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# Pacific Central Mountain

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**Abstract**

This is a creative thesis told over the course of eight short stories organized around three different home spaces. The original goal of the project was to examine these places through the lens of friendly and familial connections. The prose itself was meant to be informed stylistically by the poetry of modernists such as T.S. Eliot and postmodern novelists such as Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace, but throughout the writing process, the overall project evolved into an examination of the interaction between the Apollonian and Dionysian sensibilities as described in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Although there are still elements of commentary on place in the final product, the theme of the thesis became how anxiety and perceived alienation are resolved in the pursuit of human connection.

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**Thesis Title:** Pacific Central Mountain

## Abstract

This is a creative thesis told over the course of eight short stories organized around three different home spaces. The original goal of the project was to examine these places through the lens of friendly and familial connections. The prose itself was meant to be informed stylistically by the poetry of modernists such as T.S. Eliot and postmodern novelists such as Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace, but throughout the writing process, the overall project evolved into an examination of the interaction between the Apollonian and Dionysian sensibilities as described in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Although there are still elements of commentary on place in the final product, the theme of the thesis became how anxiety and perceived alienation are resolved in the pursuit of human connection.

## Dedication

This project is dedicated to my family, friends, teachers, and professors. Each of you have helped me to find my passion in life and art. You have offered me your support, reassured me with your patience, and inspired me with your creativity, and for all this I am deeply grateful.

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## Table of Contents

Forest Lawn - 1

Alta Dena - 9

Through the Windshield - 16

Airport Hilton - 26

Congress - 34

Attention Metra Commuters - 42

Treasure Valley - 50

Brewforia - 56





## Forest Lawn

The gates of Forest Lawn are tall. The grounds themselves fold into the foothills surrounding Glendale and the place has a gentle rising and falling that calls to mind some Scottish field of barley or untouched spring plains. All the trees are neatly kept. They are now in the fullest lush of their April bloom. They fleck the hills at regular intervals. Past the hills with their sunken squares that look like melon dimples the hills surrounding the grounds are dry and rocky. Bushes flat like lichens give them texture. Unseasonable grey hangs over the San Fernando Valley. Although I do not expect rain I wish for it. Approaching the entrance to the grounds I look up at the square stone parapets that reach up about twenty-five feet before the black poles of the gate jut upwards from their center. They frame the small stone kiosk in the center of the driveway that rests on the last of the flat land. There is fog on the rear view mirror. The windshield slants harshly backwards. There is a small procession ahead of us blocking the hill. As we approach the kiosk a small woman leans out flashing a blank expression that hesitates on the verge of smile. The curtained windows of the long black car in front of us look swollen in the slant of the windshield. She is maybe in that car. Or maybe she is already perched waiting on the top of the hill. The gates of Forest Lawn are tall and open.

We make our way up the first hill slowly. We stop to consolidate and to meet guests. The hairdresser comes up and hugs me. She has tears in her eyes and wears a black veil with a black dress. I am not wearing black. I am wearing the hot pink tie that I had been given for graduation with a suit jacket that is blazer blue with pink lines and fits me very snugly around the shoulders. Underneath it a silky looking dark green button-up with small faded shapes that look like four-legged animals. I

look upward at the clouds and they clear and darken again like Pacific fog. They seem low to the ground. I am the only one who knows why I am not wearing black.

As we stop the long black hearse in front of us slows and the door opens. A driver looks towards us with squinted eyes. I look back and the hairdresser is talking to my father and now they are hugging and both in tears. I turn back to the driver just as the door closes and his red taillights flash. The small chapel up ahead is lit and from within there is a low murmur that might be cello music or the blended voices of people sitting in pews and pacing up aisles to say morbid goodbyes. I blink slow and get back into the car.

I am looking at the people pass in the tinted windows of the car. They are all veiled and move deliberately as if they were being filmed. Many of them press things to their noses or their eyes. They are mostly older. Many have white hair and sensible dress shoes. I look down at the scuffed shoes that swell tight on my feet. They are suited to years ago. These she had given to me. My hand dips into my pocket and traces the wings of a small dragon figurine. It bulges out in the ill-fitting slacks as if I had been shot through with an arrow. We pass three processions going up the hill and sometimes as we pass a face in the crowd outside will catch my gaze and look at me pointedly with bloodshot eyes. One woman with salt and pepper curls looks at me while we are at a perfect stop. Her face is framed within the airy reflection of mine. She has no tears left and I have not yet cried.

After some time the car stops and we walk up the familiar hillside to a large mound covered in artificial green turf. They have framed it so we cannot see the hole. There is the casket and the turf but we are seated such that we cannot see the hole. The casket is lilac purple and its surface has a shine like clean steel. We settle

into a single row of chairs ten long with one empty on the left side while the preacher begins. He is brief and to the point. Very concise and just a little ambiguous. One by one we approach the casket. We stand facing back towards the row of chairs to say our words. The casket is closed. I know that I am to go last.

My fingers in my pockets curl around a leaf of paper upon which I have composed a poem for the occasion. The moments between each of the speakers are elastic. They stretch out and dilate. There is no swiftness in anyone's step. Each of them offers remembrances and declarations of deep meaning. None of them rhyme. Although they are my relatives the grief and the grey sunlight has made their faces strange to me. They are flesh masks set into black frames that leak like baroque stone fountains from the noticeably heavy eyes. There is no semblance of performance or artifice in their words. No one else has anything prepared. I look down at the folded sheet of notebook paper resting (almost dangling) from my left hand. I can't imagine how this will not seem sickly staged. I will unfold it and clear my throat as if introducing a guest speaker at some school function. The paper will tremble and make that disgusting rapping sound in the wind. There are aspen down past the casket being blown by a slight breeze. They make a trickling kind of thrush and their leaves wink at me. My absurdity echoes back to me even from the trees and bushes in the distances. I close my eyes and will them to fill and burst. I will my cheeks to swell and grow hot. I will my hands to shake and my back to hunch. I want so badly to cry. I open my eyes again and there is silence. My turn arrives.

I am a boulder in a cold fast stream. Not a single muscle in my body is tense. I stand. The casket is closed. There is a hole behind the mound and the casket is closed. I walk towards it seeing my own reflection warped ovular in grey sunlight.

The mound breathes in, dissipates, melts, the casket sprawls, the purple drips into the green and the grey and I am caught in their tides and smeared across the still point of a turning world.

With my mother's back turned to me as she listens I see my father's face react to her own. I don't want to stay long enough to hear the news out loud but I do. We got home late and the house was dark and the telephone rang before the front door had even closed and now I look at my mother's back and at my father's eyes. Even then, it seems in memory as if I am halfway down the dark hallway when I hear "She's gone."

In my room as I spin in my chair I see objects in succession. Plaid bedspread stuffed rabbit wicker laundry basket closet mirror black television white door gold handle wood grain desk crystal dragons cork board bookcase small suit of armor framed letter opener venetian blinds closed fog water vaporizer hourglass pillow stuffed rabbit wicker laundry basket closet mirror black television white door gold handle wood grain desk crystal dragons.

She is in each of these things.

We had sat upon the bedspread when she visited waiting for dinner while I showed her my little poems. The small stuffed rabbit was a mystery to both of us. I had found it in the small toy box that she kept for visits from children but she insists she never bought it. I have slept with it every night since. She had given me the crystal dragons that sit on top of my desk as well. She has given me one every Christmas for seven years. She is in the pictures that are tacked to the cork board along with shark tooth necklaces and other little charms that she would buy for me during our visits to Ports O' Call in San Pedro when I was young. One of the pictures

in particular is bell-clear. It stands out as if jutting forward from the wall to meet my eye. It is of her and me when I was barely able to walk. I am wearing small green overalls and my hair is pale blond and thin like an old man's. I stand in front of her with my arms raised to grasp her hands. She stands behind me holding my hands and looking off to her upper left. Her mouth is slightly open and her tongue slightly out as if she was trying to loosen some trapped piece of food between her teeth. She clearly did not know that the picture was being taken and it is not flattering. Her hair is large and dark and even though she was barely five feet tall she seems to fill the entirety of the room compared to my small-even-for-my-age frame. She would not be happy with me if she knew that this is the photo that I keep displayed of her. She probably would wonder at me displaying one in the first place. I am tacked on my wall with her holding her hands and looking at her in a moment of shameless, casual life.

I stop spinning and stare at the photo and then at the dragons and then at the hourglass. Without dislodging myself from my chair I open the bottom drawer of my nightstand and see a small set of green pajamas folded carefully. These she had given me late one night when I was no more than ten. I was distressed for some reason I cannot recall and she produced them from a small black shopping bag asking me if they made me feel better. I take them out and undo the buttons on the shirt one by one. While I am doing this I stare at the photo and then the dragons and then the hourglass. I splay the shirt unbuttoned across the bedspread.

Her house is warm. The air seems to hang lower and light has a consistency like luminous smoke curling from the tip of a lit cigarette. Her walls are eggshell white and smooth in the adobe style with terra-cotta half-cylindrical tiles on her

roof that occasionally slide off and break with a hollow jangling sound. I breathe in the damp smell from the cotton-soaked air just before she wakes me.

She would say feet on the floor in ten seconds. Without waiting she would stand up and exit to begin cooking my breakfast. It was tacitly understood that, were my feet to leave the floor during her absence, there would be consequences. I never incurred those consequences so I cannot testify to their nature or ultimate severity, but I do know that the only time I ever forced her to go below the count of five there was a look of such indignation on her face that I didn't hesitate to carry any shopping bags for a week afterwards.

Today is especially important. It is the day of a ritual that I have only been a part of a few times in my life but it has always had a profound effect on me. We are going to visit Bob today. This is one of the harder visits she has to make. It marks a decade since her husband's passing. I have never once in my life seen her shed even a single tear. My father calls her the rock but not to connote coldness and hardness. Rather she is strength and safety.

There was a small flower shop in a brick building with green lattice that we would stop at beforehand and she would buy an assortment heavy on the baby's breath. I always asked her why she never cut flowers from her own garden but she said they weren't pretty enough. Or they were out of season. Or sometimes they were simply the wrong flowers. She only grew roses and only in summer. Today instead of getting just her usual assortment she selected a single miniature rose and placed it in the very center of the bouquet. We leave the shop and are almost immediately at the tall gates of Forest Lawn. They hang open silhouetted against the puffy white clouds of July. She nods to the small woman in the kiosk who always

wears a strange almost-smile. We drive slowly through the tall gates and sloping hills. She slows down passing the Wee Kirk o' The Heather. She told me once she liked to look at the shadows on the stone. Today the shadows are rich. After some minutes we come to the spot. Walking to it she has a needle's precision. Gold embossed letters read Robert "Bob" Olson. She kneels and digs with both hands at the grass below the stone. With the roots cleared aside she pulls a small bronze vase out from a wet loamy cylinder in the ground that was always half filled with water. She places the flowers in the vase and places the vase back in the cylinder again and there is silence. Even at the mouth of the grave this silence is full and open. For a few minutes we sit arranged like this casting static shadows. I stand hunched over slightly towards her keeping quiet. After a few moments she rises. I take her hand and we walk together back to the car. There is a sense of finality as we leave behind the tall gates. They linger in the rearview mirror like I will not see them again soon and they are trying to fix my face to see how much I've grown next time.

We are driving away now from the purple closed casket and the uncovered mound and the hole I only glimpsed walking back to the car. I still hold the folded piece of paper in my hand and my eyes still blur the road outside. The freeways are clear and free on this early Tuesday afternoon. We are back at her house in minutes. There is food laid out for the visitors and the light is thick and warm like glassed-over amber. I walk alone down the narrow hallway to her bedroom at the end. I sit on her bed and looked through her frilly curtains at the orange tree. There are no blossoms yet and the leaves are still a sickly orange-green. It is a summer tree.

I have only been to visit once since we laid Betty next to Robert "Bob," and this ritual is now mine. I bought the flowers from the same shop and went heavy on

the baby's breath. I chose an arrangement with lilac and a single baby red rose. I walked to the stones with hesitant precision. I knelt and dug at the grass until the roots parted and I found the little bronze vase already filled halfway with water. I placed the flowers in the vase and the vase in the ground, said no words, and soon left. I took the hills downward slowly and paused at the gate to see the Wee Kirk in my mirror. The sky was hazy blue with white clouds, and the grass was lush green in the droplets of sprinkler water.



## Alta Dena

I am driving up Lake Street. I have been driving up Lake Street for the last fifteen minutes, at a decent pace, and it doesn't seem like it will end until the asphalt of it blends into the shale rock of the hills surrounding Alta Dena. Driving along the street I have passed three economically distinct areas in a steady slope up from the freeway, which is itself a steady slope down from the foothills of the Angeles Crest. I had set out from the top of Alta Canada street in La Canada, and have summited and descended at least five separate times between there and here. Even with all the variation in trees, houses, residential and commercial areas, there is something impersonal and vague about the hills and valleys of Southern California. They are seen through windshields, dealt with as you forage through, never touching. I take a sharp right, park, leave the car, and walk towards Drew's house.

There is a distinct "thock" every few seconds, the sound of a ping-pong ball missing its target. I never understood the appeal of drinking games. But then again I don't drink, have never tried it. I guess they get harder the more you play, which is interesting, but so does Jenga. I take the steps slowly, carrying a small cylindrical paper bag. As we enter the piano music stops and there are greetings, some surprising and some familiar, and the eyes of the room focus themselves upon me. I know these people all by name, see them every day but here their faces are strange to me, and mine to them as well.

I am taken aback by the surprise, which in a few moments remolds itself into enthusiasm and then quietly settles back into indifference as I make my way around the room. I feel a sense of something between aversion and belonging. I mean, I know these people, but their initial reaction was like I had just walked in on them in

the bathroom. I understand it must be strange seeing me here, since they've gotten to know me in such a controlled setting. It's honestly probably more the fact that I'm still behaving like I'm in a controlled setting. I always do. I feel a weird kind of jealousy of them that they can switch between extremes like that. I make my way through the clusters of people to the kitchen. Down two wooden steps to a stainless steel fridge, I take them in a little hop and stop at the granite countertop island, clouded with ruby Solo cups and half-empty bottles of cheap rum. There's really a lot of alcohol here. I knew there would be drinking but I didn't realize how much for this many people. It's kind of funny honestly, like when a little boy tries on his father's shoes and realizes for the first time just how much growing he has to do. I open my small paper bag and place its cargo, a bottle of Apothic Red Wine, on the countertop, and immediately feel like an ass. It has always been a tradition in my family, maybe more of a common courtesy, to bring something "for the house" upon entering a new home for the first time. Scottish superstitions claim that not to do so brings bad luck. The bottle, I now realize, will probably be gone in fifteen minutes. I grab an empty Solo cup, just to not look so out of place, and walk with purpose through the sliding glass door to the backyard.

Once in the backyard I stand for a moment next to the long wood grain table upon which two-dimensional pyramids of plastic cups point accusation at one another while orange ping-pong balls repeatedly fail to fall into them. At least that's the best I can describe it. It doesn't look very hard but chances are, with my athletic abilities, I'd have trouble landing a ping-pong ball in ten pitchers. There is a line four teams deep for the next game. I knew there would be drinking, and now I know there would be a lot of drinking, but I hope that drinking is not all there will be. I

guess it just seems like people at a party would be doing more, but most of what I know about parties comes out of movies and secondhand stories where they seem a lot less subdued. I reach into the pocket of my leather jacket and pull out a Grape Swisher Sweet. I light it and draw deeply before billowing a cloud of smoke upward. So much of me seems like show. I turn and begin to walk deeper into the backyard.

Drew's backyard stretches far beyond his house into the slight hills of upper Lake Street, Pasadena. In irregular patterns miniature poplar trees spring up from the mounded grass; from these hang Chinese paper lanterns in white, red, and green. The hill inclines slightly and culminates in a cul de sac of lush foliage and peat, framing a firepit, stone and dug deep into the ground. There is hardly anyone here. What a relief. Here my awkwardness can be my burden alone.

I take a seat in one of the lawn chairs on the opposite side of the fire from the only other two people there, a girl and a guy that I know from one of my classes. The fire strobing between us gives a look of baroque drama to their faces and bodies. She sits contorted to one side. Her hair falls jet black over her shoulders in the firelight. He crosses his legs in the masculine fashion, one leg forming a triangle over the other, and his elbows rest deliberately far from his body, as if he were trying to fill out a throne. He seems as if he is trying to surreptitiously touch her. If this is the case his effort is pretty transparent. Who knows though. Maybe that's just how comfortable people sit.

I look up at the stars through the smoke for a few moments, and when I look down again there is only the girl. Alex is her name. She looks downward into the fire and her eyes seem heavy. They are dark brown. Aside from the grey wool shirt she wears tight blue jeans faded nearly to white over the thighs, and flat shoes that look

like they are for dancing. Gasping for something to do, I check my phone. No reply, no service, no sign of those that had driven with me here.

I relax backward into the chair, the din from the party down the grassy hill growing more faint and regular, less spiked with the noise of new arrivals and skilled beer pong shots. With this quiet I suddenly realize how weird it is that I'm not talking to Alex. I check my phone again, thinking I felt some slight vibration against my outer thigh, and find nothing.

Rising with conviction I breathe deeply and stretch my arms out, a signifier that I feel will mask my discomfort at the length of time I have lingered here in the first place. Passing Alex, I mostly mumble can I get you anything in an attempt to justify my leaving and make it seem somehow less than permanent, so she will not take it personally. To my surprise she answers, asking is there anything that isn't cheap beer. I almost jump. I look down at her to find that she has not taken her eyes off of the fire. She holds an empty cup as well, with eggshell foam near the bottom. I take it from her hand and walk away, trying not to look in a hurry.

The party has died down considerably, and for the most part moved indoors. The game table is now piled over with old cups and a few empty cigarette packs. It looks like they left midgame. I find one of the balls and try to make a cup. I miss, horribly. Through the glass doors I see that the kitchen is empty but the faint roar from inside washes, muffled, against it. Sliding the door open I can hear the increasingly manic drumbeat of I Can't Stop

I enter through the doors and step into the dark kitchen. I look over to the island. It is substantially more cluttered than before, ruby cups, some half-full, most empty and tipped over, emptier bottles of cheap rum and vodka, dingy shot glasses,

cabinets overhead hung open in various stages of undress. I would think that with that much alcohol gone people would be too drunk to function, but again I don't drink. I am shocked to see the Apothic untouched, sitting in seemingly the exact same position. I walk forward into the living room, up the few steps and into the din. The walls wheeze under the thunder of the bass bubbling out of the speakers. A solid mass of faces and bodies undulates like the tangle of coital snakes. I can't imagine how anyone in the middle of that is having fun. I lean against the doorframe of the kitchen and watch the spectacle for a few minutes. A brunet dancing close to a blonde female jerks his body awkwardly to brush against her arm. He repeats this several times, each time rounding his fingers with more tension to suggest a pivot to her. After several attempts she comes closer to him and they press against one another. With each movement they lapse back into the primal waltz of the whole. I can't believe that worked. I can't believe he thought it would work well enough to try it. I retreat back into the kitchen. Drawing breaths in deep, I retrieve two glasses from one of the cupboards and fumble through three drawers before finding a very rudimentary wine key. I grab the Apothic by the neck of the bottle, wrapping my fingers around the deep red label, and make my way outside, inviting ruin down upon the house or my own head.

In the distance the glow from the stone pit is faint like a newborn star. I see the chair silhouetted with soft outlines, and for a moment it is unclear whether or not she is still there. It would make a lot of sense if she were gone. I'd probably even laugh to myself. When I am no more than a few feet away, however, I can make out her legs curling around the edge of the chair, underneath it into darkness. I loom for a second, a newborn myself just beginning to burn, before stepping forward quickly,

extending an arm holding one of the glasses and the bottle itself. She looks at it, then up at me, as if I had just pulled a rabbit from a hat. I open the bottle, pour a glass for her and set the bottle down. I take a seat, looking down at my lap and tracing the ridges of my jeans with my finger. When I look up, there is a full wine glass extended, almost pressed against my lips. You know, until I could smell it right under my nose I never thought about not drinking as a huge decision. Now it seems like a deathbed conversion.

We say some words that are hushed and quick. She swirls the glass, so the wine will breathe I suppose, and then gulps down her glass in two large swallows. I suppose that's how it's done. I do likewise so as not to appear in any way untoward. I had always imagined that wine would taste like the juice seeping from a choice prime rib, or some molten rich gravy. Wine does not taste like this; it tastes rather like thick, mild grape juice, with a hint of cherry near the end. As I force myself to swallow I can feel wings spreading in my chest, gaping my throat against my lungs. I think she does not notice. I hope she does not notice.

Without dislodging herself from her seat, she reaches over and takes my glass to refill it. She refills her own afterwards and offers a silent toast. The glasses clink with a brittle sound, being too full to ring out bell-clear. She again downs hers extremely quickly and I stare into mine, swirling it slightly. This is like a scene from a movie; maybe that's why I'm feeling more comfortable.

She fills up a third glass for herself and I even though I haven't touched my second I am beginning to feel the faintest numbness in the ring and pinky fingers of each hand. I take a faint sip and set the glass down on the far end of the lawn chair. I am aware that it is cold but I am not cold. It occurs to me with my hand already in

motion that I am reaching towards her. I'm not even sure why. I gently touch her forearm.

She moves her arm such that my hand is now on top of hers. It is cold and immobile. I look upward and her head is turned, looking into the last dying coals of the fire. I move my thumb over the hills and valleys of her knuckles back and forth slowly and gently, recalling a gesture I have seen before. She leans slightly towards me, eyes on the fire, sweeps her free arm down across her waist, and the crevice of skin disappears beneath grey wool. With my free arm I reach to my glass, empty it, and lean back into my chair. I sweep my thumb back and forth, feeling either a gathering or release of tension against my palm. We draw just a little closer and our gazes converge as we fix our eyes on the common point of dying light.

## Through the Windshield

After many miles I allow myself to realize that perhaps I am taking entirely the wrong approach. I cannot tell whether I am pursuing or escaping. The dim valley stretches out in front of me and the lights behind me skitter and jump in the distance, refusing to remain still. I had thought that maybe I could grab it whole if I saw it from far enough away. Why can I not wrap my arms around the lights down below and behind me?

I drive through the Angeles Crest National Forest at 11 PM on a Friday night. In point of fact I am not driving through the forest itself but rather the path that leads from La Canada to the forest. The road itself, a small two-lane highway, slithers through the foothills, climbing far above the valley behind and into the darkness ahead. Palmdale, the nearest town to speak of, rests at fifty miles away and there is little reason to continue that far unless you have a taste for danger and solitude. Rocks often tumble down from the higher shale cliffs, and mud drizzles the road at even the suggestion of rain. The asphalt spikes up and down like three-dimensional pointillism; because of this traction can be a problem. On the ascending side of the road you are hugging the cliffs, often close enough that flicking ash off of a cigarette out of the passenger window would put your arm at considerable risk. The descending side of the road, however, hugs the sheer drop into the gulley running between the hillsides, and there are barely any guardrails. For some reason the turns feel so natural on the wheel, at least they do in the breezy boat-like drift of my old-model Chevrolet Malibu.

This is something I do to unwind. Since I got my license a little over a year ago it has been an irregular ritual of mine. Often I will leave the house under the



pretense of meeting up with friends only to drive far up the Crest, each time further, looking for the highest turnout I can find with a view of the suburbs below. The views of suburbs, to me, were always far superior to those of cities. Cities are graphed out with irritating regularity, and with the tall buildings and standard streetlights, everything compelling is lost in right angles. Suburbs roll and pitch like waves, and the lights change colors. Bland orange and pale blue bleed together like a starry sunset. From the Crest, in some spots, you can see the whole valley framed between two sheer peaks: seas of dim lights given texture by undeveloped hills interrupting their flow.

If I were keeping count I imagine this trip would be my forty-something. It's hard to gauge. I remember my first time was such a thrill because the headlights of my Malibu are so weak, even the highbeams. Now I know the turns for the first ten miles or so well enough that I could probably take them blindfolded. It is tempting with such a habit to think of myself as a transcendentalist or romantic, but it is as likely as not that the road is a substitute for the safer and far more perplexing recklessness of house parties, dancing, and alcohol that occupy so many of my contemporaries on these Friday nights. It really doesn't matter though. The perk of driving this road is not having to think about such things. From up here, for as long as I have been coming, the town below looks tranquil, intact, able to take care of itself. Leaving behind its veins and nerves, removing myself from the beating that forces people through its roads, into its houses and out again, gives me a sense of still control that I have not found anywhere else. But tonight is different.

Tonight in particular I am testing the limits of my intrepid, well-used car. I am tucked deep into the Crest. This far inward the road inverts itself. This means

that any turnout will not have a view of the valley behind me but rather of an immense darkness that extends downward and outward as far as the eye can see. I stop at a dirt semi-circle carved into the ground and look into the heart of the Crest itself. The rising moon behind me makes the stars scarce, and the darkness in front of me is thicker than that of the sky. I stay and stare for maybe twenty minutes, thinking nothing with no sound.

The sound of my own blood pumping rattles around in my ears in the overwhelming silence. The darkness here makes the silence seem terminal, like the quiet that wraps the last scrap of land at the end of the world. I sit perfectly still and will myself to feel peace. Looking at the undeveloped valley below me I find no comfort. There is nothing to grasp, nothing to unravel, nothing for which to account. As my eyes adjust I see vague shapes that seem to slither in the warm breeze. From this distance the valley is not flattened and complete; it struggles against itself while the darkness twinkles. In all my time making this drive I have never gotten far enough away from the movement of the valley to truly feel alone, to feel as if my responsibility to give in to the flow of the place has faded and that I can simply take in the scene at once, observe and admire every gear. Now I am farther away from it than I have ever been and I find myself staring into a shadow system, butting up against the town, penning it in with a darkness that moves and flows as much as the streets and houses of the valley behind me. I crane my neck to look at the distant lights, with the growing uneasy feeling that there is no outside, only in-between.

The solitude of climbing the hills and looking at the town from afar is not really solitude so much as a literal manifestation of the exile I impose upon myself. I turn my car around slowly and begin the descent. Normally I would take joy in

resting my feet underneath the seat and see how much coasting speed I could build up before it becomes too dangerous, but tonight I take the drive back slowly. The lights hover when they are not flashing by at speed. On the four-lane highway again, I feel a soft vibration in my pocket. Checking my phone at the nearest stoplight, I see an invitation that for some reason I think it would be fun to accept.

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I do not feel cramped here. The tightness of this place comforts me; it is more like a hug than a bind. Everything is so tightly wound around everything else, and I am becoming aware for the first time just how small this place really is. This is my fourth year walking its grounds in the late hours, between periods of it swelling with people rushing here and there.

I walk the Flintridge Prep campus at 6 PM on a Friday. My campus sprawls jaggedly, being built on a steep hill. I am sitting on one of the staircases. In this particular area, there are two staircases side by side, one normal and one with stairs that are roughly two and a half times the size of normal stairs. The stairs cut the winds into ribbons that settle into a dusting of cold air on the surface of everything like invisible snow. It is late November, and as such the sun has set more than an hour ago. I watch the first of the automated lights turn on along the narrow walkway above. Everywhere I look the campus stretches and reaches, blocking the unseen threats of the world outside. I wait for the other members of my group to arrive for tonight's performance. I walk the campus in large circles, searching for unlocked doors.

The campus itself is not very large, and can be lapped in about ten minutes at a relaxed walking pace. Our field takes up most of the lower grounds, encircled by a fence that has fused with the encroaching trees. In the farthest end of the field there is a small gate, warped into a pointed gap like a knothole in an oak's trunk. With the last of the sun's light trickling away I walk across the grass of the field, feeling a sharp breeze of thin cool air, the closest thing California has to real winter. At the halfway point of the field I turn to see the grounds behind me in perspective. In my night walks I make a point to find the small nooks where people do not go, where it would seem strange to be during the day. I stand or sit here and there and observe the campus from new angles. The differences in perspective flesh out the picture of the campus in my mind. These little haunts remind me that this place has the same contours and points of seldom-touched sensitivity as any living body. Finding these little nooks, seeing the campus through their lens, is my repayment of its kind protection, my effort to know it as intimately as it has known me. The ancient, enchanted-looking doorway through the bordering woods on the end of the field is one of the very few spots that I have not yet explored. I turn and begin to walk again.

The leaves on the wall of trees before me blend into a dark green mass. The wind blows but they do not move. They are frozen, static, packed dense. As I approach the opening I see the fence bend near the top like the crest of a wave. The first cold breezes of winter have silenced the crickets and the other trees have lost their leaves. My breath fogs the air and the last wisps of sunlight creep behind the freeway overpass. The overpass glows dim orange and streaks the horizon behind me like a flat brushstroke. I am standing one step away from the mouth of the trees now. I walk forward and tendrils of black truss up the light behind me as if closing. I

can hear the electric hiss of dried leaves marking my steps. After a few moments I can no longer see the opening behind me, and above me trees clasp their fingers and show no sky. This place does not shield from the world without but seals the world within. I pull my phone out of my pocket to light my way, and I can see that the tunnel through the trees stretches on farther than I thought, beyond the light of my little screen. The tree branches do not allow any of the intimacy of un-walked spaces to seep in. This place feels more forbidden than neglected. I reorient myself to the crevice I entered, and stand in the dark and quiet for some time before walking back to the opening with ginger steps.

Outside once again the sky is deep blue and the stars throw out spears of light, sharp and still. The silver light from the half-moon beginning to rise paints aquamarine into the shadows of grass on the field. I walk back across, into the corridor by the big stairs. All the lights are on now, and the deep blue tiles leading up to the little theater radiate warmth. I open the double doors leading into the Black Box and begin to set chairs around the center of the room. I think I hear the others coming to help set up, and I set down my chairs and face the doors, waiting for them to burst.

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In the silence of this house I manufacture sounds in the unlit corners and dim spaces outside the windows. This is the type of house in which an intruder could go undetected, could crouch in any room, without purpose even, just crouched and staring in a dark room, waiting to be found. I realize this is a strange thought even as

I am thinking it. There would be no malice in the act beyond the invasion of the space, the audacity to occupy, to use and inhabit a space uninvited. The idea of a voyeur is more unsettling to me than any attacker. Maybe I feel like this intruder myself, living and acting unobserved in a space that is not mine. I am somehow troubled by everything I do here, as if each act is shameful outside of the context of my own little glass case; in a sense I crouch here waiting to be found myself, waiting in a strange home to accept the judgment of those who belong.

I sit in my friend's bedroom at 8 PM on a Friday night. I am house sitting for him while he and his family are on vacation. This is the second night of the two weeks I will spend here and I am beginning to feel comfortable. My friend's home sits nestled into the absolute back of a cul-de-sac off of Alta Canada. The closest neighbors border the back wall of the backyard, and the combined yards put about 500 feet of distance between the two houses. They keep parrots that wail at all hours of the night, always in triplets.

The room I sleep in during my stay is on the third storey of the house, up its own little private staircase. A record player and two immense speakers sit beneath the window by the table, and the walls are painted deep red. A green couch wraps around the walls behind me, leading to the desk and blue-screened computer. I rise from my chair and walk down the stairs to the kitchen. The creaking under my shoes turns to clicking as I step from the hardwood floor to the granite tiles of the entryway. Two windows carved out on either side of the door show only the smolder of the porch light and the first of the few brick stairs down to the driveway. Beyond that there is only darkness. I look down to see the grey cat that I am taking care of perched in the window, pawing at the glass. Her legs arch up around her

body and her eyes peel wide. I turn and walk into the kitchen, hearing her trot behind me while I approach her dish.

The kitchen appears as stark outlines from the moonlight shining inside. The stone countertop island glints like a blade, compressed and flattened in my view. The openness of the room unnerves me. I fill the cat's dish and turn back towards the doorway, hurrying past the light switch, managing to slap it off on the second try. Up the stairs again and into my friend's room, I close the door behind me and reseal myself before the television to regain my composure.

The wall on which the television screen is mounted does not go all the way to the ceiling. Over it two bookshelves border a large bed, and a bathroom door rests nearly closed. Three large mirrored doors conceal the closet, and behind the farthest there is a little crawlspace leading to a small square door that allows access to the roof. A small purple backpack squats near the door, underneath deliberately placed old blankets and toys. Inside it a small black pipe and large sack of blended cherry tobacco are wrapped in towels to conceal their smell. From the roof you can see the lights freckling the hillside, forming into discernable lines as they follow the Angeles Crest, and disappearing two-thirds of the way up the nearest hills. I know that tonight is a full moon and that the winds will be high. The television fails to distract from the breaching silence.

I rise and walk with measured steps around the partition, into the dark bedroom and observe myself in the mirrored door before pulling it back. Once in the little crawlspace, I consider closing the mirror behind me before remembering that I am the only one here. I slide the purple backpack out from under its hovel carefully and force open the sticky square door to the roof.

The full moon is directly overhead, the grinning half face seeming to purposefully return my gaze. Everything blushes sharp silver; the air is clear and the winds are warm on my face. The trees stumble back and forth in the wind, cutting little mosaics of deep blue from the sky behind them that shifts and shutters. I open the backpack's stubborn yellow zipper and pick through its contents with my fingers. Finding the small black pipe, I grip it between my teeth while I pinch tobacco into its deep bowl. Smoke spools out like falling ribbons in the still air. Drawing deeply and puffing out, I saturate the air around me with rich cherry and sandalwood fragrance. I keep my head deliberately fixed forward, hearing the tiles on the other side of the roof vibrate in the wind, as if under-foot. The winds are returning now, and the trees around me whip harder than before. From the roof you can clearly see the undeveloped field next to my friend's house. Wheat-like stalks and fennels overspread it and thrash in the wind like lines of insects rushing back and forth. I focus my eyes on the smoke rising up in currents and bleeding into air. The moonlight soaks the field in my periphery, gleaming bright off of the large metal tripod power poles running up its center.

The emptiness of the field tugs at my eyes, as if whispering. I glance back and forth as I smoke, and little sounds prickle my skin. As I sip from the pipe, something catches my eye, a movement that does not follow the wind. A formed darkness slinks through the field. It must be a person. A light flashes in front of its face, a small flame, then disappears, leaving behind a tiny glowing speck stuck into the shape like a single eye, occasionally moving up and down with a sweep of its arm. I become conscious of how well lit I am on this roof beneath the moonlight and retreat inside, hastily dousing my pipe against the side of the house. Once inside I hear a faint



knocking, dull and regular in intervals of three. I tiptoe down the stairs, feeling the tightness in my chest swell. The cat is once again at the entranceway windows, pawing frantically at the glass. Hearing the knocks subside I perch on top of the stairs leading down to the door and feel a vibration against my thigh. Blinking on the dull blue screen is a message from another friend of mine. He is at the door wanting to be let in, carrying a bag of his own.

## Airport Hilton

My reflection stares back at me while I wash my hands and slide back the shower curtain. I place myself on the lid of the toilet seat and take slow, deep breaths, a measure to counteract the anxiety I can feel bubbling up in my chest and pooling in my forehead. One breathes in for five full seconds through the nose and then exhales, as slowly as one can, through the mouth with one's lips pursed, as if blowing through a straw. Five or so minutes of this yields the usual effect; my shortness of breath dissipates and my heartbeat returns to normal, but the tightness in my chest and heat in my forehead remains. I am in a state of tensed stasis, like the arm of a catapult trussed back, primed to fire. I reflect on our journey from the airport to the hotel room in long brushstrokes of memory.

We take the final steps out of the pressurized hallway of the 747 jet and are in Chicago. The flatness of the place rushes up to greet me. I can only see through one of the windows but the land is perfectly splayed and smoothed out. Except for a couple of irregular patches of trees the place rolls itself out like an unremarkable rug before me. This is the first time I have ever been to Chicago. I feel lost without the constant dipping and jutting hills of California, and do not like having to manufacture perspective in their absence.

We wander through the strange airport more or less in a collective trance. I am vaguely aware of a rental car, hotel reservations, a tour of the campus scheduled for tomorrow. The atmosphere of the place is a sharp departure from that of LAX. There is a strange kind of familiarity and casualness about the place. Employees stand in little clusters talking, their jackets unbuttoned and the TSA badges on them flitting back and forth with their gesticulations like bats with wings made for planes.

Back home no one talks in the airport; people seldom talk in general. It is strange for comfort and familiarity to be so off-putting. I miss Los Angeles. The brief glances of acknowledgement followed by politely determined indifference created a real sense of voluntary community. It is not as if people don't talk if approached, but more like it was totally your choice to approach or not. There were no expectations manufactured by a pre-existing atmosphere of interaction.

We find our way outside and the heat bastes my skin. I do not breathe; rather air sops into my lungs, landing with a soggy thud on the bottom of the inside of my chest like lumps of soaked cotton. Just the short walk from the terminal to the rental kiosk seems straining because of the pervasive, syrupy thickness of the air. In California the heat is dry and beaming down, rather than moist and oppressive from all angles. Once inside our rental car we begin the process of wresting meaning from the road signs, which seem designed explicitly to trick new arrivals. They are not clear, delineated, comforting like they are back home. They announce road bisections and upcoming exits with barely enough time to register them, let alone take them. Several false starts and tense moments later we are finally on the path away from Chicago proper, towards Lake Forest.

The road leading up to Lake Forest is humming with cicadas. This is, for me, an entirely new experience. In California, at my home especially, the twilight and early evening always ticked along to the metronome of several crickets beating in unison, but the sound of the cicadas is different. They do not seem to care that it is daytime, and their hum falls heavy on the air, sharp and almost electric, with irregular crescendos and diminuendos like some Gregorian chant. The cicadas have a quality of language that disturbs me. Looking through the trees along Highway 60 I

hear a great unseen chorus of whispers, roaring out with occasional laughter and then retreating again behind their cupped hands.

We arrive at the hotel, which leans back from the road, alone except for a small tech firm neighboring it to the left. We enter and the man who greets us at the desk waves hello and smiles.

The journey recounted in my mind, I find myself still staring into the bathroom mirror.

When I come out of the bathroom my mother and father are each lying on one of the two beds in the bedroom of our room. They stare at the television, committed to silence. I notice my father closing his eyes sometimes and taking deliberate breaths. I inherited my anxiety from him, physiologically speaking. My mother fixes her eyes on the television screen, not so much watching it but letting it wash over her. She finds comfort in television and radio the way a fitful sleeper covets the hum of a fan. She bathes in white noise to drown out the worrisome voices that make my father and me breathe funny. I have always admired and envied her for this ability. I go back out to the living room and open the empty refrigerator and look into it for several minutes. This is a common trick I have used many times in the past to stall for time, when I do not feel comfortable enough to join my family and risk being asked “what’s the matter?” For as long as I can remember I have hated that question, as if the question itself was the thing that solidified the problem; that, the question being unheard, I could shoulder-shrug away as the trembling of an overzealous mind. The cool air of the refrigerator on my face steadies me, and I feel confident enough to return to the bedroom. I lie next to

my mother and, through the getting of food and bedding down, we pass the night in relative silence.

Today we are going to see the college. It is the first time I will be seeing the college; I have not even seen pictures. I have gotten second-hand reviews from my friend, with whom I will be living for the year, but I have not seen the place myself. We take the short drive from the Hilton to the campus slowly, having built up significant mistrust of the roads from the previous day's struggles. The cicadas are screeching so loud they seem to move the trees without wind. I keep my eyes focused on the land passing by the passenger side window, counting every last detail that lies between myself and the home to which I have blindly committed four years of my life. Turning down the Deerpath exit I feel as if I'm recognizing someone I have never met; the place looks like an experiment to recreate my California high school town that has been left unattended in a Petri dish, spread its spores, and grown monstrous. The trees are full, almost swollen in the late summer heat, and the houses are set back deep into their yards with an obvious aura of money and establishment. This is not at all unlike La Canada, the wealthy little town I have gone to school in my entire life. Because of this, every subtle difference screams out to me, devouring my attention and swallowing any familiarity. Without the constant ups and downs of the hills that give La Canada such a dynamic flow, the air of wealth here collects unstirred at the street level and suffocates any sense of movement through it. The houses here all look so much more classical in their large scale. Having grown accustomed to the more modern and Spanish style of upper class neighborhoods in California, these homes seem pretentious in their old-money, East

Egg sensibility. Their immense open front yards seem less welcoming than the stone walls and mechanized gates of the houses back home.

We take breakfast at a small café. Across the street, through the window next to which we are seated, I can see the train tracks raised above the street, crowding back into the thick trees. Three times during the meal the Metra crosses the small bridge and the whole window gasps. The trees bulge outward from the background of the glass-encased image, sucked towards the train by its frantic speed, heaving back into posture as it anxiously brakes pulling into the station down the road. The sound of it is fluid through the glass, like two clean bars of metal sliding against one another. Around us in the brownish crimson of the restaurant people crouch over plates and suck on forks like split ends of bone. Conversation folds itself into bare noise and seems to come from no one. All are eating with downturned eyes. I imagine many of them are like me, new here and treading water off a quick-sinking shore. The dull ache of the people talking seems distant and overhead, a subsurface tone that has always been here, but that I am just now noticing. The waitress comes and fills our drinks with a heavy smile and makes small talk. I stare more at the glass of the window than through it, and the meal passes in a pantomime.

To aid our digestion we decide to take in some of the town before making the final half-mile push to the school. I have trouble taking my eyes off of the tracks as we walk along, they seem to vibrate on the brink of rupture, waiting only for the next train to collapse. We take a left and begin walking through the residential neighborhood on the street's only sidewalk. The sidewalks are even and flat, clearly having never been forced to maintain their composure against quaking earth below.

I find it strange to realize this; in California even the sidewalks are split into hills and valleys.

As we go deeper into the neighborhood the cicadas drone louder and louder, the pace of their rising and falling action becoming more frantic, as if they were spies warning those around us of our intrusion. My mother and father hold hands and walk pleasantly behind me, experiencing the precise opposite of my current anxiety. I hear deep breaths and without looking can feel them pointing right and left, letting out awed whispers about the beauty of the houses all around us. They are relieved, leaving me in a safe place that is more comforting to them because it will remain forever new. Without the pressure of the need to become familiar with this place they can allow themselves to take it in and I envy them. To them it is a mobile spinning overhead, just as each passing star and moon is new in a baby's eyes.

We find ourselves next to the Lake Forest Public Library, a building that looks as if it was preserved as a historical landmark in the ancient days of Athens. The dome crackles between bluish grey and faded jade, giving the illusion of spindly shadows as if always shined upon through trees. The steps up to it are empty and we decide without speaking to one another to go inside.

The doorway crowds us in and the mosaic floor spreads out as if spilled onto the middle of the room from above. The light hangs inside the way it does in a film, and the little unidentifiable specks inside the thick beams lazily float in small circles. We walk forward onto a green faded carpet, or a carpet that seems faded green. The place looks to the naked eye the way that a memory of a place would look pictured in one's mind. It seems to have been built to fit the exact stereotype of a library,

cultivated from film and television. It is the form of a library, even in the stacks that are not standardized and stuffed haphazardly with disparate, spine-cracked books. As we walk through it I find myself filling with a sense of strange calm. The familiarity that comes with this place's archetypical aspect gives me a sense of anchorage. Thousands of miles from home where even the lay of the sidewalk slabs and the feel of the summer air are different a small cove of sameness blooms mere feet from my new home. Even after our first circuit around the place I feel somehow as if I have walked it countless times. It reminds me of the hills on the horizon back home, in that they too always seemed to me sketched from some inescapable template. They are to me the form of hills. Knowing that same feeling can exist here as well makes a bridge between home and here, and in this I find peace. We find ourselves at the entrance once more and stand under the center of the dome. For a few minutes we just stand there, looking up and around. I know that when we exit the building we will turn left, through the small triangle-shaped park, and find the campus. I feel calm.

The last few hundred feet to the edge of the grounds rises and falls gently like smoothed-out plains. We turn right and walk across the stone bridge that runs along the North Campus ravine. I am made to understand that the girl's dorm is the Victorian-looking building shyly peering through the tree line to my left. The cicadas are taking their afternoon nap, and the street is quiet. We walk down the long driveway leading to a tall building with a raised porch, facing west. The paths cut into the grass tangle together, and we cross them through the middle of the grass. My parents and I are walking in line now, me in the middle the way we used to when going to look at the neighborhood Christmas lights. We reach the small brick



building at the far end of the campus and stand beneath the archway, looking ancient and charming with “Blackstone” carved into a scroll-shaped stone. We take our key from a young woman with glasses and walk up the stairs to the room that will be mine. The emptiness of it bursts through the unlocked door. The place is a canvas, blank with windows that catch the sun through a large tree in the afternoon. I walk to the window and pull up the blinds while my parents hover in the doorway, holding hands and smiling. The place has a reddish tint and feels lived-in already. I seat myself on the bed in the far left of the room and recline. My breaths are regular and of medium depth. I rise, walk between my mother and father exiting the room, and lock the door behind me. Walking back through the campus I once again feel a strange sense of rightness. Like the library, the place has a character of permanence, as if somewhere tucked in the back of my mind, this is what all colleges have always looked like. Trying to form one in my mind’s eye I can distinguish little difference between the vague picture in my head and the meticulous reality around me. I walk through the grass between buildings and the sun feels crisp, shining down with purpose. All the houses look new and strange on the walk back to the car, and every few we pass I let out a little whisper of awe.

We arrive back at the hotel just as the sun is disappearing over the flat horizon. The clouds are tinted pink and orange, and the air stirs with light breeze, feeling like the rush of lukewarm water. We have dinner in the lobby and then walk the stairs to our room. Once inside I stretch across the small bed on which my mother is seated. My father sits on the other side of me and gently pulls my mother down by the shoulder. They embrace me as I gaze at the television, the sound of it washing over me like waves.

## Congress

The pathway through South Campus is flecked with people already deep into their weekends. I look to my left and see a man smoking a cigarette and wearing an athletic hoodie and sweats. He squints and whispers plumes of pale smoke into the spiny evergreen bushes near the glass door to his building. The top of a bright silver can glints in the sunlight, throwing a beam into my eyes and forcing me to squint back at him. He shifts his glasses slightly upward onto his nose and sweeps his arm flicking ash. He makes the sunlight seem somehow uncharacteristic. Coors cans and cigarettes, warm clothes and that relaxed squint that accompanies the third or fourth beer, these things have until recently been almost vampiric in nature to me. They emerge in the evening and stalk among the unlit pathways, seeking nests to gather in. I know South campus as their haven. I have ridden the walls and doorways of a few parties here and am adjusting to the relaxed rules that come with such a number of unconfined people my age. In the back of my mind, mixed enough in with the anticipation of the evening and the novelty of the sight that I don't have to fully admit it myself, I feel a sense of admiration for him. Not so much for the action itself but rather for the unashamed committal of the action. In passing I can enjoy someone truly indulging in the now. Before I am out of sight we catch eyes and he moves his hands down lazily to lace his fingers across his stomach, covering the protruding can. He seems to nod, or jerk his chin upward towards me, and I face forward and increase my pace just a little, my usual reaction to someone when I am not sure if they are greeting me.

I have trouble making my mind up about him. The specter of the coming night hangs in my mind. Tonight is the first night that we are to attempt the city. The

Bloody Beetroots at the Congress; my head swims at the thought of the thick music and the molecular crowds. Looking at this man I can imagine him transposed exactly, standing in his same attire with his same gait, near the outer edges of the dance floor at this concert. He would look in place there, and maybe his aspect would be easier for me to admire. Or maybe it would be more off-putting. It is hard to tell. I want to walk over to him, to ask him what his evening has been like, what his morning is like right now, how he is feeling, what his obligations are, but I cannot. I want to ask the questions more than to hear the answers, just to know if they would be the right questions to ask. I feel that if he and I were to change places I would regard the man shuffling past with suspicion, maybe even a hint of bitterness at the perceived possibility of judgment. I hope he realizes that is not my intention, and that I simply do not know whether I want to shake his hand or disappear.

The brick and stone parapets of the two dorm buildings frame the campus like a Hudson River School display piece. I reach my room again and my friend is kneeling in the closet, moving piles of pastel-colored clothes to the left and right. I turn my attention to my own drawers. I retrieve a dark purple v-neck, white corduroy pants, and a windbreaker. The windbreaker is a recent purchase, and my current favorite article of clothing. It puffs out along the shoulders and biceps, coming more to a point near the wrists, and is white with ribbons of pastel blue, pink, and green forming a v down its front. We are joined by our third friend shortly after, looking normal compared to us, and we walk together to the train station. We see the Metra creeping in the distance from Triangle Park and cover the rest of the

distance in a sprint, watching the rotating lights at the front of the train steam past, goring at the air like a bull seeing red.

I have never been on the train before. We sit together in a right angle formation on the upper deck, watching the trees rush past. After many stops the track takes an ominous turn and the trees disappear. I can just barely glimpse the buildings creeping up in the distance as we plod deliberately towards them, like a roller coaster car trundling upwards towards the largest drop. I am almost sick with anticipation. To say that the night's coming activities are beyond my comfort zone is an understatement. It is not simply that we are going to a concert with dancing and drinking in a city that I have never explored. I will be an alien to myself tonight. My reflection even seems to look quizzically at me, as if it is perfectly aware of how much of a stretch I am attempting to pull off. Tonight I will attempt to inhabit a psychic space that has always loomed, imposing, on the periphery of my mind, seeming a place forbidden to me. Looking through the thick windows I stare through a phantom of my own reflection. In the reflection also I can see the faces of those behind me, and am surprised to find that, even in my candy kid clothing, I am catching no eyes. We slow to a stop on a platform of warped wood like that of a sea-soaked pier. A sign reads "Ravenswood" in white block letters. We walk the steps down from the creaking platform in a crowd and layers peel away as we walk towards our destination.

The walk itself takes little over twenty minutes but passes two large graveyards on the right. Their walls and gates are high but bare and practical, seeming to forego respect for the dead in favor of the aesthetic of a lower-scale gated community. Wrappers and large red cups are caked into the crevices between

the large stones at the base of the gates. The stones inside seem to all tilt a different direction, missing only a creeping ankle-high layer of fog in their resemblance to cemeteries in old movies. I wish that the streets around us were less well-lit. The clear dull orange of the streetlights and building facades robs the crypts in the distance of all their mystery, and the grasses are speckled with cigarette butts like nicotine sod. On the right side of the street there are various convenience stores and fast food outlets, with people darting in and out of them, and walking their jittery vectors inside, visible through the windows, awash in fluorescent bulbs that give a sickly aspect to their vibrant moving and living. Walking between these two extremes makes me feel like the central figure in some heavy-handed metaphor about the inevitability of death, futility of life, and drabness of both. I fish my pack of cigarettes out of my absurd jacket and light one. I draw deeply and exhale a puff of smoke before resting the cigarette in my upturned palm, taking comfort in the aspect of show.

We arrive at the theater and find a line of only two groups at the entrance, as people steadily stream out from a show that has just ended. We lean against the wall, putting on our best look of collective nonchalance, my roommate's body language more pronounced to hide the indentations of the dual flasks strapped to the undersides of his thighs. As the line accumulates behind us the velvet rope of the entrance is peeled back and a large bald man begins admitting people ahead of us. As I smoke and chat with my roommate our friend notices each entrant being patted down extensively and we struggle to maintain our cool. Deciding that risk is undesirable but that waste is unacceptable, we cede our places near the front of the line and scramble across the street to a small circular park, preposterously stuck on

a bizarre, almost pentagonal patch of unused land completely surrounded by streets. A wall of shrubs about six feet high forms the borders of the park, and in the center a stone man holds a stone boy aloft with a look of excitement. My roommate reaches down his jeans and pulls out the first flask, a sound like tearing cloth muffling his near-scream. We pass it around, finishing the cheap rum inside quickly before moving onto the next one in the same fashion. In order to cool the seeping burn on our tongues and mask our breath, we each smoke a cigarette quickly, and I imagine that from beyond the bushes the circular mouth on top of the park with the smoke billowing out must look like a sleepy, rousing caldera. We nestle the empty flasks beneath our bench and head towards the street. When we emerge from our sanctuary we find that the line has stretched to the other door at the far side of the Congress theater. We take our places, content to wait our turn, but the bald man at the front of the line vanishes into the building, clasping the velvet rope behind him. For a moment we worry that we have missed our chance, but we do not have time to vocalize this concern before he emerges directly behind us, having decided for some reason to start taking tickets from the building's far door. How did that work? I have often wondered something like that, but rarely about actions that were my own. We flash our tickets and walk inside, done as if by order.

The venue is far smaller than it looks from the street. Down a short set of stairs from the door there is a massive unadorned black room leading to a mostly bare stage. As I mill around the floor I see people streaming in, many barely dressed. One woman in particular grabs my eye, wearing a full-body fishnet stocking with an opal bikini and bunny ears. She walks towards me directly and hugs me without provocation. My skin crawls ever so slightly, but I manage barely to maintain my

composure, enough to even pat her stiffly on the back with one hand before she releases me. I swell privately with pride at my progress since the backyard parties of years ago. My friends and I begin to huddle closer as the band takes the stage and the air around us rushes for the exits. We are near the front of the dance floor, within arms' reach of the stage, and I feel something between exhilaration at the coming explosion and terror at the lack of an available escape route. The two-man band takes the stage, wearing luchador masks, and waits for the tension to reach full potency before turning the speakers loose upon us.

In the din of the first two tracks the collective vibration of the room separates me from my friends. We are being roughly shuttled in opposite directions, and in my conscious effort to carefreely dance I am pushed to the perfect center of the floor by the twisting bodies around me. Nearer to the stage the dancers are all young women, mostly waiflike and hardly dressed. They are entranced by the music, but their dancing is more contained: it is deliberate yet chaotic, lashing yet soft like a wine-drenched Bacchanal. The center of the room is a harsher sea. All the men tall enough to be content with this distance from the stage but violent enough to have fought their way this close thrash around, jerking through the crowd like sharks through the water around a fresh kill. It is all I can do to keep from being crushed under. Suddenly the music drops out, the whole room freezes, and with one mind and in one voice the room shouts "1, 2, Woop Woop" as the speakers launch a barrage of electric buzzing and bass, signifying the beginning of the band's signature track, "Warp 1.9." The sea around me becomes a tornado, lifting and tossing me. I am struck hard in the chest by a flying elbow, and am unable for a moment to draw breath. The lack of oxygen deflates me, and I fight my way single-mindedly to the

back of the room, up the few stairs to the seating area, and place myself at a table in the corner with a good view of the stage.

I rest my chin in my two palms, breathing in and out slowly, and looking down at my shoes that look as if they have been mangled by a lawn mower. With the music washing over me, I watch the scene on the dance floor like the movements of migrating birds in the sky. The collective whole moves with obscured purpose, each individual surrendering to the power and priority of the pattern. They seem to follow an unseen leader, and none breaks step. I still may not fit in with the formation but I no longer pick through the dancers with surgical precision, singling out the deliberations that make up the movement of the whole. I cannot even find my friends in the mass, but it is mainly for lack of trying. The dancers transfix me like a writhing fire, and I vacate my thoughts to be present in the watching. The music and movement blend together and before I know it the concert is over, and people are streaming past me with mascara running and white tank tops soaked through with sweat. My friends find me in passing and we walk together outside.

The cold air does not hit us but wraps around us, sealing us like a membrane. We rush along the street towards the train, each pointing out sites of bruises yet to come and talking with the rushed exhilaration of men fresh out of combat. When we arrive back on campus the moonlight is stark and our breath curls outward in tendrils. We say goodnight to our friend, my roommate and I, and then retreat upstairs. Before bed I walk downstairs for a final cigarette. Seated on the bench beneath the moonlight trickling through the solitary tree behind me I light my smoke and draw on it once before stretching my arm out and moving it in little sideways figure eights with a turn of my wrist. Looking down and to my left, sitting



at the base of the ashtray, I see an indistinct shape, throwing back silver beams of moonlight. I bend down, without even realizing why, and lift it to examine it further. It is a crushed Coors can, with a slight amount of liquid still sloshing back and forth with each movement. A faint half-smile crosses my lips. I replace the can at the base of the ashtray, feeling like I am placing an offering at the feet of some pagan idol. I wonder where the man is tonight, which building he stalks, what secret rites he might bear the mark of in the morning. Flicking the filter of my cigarette, I rise and walk inside; I pass someone I do not know, and I jerk my chin slightly upward in acknowledgment, the gesture feeling natural, suited to the situation.

## Attention Metra Commuters

Here I feel as if I am an incidental speck off-center on a specimen slide. The buildings here are not like those back home. They huddle together, peering down, and every time I look upwards it is like awakening from a deep sleep to find myself being watched. The buildings back home are loose, they do not whisper to each other the way these do, they mimic the people back home, casually standing here and there, feigning ignorance of the existence of all others. In Los Angeles the city is open and sprawls outward in all directions. Here in Chicago the buildings pack tight like scared children, or the corridors in some giant's game of hide and seek.

I walk outward from Ogilvie and cross the bridge over the river. Below me double-decked boats of tourists turn their heads at every murmur of the loudspeakers behind them. I look ahead of me and see a man wearing dirty clothes, pacing in nervous vectors. Every few moments he says something, and nods with a look like contentment. It occurs to me that anyone could just drop something off of this bridge and there isn't a lot that the people on the boats below could do to avoid it, other than diving into the surely lethal chocolate brown waters of the river itself. No one on the boats below seems to notice or worry though. Cities are built on this bizarre species of trust that is not really trust but the confidence that a certain level of audacity has simply been rendered impossible by the system. I pass the pacing man and he holds his hand out to a vacant space two feet to my left and looks downward. I slide a dollar out of my front pocket (I keep a few dollars there so as to not have to produce my wallet in these situations) and stretch to put it in his hand. He does not close his fist around it, however, but continues to pace, it fluttering in the slight wind. As I pass him, though, he pivots and reaches out towards me, resting

the tips of his fingers for a moment on my left shoulder. My whole body tenses as I struggle not to break my stride. I walk faster down the remaining twenty feet or so of the bridge and onto the sidewalk. I am funneled by a surrounding crowd into a sort of overhanging area coming off from the building to my left that looks like a mining tunnel with its bare pipes, caged light bulbs, and cheap wood. I emerge from the overhang on a street corner where I can see the buildings stretch far in four directions, each seeming to lean toward me, as if they would tiptoe closer if I were to let my guard down.

In the middle distance I can see the raised train tracks snaking through the buildings. The area underneath them hangs dim and damp like a curtain. The streets seem stamped deeper into the asphalt by the lumbering cars overhead. The flimsy-looking columns that hold the tracks and the platform wheeze with each passing of the train. It all seems so out of place. The cast iron and rough concrete branch downward in columns and stairs like capillaries running off some strained artery. I walk up the wide platform stairs and pass through the gate leading to the platform.

The platform is such that the oncoming trains appear suddenly, jumping out from behind the platform's walls. The Pink Line is scheduled to arrive in five minutes. People seem to be staring at me but I do not know why. Their gazes pull time apart at both ends, stretching five minutes out into excruciating cycles of catching eyes with a stranger and then darting them away. On the opposite side of the platform a large man in a mud-caked black hoodie leans against a large orange duffel bag and stares. When I match eyes with him he will not look away. He becomes the anchorage of my drifting eyes; every few moments I look back at him to find he has not looked away. I can hear the track quaking as the train rounds the

bend into the station. I board the train and can still see the black-hoodie-wearing man through the frosty windows, gaze unbroken.

The inside of the train hangs between eggshell and ecru. The blue padded seats face all directions, which is perhaps why everyone has chosen to stand. I wait on the balls of my feet for the pleasant computerized voice to announce Washington and Wells. I glance up towards the route map above the row of seats in front of me, trying to get my bearings. Thick lines of pink, orange, brown, green, and purple wrap around one another, looking like the artwork of a kindergartner without much imagination. My hand grips the leather strap above my head tightly, and I cross one leg over the other in an attempt to look casual. No matter how gradually the train slows approaching each station I lurch forward when we come to a complete stop. I am the only one who is visibly affected by the train's motion; everyone else around me seems to have developed some kind of urban sea legs that compensate for the jittering motions of the train cars.

The train skips to a halt at my stop and I exit quickly, carefully avoiding lines of sight with my eyes as I walk down from the platform. Above me a huge green owl spreads its metallic wings, perched on the public library. Here the streets are wider than near Ogilvie but the buildings have that same looming quality, and the winged metal beast above me seems prone to sweep down from the building and swallow me whole. As I stand looking upward I feel a tap on my shoulder. My body instinctually seizes downward from the point of contact, and I hear laughter as I turn to see my friend, carrying a small brown paper bag and wearing a smile.

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There is a tactile closeness to the college campus. Standing in the archway between the towers of the Middle Campus dorm buildings I feel as if I am blocking a synapse, currents smacking bluntly into my sides, pressing from all directions. The large mock lantern on the archway's gate throws down swatches of peachy orange. The light splashes on my face and I can feel droplets of it misting my skin. I turn and walk towards the bench that sits on the smaller lawn of the quad, taking a seat next to the obelisk ashtray.

Behind me Harlan Hall winks as shutters are billowed by autumn winds. Many-colored eyes cover the building, and when each shutter is blown back I can glimpse those inside. In almost every window there are people standing, their profiles framed. Sometimes in two rooms they will face opposite directions, so it looks as if they are carrying on conversations through the walls. Every now and then I turn back and see someone looking out a window at me with a look that seems to question my motives. I dig into the deep pockets of my large black overcoat and pull out a small blue pouch labeled Bugler. I open it and pull out a small rolling paper that flutters against the wind with a brittle sound. I sprinkle it with tobacco as if seasoning it to taste, and then crush it between thumb and forefinger, rolling and squeezing it into a pleasant conical shape. I bring the small tube to my mouth, lick it closed, and then pink my fingers around the larger end and twist it into a small point. I rotate it around the very tip of the flame dribbling from my lighter, drawing on it in short puffs to make sure that it burns evenly all the way around. I examine the tip of it, satisfied, and then turn again towards the building. People are still

looking at me. I would have thought that my meticulous display gave me more than enough reason to be sitting out here alone.

I rise with my rolled cigarette clenched in my teeth and place my hands in my pockets, walking towards the small stone chapel up the pathway toward North Campus. I stop underneath the single light along the path and examine the blown glass of the chapel's windows. I turn off of the path and walk towards the covered stoop leading up to the imposing wooden doors. Before I can reach them, however, a car with blue lights on top pulls into the parking lot and its headlights stab at me. It does not migrate into a space; rather it sits in the middle of the lot, and the headlights fix me pointedly, mirroring the suspicion of those inside Harlan. I slow my pace and eventually stop, the force of the unseen gaze within forming a bubble I cannot penetrate. I take a deep puff on my cigarette and exhale it deliberately towards the car, clouding their lights and, I hope, absolving me of any wariness.

I walk back to the path and follow it, taking odd turns at acute angles, and look up to find myself approaching Hotchkiss Hall, looking like a miniature castle or gigantic miniature golf obstacle. The rough, jagged-cut red bricks of it cup their hands around the shadows thrown by the streetlights nearby. I sit on the nearby bench and flick the last burning embers of my cigarette to the wind. The campus looks unstirred from here; there is no reason to walk this way on a weekend night. Here I feel unassailable. This bench has a good command of the whole campus and sits several layers removed from its hot shifting center. I sit in the stillness, feeling the comfort of a bathysphere pilot, isolated and safe from the crushing pressure on all sides. In the far distance I can see vague shapes moving back and forth, glowing against the dim light of the chapel pathway. From here I cannot even pick out facial

features. They are blank, moving in regular patterns, like migrating shades. None look this way. I feel something between a voyeur's pleasure and a hermit's peace of mind.

After five or so minutes I begin to hear a small sound nearby. It is indistinct but carries a kind of urgency, like the scraping of fingernails on stone. I look to my left and the sound grows louder. After some moments, the sandstone trashcan about ten feet away moves. The flap on its front opens slowly, spilling darkness, and a shape takes form, framed within it. Suddenly a large raccoon's head lurches out of the can and looks back and forth hesitantly. I lock eyes with it and we are frozen there for what seems like a long time. Intrigued, I rise and walk slowly toward the animal, measuring my steps so they will fall without sound. When I am no more than a few feet away it hisses, barely audible, and flashes its teeth that glint like flying arrows. I back slowly away with the same measured gait and begin to walk back along the path in the direction of my room.

When I am far along the path I look back and see, or imagine I can see, the thing's head still peering out from the can, its brown eyes still locked into mine. I walk looking backwards for a few steps before I hear a voice calling my name. I look forward and see one of the faceless shapes ahead waiving its arm towards me. I hear my name once more and waive back, altering my course to intercept the shapes in the distance. Just as I am close enough to make out features I look behind me once more I can see the animal waddling away, walking with exasperated disinterest like it no longer cares for some game it has been playing.

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For a moment I stand blinking upwards, like a child. The street underneath my feet and the sidewalks and the yards of the houses are blended together and shimmer like a pool. Little mounds here and there give texture and perspective to the ground, and trenches tracing ahead of me commemorate footprints that are not mine.

This is different from the other snowfalls I have seen since coming here. They were harsh and the snow did not fall but whipped back and forth along the ground, cutting through clothes and eyelids with little bits of hot chaff that stung the skin. Tonight the winds nuzzle the huge flakes down from above, letting them waltz lazily through the air before coming to rest with no impact. They fall on my face like a soft kiss. I walk down Deerpath towards the Lake Forest beach, eager to see Lake Michigan catching the flakes and stirring them like foam on hot cocoa. It is late and the street listens. Every crunch of the snow under my boots is isolated in the silence, and rushes up to my ears like a burst of cold water. The constant motion of the air tricks my eyes; more than once I think I see some shape dance from the tip of my vision into the shadows ahead.

The thick-falling snow muffles the usual distance of cold air and everything seems to touch. The grass under each uncovered footprint weaves together like a stitched pattern. I stop at the mouth of the huge staircase leading from the park to the beach below. At the bottom of the steps the emptiness of the beach swells around me like the waves I can hear lapping against the ice flows offshore. I walk out onto the sand, wondering with each step whether I am still on earth or testing the unsure glacier growing by inches every winter day. Without daylight and



through the heavy flurry the beach loses all context. I might as well be standing on the edge of some ancient map of a flat earth.

I walk back onto what I think is the pathway and continue down the beach. In the distance a flagpole shines above a circular stone outcropping. I walk to it and out to its furthest tip. In the gaps between the crashing of the waves against the jagged ice I hear, or imagine I hear, distant crunches coming closer. In my periphery shadows and spigots of lake water dance like wild shapes in firelight.

The wind subsides and now I am sure that I hear footsteps. I turn and look further up the beach to see a figure walking towards the water. It wears a long coat that trails like a shroud and it walks with deliberate steps as if counting them. I think of walking towards it but hesitate. It hovers at the very tip of my vision and it is possible that it is not alone. It walks to the tip of the ice and looks down at the rippling water, collecting ridges of snow on the top of its head and along its shoulders. Just as I make up my mind to approach, I feel a vibration against my thigh. Removing my phone and squinting into its screen, I can see a message from a friend of mine, wondering where I am. I reply quickly and start to walk back towards campus, turning only once to see the figure just barely standing out against the white-flecked blackness, perched still with hunched gait as if it mesmerized by the water casting its broken reflection.

## Treasure Valley

The valleys and mountains in Idaho seem desperate to distinguish between one another, like frustrated twins. In California they talk to each other; the roads trace back and forth between them like the touch of a lover. In Chicago there are no hills, the land lies flat as if in a deep sleep, waiting for the plates to shift. Here the mountains linger in the distance like the shy ones at a dance, and the land leads up to them hesitantly, on tip-toes, before the mountains scoop it up. I look out the window of the small propeller plane and see a suburban grid that spreads out over dust like a whispered suggestion, never seeming sure whether of its own intention.

The plane lands in the small Boise airport and we are off it in moments. I retrieve my bags directly from the belly of the plane and walk through the small glass bungalow that leads into the three-terminal structure. Everyone flashes smiles at one another. Planes sit at odd angles on the tarmac and the pilot stops to chat with one of the female baggage handlers. Behind me I hear them burst into laughter, and I look back to see the woman paw at the pilot's chest as they exchange gasping monosyllables. Once inside I am crushed under by the small scale of the place. O'Hare to LAX has been my routine for three years now, and I have lost my fear of flying alone in the pervasive anonymity of large airports. I had thought that O'Hare seemed personal compared to Los Angeles, but at every turn I see those around me redefining the word. People on the escalator contort their necks back and forth, chatting with those in front and behind, laughing about the slight turbulence of the flight and the man in the third row, visible to all of us, who ordered three drinks and snored loudly for half the flight. I grip the handles of my bags tight. Through the glass doors in front of me people pair off with one another after the exclamations

and embraces that mark a homecoming. When I am no more than a few feet away I can see my parents, smiling wide, and the distance that remains between us after we see one another seems like miles. I wish I had not seen them until I was closer. So far away I find myself over-thinking the proper way to convey my joy. They meet me at the doors and we hug, my mother squeezing tight and my father laughing.

The drive to my new home slips by like a half-remembered dream. They tell me about the state of our new home, the valley, the surrounding neighborhood, the school across the street, and their brief interactions with the neighbors. I sit and look without seeing through the passenger window and remain as still as I can, hoping that the words will wash over me and seal me against the strangeness of the place. The city of Boise is no larger in scale or population than certain areas of Glendale or Burbank. Christmas decorations adorn every storefront and billboards proclaiming the glory of Christ and God are as regular as mile markers. Although I have never practiced any religion I have never been against any religion. Still this seems so strange to me; the zeal of the freeway signs leaves me feeling impious and negligent of some unrealized duty. I know that this is a manifestation of my own anxiety, but I cannot help feeling as if the place is somehow rejecting me, the way a body might reject a transplanted organ. The lack of traffic, the dearth of on-ramps and off-ramps, the harsh fish-like smell that emanates from the valley's sugarbeet factory, each of these things creeps into me like antibodies mounting an offensive against a hostile alien body. We exit the freeway and drive through a district made up almost entirely of restaurants and mini-malls, passing with dizzying frequency.

After many turns and a long stretch on a quiet residential road we pass slowly by an elementary school. To our left the grounds sit empty, the children

having abandoned them for Christmas vacation. To our right, a small vinyl fence stretches, broken only by the turnouts for little dead end streets on which houses sit and face one another as if looking in a mirror. We make a right onto Shy Creek Place, and immediately another right into the driveway of our house. My anxiety eases slightly as I chuckle to myself at the street's name. I could not have chosen a more appropriate one myself. We exit the car, and as my parents and I retrieve my bags from the trunk I look down the street and across it. Our house looks no different from any of the others, except for the old-fashioned Christmas lights with the huge bulbs that are the only familiar thing I see. My parents walk me around the garage to the sheltered front door of our new home. Next to it sits a small porcelain statue of a German Schnauzer, looking up at me with submissive eyes. This statue is from my grandmother's house, to match the actual German Schnauzer we inherited when she passed, whose name is Max. This used to sit on a hope chest in our old den. Already I feel thrust into a new home that looks as if my old one had been cut into shreds and reassembled from shaky memory. The door opens before me and I walk in with half-closed eyes, feeling something like the anticipation before fireworks explode.

On the stove a pot bubbles and suffuses the air of the living room with thyme and peppercorn and sweet smells of things roasting. I look around the room and see familiarity without context, like a dream that I somehow know is a dream. Up the stairs I see my Himalayan cat peeking around the corner, mesmerized as much by the stairs themselves as my presence. The stairs are new to both of us. I am staring into the eyes of a new home that wears my old home's face. Contents of several rooms sit next to one another, chests and furniture and tables and cabinets that I

have never seen together in the same glance. We sit down at the dinner table and we chat while the roast in the pot finishes turning.

While my mother serves dinner I cannot keep my eyes focused on my parents or the table in front of me. In the soft glow of the overhanging mock chandelier the colors of the house blend together, and the whole place has a look so archetypically homey that it seems manufactured and plucks suspicion out of the back of my mind. It is an hour before I feel confident enough to see my room upstairs. Walking up the stairs is strange to me, and the thought of doing so as part of a daily routine swims in my mind. Once at the top I open a door to my left and my room spreads out before me like patterns on a screen. A large bed dominates the room, which is furnished and decorated starkly so that I may do as I like to it. I see a coat rack in the corner holding my old walking sticks and hung with my old scarves. On the other side of the room, a closet hangs open holding all my old clothes, several old toys, yearbooks, and trinkets. I tell my parents that it looks beautiful, wondering how I will not feel lost on such a large mattress at night, how I will take up so much space. Wordlessly they direct my attention to the wall facing my bed. I look up and my eyes well almost before I can register what they have seen. A pencil sketch of our old home hangs there, the only home I had known for my twenty-one years of life. The details put even my fresh memory to shame. My eyes, through a gathering fog, trace along the driveway, the plane of the roof, the large pine tree puffing like a cloud from the backyard. I turn and my parents are smiling at me with tears in their eyes. We hug and I hold them tight. We are still, holding each other while minutes pass; the tightness in my chest from the flight and the drive and the dinner melts away and in my head there is nothing.

We head downstairs to the den, in which our Christmas tree throws rainbow spirals on the corner. We sit down and listen to our traditional holiday album, “Christmas 1945,” arms around one another and all looking quietly at the tree. There are a few presents underneath it, not as many as years past, but just enough to give the scene the proper depth. My mother’s collection of nutcrackers dots the room, standing guard on the edges of the couch and the body of our standing grand piano. I tread water in the warm colors of the room and the thick smell of the needles on the tree. Each song calls to mind a different picture from my youth, of hanging the tree and unwrapping gifts and watching my family sing together. I am lost to memory and soon the album ends, and I can tell from the heaviness of their arms around my shoulders that both of my parents are long since asleep.

I rouse my mother first. My father groggily rises and goes to unplug the Christmas lights but I stop him, telling him I plan to stay up for a while yet and acquaint myself more fully with the house. He hugs me and follows my mother up the stairs, while the cat lurches away from them down the stairs and huddles between my legs. I go to the far corner of the living room and grab my guitar, returning to the den with my cat in tow. I fiddle on the strings softly and sing in a quiet falsetto, so as not to disturb my sleeping parents. The thin walls of the house bounce the sound back and forth like a trampoline. After a few songs I lay the guitar flat on the couch next to me and walk to the kitchen. I return and sit quietly staring at the glittering tree with a small amber bottle of beer in my hand. My parents do not yet know that I drink but I do not imagine they will mind. I think they will not mind. Sipping at the lips of the bottle I settle deeper into the couch, feeling waves of

sameness lick at my feet. This feels like it used to at home. I rise and walk through the den and the short laundry room into the garage.

The garage is bright and organized, a sharp break from the dim clutter of our garage back home. The garage was one of the rooms in my old house that I was oddly connected to; so many private trips at night to the dingy refrigerator that housed my many drinks and snacks. There was a long brown countertop on which sat stacks of old CDs and two tool boxes. The place had a home-like quality all its own, and despite the mess of it and the dust that occasionally strung down from the visible rafters overhead I always felt safe and comfortable there. This new garage is bright and clean, and is the only part of my new home that does not yet look lived in. Sitting on an old storage box to the immediate right of the doorway is an ashtray and half of a cheap cigar with a wooden bit; I light it and puff slowly on it, watching the plumes obscure the light, and the smell and rich opacity of the air completely saturate the place in my mind, make it feel more like home. I hear a mewling at the door and a small padded thrush, the sound of my cat trying to follow me. I reenter the house, leaving the cigar to smolder in the tray, and shuffle to the kitchen. I open the refrigerator and grab a beer, moving with fluidity. I take my place once more on the couch, and my cat jumps up next to me, pawing inquisitively at the guitar, every now and again hitting the low E string and letting a deep resonant hum probe the room. I look at the tree and settle deep into the cushions, feeling the place wrap its arms around me, and the light of the tree running its fingers through my hair, whispering through a smile about a place that I used to know.

## Brewforia

My father guides me backward with a forearm as he tosses the match. It lands in the small bronze bowl and flames leap upward and the logs sizzle as if turning on a spit. The air rushes outward, hot against my face in its frantic escape. The sun has not even set yet but ever since my father got this little above-ground fire pit he cannot resist kindling it in the hours after dinner, resting his feet against its tinny edge and catching wind in his curls. It has become a new nightly ritual in the warm, thin breeze of Idaho summer. I sit and watch the flames spill down the surface of the logs and feel myself gripping the arms of my chair tight. They will be here soon and I do not know what will happen. Will it feel the same right away, being with them, or will it feel like my new home did at first, segmented and then reassembled according to some new blueprint that seems structurally unsound? Or will the differences in locale prove insurmountable? Will we sit around this fire with nothing to say, following its tide as one with our eyes afraid to touch? There will come a definite moment where I will be tested, where I will have to ask, I know they will not offer to me, they do not know that I would now accept. A moment when one will hold a bottle, with my reaching for it the furthest thing from his mind, and I will have to reach. My father looks deeply into the cast iron bowl's center with the reverent contentment of a man burning offerings.

My friends make the long journey to Idaho and arrive late in the evening. The night does not fall in Idaho so much as it limps across the sky, the sun stubbornly spewing rays long after the orb of it has settled beyond the short mountains to the west. We unpack their luggage together and settle them into their room before venturing into the backyard, as the sky drips into deep purple around 10 PM. Jeff is a



tall blond with wide blue eyes and an infectious laugh that bursts out suddenly as if triumphantly breaking free from shackles with each gasp. Jack is also tall, with deep red hair and glasses and animated gestures as if permanently speaking from a pulpit. They have driven twelve hours from California and they say that for the last five hours of the drive, until they spotted the sign for Treasure Valley, Nampa, they had seen absolutely no one on the unlit two lane road leading east from the Oregon border. As they talk I strain to imagine the feeling of their trip. Idaho and California exist in my mind as parallel universes. I never had the experience of coming from California to Idaho. To move from one to the other sounds to me like passing between worlds separated by an invisible membrane that one must probe for weak points. Maybe this is why they had to approach through Oregon, maybe Oregon is the area of structural fault in the boundary that keeps my two homes so disparate. Jeff produces a cigar from a coat pocket and I lead him and Jack through our small house to the backyard.

My parents sit around our fire pit on the patio, staring into the flames with bottles in hand. They rise and greet my friends, hug them, welcome them with smiling questions. After the embraces and the gathering of more chairs we all settle down together to talk. Jeff lights his cigar and the smell of sandalwood infuses the smoke from the fire, growing tall and spreading its arms, feasting on fresh logs. The sound of the conversation quilts together, and only upon later consideration do I realize that I am not examining the fabric of it but rather contributing, allowing myself to be sewn into the whole. After some time my parents say their goodnights and go upstairs to bed. We add another log to the fire and Jeff produces a bottle of Andre Brut champagne from his coat, the pockets of which must be deep. It uncorks

with a satisfying smack and he passes it to his left, where Jack grabs it with his large hands and puts it to his lips at an acute angle. This is the moment that I dread, the moment I have seen reveal itself by awkward and alienating measures time and again since I learned that my friends were coming here.

Jack passes the bottle back to Jeff who holds it resting on his thigh and looks forward. I try to form the words but there are none that do the work of action. The fire pitches and rolls like unsure waves. The breezes die and the space around me seems to swing inward, gasping in anticipation. I hear the little bubbles in the bottle bursting. It hisses at me. They will look at me in shock. They will rise and walk away in silence, leaving the bottle and me to glare at one another through the flames. My hand feels pressed against the arms of my chair by immeasurable gravity. I can see their eyes meeting mine in a moment, hollowed out, frozen like glass. The lights above in my parents' window angle downward to watch me. Measuring my movement so that it does not seem too eager nor too timid, I lean forward in my chair and extend my hand towards Jeff with a sideways palm open. For a moment he nods slightly at nothing, which frightens me. Jack taps him on the shoulder and points towards me. As he turns his head, Jack rises and walks inside without words. Jeff stares without expression, his hand slack around the neck of the bottle, and every time he offered to me and I refused press daggers of accusation hot against the soles of my feet. I hear the soft thud of some door closing inside and the lights in my parents' room die abruptly into darkness. Nothing moves. Suddenly his expression brightens. He cocks his head to one side and a wry smile forms on his face. He looks at me for a moment with a mix of disbelief and validation, as if he made some bet that he knew would someday pay off but thought he might die

before he could collect. He passes me the bottle, saying nothing, and I drink, holding the neck of the bottle with my right hand and supporting its base with my left. It has the look and feel of a ceremony between us three.

The moment passes and the time is once again fluid, no mention of my partaking is made or needed. Jack returns, having merely gone to the fridge for a morsel of food. We pass it between the three of us now, each drinking in gulps, laughing more often than speaking. The firelight coats us in indistinct shadows and during long breaks in the conversation we each stare into the pulsing coals at its core. I take the cigar from Jeff and draw deeply on it, holding it towards me and looking down at the ember with my head cocked and my eyes slightly squinted. I muse for a moment at the gesture, so clichéd but seeming right now so natural, as if I have penetrated the sense of show and am living the life that art imitates.

Feeling the time is now right and the auguries are good, I gather my friends and take them inside, instructing them to sit at the dining room table and close their eyes. I go to the closet and retrieve two small red bags with green cellophane spewing from their tops like fountains. Jeff and Jack open their eyes and look to me, as if to ask why the presents were necessary. After some reassurances they pry the cellophane from the bags and each reach in blindly. Jack's hand emerges clutching the wax-dribbled neck of a bottle of Marker's Mark, and Jeff's large hand emerges wrapped around the body of a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label. They each look to me with palpable surprise and appreciation in their eyes, flecked with a hint of excitement. I am already walking towards the kitchen cabinets to get glasses. They each insist upon all three of us sharing a shot from their bottles, and we do this before they each pour themselves a generous three fingers over ice. We retake our

seats around the fire pit, now offering only a dim glow as the sky above, cut by clouds, hides and reveals the stars.

Before long the sky above threatens us with impending sunrise; little threads of blue begin to burrow into the dark above and the stars shy away. We rise and walk together up the stairs and bid goodnight, closing the doors to our respective rooms. I lie down in my bed and sleep covers me in almost the same moment as my sheets.

In the morning we rise and take breakfast in town. Today we have decided to explore the Payette River. One of the most remarkable things about Idaho is the proximity of nature. In California, the fire trails and hiking hills tucked between the towns and valleys are tamed, and without possessing it, invoke the undisturbed character of nature, but here a quick trek reveals real pristine land, land that is not in between the cities but that crowds around them on all fronts, each town a small barracks defending the loose foothold we have established here. Or at least this is the impression the land gives. After an hour of driving we find ourselves alongside the river's coils deep into the small foothills. Finding a likely spot, we stop the car and hike carefully down the steep hill to the river's edge. We set our chairs into the wet silt on the water's edge and read in silence for some time. I rise and walk forward into the water, feeling my ankles tense against the cold. I fall backwards, the river flowing over and around me and my lungs clenching. I emerge and the water drips from the tips of my tendrils of hair down my nose and into my eyes. My skin flushes with the blood returning, engorging my veins; I feel my skin shading red and giving off slight heat. I return to my book and at various points my friends and I

return to the water, with each dunk filling with the kind of momentary exhilaration that could shore up a lifetime's worth of religion.

I am barely more familiar with this area than my friends are, so we drive slowly. The windows down and music playing, we take the downhill winding road from the river valley slowly, admiring the land, feeling the faintest lick of California wafting in the breeze, an association impossible for us not to make, so used as we are to driving up and down its hills and valleys on aimless summer days. When we are once again in civilization, stopped at a red light on the highway that intersects the main road, we notice an intriguing sign that we wish to further investigate. It is a building to our left set against a large duck pond, and the sign before it reads "Brewforia" in a modern-artsy font. We pull into their parking lot and walk into the building.

The inside of the place draws us in, with walls painted dark brown like the color of good chocolate. There is a small rectangular bar in the antechamber of the building, and beyond that a large room dotted with tables and the walls draped with exotic beers. We walk excitedly around the room, grabbing the bottles and reading them, the adults who grew up from the kids in the candy store. We take our seats on the outside balcony and each order something new and exotic. We sip on our beers and chat about the day at the river, the clarity of the air and water, the lack of traffic, and other virtues of my adopted state. After we have eaten our fill we leave our table and walk inside, marveling at the selection tacked to all four walls. We each take a folded empty six-pack container and select our assemblage with care. We make certain not to get two of anything, so that we can have the broadest sampling possible. We tell our selections apart by our most promising acquisition; my pack is

the one that contains a small green bottle filled with deep brown ale, a Belgian barleywine labeled "Scaldis." Outside under the hot sun once again I gain a new appreciation for the atmosphere conjured by the place. The casual familiarity, the appreciation of beer raised almost to the point of worship, the newness and strangeness of it, all of these things would have had me measuring my breaths and looking for exits not long ago. Instead the place was like a shelter, possessing a quality of sanctuary that seemed to pervade everyone within with an unspoken connection. We make the rest of the drive home quickly, eager to chill our six packs and welcome the long-coming night.

Driving home I am once again gripped with a sense of worry. My parents will be settling around the fire now, my father intent on performing his nightly ritual. I am twenty-one and by right have no need to worry what my parents will think of my drinking, but I cannot help but worry. They are the last scrap of land upon which I could hide. My home, sitting with them around a fire or in a living room or down to dinner, these places are the last chambers that house the pieces of something I for some reason hold sacred. They may be taken aback, they may disapprove in so many ways. Would there be that stunned look of disappointment, the kind that seeps slowly into the soul and takes deep roots? Will my mother avert her eyes and expel the heavy sigh that she sometimes makes when devastated, as if trying to breathe out some invading poison? Or would my father raise his voice, speak in the high-toned boom that sometimes escapes when he is angry, with which he can force the even the walls to crowd back? No. There would be silence. I know this. I have experienced it before in our house, a silence that is almost tactile, bristling with dull pain and desperately grasping for explanation, justification, any reason at all not to

abandon hope that a harmless misunderstanding might only be wearing the mask of transgression. Anything less than their acceptance would make me feel impure, as if I had broken some unspoken promise upon which they had laid the foundation of their remarkable trust in me. My friends always expected that I would come around to the idea eventually, even though they were surprised that it was now, but the knowledge that they regarded it as something of an inevitability made it easier with them. As we near the house the roads seem to shorten and we take exits and turns before I can apprehend them. I realize that maybe it is not so much their reaction I fear as the simple act of revealing myself. Once they know then it becomes irrevocable, it becomes truth, and however imperceptible, I will have changed. We round the corner to see my garage door open, my father clenching his cigar in his teeth and waving us in with a smile. We exit the car with Jeff carrying two of the six packs under each arm and Jack casually swinging one at his side while he walks. Having been in the back seat, my hands are empty. My father greets my friends and me with gentle pats on the back and asks about the river. After some pleasant small talk my father looks at me and asks, "Which one's yours?" Not an atom in his expression shifts, his bright eyes and warm smile bearing down on me. Sweeping my arm with haste to stifle the hesitation I can feel tugging at my limbs, I indicate the pack under Jeff's left arm, the "Scaldis" label peeking out, facing us as if to watch the big reveal. He nods, smiling, and tells me that there is plenty of room in the freezer if we want to cool them off quick, and that we should come sit by the fire while they chill. The moment does not even have time to gather its own momentum in my mind before it is over and I feel light and cool, as if under water. The same interaction repeats itself almost precisely when we reach the kitchen, where my

mother wraps leftover food and beams a squinting smile as we enter. We lay our beers in our freezer's ice tray, and while my friends pour three glasses of scotch my mother hugs me and remarks on the smell of sunscreen fresh on my skin, saying it reminds her of back home.

Evening comes and we once again settle around the fire with my parents. The sky tonight is crystal clear, the stars casting arrows of light downward with the kind of pointed sharpness that makes it seem like they are shining at me directly. The moon, a crescent sliver, peeks over my roof, looking like a cactus barb jabbing outward from the house. It is hot outside still from the day, and the air crackles with the sounds of summer bugs giggling. Everyone talks with their eyes centered on the fire, wild and directionless in the windy night. Occasionally some piece of wood will snap and the fire will spew embers upward, the wind whipping them into a miniature cyclone of flame, careening over the backyard fence and dissipating in the street, as if its potency is confined to this space. My friends and I enjoy a glass of scotch while my parents puff on cigarettes and cigars and talk over their drinks, slumping slightly into their chairs, weary from work and pleasantly tired by the dinner and night's conversation.

My parents, feeling sleep creep upon them, rise slowly. "Don't stay up too late you guys. Don't want to waste a day tomorrow," my mother says as they step inside. "No worries," replies my friend Jeff, shaking his hand and smiling, "Namaste."