you’re welcome to tag along.”

Thompson blanches and shakes his head, and Ryan and Romero, who were already looking fairly sick, beg off to go set up their gear. You stand there quietly and the colonel nods at you. “All right then, Soldier, come on.” You follow him out of morbid curiosity. You still haven’t seen what death looks like.

You stand with the colonel at the end of the entryway that leads from the landing pad to hospital – a long green canvas tunnel – watching as a pair of Blackhawks swoop down, their wheels barely sinking into the gravel before their crews have hopped out and started pulling stretchers from the helicopters’ sides. The orderly sergeant and his soldiers meet them on the cement path just outside the sweep of the still-turning rotor blades, loading the bloodied and roughly bandaged soldiers onto gurneys and wheeling them toward you. The ceiling of the long hallway where you’re standing is hung with an American flag, pinned flush with the ceiling, running down its entire length. It’s probably supposed to reassure the casualties as the orderlies roll them in, but it looks like a ceremonial coffin turned inside out. Is it any more comforting to them than their actual flag-draped caskets will be to their families?

“The casualty we’ll be treating is expectant,” the colonel says as you both put on scrubs and wash your hands, “which means that regardless of what we do to him it’s unlikely that he’ll survive. He’s lucky that we’re slow today – if there were fewer operating rooms available we’d have to treat the others first and work on him when they were done, if he was still alive by then.”

The soldier is already prepped and on the table when you walk into the operating room. You can hear his breathing faintly as it rattles in his chest and forms little bubbles in the film of blood that coats his lips. Without waiting for instruction, the Sergeant be-
gins to cut the sopping, red bandage away from the soldier’s scalp, peeling it off to show a ragged hole in his skull, inside which you can see his grey-pink brain floating in a pool of blood. It’s fascinating, you think, as you almost reach out to touch it with your hands, that everything comes down to something as simple and ugly as this: a lump of slimy, lifeless matter lying in a fragile shell.

You leave the OR before the operation is over — the colonel was trying to patch up the skull as you left — and walk down the hallway to the DFAC quickly: your concert is just about to start. Ryan, Romero, and Thompson are already performing when you get there, playing an upbeat Miles Davis tune, and you wait for the song to end before you pick up your bass and plug the instrument cable in. You flick the amplifier’s power switch on, and its LED glows bright red then dies as the electronic panel on the back fizzes, sparks, and pops. You turn it off and look down to see the power cable running into a 220-volt outlet in the wall and smell that familiar bluish smoke.

“Oh, sorry dude,” Romero says, looking over at you. “I thought you wanted it plugged in there. My bad.”

“God damn it,” you mutter, as you turn around to glare at him, the power from the socket flowing through the dead amplifier, up your arms, radiating from your glowing eyes. You are filled with insensible rage, this ruinous wrath. Another senselessly broken thing, another dumb object pointlessly destroyed. Words fail you: no curses you could utter would be remotely angry enough. You put down your bass guitar and clench your fists. You’ll give the muses something to sing about.

Romero has already turned back to his keyboard, though, and Thompson is clicking his sticks to set the tempo for the next tune, oblivious. You sit down heavily on a chair. It doesn’t really matter; it’s just an amplifier. It can be fixed — not like you; not
like Chris. Whatever energy had been bestowed upon you dissipates, and instead of shouting you whisper halfheartedly to yourself, “There can’t be anything worse than waking up on New Year’s morning in Iraq and having to deal with fucking morons like you,” but even as the words are leaving your mouth you know that none of them are true.

You play a gig at FOB Normandy that Friday. It’s a small and muddy outpost in the forest on the Iranian border – near Muqdadiyah – and the soldiers there predict that since Saddam has been captured the war will cross over into that country as well. You’re supposed to play another gig at a different FOB the next evening, but your helicopters never come. The base commander shrugs his shoulders when the Sergeant Major asks him where they are or when they’ll arrive, so you spend the next days waiting on the airstrip for them with your giant pile of equipment, sitting on the gravel while Ryan and Romero play made-up games of throw the little stone at the other, smaller one. Sergeant Long waves to the soldiers from the camp as they drive off on patrol, but they ignore you. Obviously, you’re a low priority to them, too.

You’ve been waiting for three days when the helicopters appear, though they’re Blackhawks and not Chinooks, much smaller – personnel, rather than cargo choppers – and everything fits into them, but barely. You end up alone in the second helicopter with the gear, wedged in between the pilot and co-pilot’s seats with a crewmember almost seated on your lap, watching out the front windshield as it flies in low over Baghdad, the tops of the tan two-story buildings barely a hundred feet below, draped in places with brightly colored swatches of color, satellite dishes blooming like some exotic fungus from their sides. In the countryside men and women looked up from their work in the fields as you flew by overhead and children riding bicycles along the dirt roads waved
excitedly as you passed, but the city streets look deserted, and the few figures you can see keep to the shadows, heads down, scurrying like insects along the walls.

You look up just as the lead helicopter is engulfed in a burst of tracer rounds, streaks of orange racing up from the earth like shooting stars falling in reverse. The bullets strike the helicopter and it veers briefly out of control, the horizon lurching across your field of vision as your own pilot roughly jerks his Blackhawk to the side, pitching you into a sickening roll, the equipment cases in the back slamming into the vehicle’s walls. The bullets are all around you. They float upward in slow motion into the sky. You want the rounds to find their target, to tear your flesh, to send the helicopter down in flames. You want to reach out and draw them toward your body. You want your one remaining love to be consummated at last.

The pilot banks to the left again, and the bullets trail off, fizzle out, and fall harmlessly away. The helicopter lands at the airstrip in Baghdad just as the predator drones are taking off, unmanned aerial vehicles whose operators are tracking the Iraqi gunmen from thousands of miles away on computer screens, searching for their heat signatures in the darkness and letting slip their Hellfire missiles, raining an ignoble death upon them from above. You climb out of the helicopter, take out your journal, and begin to write. Ryan hops out beside you and holds his hand up above his head. You stare at it, puzzled, as the crew starts unloading the gear onto the gravel behind him. He shrugs and turns to Romero, who gives him a high five, before turning back to you, his face alight. “That was fucking awesome!” he yells.

You play a gig at Camp Liberty. It’s one of the four quadrants that make up the walled-off, American-occupied section surrounding Baghdad International Airport – BIAP – the other three being Camp Striker, Camp Slayer, and Camp Victory. You share
a room in a palatial building on a man-made archipelago on the Tigris with Ryan, Thompson, Romero, and Sergeant Long. Your quarters are lit by crystal chandeliers, the fixtures in the bathroom are covered in gold leaf, and your steel-frame bunk beds stand incongruously on polished marble floors, while the Sergeant Major and the Chaplain have their own rooms that are even more opulent than yours. You have a few days off after your concert, so the Sergeant Major finds a guide to show everybody around the base, less as an exercise in cultural education than as a kind of victory lap.

“This place used to be full of people,” Ali, your guide, explains as you walk alongside him down the promenade toward a row of Saddam’s old palaces, the rest of your band carrying their cameras and trailing a few feet behind. You have your notebook out, and you write his words down. He looks over at you, and smiles sadly. “My friends and I – men, women, Sunni, Shi’a – would walk here together sometimes on summer evenings, arm-in-arm.” He laughs fondly. “We would call this street ‘dick alley,’” pointing to the remnants of the phallic arabesques that adorn a bullet-riddled wall. “Islam was not always such a deadly serious thing.”

“Life under Saddam was torture,” he says, turning to look you in the eyes and putting his hand on your arm. “Believe me, my friend, I feel no love for him, and I have no desire to see those days again. But why, when there was so much beauty here, did our liberation have to turn out like this?”

You stand with him quietly for a moment, letting his hand rest gently on your arm, standing there together on that dusty street in the heart of Camp Liberty. You hear your bandmates approaching and turn toward them in time to see Ryan’s camera flash. “Faggot,” you hear him whisper, snickering. You blush and clench your fists tightly, but you don’t remove Ali’s hand. Instead, you look over the water toward the sunset – red
and purple and gold – and the light reflecting off the river conjures up a watercolor fantasy of the Baghdad that could have been. It’s January 6th, you realize, as you watch the stars appear singly in the sky, the day of the Magi, the Feast of the Epiphany.

You play a gig at Tallil Air Base – near the city of An Nasiriyah – a week later and a couple hundred miles South. The day after your concert, the captain in charge takes you all out into the desert that surrounds the base. There’s an immense pyramid there – alone amid the endless, level sand – with terraced, crumbling sides and a central staircase leading to its truncated top, its interior of dried mud and straw bleeding through rows and rows of bricks of pale brown clay. “The Ziggurat of Ur,” the captain says, and everybody gets out of the bus and climbs to its summit, cameras out, taking pictures of each other posed atop it like conquerors, of the city and the air base in the distance, of the miles of empty land.

You stand off to the side and watch them, kicking loose fragments of rubble gently with your boots, until you notice a piece of brick with rows of cryptic markings inscribed into one side. You crouch down to take a closer look – letters of some kind: cuneiform – and take your notebook out. What could they once have spelled? Sentences that fell apart as languages dissolved, scratches that could once have expressed the loftiest ideas now fallen, not just ignored, but long forgotten. You look down at your journal. One day your words will be forgotten, too.

You’d been thinking about Icarus on this trip – his hubris in the Greek myth from your childhood storybook; his insignificance in the Breughel painting and the William Carlos Williams poem – but maybe the classical metaphor you’ve been searching for is Ozymandias, instead. You’re standing on the last remaining ruins of an antique empire of whose grand intentions only these tiny, incomprehensible fragments remain,
an old story, both inevitable and banal. Your bandmates are posing with their useless ri-
fl es astride the ziggurat’s crown, their clay-caked boots on either side of the staircase’s
edge. This doesn’t need to be recorded. You put your notebook away; you drop the tablet
to the ground and cover it with the sand. Let the past stay buried: it holds no more
lessons for us. Ashes to Ashes.
There’s a little outdoor food court by the MWR building a few rows away from your tent at Camp Arifjan, in Kuwait. It’s made up of several single-wide trailers that have been disguised as a Burger King, a Pizza Hut, and a Taco Bell, all staffed by Pakistanis cooking their interpretations of international corporations’ proprietary versions of American food, which is about as close to reality as anything else you’ve seen. There’s a Starbucks, too, with its own comparatively lavish pre-fab sheet-metal building, the inside of which is decorated with mechanically reproduced works of art and strewn with comfy chairs, almost indistinguishable from its counterparts across the world. There’s even a shelf of branded merchandise there, touting stores in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, and other places the people dining here have probably never been, all of which, like the trinkets in the gift shop across the street, are made in Pakistan.

You avoided the gift shop the first month you were in Kuwait, assuming that
your experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq would be meaningful enough that you would have no need for tacky, phony souvenirs. It was when Ryan showed you his photographs, however, that you realized that all of your role-playing, all of your macho play-acting, had been for naught. Picture after picture of helicopters on the landing pad, bullet holes in building walls, soldiers on crutches and with bandaged heads and arms, lines of Iraqi tanks rusting in the sand, the gaudy ruins of Saddam’s palace in Baghdad, Alexander’s empty fortress, the decaying ziggurat: all those shots of the war that you had missed, of the history that was being made without you, that which had already come to pass, that which had already become the past. You aren’t a warrior and you never were: you’re a war tourist, and even the spoils of war have been spoiled for you. So you stop by the shop that afternoon, the Friday of your first week back. If your entire deployment has been a joke then your souvenirs might as well be, too.

You find what you’re looking for on the rack of t-shirts, hidden amid countless others covered in amusing misspellings and bizarre collections of English words. It’s a white cotton t-shirt, child-sized, with “Magi” in alternating letters of red and white written across a spangle of little blue stars on the front. This should be your uniform, the profane vestments of the infantile wise men of Team America – it will be the perfect belated birthday present for yourself. You bring it to the cash register, and the dark-skinned man behind it smiles. “Ah, baby clothes,” he had said, “my congratulations. You must come back again – I will make you a beautiful silk dress for your wife.” He folds the shirt carefully and puts it in a purple plastic bag with Arabic script drawn calligraphically on the side, the letters twisting around themselves to form delicate blossoms of lilac and rose. He gives you his blessings as you leave, and you feel your face flush. You open up the first rubbish bin you see and throw the bag and the shirt into the trash.
You sit down on your bunk. It’s mid-February, winter is ending and the days at Camp Arifjan feel even longer than they did before, like time stopped passing when you left the mortar rounds and warning sirens of Iraq behind. Nothing is important here. Your armor is packed in a duffel bag in your tent. Your helmet hangs by its strap from the corner of your bunk. You’re wearing your PT uniform instead DCUs – sometimes you even wear your civilian clothes as well. Your rifle, which had lain for so many nights like a lover at your side, sleeps alone and unloaded in the arms room as you count down the days until your flight back to the States.

You walk the perimeter of the base that night, and in the stark light of the generator-powered halogen flood-lamps that line the fence, the fine particles of sand in the air appear to drift like snowflakes, swirling upward off the ground, floating back into in the sky. It’s like in that story of Joyce’s – *The Dead* – only backwards, but you don’t know what that means. Maybe reality is becoming magical at last in fitful starts and stops – or with such astronomical slowness that you just perceive it that way – and the dead will rise like the dust; maybe Chris will come back across that dark barrier and you will hold his risen body in your arms again. You wish he would; you wish it was, but your wishes mean as little now as any other stupid thing does. The ground by the fence is cracked, a smooth sheet of rain-soaked clay dried and broken into plates that curl up like pleading hands, reaching toward the absent sun: another empty symbol. There’s so much that you don’t understand.

The Starbucks is the only shop open early in the morning, and you go there by yourself once the sun begins to rise. You stake out a seat by the window and watch as groups made up mostly of overweight Navy guys gradually trickle in. The dust is still swirling outside the window, but whatever possibility it held a few hours ago has dissi-
pated again. If only you could enter that fantasy world at will instead of just by chance – at the mercy of tricks of light and shadow play – and see every second like it was an epiphany, have every moment be momentous, every second seem a choice – a life changing event. But you know now that those choices were never yours to make; those snowflakes were never more than grains of sand.

You look over your journal from the past few months, pages and pages of observations written neatly, chronologically organized. It doesn’t make any sense. It’s not a story – there isn’t any plot to speak of – just one thing after another, a collage of disconnected moments jumbled together, scenes that leap schizophrenically from comedy to tragedy, full of both budding hopefulness and crushing despair. Even the characters are fragmented, their paper lives composed of deconstructed gestures, broken into lips and eyes and arms and hands. You take out your pen and try to write Chris’s body back together, but you can’t.

Weren’t these traumas supposed to make you a better person? Weren’t you supposed to grow up by overcoming terrible adversity? All these pages of writing with no narrative, just a series of false beginnings and endings – arrivals and departures – and you haven’t progressed, changed, or come of age. These concatenated circumstances haven’t added up: you don’t understand life or death any better than you did before. All this time spent wandering in the desert – 40 days and nights and more – and all your little revelations don’t amount to anything.

Outside, a tanker truck trundles down the dusty street, “Non-Portable Water Only” written in big block letters on the side. You sigh. At least absurdity affects all cultures equally – the Americans in the Army, the Pakistanis in the t-shirt shop, whoever painted that truck – and all the people in all the world are always making unwitting fools
of themselves. They seem so earnest about it, so unconcerned by it, so oblivious to it, though; maybe you’re the only one who’s still concerned with the sanctity and power of words. Or were. Maybe that’s the thing: you’ve only seen the tragic side of life and not the comic because the joke has been on you all along.

Another truck rolls past. This one says “Non-Potable Water Only,” which makes a bit more sense. You drag your hand across your eyes. Not sleeping is probably making you see things, making every boring thing around you seem surreal. Your right eyelid twitches slightly at the corner and you sip from your disposable paper cup of coffee, an Americano. A sailor comes into the Starbucks smiling, dressed in drab desert camouflage, carrying a bouquet of flowers; red and pink and white. You sigh bitterly and look out the window again. Those petals will also shrivel, fall, and decay. Yesterday was Friday, the 13th of February. Today is Valentine’s Day.

You meet up with the band later that morning at the armory to draw your guns and ammo for your trip to the American Embassy that afternoon. You aren’t scheduled to leave until after lunch, so the rest of the band goes to the DFAC and then to headquarters to call their loved ones while you go back to the tent. You lie on your bunk with your uniform on, waiting for the minutes to crawl by, overtaking you in their glacial movement, each one adding another inch to the mile-high sheet of ice that entombs your body, that presses down upon you. This is going to be the band’s last gig before packing up the equipment and sending it home. The weapons were issued as a formality, security for the innocuous drive downtown, and after tonight you probably won’t be given one with ammunition again.

One minute passes, then another. You sit up, take the M9 from under your pillow, and put it in your lap. You feed the bullets from their plastic sandwich bag into the 15-
round magazine one at a time. You slide the magazine in and heft the pistol one-handed, feeling the dead weight of the thing. It’s strangely heavy for something so small, and it is so cold. All you have to do is pull the slide back, put the muzzle to your head, release the safety, and pull the trigger. It would be so easy. It would be the easiest thing in the world.

The sides of the canvas tent bow inwards. You can hear the wind whipping dust against the walls. The desert of your fantasies swims before your eyes, the air full of floating sand, and it reminds you of the image of winter in a line from a poem, the sound of the wind in that bare place: the sound of emptiness. You cock the pistol, lift the muzzle to your temple, and close your eyes, feeling the cold bite of metal into flesh. If you pull the trigger the shot will make a circle, the bullet will tear a hole in your paper skin. This piece of lead will reunite you with Chris below the earth. This round will make you whole again.

If you choose to live, remove page 165 from this book.

If you choose to die, remove page 166 from this book.
You tighten your grip on the pistol, close your eyes, and press the muzzle tighter against your skull, mapping the correct vector in your mind. You’ve heard of people shooting themselves in the head and missing their brain entirely. You saw that expectant casualty in Iraq survive. You may never have another chance like this. You want to do it right. You breathe slowly, flicking the safety off with your thumb and prepare to draw the trigger smoothly back, just like you’ve been trained.

“One shot, one kill,” you whisper, and then you repeat it louder and louder again, until you’re almost shouting. You stand up in the center of the tent with the gun still tight to your temple. Your eyes are open and everything in the room vibrates and glows with a hard-edged light. You feel your body heat rising, waves of energy radiating from you to fill the room until the air itself is alive, until everything is primed to explode. This is the way you want your world to end: not with a whimper, but a–

You jerk the trigger back and a terrible force surges through your hand. In that split-second your perspective shifts, becoming universal, and you feel the hammer fall, you see it strike the primer and watch the spark ignite the powder, the tiny piece of metal propelled down the barrel, engulfing you in a final flash of light.

The overhead fluorescent fixtures surge and explode. A spider-web fracture splashes across your reflection in the static that fills the television screen. The air-conditioner’s hum builds to a roaring crescendo and its motor pops and dies. The walls of the tent expand outward with the shockwave and are sucked back in by the vacuum that ensues. The room is dark and quiet and filled with bluish-smelling smoke.

Everything, finally, is silent.
Your finger is still resting on the trigger. You wanted to pull it back so badly, but you couldn’t. You can’t. You lower the pistol from your temple slowly, and consider its shape in your hand. It seemed so powerful just a moment ago, but it looks like such a small thing, insignificant, just like everything else. Maybe you really are just another one of those pale, poetic background figures, formless and colorless: a hollow man.

“Another easy allusion,” you whisper as your grip on the pistol wavers, because after all, you aren’t actually the subject of that or any other poem. You’re not straw-stuffed shade haunting the wasteland of post-modernity. You’re not a stoic figure made of ice and snow. You’re not well-spoken enough to even be a Prufrock, let alone important enough to be a Hamlet – there will never be a love song written about you.

You sigh and sit down heavily on the bed. Mothers should never tell their children that they’re special – yours had called you Mighty, Magnificent, and Marvelous far too many times – unless they want to set them up for an inevitable disappointment like this. All you’d ever wanted was to live up to those pet names of hers, to be an epic figure, a comic book superhero, or a G.I. Joe, but there aren’t even regular heroes anymore. Killing yourself would be too melodramatic, too self-important to really befit your life of petty anonymity, and there’s no glory waiting for you in death, nor any love to be found there either. You may as well resign yourself to the last available genre left to you: the tragicomic, which as far as you can tell lies entirely within the public domain. Your life is pathetic, ridiculous, and absurd, but no more than anyone else’s, so why take it – or yourself – seriously anymore? You toss the pistol contemptuously onto the floor, lie back on your bed, and embrace the unbearable triteness of being.
Ryan comes to collect you a couple of hours later and finds you lying in the tent. “C’mon you lazy motherfucker,” he says, squinting like Dirty Harry – or whoever – as he brandishes his gun, “let’s go get some. Or do you wanna live forever?”

The American Embassy is located on the outskirts of Kuwait City in the diplomatic district. It’s a partially fortified compound, surrounded by walls and chain-link fences and patrolled by guards. You all have to show ID and pass through a metal detector to get in, and you leave your weapons locked up at the door. Sergeant Long tells you and Ryan to set up the PA system on the patio behind the bar (which is named “The Oasis,” of course) that’s already starting to fill up with a contingent of tough-looking young Marines. It sits at the end of a long, lush quadrangle that’s surrounded by imported palm trees. Maybe it’s just because you’ve been in the desert for so long, but this looks like the greenest grass you’ve ever seen. At the far end, an American flag hangs limply from a pole, and beyond that, somewhere nearby in the city, loudspeakers are sounding the evening call to prayer.

The show goes all right, though the crowd is drunk and talks over most of it, and everyone in the band is bitter about not being allowed to drink and tired of playing the same songs all the time, so Sergeant Long cuts your set list short, and you step up to the mic for the obligatory encore. In honor of the holiday, you convinced the band to close with a joke you’ve stolen from an episode of The Simpsons, introducing the last tune as a love song and then launching into the “The Monster Mash.” The crowd watches in amusement, and you wave your arms theatrically to stop the band after the first chorus. “Wait a minute,” you yell over the audience’s applause, “what the hell holiday is this, anyway?”
The audience is still laughing as Thompson counts off your real finale, another song you’d figured out the chord changes for on the ride to the embassy: “Believe,” by Cher. In the last few years of high school it had been one of Peter’s favorite campy songs – Chris used to make fun of him for it all the time, lip-synching to it like a drag queen whenever Peter put it on – and you think about how much he would appreciate the irony of this situation as you tear into the opening few measures, punk-rock style, swinging your hips and singing that opening verse in an Army band in front of a crowd of drunken Marines. The Chaplain looks shocked as the lyrics begin – recognizing it from some seedy gay bar, no doubt – and you smile and wink at him.

You get to the second chorus and the band suddenly drops out, Thompson clicking his stick together over Ryan’s last ringing guitar chord while the audience claps the beat in time. “Do you believe in life after love?” you sing, your voice alone echoing off the walls. “I can feel something inside me say: I really don’t think you’re strong enough, no.” You lean closer to the microphone to repeat that final refrain, and as you say the words a blue spark arcs to your lips, the lights on the patio all flicker and you lurch from that flash of light into blackness, overcome by the electricity of the kiss.

The ride back from the embassy starts out along the same highway you’d taken back to camp when Haroon had led you downtown before, but it seems different – more foreign – now. A thick fog has settled in over the desert, and you can barely see the road signs out the window until they flash by beside you, appearing out of the haze as you speed past. Sergeant Long and the Sergeant Major are following in the cargo van with all of the equipment, and you’re sitting in the middle seat of the SUV with Romero – Thompson is in the back, Ryan is driving, and the Chaplain is seated at his side. “I’ve got no goddamn idea where the fuck I’m going,” Ryan says into the radio. He pauses
for a moment, then turns to the Chaplain and adds, “Oh, shit. Sorry, Sir.”

The highway peels away from the city into the desert, and the fog becomes an impenetrable field of static in the SUV’s headlights as the streetlamps that line the road go out. Ryan takes a wrong turn down a road that dead ends in a military gate, one of the main access points for military forces traveling by convoy from here into Iraq. “Pull over,” Sergeant Long says through the radio, “and have someone pull security while I figure out where the hell we are.”

You climb out the car and take up a defensive position by the back bumper while Romero guards the front, kneeling on the gravel with your pistol in your hand. It’s like the convoy exercises you did in Basic – leaping from the back of a cargo truck as you came under fire, forming a perimeter defense in the dirt – but even less real than that simulated training was: it’s ridiculous to think that anyone would attack you in Kuwait. It’s fitting that the one vaguely military action you’ve taken part in on this deployment is such a joke. You can barely see the ground in front of you, let alone any imaginary enemies that might be about to stumble into you through the fog. You’re more likely to die from boredom than from bullets crouching here. Maybe they’d give you an award for that anyway, and your story would go up on some placard at Fort Jackson for other skeptical soldiers to read: “He fought off sleep until his ammunition was expended and he was finally overwhelmed.” That’s Medal of Honor material right there.

The sideways crescent moon is hanging above an imaginary horizon, and it reminds you of the brief fantasia of your first evening overseas, shining hazily through the fog like a smile made mysterious by a muslin veil, alluring and inscrutable like Scheherazade. You laugh. That Oriental fantasy was always a lie, but your subsequent impression of the drab and uniform emptiness of the Middle East has turned out to be
as well, disproven by a lot of little truths sprouting with the bright green weeds from the wet Kuwaiti clay the day after a storm; swirling ineffably in the infinite gradations of the grains of sand. This isn’t the desert of the storybooks, the history books, or the cartoons – there are no dunes besides the earthen berms that line the roads leading to the Army installations’ gates, and the only palm trees are the ones that the embassy staff and tourist offices planted, trying to turn this place into the Arabia of their imagination – it has a myriad of shapes, forms, and lives all of its own. This is not an undiscovered country, a *tabula rasa* for you to write your own romance or adventure story on; there is no *terra nullius* here, but an abundance of people whose lives you can only dimly apprehend, whose own stories are being written on and by the land. This desert is not a metaphor of any kind.

You draw an X in the dirt with the muzzle of your pistol. “X marks the spot,” you say with a smile – any arbitrary point is the middle of somewhere, and this X, like every other, can become an empty crosshair, a Christless crucifix. The beginning of Lent is almost upon you – your father used to take you to that early Wednesday Mass, the priest drawing a cross on your forehead with his thumb after dipping it in ash. You remember looking at it in the mirror after dinner before washing it off one night, your face still red from crying after your father had caught your hand reaching across the dinner table for the bread before he’d finished saying grace, when he’d thrown you to the floor and sent you to your room. It had been an ugly, smudged, gray thing, less a picture of piety than an ersatz mark of Cain. Holidays and symbols like that no longer have any significance to you, except perhaps as aggregates of memory, a myriad of foci around which your cyclical life story can be organized. That gray spot and the date it fell on – both of them were arbitrary too.
You sit down in the dirt, lean your back against the bumper of the SUV, and close your eyes. Ryan will wake you when the time comes, and maybe in the meantime – in your dreams – the Devil will finally come to tempt you, taking you to the top of that high mountain in the desert, showing you the glory of all the kingdoms of the world. You’re not going to hold your breath, however: you haven’t dreamt at all in so long – even your journeys through the night have been apropos of nothing. You smirk, remembering the Colonel’s question to you on the flight from Fort Bliss, as sleep slowly comes to drag you down into darkness. “What are you doing here?” indeed.

You leave Kuwait on a Sunday, the seventh day of March. The sound gear and instruments were all packed and shipped back to Maryland a couple of weeks ago, so all that you’re carrying with you on this final flight are your duffel bags stuffed full of armor, your pistol and PDA at your hip, and your unloaded rifle slung across your back. Before you can board the chartered plane, the MPs have to check your bags for captured Iraqi weapons, money, historic artifacts, or other illegal souvenirs.

“Are you bringing any animals with you?” the sergeant at the counter asks. You shake your head. “Are you carrying any other organic matter? Any plants or any sand?”

“Just a little bit of dirt,” you say, and gesture to your boots, knocking their heels together to shake some of the Kuwaiti, Afghani, and Iraqi dust off onto the floor. When he doesn’t smile you add, “Maybe you’ve heard that one before.”

He just slaps an inspection sticker on your unopened bags and waves you away. “Get the hell out of here,” he says.

The flight home to the States is almost empty. As the plane touches down in Texas you take your PDA out of its holster, and for the first time since you enlisted in
the Army you compose an email to your family and friends, addressing it to your mother, your father, AJ, Peter, and Matt. “This is just to say,” its subject line begins, and the body of it continues from there:

I have returned
from months
of travel in
the sandbox
during which
you were probably
wondering
where I was.
Forgive me
they were unremarkable
though wet
and so cold.
iv°
Your father replied to your email promptly, saying that he was still on assignment in Richland, but would take a week off work and fly out east if you would come to visit him at his parent’s house. It’s a quaint brick place in Alexandria where they’ve lived since the 1940s when your grandfather got a job as an engineer for the government, working on some top-secret military project during World War Two. Your father grew up there, playing with a bunch of Army colonels’ kids on that Edenic, apple-tree-lined street while his father commuted across the Potomac River to his laboratory.

He’s meeting you at Union Station in Washington D.C., which your great-grandfather Matthew designed. You took the bus there from Aberdeen – it was slow, but it was easier for you than taking the train would have been. It’s late March; you spent the past several weeks “redeploying” – first a week at CRC, and then another couple at APG – turning your unused equipment in and filling out Post-Deployment Health Assess-
ments, checklists of all the exciting things – combat, destruction, death, etc. – that you
didn’t witness overseas. Finally, the last of the paperwork was filled out and Chief let
you and the rest of the show band go on leave.

You see your father standing by a pillar in the station, looking around, and he’s
never seemed so haggard before. He looks lost, shuffling back and forth in place like an
old dog waiting at a kitchen door, the worry lines in his face stretching upward to replace
his receding, graying hair. You walk up behind him without speaking, and wait quietly
for him to turn around. When he finally sees you he smiles broadly and looks you up
and down, then he claps you on the arm and shakes your hand. You flinch as your skin
touches his, but he doesn’t notice. He doesn’t notice anything. “Welcome home,” he
says.

Your grandfather is waiting outside with the car, a yellow Model-T Ford from
the late 1920s that he refurbished in the machine shop in his garage. He’d ridden in one
that was almost identical with his father when he was young, and he used to take you to
ride in this one when you were younger. While it had been fun watching everybody stare
and smile and wave, the car itself was noisy, slow, and uncomfortable, and you never re-
ally understood the appeal. Now, however, there’s something in it you can appreciate:
that longing to return to the simplicity of childhood, to exhume the corpses of your
memory and to shape them like Dr. Frankenstein, not so much to raise the dead, but to
make a mechanical reconstruction of them; not to relive the past, but to revive it, to
perfect it.

Your grandfather pulls the sputtering car into his driveway, and your grand-
mother comes out to usher you and your father in. She and your grandfather go to the
kitchen to get everything ready for dinner, while your father paces back and forth in the
living room, muttering to himself. He had been talking to your grandfather for the whole
ride home, but you couldn’t hear what he was saying from the rumble seat – only see
his hands gesticulating through the glass – and you can barely understand it now. You
wait in the dining room, looking over the miscellaneous books and trinkets on the shelves,
all gathering dust like display items in a disused museum, like urns in a columbarium.

One small book catches your attention, drawing first your eye and then your
hand to its well-worn black leather binding. It’s a small diary from the turn of the pre-
vious century – the first entry dated May 1st, 1901 – written in German in a dense,
gothic hand, its finely wrought lines folding back on themselves, intertwining. The black
letters have started to fade with age, and the paper has begun to decay, yellowed and
brittle around the edges, but the little you can make out details your great-grandfather’s
adolescence in Switzerland, his life in the little village of Mels in the eastern canton of
St. Gallen, as he prepared to leave home for the local university. There are many words
you don’t recognize – though you do see the verb töten there – and the spelling of his
name changes with each entry – the consonants split, double, and disappear – like his
perspective was always shifting, like his identity was somehow mutable.

“I don’t know what you and your father want with that old stuff,” your grand-
mother says as she comes in carrying a pile of plates. “He was looking through our old
photo albums all of yesterday.” She sets the plates down on the table and arranges the
silverware. “And your grandfather with that ridiculous car.” She shakes her head, goes
into the living room, and shoos your sheepish-looking father to the table while your
grandfather brings the ceramic serving dishes in. When everyone is seated, he lifts the
covers off with a little flourish to reveal roughly take-out-container-shaped piles of luke-
warm Chinese food that were probably ordered, in anticipation of your arrival, that af-
ternoon. Your grandmother passes the dishes around, and you spoon some politely onto your plate as your grandfather walks to the liquor cabinet and fixes a gin and tonic for himself and a double one for her. A film has formed over the stir-fried vegetables, and the sauce on the other dishes has long since congealed. “You’re so skinny,” your grandmother says, when she sees how little you’ve served yourself, “you’ll starve to death,” and she generously helps you to more.

“I was so worried when I heard you were overseas,” your father says, looking across the table at you, “it seemed so senseless, so dangerous.” His face is drawn, his thinning hair is a little wild – floating up like he’s pulled his hands through it too many times – and you can see the gray stubble poking through his sunken cheeks. You grandparents are eating quietly. You don’t say anything, so he goes on. “It was all about pride,” he says, “misunderstanding. We created this religious conflict, willfully destroyed this ancient society just to get back at Saddam for attacking Bush’s daddy.” He puts down his knife and fork. Your grandmother is watching him now, tight-lipped. Your grandfather takes a drink and looks down at his food.

“These people that are in power over us,” your father says, leaning forward with his hands on the table, “it’s all personal to them. We backed Osama to get back at the Russians in the Cold War, and it’s the Cubans that were the trigger the whole time. The exiles living in Miami, plotting treason.” He stares at you intently, jabbing his finger in the air. You nod and fidget in your seat. This is how he used to lecture you as a child. “Treason! The violent overthrow of Castro’s government, and they control our main swing state, and have had their hands in our government this whole time! They need to be rounded up, maybe while at church,” he lowers his voice a little and makes a calming gesture with his hand, “and quietly so our population doesn’t panic – and talked to sen-
ibly – sensibly – and given the option of sticking with their desire to stay Cuban and take back their land and have their vengeance and be deported, or choosing citizenship here and receiving counseling in the checks and balances that govern our political life.”

“Joseph John,” your grandmother says sharply, as he sits back in his chair and picks up his knife and fork again, “be quiet now. This isn’t dinner table conversation.”

Your father looks chastened for a minute, lifts a forkful of stir-fry as though to eat it, then puts it back down onto his plate and starts talking, a little bit louder now. “The spiritual ties to Israel,” he says, and waves his hand as if to illustrate his point, “the partition of the Middle East. Who were the advisors helping Al Qaeda?” He leans toward you again, reaching over the table to grab you by the upper arm. “Were they Cuban-American?” You shiver as he touches you, tensing all the muscles in your body. You haven’t seen him this angry since the last fight he had with your mother, years ago. You wish that you could do now what you had done then: run to the basement and hide.

He squeezes tighter for a moment, staring at you with his bright and glittering eyes, then drops your arm and stands up from his chair. “Throughout our country’s history there’s always been this radical fringe starting all the trouble, the ones that never have anything to lose. Look at the Boston Tea Party,” he jabs the air again, “the needless destruction of one-and-a-half million dollars in tea, forcing the nation into outright rebellion when Virginia still had a good working relationship with the British! Or the abolitionists forcing the issue by making a martyr out of that treasonous traitor John Brown.” His face is contorted and ugly as he spits out that name. He slams his hand into the wall.

Your grandfather gets up from the table and walks to the liquor cabinet, and your grandmother shakes her head and sighs, bent forward over the table in her chair like your father is a physical burden she’s borne for years. He stands there looking at his
fist as the dark red blood wells up from between his knuckles and drips to the floor like tears.

“I was just so worried about you being in the Army,” he says at last, “then hearing that you’d been sent over there.” He walks behind you and puts his hand on your shoulder and you cringe. “I hope you can put it behind you, get it out of your system. I hope you can settle down into a loving community and worry about yourself for a while. Just let it rest and trust the government to take care of things. Let them do what needs to be done.” He turns abruptly and walks out the back door, and from the dining room you can hear him muttering something incomprehensible again. You can still feel a dull ache from his hand.

“The food is delicious,” your grandmother says, and takes a drink.

Your grandfather nods. “Everything is delicious,” he says.

You’re getting ready to go to sleep on the couch in the living room when your father comes in. His eyes are glinting, and he has a lit cigarette in one hand and a package wrapped in brown paper in the other. “If you have night terrors you should just go through with them,” he says, sitting down at the end of the couch by your feet, “just ride them out. I used to have them a lot after you were born, when your mother used to put you between us in bed and I had to sleep on my back like a soldier because I was afraid that I would roll over and crush you.” He takes a drag on his cigarette. “You were so small, you know?”

He grinds the cigarette out in the ashtray on the table and puts his free hand on your calf. You twitch involuntarily and almost jerk your leg away. “I had my first episode on the day of the Three Mile Island disaster. Your Mom and I were living just down
river from where it happened.” He shakes his head, looking down. “That was a terrible
day. We moved up to Boston to get away from it, then to Canton to find a good school
for you once you were born, and I fought our neighbors tooth and nail to keep them
selling the land around our house to developers because I didn’t want you growing up
in a fishbowl.” The forest behind your house that you and Peter used to play in had been
cleared and replaced by condominiums when you were in elementary school. “I didn’t
want your childhood to be public, to be entertainment for them.”

He puts the package down on the table in front of you. “But eventually your
mother couldn’t take it anymore and she told me so. I thought if we had another baby
then we could keep things together, and when AJ was born there was a little reprieve,
but then the tension got to be unbearable again.” You look over at him. The fervent
light in his eyes has finally gone out. He looks old and confused, like he’s unsure how he
got to this point, too. “Your mother and I have been living in tension for over 20 years,”
he says, “and I’m sorry you got in the middle.” He gives your leg a final squeeze and
stands up, looking down on you like a baby in a cradle. “I have these presents for you. I
wanted to give them to you on your birthday, but I didn’t know how to send them to
you.”

He stands there quietly and you look up at him and consider telling him some
comforting lie – that you love him, that this was no one’s fault, that everything will be
fine – but you don’t say anything. “Well, goodnight,” he says, “I hope things will work
out between us in the end,” and you watch him leave the room, listening to his footsteps
on the creaking stairs, wondering what and when “the end” could possibly be.

You sit up and open up the package after you’re sure he’s gone. Inside, there’s a
photo album that he’s put together, with another copy of the family tree he made last
year tucked inside the cover. The pictures stretch back to the early 1900s, when your
great-grandfather arrived at Ellis Island in New York, having left Switzerland after a
close friend war getölet. He left that body buried in that little, idyllic village, moved to
Washington, studied the sciences, and became an engineer, just like your grandfather
later did. Like your father did, as well.

You tiptoe over into the dining room and grab your great-grandfather’s journal
from the shelf, take it back and lay it next to your own, the three birthday gifts from
your father – the notebook, the photo album, and the family tree – now laid out together
on the coffee table, arranged like an offering. You compare the writing in the two jour-
nals. You open the photo album and flip through the pages with the family tree in your
hand, trying to match the pictures with the names. The first photograph shows Matthew
as a teenager, looking stoically at the camera in front of a snow-capped mountainside.
You find several pictures of your grandfather Jacob when he was younger, of your father,
and of you. You take them from their separate pages and set them on the table side by
side. Some are black-and-white and some in color, but all those silent, staring faces look
the same.

You fold the family tree in half and jam it back inside the binder. You stuff all
the pictures back into the album and slam it closed. You slide it into a pile of books in
the cabinet below the TV and close the door. You wish that he’d thought to frame this
copy of the genealogy like the last one, to encase it in glass and steel, or that you could
hide it not in a cabinet but below a mountain – maybe that would be enough to keep its
toxic history from infecting you. It deserves to be forgotten. It deserves to be buried, too.

You lie down on the couch and close your eyes. The cushions are stiff and un-
comfortable, the tips of broken springs poke up through the threadbare upholstery like
spears into your side. You can hear your father snoring through the ceiling from his childhood room upstairs. You open your eyes and see a static glow emanating from the television screen. You check to make sure the TV is off, and close your eyes again, but your vision is filled with ghostly snow, through which a procession of ambiguous human bodies marches, sleepwalking away across a desolate plain, dissolving into the background as the line of them recedes. When the last one disappears from view it leaves behind an after-image that lingers like a sunspot in your eyes, inverted and darkly radiant like the negative of a photograph.

You sit up and open your eyes to a room made of static and shadow. The television is flickering and you can’t tell if your eyes are open or closed anymore. What or who could those gray figures be? Where have you seen them before? When you were younger sleep was an escape, an adventure – you would lie back in your bed and set sail across the sea of stars, the ocean of dreams – and the images from your nightly wanderings would stay firmly fixed in your waking mind. But as you’ve grown older what dreams might have come have dissipated immediately upon waking, rendering your unconscious mind each evening a newly undiscovered country. Maybe now you’re returning there for good, or maybe the boundary between worlds is finally breaking down, and every thing in both of them is under your control at last. You put your feet up on the couch, casting off in your little skiff from the shore of the living room and into the softly glowing screen, surrounded on all sides by the figures from your past, adrift on the river of forgetfulness.

You must have drifted off to sleep eventually, because you wake to your father shaking you by the shoulder. You get up, put your shoes on, and follow him outside and the last few wisps of nocturnal fantasy burn away as the sunlight strikes your face – you
throw up your hands to shield your eyes too late. Those cherished souls fade from your memory, replaced by a parade of featureless, gray figures once again, until those too disappear, leaving you with nothing but the vague feeling of having been betrayed, having been exiled from that kingdom once again. You lower your hands and look at the rising sun straight on, letting its fire fill your eyes. If you can’t build your fantasies then you’ll destroy them. You’ve been burned for the last time.

It’s not until your father pulls the car into the parking lot that you realize that he’s taking you to church. You haven’t been to a Catholic Mass since childhood, before your parents got divorced. You can still remember all the torturous hours spent kneeling on those wooden boards that folded down from beneath the pews. Your father pressing his hand down on your shoulder, digging into the fabric of your Sunday suit. The processional has just started, and you and your father slip in the back as the priest and his altar boys march solemnly past down the aisle. One of the boys smiles at you angelically, and you watch him from behind, his narrow hips swaying beneath his gown, his delicate hands bearing a gilded cross wrapped in a crimson shroud.

The priest leads the congregation through the sign of the cross, the opening Latin call and response, and proceeds into the liturgy. Your father bows his head throughout, and kneels for the consecration, but he remains quiet until the priest breaks the bread, then you hear him softly singing along with the hidden choir as the melancholy organ plays, “Agnes Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.” Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

You don’t sing along, and you don’t rise with him as he goes to receive the sacrament. You’re through with ceremonial self-pity, with prostrating yourself. You don’t want this wretched mercy anymore. You stay seated, watching the blond-haired altar boy
standing by the priest, holding a golden plateful of the transubstantiated body, dressed and ready for a sacrifice – ready to be devoured. Your father returns and sits beside you, resting his hand gently on your knee until you brush it off, while the priest makes a few final announcements and gives you all his blessings on this, the fifth Sunday of Lent, the beginning of Passiontide.
The cab driver drops you off at your mother’s new address – she sold the house in Canton while you were overseas, and now she lives near Newark, New Jersey with AJ and David, her fiancé. This house means nothing to you – white wooden siding, black-shingled roof, picket fence: all the signifiers of generic suburban domesticity – but you don’t miss the old one and its particularities at all; it had become a tomb for your memories, a mausoleum for your desires.

The front door is unlocked, like it had always been at home, and AJ is sitting at the kitchen table with an open paperback in his hands as set your backpack down and remove your combat boots. “Hey AJ,” you say as you walk toward him, “what are you reading? Is Mom around?”

“The Fountainhead, no, and nobody calls me ‘AJ’ anymore,” he replies without looking up from his book.
“Why is that?” you ask as you pour yourself a glass of water and sit down across from him. After he doesn’t say anything for a couple minutes you reach over and grab the book from his hands. “Ayn Rand is a good author to read if you’re trying to become an asshole,” you say.

“So you’ve read her, then?” he replies.


“Mother Mary and Father Joseph are out performing some act of immaculate conception at the local inn. I don’t think they’ll be home for a while.”

You look around at the kitchen and take another sip from your glass. Your childhood poems and pictures are affixed by magnets to the fridge, and the newspaper clippings from your high school graduation still have their place alongside your mother’s astrological decorations on the wall. Everything from Canton has been effectively uprooted and replanted here. There is one new picture, however, of a smiling, dark-skinned man wearing a bright orange robe – his happy eyes shining above his chubby, dimpled cheeks and below a large afro. “That must be David,” you say.

“Can I have my book back now?” AJ asks. You regard him coolly, and he sighs theatrically and goes on. “The name ‘AJ’ is childish, so when we moved I decided to leave it behind. The teachers at the high school here called me Andrew, but I told everyone else to call me James, instead.”

You remember your last conversation with him – when he told you that you should just kill yourself – he hadn’t sounded anywhere near as pedantic, arrogant, or grandiose as this. “What do they call you now?”

“Nothing. I dropped out a couple of months ago. I hated everyone there. It was a total waste of my time.”
“Come on.” You hand him back his book. “It can’t have been that bad.”

He glares at you through narrowed eyes. “How would you know?” he asks.

Your mother comes back later that night and when she sees you sitting on the couch she apologizes profusely for not having been at home when you got in. She has makeup on, she’s dressed in a colorful beaded blouse and matching skirt, and there are reddish highlights dyed into her graying hair. “We were just out at this devotional meeting,” she says, “David introduced me to them,” she gestures to the man standing by the door, putting his and her coats away, “he’s a Sai Baba devotee.”

“What?” you say, confused.

“Oh, he’s incredible,” she says, and takes the picture of the orange-robed man down from the wall. “He’s a holy man from India, the current incarnation of the Light of Love.” She hands his picture to you. “He tells people: ‘Jesus was the Lamb of God,’ and then asks, ‘and what’s my name?’” She smiles and makes a sheep’s bleating sound: “Baa-baa.” You smirk and give her back the picture as the man closes the closet door and walks toward the two of you. “But the best part about it is the singing,” she goes on as she hangs the photo up, “it’s not at all like those depressing Catholic hymns.” She hums a little to get her pitch, and as the man puts his arm around her she begins: “Baba won’t you help me make it through. Baba let me think only of you.” The man joins in, a sonorous baritone: “It’s not so easy when life’s a grind. Baba won’t you take my monkey mind.”

You watch them incredulously as they sing and sway gently side to side, a rapturous look on both their faces. If traditional religion is the opiate of the masses, then New Age beliefs are obviously their hallucinogens. “I’m David,” the man says at last, disentangling himself from her and holding out his hand, “but you can call me Dave.”
“I met him online through my natural healing website,” your mother says, as she snakes her arm back around his waist, “and we really hit it off. It helps that we have complementary signs, of course – that was always the big problem between your dad and me.”

“Astrology is very meaningful to us,” David says with a smile, “I think it describes people beautifully, and it makes a lot of sense. It’s a very logical science.”

“You should look into it,” your mother says as he walks off. “I had a chart written for you when you were born by my friend Shining Thunder that I kept to give to you on your birthday once you grew up. I’ll get it for you right now in case you want to read it tonight.”

She follows David to his bedroom while you lie down, and a couple of minutes later she comes back with a booklet – bound in plastic and covered in manila paper like a college course packet – in her hand. She puts it down on the coffee table and leans over to tuck you in. “Happy birthday,” she coos, reaching down to tousle your hair, “my Mighty, Magnificent...”

“Mom,” you say, brushing her hand away, “please stop.” You’re not a child. You’re not her little superhero anymore.

“Goodnight,” she says, still smiling, and goes to bed, and you lie there on the couch for a while, opening and closing your eyes. What happened to your family while you were gone? Your father, your mother, and AJ – their lives now seem so different, unfamiliar, while you’ve remained the same. Has it been so long; your five full months spent in training and the six from pre- to post-deployment overseas? All you thought you knew about them hasn’t faded, but changed, becoming incomprehensible through some chain of events that you can’t fathom. How did everything become so strange?
The light is still on in the kitchen, and a yellow wedge of it is spilling through the wide doorway into the living room. AJ is sitting at the table, reading, so you get up and walk across the cold kitchen tiles to sit at the table opposite him again.

“The problem with Ayn Rand’s ideology,” you say, “is that it presumes that there is something to be gained by mastery over physical things, that any satisfaction can be gained by showing your inferiors up, or that anything can be improved by showing them how things should be done.”

“What do you mean?” AJ says.

“I mean, what good is it to be the one visionary if everyone else is blind, not to mention dumb?” You jab your finger at him. “Their adulation would be worth nothing even if you could get it, and the best you could reasonably hope for would be simply to be ignored. Even if you – her archetypical architect – design and build your grand edifices for no reason other than your own enjoyment, how are you going to feel when the rest of the unenlightened world turns them into tourist attractions?” You shake your head. “You’ll go to your deathbed wishing they would allow you the dignity of watching everything that you once loved be torn down.”

“Is that supposed to be an argument in favor of populism?” he asks, closing his book and putting it down, “because, honestly, it’s a pretty crappy one.”

“Not at all. The problem with objectivism is not that it’s selfish or individualistic, but that it’s constructive, that it relies on the idea that a person can make a positive change.” You chuckle. “As long as you’re modeling your life on fiction, you should consider some more realistic options, like absurdism, nihilism, or super-villainy.”

He laughs shortly, and after a moment of reflection says, “Wouldn’t you just run into the same problem regarding other people, though?”
“Well, it couldn’t be the kind of evil empire that requires a huge infrastructure to maintain it.” You stand up and start to pace around the room. “As the Army has demonstrated, even the simplest orders inevitably trickle down to the dumbest level where they get perverted, completely divorced from their original intent or purpose.” You pound your fist in your palm – your eyelids are starting to twitch again. “It’s not just a logistical problem of having incompetent henchmen, it’s that the world is too stupid to be worth ruling; it doesn’t need to be dominated, but destroyed.”

“Okay then, evil genius, what’s your brilliant plan? Are you going to rock us to death with your bass guitar, or do you have some sort of special ability that I should know about?”

You look at him cautiously, wondering how much you should say, whether he feels anything like the power that you do, whether he would be your ally or your adversary. “Well, there’s this weird thing that happens with electricity,” you tell him after a moment, “things like circuits breaking or streetlights spontaneously turning off.”

“That’s your super power?” He asks, laughing more derisively this time. “Coincidence?”

“It’s not funny,” you say, and he snickers again. “Let’s go outside right now.” You grab him by the arm and pull him, struggling, to his feet. “I’ll show you what I can do.”

You drag him to the entryway and throw open the door. It’s raining softly. In the distance you see lightning strike, and as you stride across the lawn – feeling the grass and mud being ground between your toes, the smell of growth and decay mingling with the pleasant scent of the storm – you hear the thunder rumbling like kettle drums.

AJ watches from the front steps as you take your place in the middle of the street, lower your head, and wait for the energy to come. The thunder is still building and long
fingers of lightning dance on the horizon out of the corners of your eyes. The streetlights are blue and yellow, and make everything in the street look sallow, the colors washed out, becoming shadows, shades of sepia and gray, strobing slightly at 60 hertz so that you can almost watch them changing frame by frame.

You lean your head back and let the rain run down your face. You throw your hands out to your sides. “Come on,” you mutter to yourself – like a mantra or the opening to a monologue – closing your eyes and concentrating hard. “Come on lightning: strike me down, send your energy coursing through my veins. My power. My power. Don’t forsake me now.”

“What’s wrong?” AJ calls out after a couple of minutes have gone by, “performance anxiety? Should I go put some mood music on?”

“It’s coming,” you say, staring up again from below your dripping, furrowed brows, your steady gaze scoring neat lines across the fallow sky, trying to cull the electricity from the clouds.

“Whatever,” he replies, “I’m going back inside.”

You hear the front door slam, and you clench your fists until your knuckles turn white and your fingernails dig painfully into your palms. You shouldn’t have told him anything, or believed in anything. Now he just thinks that you’re a fool. Your face is hot below the stinging rain. Maybe he’s right about that, too.

You close your eyes just as the light that had been shining in the kitchen window goes out, and in the darkness you feel your fingers tingling and there’s a sudden rush of blood to your head. You open your eyes to find yourself bathed in shadow – the streetlights above you have gone out, as well – and you watch the lights go out up and down the street, bowing to you two by two. You think about calling AJ to the window, but you
keep quiet, lording over the sudden stillness, the silence of the eye of the storm. You’re not worried that he’s missing it, because you’re sure you’ll have a chance to show him soon enough. You laugh, softly at first, but building slowly into a maniacal crescendo as the dark energy sings through your body, electric. One day soon you’ll show them all.

The local utility crews arrive early the next morning, setting up their truck at the far end of the street, and you hang out on the couch to watch them throughout the day. Your mother goes out with Dave to a drumming circle that evening and AJ stays in his room. It doesn’t bother you. This is not your house; this is not your home. You don’t have either anymore, and that is fine.

That evening, while lying on the couch, you read through the “Astropsychological Profile” that your mother left for you. It opens with a date: 26 December 1982, and note that since no names or genders are used, the subject will be referred to by the letter X, followed by a general overview. “X’s profile is very high in the Capricorn energy,” it begins. “This gives X a great deal of strength” You skip through the preamble, the analysis of the influence of various other subsidiary signs – the Gemini ascendant, the Venus in Aquarius, the sexual energy that may manifest itself in mysterious and unpredictable ways – looking for other fragments that stand out. “The father triggers assertive and aggressive forces,” it says, “but will educate X karmically.” You smile, remembering the roughness of your father’s hands. Karmic education. You could call it that.

“X will tend to swing to extremes,” it says, as you read on, “and may be stubborn, but simply because deep down X feels a terrific insecurity. No one will be more steady, purposeful, or tenacious once X has chosen a course.” The next section is a set of instructions to your mother, how to raise you so that your natural longing for power doesn’t
lead you to devalue human life, to keep your inborn sense of responsibility from turning into guilt and making you stern, melancholy, or depressed. You laugh ironically. Obviously, her attempts at karmic education went pretty poorly, too. You read the profile through almost to the end, finally tossing it to the floor when it gets to the list of suggested role models that include the stories of Jesus, St. Francis, and “various episodes of Star Trek.” This is ridiculous. All of your model narratives were fictional from the start – passion plays and parables – and the acting was second-rate at best. No wonder the plot turned out like this.

You set the profile down and take your journal out. You let the pen carry itself automatically across the page. The cursive lines twist and intertwine and a monomaniacal narrative emerges, a story of time and space inverted and conflated, of shadowy figures of immense symbolic power, of all those dead men who lie – so beautiful – below the stars and sea, and the thousand thousand worthless things that live on in darkness forever. It’s all in the second person, not descriptive but imperative, like a prophecy, its tenses all tangled; its sentences scribbled like those fragments you scrawled in your patrol log while on the cusp of sleep, cryptic and foreign as cuneiform, written in the language of dreams.

You wake to a phone in the kitchen ringing. Sunlight is pouring in the window: it must already be mid-afternoon. Your ink-stained hands are folded over the journal resting open above your heart. The ringing continues for a little while before you hear your mother’s voice, her cheerful greeting followed by the sound of her sharply drawn breath, and the rest of the conversation is carried out in whispers. She hangs up the phone after a couple of minutes and stands with her face buried in her hands. “It was about your father,” she says finally, looking up at you, red-eyed, “he’s been put away.”
She sits down heavily at the kitchen table, and it seems like hours go by before she speaks again. You want to stop the words in her throat, but you can’t. “He was at your grandparent’s house when it happened,” she says, “just sitting in the living room watching the news on TV. They don’t know exactly what set him off. They heard a crash and when they came in he was about to throw another chair out the window. They got him outside somehow and he stood in the driveway and started swearing at the sky.”

She shakes her head in disbelief. “The police came and he attacked them. They had to call reinforcements to subdue him, to handcuff him and drag him away. I thought he was finally better.” She puts her head down and begins to moan, a low, animal sound. “Why is this happening again?”

She gets up eventually and goes back to her bedroom, and a little while later AJ comes down. “Dad got arrested,” you tell him as he prepares his breakfast, reciting the rest of the story to him. He just shrugs and watches the slices of bread he put in the toaster oven slowly turn from white to gold to brown. “It sounds like he’s finally gone crazy, or something.” You say after a little while.

“You know he’s been in the mental hospital before, right?” AJ asks. When you don’t reply he goes on. “That’s where he went all the time when we were kids. He wasn’t going on any business trips.” You shake your head, incredulous. “He’s had psychotic episodes before. Why did you think he was yelling at Mom all the time?”

“I just thought he was angry with her,” you say, “for being so irrational, so emotional all the time. Or with us.” You look down at the floor, reciting to yourself the litany of your past mistakes. “Or with me.”

“Don’t be stupid.” AJ puts down his plate and looks at you. “Dad’s sick – manic-depressive, or bipolar, or whatever they’re calling it now – he’s been that way for a long
time. Why do you think he lost his job in Boston? Why do you think Mom left him?”

“He left us,” you say, standing up, but you can remember it all: his bloody fist and the hole it left in your basement wall; the ugly twist to his shouting lips; the strange passion in his flashing eyes; the weight of his hand on your shoulder; the terrible feeling of his love. You look out the window. You don’t say anything.

“You already knew he was crazy,” AJ says, shaking his head. “You had to.”

You’re sitting on a bench at Penn Station in Newark the next morning, waiting for your bus to come. AJ is right: your father has always been crazy, but you haven’t been able to face it before, not even when your mother had taken you to visit him at the hospital, when you’d seen him lying – sedate and finally smiling – in that tiny room with bare white walls. Today is a fitting day for this last revelation: April Fool’s.

You’ve read that manic depression is hereditary, so maybe you’re slowly going insane as well. You’re at the age when the symptoms should be coming on. How finely drawn is the line between being mad and being sane? Would you be able to tell when and where you’d crossed over from one to the other? Or would that border also be blurred, blended, or obscured? The television screen in the station is tuned to a news channel – they’re replaying the footage from the day before, a glimpse of blackened American corpses hanging over the Euphrates; they’re saying that the battle for Fallujah has begun.

“It figures,” you mutter, and shake your head: the world itself has gone insane. But maybe madness is just something you’re supposed to grow into like a suit and tie, and if you give yourself over to it everything will once again seem good and right and fine, like it had when you were younger: all fairy tales of once-upon-a-time and hap-
pily-ever-after. You’ve been afraid of these sudden bursts of power – this destructive force that consumed you, this anger that was beyond your control – but maybe the secret is to let it take you, to embrace the schizophrenic nature of the world. Maybe this is the epiphany you’ve been hiding from. Maybe you’re just not going crazy quickly enough. You open your journal, take out your pen, and begin to write, muttering fervently to yourself.

Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name – the faded picture of your father; of your father’s father; the names in your great-grandfather’s diary that shift and change – Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever. Forever. Amen. All those undead, undying hours; all those lonely cities on the plains. You close your journal; you put your pen away. In the beginning was the Word, and later on the Sun, around which everything revolved. But your words are spinning outward from the pages where they had lain – laid to rest – black and white and spiral bound. You are writing your own story. You are writing everybody’s story now.
The Wesleyan campus looks identical to when you left it, down to the patches of mud that cover Andrus field, the remnants of the winter’s slowly melting snow, and the green and budding branches on the trees that frame Foss Hill. It was the same season when you dropped out, almost three years ago to the day, but at last the end of winter is not tragic to you, but triumphant, and you welcome the onset of spring and all it signifies – the beginning of the ugly, futile, and inevitable cycle of rebirth – not to embrace it, though, but to oppose it. The seeds that have long lain dormant are sprouting, and this circle will be broken: your ramifying narrative will spread like a rhizome to overmaster the earth.

Matt meets you outside the campus center, and he runs over and leaps into your arms, just like he had freshman year on move-in day. You knew he would. Everything repeats itself this way. You peel him off you and he stands back and says, “Let me look
at you. Wow, you look so different. Oh my God! I haven’t seen you in years!” You grin and don’t say anything; you follow him inside, letting him ramble while you decide how you want this next part of the story to go.

“I’m majoring in psychology,” Matt says as you head back outside with your trays of food. “I’ve been thinking about writing my thesis next year as a psychological memoir, about, you know, all these really interesting things that have happened in my life.”

You take a bite of your food and chew it slowly. “Where does psychology come in?” you ask.

“Well, I’ve had Attention Deficit Disorder since I was in high school – ADD.” He looks at you. “I don’t know if you ever noticed that I was taking all those meds. And I diagnosed myself as having OCD and a minor case of BPD. But I think really it’s going to be about my personal struggles with Narcissistic Personality Disorder and my experience with the self-help industry.”

“NPD, huh? Sounds interesting,” you say.

“I just can’t bring myself to care about other people,” he says, “I don’t even care whether or not there’s anything going on inside their heads. I guess I like to play games with them sometimes, like animals, you know? Stimulate them and see how they react.”

You suppress a chuckle and say, “I understand.” Maybe he should have been the one to join the Army – he seems to care almost as little for people as you. He could even put his antisocial skills to use, become an interrogator, or maybe just a torturer (since the idea of him actually listening to anyone is a little far-fetched), and add PTSD to his list. Even the tritest psychological memoir about the war would make for a much more interesting story than his.
“I’ve always known that I would end up famous,” he continues, he bounces manically up and down, “everything about me is so interesting! I can’t understand how people who are basically nobodies deal with it. Why they bother staying alive.”

“Yeah, who knows,” you reply.

“I’d really like to have my thesis published,” he says, “because that way everyone could just read it before they talk to me so we could skip that whole boring ‘getting to know you’ phase. I’d like to have it all laid out in a book so that when they meet me I don’t have to waste my time.”

“But won’t you still need time to get to know them?” you ask, as though the whole project wasn’t already flawed enough, as if his autobiography wouldn’t be just another self-deluded work of fiction.

He looks surprised. “Why would I want to do that?”

He talks about himself some more as you finish eating, then he gets up and leads you back to his room, oblivious to the game you’re playing, transfixed by self-reflection, a perfect Narcissus after all. You smile as you walk behind him. There must be a name for this new role of yours, an agent of retribution against his overwhelming pride, a personification of vengeance. You scan your memory of those illustrated myths and legends your mother used to read – Perseus, Theseus, Sir Gawain, William Tell – but none of them fit. It would have to be something more elemental; implacable like The Fates, The Furies, or Nemesis.

You and Matt go to a concert on campus that evening. He’s reluctant at first, but you convince him. When you were a student here before you’d felt invisible at these shows, pressing yourself into the shadows against the wall, but now the shadows are one with you, and the group of sullen, strung-out scenesters parts for you like water as you...
step inside. Matt looks ridiculous next to them – his favorite yellow shirt from freshman year, the highlights in his hair – and you know they’re looking at your own military haircut, but you don’t care. You thought you might be embarrassed coming here – as if being in the Army band wasn’t bad enough on its own, military service is basically synonymous with child-murder at this school – but looking at your old classmates you find it funny that you had ever cared.

You’d looked down on your bandmates for play-acting, but these spoiled, selfish children are just playing dress-up, too. You stand up taller and tower over them, as the stage lights flicker and the shadows loom. Now they are the ones to cower, and it’s out of fear, not contempt, that they avert their eyes. A hardcore band is playing on the low wooden stage at the other end of the smoke-filled room, the speakers struggling to keep up with the rising decibel levels, all the individual frequencies mixing, distorting, breaking down. You let the noise wash over you. You let the sound wash your last remaining insecurities away.

Matt is still on a highly regulated sleeping schedule, so you leave well before the concert is over and he brings you back to his dorm up the hill. He excuses himself to the bathroom so he can take a shower, saying that he has to get the gross cigarette smell out of his hair, and you sit down on the corner of his bed and look around the room. You recognize some stuffed animals from the pile beside his pillow, chief among which are a pair of sparrows your mother gave him for Christmas when he came home with you that winter freshman year – “For Gemini,” she had explained, his astrological sign – they’re arranged on either side of the head of his mattress, facing inward, each watching the other like its reflection on the surface of the water. There’s a full-length mirror on his door, and another smaller one above his desk. There’s a heavily marked piece of
paper posted on the wall next to it, and you get up to take a closer look.

It’s a schedule – a to-do list – a new version of the Constitution that he wrote freshman year, only much more elaborate and refined. It may be the craziest thing you’ve ever seen. Each day is broken down into 5-minute increments, filling the entirety of a notebook page, laid out like a spreadsheet in a miniscule hand. This morning starts with 6:30-6:35. “Wake up. Use bathroom.” it says, and goes on from there. 6:35-6:40: brush teeth; 6:40-6:55: exercise (see chart 3C); 6:55-7:00: breakfast (see chart 1A). You pause for a moment. What if you held up your journal next to this? You look around on his desk for Chart 1A, but you don’t see it, so you skip ahead, skimming over the rest of the day. 12:00-12:15: lunch (see chart 1B); 14:30-15:00: meet my old roomie! Between 21:00-22:30 something has been erased and written over with “go to concert” – he must have just made that revision before you went. Below that is 22:45-23:00: have sex.

You look at the clock on his bedside – 22:37 – just as Matt opens the door and walks in wearing nothing but his bright yellow underwear. His almost-naked body is tanned and lean. “Would you mind taking a shower, too?” he asks and hands you his towel. “I really can’t stand the smell.” You smile as you take it – let this be the last time that you submit to him.

You take your time in the shower, and he’s looking at his clock impatiently when you walk back into his room just like you knew he would be. The bright green numbers read 22:55. He motions for you to sit down on the bed, then grabs your shirt and starts to help you out of your clothes. “Tell me that I’m sexy,” he says, as he places your hand on his hairless and muscled chest. “Tell me that I’m special.” He slides his other hand down below the waistband of his briefs and starts jerking off. “Tell me that you want to fuck me.” He looks over his shoulder at the clock.
You laugh and take your hand off him and put your shirt back on. “I thought this was what you wanted,” he says, his look of dumb confusion slowly reddening into hurt. His lower lip is trembling slightly, vibrating at about the frequency of a low “B,” of alternating current: 60 hertz.

It is, you think to yourself as you watch him. All the electricity in the room is alight in your eyes. It is.

Matt has class the next morning, and when he’s gone you explore his room. His socks and underwear are tucked away in neat – almost military – rolls, and his other clothes are all still color-coded, but the palette has changed since freshman year. It used to be a rainbow in which all colors were represented almost equally, but its frequency spectrum has shifted – moving away from violet, blue, and green; toward yellow and orange and red – like the color of the universe expanding, of galaxies drifting slowly apart. You pick up objects and consider them – a set of dumbbells, a bedside lamp – and put them down in approximately the same place. Let him try to make sense of their imperceptible movement, read some augury in the new patterns of dust they leave behind.

You check your email on his computer – his desktop image is a shirtless photo of himself. There’s a new message from your mother telling you that she’s been feeling so unhappy since you left. David was shouting at her last night, and then that morning AJ ran away from home. She’s already started to pack what little stuff she brought with her, but she’s not sure where to go. You read the email over once then move it deliberately to the trash. “Things fall apart,” you say aloud, because the second coming has come and gone, and your concern for her, or for anyone, departed with it. You cast off your responsibilities like a nebula expelled from a collapsing star; the old solar system of your family isn’t heliocentric anymore. If she’s sad about things not working out, she can go
meditate about it, call upon the power of the directions, or consult her daily horoscope. If she wants to try to keep this meaningless universe together she needs to make sense of it herself.

You stay with Matt for a few more days. He follows his schedule to the minute, which at first includes some time set aside to spend with you. By the end of the weekend, however, it has become hermetic – sealed off from any outside interference to better maintain the central illusions of his identity: self-importance, self-improvement, and self-control – and he has stopped talking to you entirely. You sit on his bed silently and watch him going through his obsessively repeated motions like a machine.

You open his desk after he leaves the room for class on your final morning with him. Neither of you said goodbye. You take out the notebook filled with cross-referenced charts – 1A, 1B, 3C: some names you recognize from the schedule on the wall – and page after page of text delineating subdivisions of his Constitution, the various rules, laws, technicalities, procedures, and statutes, as well as a formal amendment process in case he wants to make a change to anything. You get your pen from your backpack and cross that last section out with heavy black lines: redacted. Then you take his schedule down from the wall and write down, at 3:45 today – right after his post-psychology nap – “Drop out of Wesleyan.” You laugh as you put the Constitution back on the wall and slide the notebook back into the drawer. You’re doing what needs to be done.

The bells atop South College are playing a vaguely familiar song as you walk away from Matt’s dorm room and down the hill toward Main Street. You recognize it as the first few notes of the chorus chime – “Come Raise the Song,” the Wesleyan Alma Mater – and as the second verse starts you join in, swinging yourself jauntily around a
lamppost as though you’re in the denouement of a triumphant Broadway adaptation of your life. “Come, throw away all thoughts of sorrow,” you sing with a beatific smile, “and give the night to mirth and song. If care must come, it comes tomorrow; today our hearts are bold and strong.” The bells play the final chorus, building from consonance to dissonance as the echoes resound and combine to form a final chord – unintended and unresolved – that swirls about you like a cape as you walk in slow motion down the hill.

You’re riding the bus to Boston from Hartford, and you look out the window and watch the city roll away. Abandoned row houses hide their faces from the highway, turned inward like derelicts huddled around the last embers of the city’s slowly dying fire. Their dirty brick walls are covered in graffiti, their black, tar-paper-covered roofs collapsing and caving in, gaping like thousands of starving nestlings’ mouths. There’s a logo on one of the few office buildings left lording over the slowly disintegrating downtown. “Hartford,” it says, in shiny metal script, “New England’s Rising Star.” The city planners were either being absurdly optimistic when they thought that slogan up, or their fates have fallen drastically since then, gone down from the heavens like Lucifer, the Light-Bringer; the Morning Star. They should ask him about dramatic irony, about hubris, about how the best intentions go gloriously awry.

You look down to see the multiple blue and gray shadows of your writing hand playing across your notebook page. At first they overlap like normal, but as your eyes focus on them they separate themselves into an impossible number of perspectives and tessellate, forming a fractal pattern as your previously three-dimensional notebook becomes a tesseract. You look back out the window and are struck by the beauty of the golden light as it falls on a row of crumbling, half-dismantled bridge supports, oblique
concrete monoliths streaked with hoary beards in dried-blood brown, wearing on their headless necks a set of thorny, twisted, rusting rebar crowns. You love the sight of these broken things, the shape of ruins, the colors of decay.

Everything had seemed so random for so long, but it had to turn out this way. Everything has been following a pattern that you could never see, a structure of such complexity that you could never possibly understand. You thought you were making choices, that you had some kind of agency or free will, but you were just another archetypal figure and everything in your life was going according to some unseen force’s plan. Your resistance was always futile. What seemed arbitrary was in fact inexorable. Even before Chris died your future – this future – was inevitable. But now that you’ve embraced destruction that pattern has lost its power: you no longer want to control it, but to deconstruct it, to destroy it. You smile. You smile and are a villain.
Peter meets you in Harvard Square, waving timidly in your direction when he sees you getting off the bus. You walk over toward him purposefully, and he flinches when you shake his hand. “How long have you been living here?” you ask. You haven’t seen him in almost two years, but he looks like he’s aged much more than that – his curly hair has lost its luster, his fair skin has turned sickly pale – he shuffles back and forth, looking at the ground, almost like your father. He looks so pretty and helpless with his downcast eyes, his long lashes fluttering like a girl’s.

“Since the end of high school,” he says. “My mom found these pictures I had on my computer.” He looks at you. You can guess what sort of pictures he’s talking about. “My dad got really angry. He started hitting me and my mother screamed at him to stop, so he just looked at me, like he was so disgusted, and told me to get out.” He looks away and rubs his eyes. “I didn’t know where to go. I came to Boston and lived on
the streets for a couple of days until I found a guy to take me in. He turned out to be an asshole, too, so I got a job at a coffee shop and found a room for myself.” He starts walking toward the Harvard campus and you follow him. “I’ve been on my own ever since.”

You put your arm around his shoulders as you walk, just like you had when you walked him home from school that Friday afternoon. “I had no idea,” you say, “I thought you were in college this whole time.” You’d been living just a few houses down from him when he got kicked out. Why hadn’t he come to you? Your hand tightens on his shoulder, your fingers digging into his skin. His flesh is so soft, so weak. “I guess you don’t go to Canton too often, then.”

He shakes his head. “I never want to see that town again.”

Peter’s apartment is near Inman Square, just a few blocks away from the house in Somerville where you were born, so you stop by there for a moment and stand by the wooden fence looking in at the yard. Your mother told you many times how the midwife had saved your placenta for her so she could plant it in her little garden with a sapling— an apple tree— that she carefully tended in the hopes that it would one day bear fruit, but then moved to Canton with your father before it did. The apartment owners after her let it go, and in the shadow of the neighboring buildings it’s grown wild, twisting in onto itself, transmuted into vegetation from some Germanic fairy tale, stunted, haunted, and strange. In the soft April evening light, the few pale blossoms that adorn its skeletal branches seem to hover about it, floating in the air like will o’ the wisps, running over its dark surface, glowing in the dusk like St. Elmo’s fire.

You and Peter get Chinese take-out for dinner, and you eat it sitting on his futon that’s folded up into a couch. Neither of you are talking, so you pick up the remote and turn the television on, flipping through the channels rapid-fire, stopping short when you
hear the first few notes of a familiar melody — it’s the Star Trek theme song. You put down the remote control as the voice-over begins and chuckle. Your mother would be happy with you — no doubt she had watched this show with you every Sunday evening on your astrologer’s advice, not because she had liked it herself — maybe you’ll actually learn something from it this time.

It’s not an episode of The Next Generation, it turns out, but a recent film with the same cast that you haven’t seen. The story is mostly about doppelgangers, it seems, figured either as twins or clones (there’s an identical but evil brother of the android, Data, and the villain is a genetic copy of the captain, Jean Luc Picard) about these sets of equal and opposing forces: the movie’s title is Nemesis.

“We’re the same,” the bad guy shouts at Picard as he holds the captain captive in his lair. He’s dressed in a uniform of gray and black. “The same noble blood runs in our veins. Had you lived my life, you’d be doing exactly as I am.”

You look at Peter — he’s watching the TV intently — the last remaining hint of color in his skin washed out by the blue glow of the screen. The scene continues and Picard escapes to the Enterprise, where he watches a flickering holographic projection of a galactic system in his office wistfully, wondering how things would have been different had his clone looked up at the same stars that he did as a child. The acting is mediocre and the scriptwriting is even worse than you remember, but the title is too perfect to be coincidence. Has life always been this transparently symbolic? Is your own origin story as obvious as this?

Picard and his clone fight to the latter’s death, the credits roll, and you turn the TV off. You sit beside Peter quietly for a moment, the faintest hint of electric snow reflecting on the glassy surface of your eyes like starlight as you consider coldly all the
beautiful futures that might have been. You reach over and wrap your arm around him, the black fabric of your military sweater contrasting starkly with his milky skin. You draw his face into yours for a kiss, feeling the power that fills your body flowing into his. You lift him up and lay him on the futon, unfolding it into a bed, holding him down as you undo his belt and take off his clothes. He struggles at first, but he never says no as you force his body to submit to your will.

After you fuck him he lies beside you quietly, his face turned toward the wall. You reach out your hand to touch him, and you can feel the electro-magnetic current between you crackle in the air. The smell of ozone overpowers the odor of his flesh, as each of the water molecules making up his silent tears ionizes. Blue and white sparks are leaping from your fingertips, falling toward his body like stars, like snowflakes, like the petals of apple blossoms cast down by the April wind. “Don’t touch me,” he whispers into his pillow, so muffled and soft that it’s as if he talking to himself, as though you’re no longer there.

You get out of his bed and drape the covers across him, lean over and brush his hair with your lips. It seems fitting to you that things should come full circle like this; that you should begin again in Somerville on the street where you were born. The plot of your life hasn’t been following some rising action like a story but the arc of an end-lessly falling body, an elliptical orbit of the Earth. You’ve returned to your starting point, but are not the same, having undergone an eccentric revolution, a disjunct evolution, no longer merely a winter soldier, but a summer villain. You look at Peter’s bed, at the gray and blurry sleeping form – Peter and Chris and Matt and a thousand others all collapsed into an empty shell, an object, a receptacle for your desire. Your hands are trembling, and you put them in your pockets to keep them still, to stay their destructive
power. You take pity on him, another pathetic mortal; you have mercy on him for now. You sleep alone on the floor that night, lying on your back like your father.

Peter walks back with you to Harvard Square on Friday evening. You march side by side down Kirkland Street, silent, like both of you have been the past several days. You were planning to head back to Aberdeen that night – you’ll be declared AWOL if you don’t sign in tomorrow morning – but you don’t intend to return to the Army anymore. It’s Good Friday, and the bells at the Catholic churches you pass are quiet, too, only the sound of solemn organs playing inside them calls the few remaining faithful to Mass. It’s a fitting day to journey underground, to get on the subway and see where those tracks take you, to leave this earthly world behind. You don’t know where you’re going. You are going to meet your train at last.

You get a table for two in a small café, and sit down to your last meal together. You order a bottle of wine, but Peter doesn’t want to drink any. You break him off a piece of bread but he won’t eat it, either. You ask what he wants to order, and he says he doesn’t care. You make a joke and he doesn’t laugh. You talk to him and he stays silent. Finally, you simply stare at him and he looks away. You’re growing angry, but you like it – the hotness in your face, the sharp edge around your eyes, the current flowing through your hands – you are becoming stronger. He is weak and he is worthless. He is yours.

“If you want to dominate him, turn to page 211.

“If you want to destroy him, turn to Chris and I were sleeping together,” Peter says abruptly. “Did he ever tell you that?”
The energy that's been building within you dissipates, and you drop your gaze to stare at your powerless hands.

“He came over to see me the day before he died, before your graduation ceremony,” he says after a moment, looking over at you, some unreadable emotion welling up in his eyes. He doesn’t look so helpless anymore. “We had sex and then, when we were getting ready to go he told me that he felt so bad for you, that you seemed so lonely. He said he cared about you as a friend. He wanted to help you out with, you know . . . sex and stuff. He asked me if that would be all right.”

“What did you say?” you ask him softly. You can’t look him in the eyes.

“No,” he says, looking down. “I was in love with him.” He draws a long, shuddering breath, and when you look up there are tears in his eyes. “I loved him so fucking much, and I never got to say goodbye. I’ve never gotten over him. I tried. I really tried.” He looks at you again. “I wanted to be your boyfriend for him, you know? Like I was fulfilling his last dying wish. And at one point I even thought I loved you – you have to believe me, I did – but you’ve turned into a different person. I don’t even know you anymore. Maybe I never really did. I tried to make you into someone you weren’t – I think that was the problem. I’m still in love with Chris.”

“Yeah,” you whisper, “so was I.” That fantasy is finally over. The last substantial thing you thought you had was never there at all.

You have been wrong about everything. You’d wanted this to be another grand narrative, like the stories your father read to you from the Bible on Sunday morning, the science fiction sagas you watched with your family on Sunday nights, the myths and legends your mother recited to you before you went to sleep, the coming-of-age novels you read in high school, the superhero comics you kept in a stack beside your bed, the
G.I. Joe adventures that you acted out in the dirt, the videogames you played with Peter, the role-playing games you played with Chris. You’d wanted all of this to signify something, somehow, to give you some set of stories through which you could understand your life, but Chris was never Jesus and you were not Mersault or any other anti-hero or anti-Christ. This tragicomic opera was never about you at all; you were a member of the choir like everybody else, not a lead player but one part of a superposition of voices that when added together cancel each other out.

You look over at Peter, and in the candlelight his face looks like a death mask, his eyes swallowed by shadow, the last flicker of light in them glinting like a goldfish’s scales as it dives to the bottom of its murky, abyssal pool. You couldn’t comfort him even if you wanted to – any gesture you could make would be empty, inscrutable, or meaningless to him. But it’s too late for romance anyway: the sun has set on compassion; your mother’s Healing Light of Love has gone down in the West; your father’s God has forsaken you; the time for succor has long since passed. Whatever beauty once lived in Peter’s face is dead to you. Whatever emotion those or any other eyes once conveyed is lost.

You look at the flickering light of the candle, at the shadowy figures traversing the wall. No, you think, that isn’t it either. You’re wrong about that as well. The sound of this metaphorical chorus shifts depending on your perspective, and the universe contains them all. It’s not that no one is a lead singer in this choir, but that everybody is – the over-abundance of main characters leading to an infinite number of first, second, and third-person narratives that endlessly combine, becoming an incomprehensible plurality. There is not one savior in this world, but too many. There is not too little meaning, but too much.
You’re not some comic book villain like Picard’s clone, then, and you don’t want to be. You don’t need the illusion of depth granted by traumatic causality, that patina of ambiguity created by a few artfully deployed shades of gray. Q was always your favorite Star Trek character, anyway – a mercurial figure, a trickster: omnipresent, omnipotent, and inscrutable like dark matter; like dark energy – both good and bad and in-between. It has to be something more abstract than that, however, like the Q from all those physics equations, the symbol of a charge – the source of forces acting at a distance; of electricity – or of particles randomly colliding, like Q, but not a symbol, and not personified. You are a force of nature, governed only by the laws of entropy; of conservation of momentum and energy; of the uncertainty principle; of general relativity. You were not created. You cannot be destroyed. Everything is relative. Every frame of reference is yours.

Somewhere they’re playing your exit music, all polytonal strings and horns and thunderous timpani, building in tempo, in volume, and in intensity from mezzo forte – from mf – to a full-on fortissimo. “No more tradition’s chains shall bind us,” you whisper, remembering that famous revolutionary song that Chris had taught your high school GSA – “The Internationale” – a chorus of interconnected individuals: a cacophonous multiplicity. “Arise you slaves, no more in thrall.” You have been following the straight and narrow path for too long – the singularity of narrative, of meaning, of purpose: all of these mighty fine lines can be broadened, the comforting illusion of their unity exploded in a world not destroyed but fulfilled, a universe that is not empty but made full. “The earth shall rise on new foundations:” louder, one voice becoming many. “We have been naught, we shall be all.”
They’ve always told you that “Right Makes Might,” or vice versa: morality was just a matter of numbers either way, of who would be counted among the righteous on Judgment Day, but you are becoming infinite – always already one and many – not universal as a totality, but uncountable and irreducible, both terrible and beautiful, encompassing love and hate and every other petty, particular human and inhuman thing. The simple additive processes of progress, of history, and of salvation cannot contain you, and doing only what is constructive, right, and good would be contrary to your nature now. You want to be a figure of chaos, of chance – a pale and dreadful fire fills your eyes. You want to be incoherent, undifferentiated, and strong – an awesome energy flows into your hands. You stand up from the table and turn away from Peter as the lights go down on you forever, and you feel the darkness in and around you rise.

You want to be wrong.
Fugue
He was the last boy I ever loved.

Exit Music

We’re not so different, you and I.
We walk the same streets;
we look up at the same stars.
We are different, you and I.

Following divergent paths,
separate tracks:

Passing through twilit cities,
penumbral figures formed
of potential energy, of static charge:

Are we different, you and I?
discrete figures in distinct orbits:
We are the same.
We are not the same.
Are we the same?
There are invisible worlds around us.

These silences are symphonies of sound.

I descend into the underworld, below the ground; the subway carries my body away.

You fall endlessly in ellipses, in ellipses, tracing arcs across imaginary celestial spheres.
Our emptiness is manifold.

The dissonant frequencies of wheels and rails are vibrating sympathetically with me, a complex assemblage feeding back, the harmonic reinforcement of multiplicities, boldly traversing interstices between interconnected bodies, seeking newer worlds.
The train breaks the surface of the earth; the gray clouds swirl and darken, the river swells, and the electric lights along the bridge cycle off to let me pass.

Scattering dark matter, ephemeral as a solitary quark, both strange and charmed, the universes you articulate are not eternal but mutable, not coherent but absurd.

Are all choices arbitrary? Are all outcomes unpredictable?
Are all events interrelated? Are all things incomprehensible?

You glow brighter as you gather speed, reaching your escape velocity, accelerating toward the speed of light, leaving this dull earth behind.

I am becoming a periodic wave of shadow, scudding along a dim horizon, mapping an evanescent margin, a transient boundary between day and night.
Everything slows to a stop as you approach that limit where time and space collapse, opening a black hole,

*A tunnel entrance lies before me, an eyeless socket rimmed with concrete,*

*We are nothing.*
We are no one.

We are everyone.

a looking glass reflecting darkness,

a point of infinite density and mass

and a passage into nothingness.

a window onto an abyss.
We are everywhere.
in memory of
This book was written under the tutelage of Professor Lisa Cohen at Wesleyan University during the respective fall and spring semesters of 2008 and 2009, and is set in a combination of Caslon, Baskerville, Bodoni, and Gill Sans, all of which are descended, to some degree, from the typefaces created by William Caslon. The illustrations include sumi ink paintings, photographs, pen drawings, and Adobe Illustrator designs, all of which were assembled using Adobe Photoshop and laid out, along with the text, using Quark XPress.