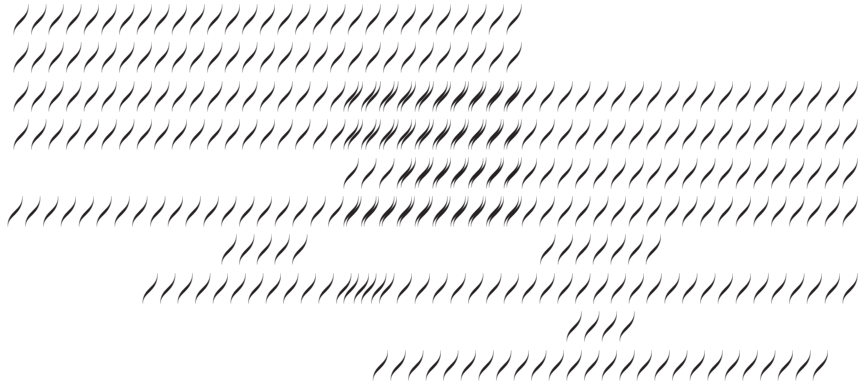


North Alter

a geological survey

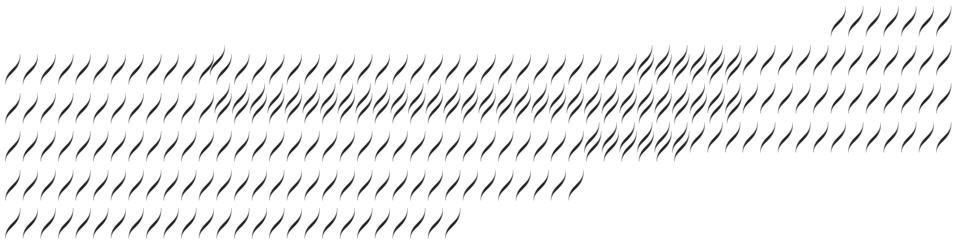




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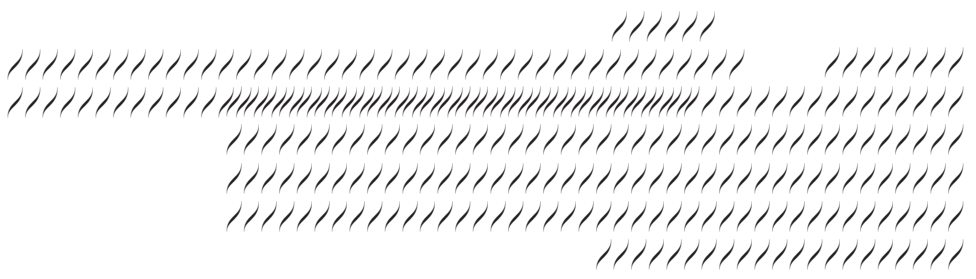
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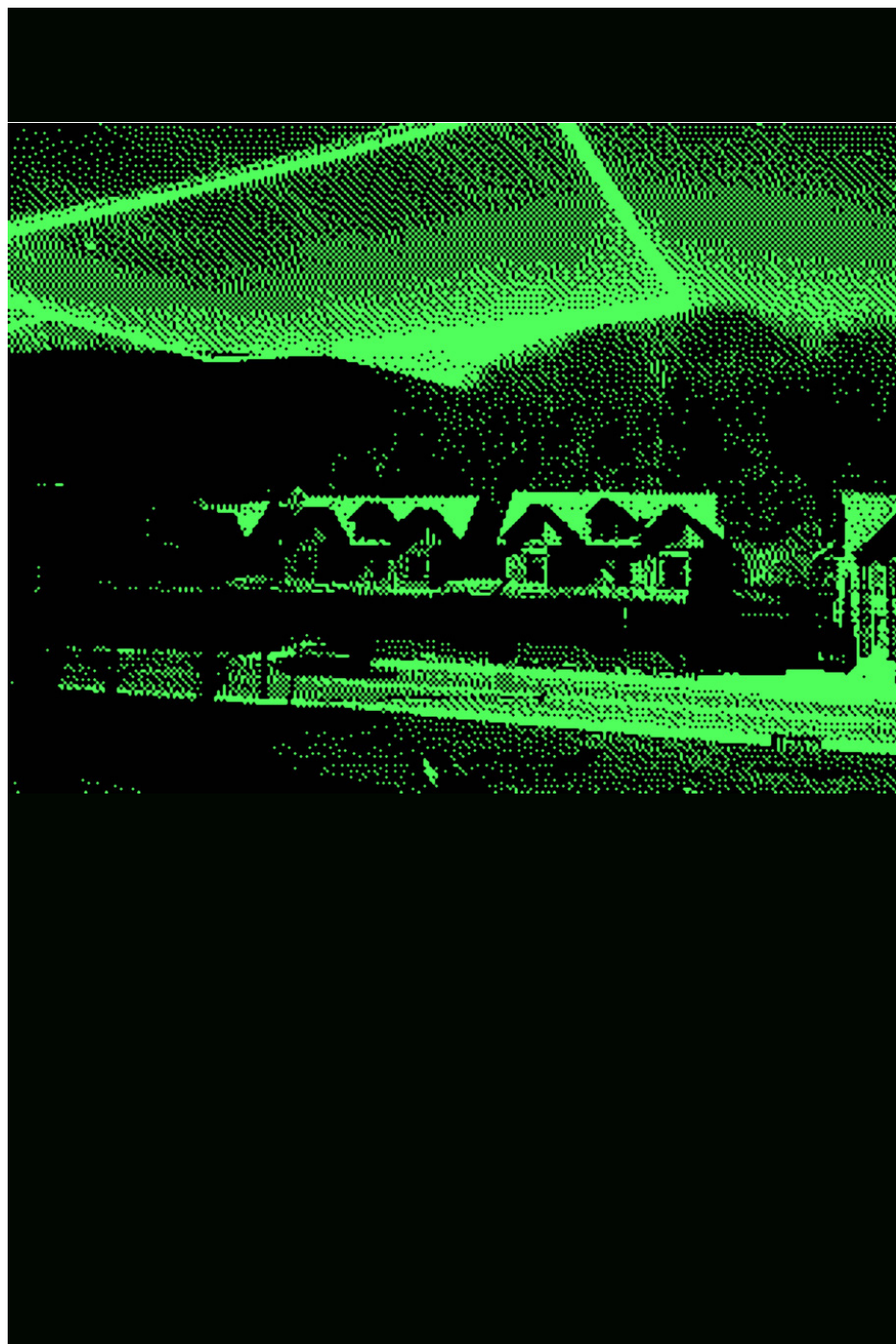
all similarities to individuals living or dead are totally fuckin coincidental and should not be scrutinized, wondered about, or litigated upon.



Thanks are in order to Liz St. Germain, Brett Belcastro, and the members of the Northern Berkshire Mineral Club.

This survey would not have been possible without the document “Blastomylonites Associated with Recumbent Folds and Overthrusts at the Western Edge of the Berkshire Massif, Connecticut and Massachusetts: a Preliminary Report” by Nicholas M. Ratcliffe and David S. Harwood.





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1 WIKTOR

The first was long ago.

I was six or seven. Playing in the piles of discarded parts behind the old Sprague Electric plant where my father used to work. I would stack the empty metal cylinders from broken transformers, fool with faulty capacitors, try to connect them to batteries and to each other and see if I could make them arc or blow.

It must have been summer. I remember the sky got very dark until it felt like it was hanging just ten feet overhead. The rain hit late in the afternoon and my father called me inside. I watched him work. Ran around and bothered the other men. They seemed not to mind. Their wives watched their children at home, perhaps they felt sorry for me.

I remember when we left it wasn't night, but dark outside nonetheless with the rain pounding hard. Small fast droplets, not much wind. We ran to the truck with our jackets pulled over our heads. My father fumbled to unlock the door and we jumped around to avoid getting wet and laughed.

It was an old Ford pickup. A bad blue paint job and vacuum windshield wipers that slowed when we went up a hill. We drove down Ashland Street and the rain pounded. I smelled ozone and oil.

There was a sharp corner in the road where it passed under the railway. There still is. A squat stone bridge above. Maybe it was quiet aside from the pattering of water on the roof. Or maybe my father was telling a joke. Underneath the bridge the rain stopped, and it was like suddenly diving deep underwater. Silence and I could feel my body, small in the front passenger seat, bouncing slightly with the uneven road.

This was it: we came out from under the bridge and the rain had gone. It was completely quiet and I could hear my father breathing and the road moving against the tires of the truck. I was looking ahead and I noticed that the droplets of water on the windshield were exactly spaced apart in a grid. I sniffed the air again and it felt hot and dry like a space heater running too close to the curtain. And I could hardly see the road over the dashboard but I saw the ground ahead of us just fall. Like whoever had been holding it up decided nevermind. Just crumpled into

the earth and inside was fire, an impossibly deep burning pit. I could hear the roaring and my skin tickling from the heat and I twisted and screamed and then the windshield wipers swept the dots away.

As it happened, I remember thinking that the knowledge of what I had just seen would be heavy with me forever.

This was the first.

NOVEMBER 2020

SATURDAY THE TWENTY-EIGHTH

2 2:45 AM

SAIRA

One night you go outside and walk up one of the two big concrete staircases behind the swimming pool. It's cold, too cold for your worn black hoodie and thin leggings, but there was a thaw this morning. You smell wet grass and asphalt. A thick mist still hangs heavy over Montana Street.

When you close your eyes, you feel yourself becoming one with the enveloping darkness. Nobody else is around. Why would they be?

After standing there for a little while, you begin to notice something happening around you. In the air and in the earth below there's a droning. Like a plane overhead, but it doesn't pass. It fades in and out like breathing and seems to come from somewhere, but you're not sure where, but you're starting to suspect.

Everything is filled with swelling noise. Seconds feel like hours. The longer you stand there the more it wraps around your body, clinging to the most sensitive, shivery parts of you. Until you feel like a droplet trembling on the outside of a glass of cold water.

Finally, with creeping horror, you realize where the droning is coming from: the fog.

You were wrong, you will realize weeks later while reading old press releases from the contemporary art museum downtown to glean sales jargon for a journalism course. The droning emanates from a downtown outdoor art installation: Harmonic Bridge, created by the artists Bruce Odland and Sam Auinger. Sound from a highway overpass is fed into two massive tubes that

resonate and flatten the noise into a deep, resounding C note. Literally the city plays itself as an instrument, is how they word it in the press release. This idea makes you feel queasy for reasons you can't explain.

MARCH 2021

WEDNESDAY THE TENTH

3 10:55AM

NOAH

Martin still hasn't replaced the staple gun since Keith's friend from Georgia went nuts with it on stage and got blood in all the moving parts. I'm sweating, prying staples out of the corkboard with a thumbnail and pushing them back in again, trying to focus on Dani's question. I'm rambling. I still feel like I have to impress her.

"...So, like, when we moved in at the beginning of the year, Martin found a drumset in the basement and I said hey, I know how to play those. I took lessons when I was younger. Before me, I guess the Void Farmers were just the two of them freaking out and making noise. I add a little structure, although to be honest I'm basically just a touring member. Even though we don't tour. I just mean I don't write the music. It's a good thing we take different classes. Otherwise we'd never get any time apart from each other. Aside from the band and living together, we all take shifts at the co-op on Main Street. Working the register and plugging community events to tourists and students and just like, randos who wander in."

"You don't help them write at all?" She asks.

"I mean..." I grunt and pull back my thumb, rubbing the imprint of the staple. "I write some of the drum parts." I stand back and take a look at the wall. The poster is askew, printed on a piece of hot pink paper from the sheaf we discovered in a staff copy room.

"Martin and Ooz are the creative ones, really. They're a good match for each other. Martin has this natural ear for melodies and weird guitar licks and stuff, and Ooz is a... highly dedicated lyricist/poet/performance artist. An acutely alarming personality to share a home with."

"How so?" Dani asks, looking up from her notebook.

"Earlier this year, before you and I started, like, hanging out, Ooz did an

‘installation’ where anyone could just come into our house and take stuff. It was called something like Anyone Who Wants Can Have Anything I Have. Went over well with the roomies.”

“Hanging out?” Dani says, with a detectable edge.

“Um.”

We’re in the tunnel connecting Murdock and Venable. It’s used mostly by students traversing the buildings between classes. Since administration has no reason to be down here, our illicit show posters stay up longer.

There are a few places we always flyer when there’s a big show coming up. They’re the places we’re pretty sure won’t tear them down: the liquor store, Angie’s sub shop, Goodwill, the co-op, and Mass MoCA.

“Why don’t you just give me the details on the show?” Dani says flatly.

“If I don’t get this typed up and sent in before noon, Kate said she’d squish it down at the bottom of the Arts and Entertainment section and put one of those shitty graphics over it so you can’t even read half the text.”

“Yeah, sorry, uh... the show is us, the Void Farmers...” I watch her scribbling.

“You don’t have to put ‘the,’” I say apologetically. She rolls her eyes.

“Headliners are us and a bedroom pop duo called Dad Senses My Depression. Openers are Paper Products and Blight of the Fumblebees. They all have Bandcamps, so you can look them up beforehand and, uh...” She’s giving me a look. “This Saturday. Five dollars at the door.”

“Great,” she says, shoving her notebook in her bag and jogging down the hall. “Later!”

“Yeah, see you there!” I call, clutching my stack of show posters with sore fingertips.

SATURDAY THE THIRTEENTH

4 1:13 AM

LINCOLN

At times, I feel grateful to have been immunized against the wellmeant childlike platitudes of the kind as well as from the hatred and cruelty of the unkind.

It feels like no one is allowed to be crushed completely anymore. I don’t

like it. It's inhuman to have 24/7 hope for yourself and the world you live in.

Poetry dragged on Friday. We're just starting to discuss final projects. Martin always knows what he's going to do. Him and all his friends. Even Saira, the least poetic person alive, has an idea for this poetic rock study thing. I went and talked to the professor after class about what I should do, and he totally blew me off. Said I have plenty of time. I know he wants me to figure it out for myself. I don't think I'm capable of anything creative right now. I'm really trying.

Write what you know. :) Write what you know. Write what you know.

I saw an old photo of myself this morning. It was taken when I had just turned 21. I was outside somewhere with friends. Back then we went for walks a lot. I was smiling and my hair looked good. I was clean-shaven and my skin was clear.

I get older and I get uglier. I talk to fewer people. I smile less. My hair comes out in the shower. I bleach it so no one will know. I drink and I get queasy immediately. I ruin my night. I drink more and I ruin the next day too. My head is filled with the same idiot questions I've been asking since I was thirteen. Why am I alive? Is it the same for everyone?

I don't know how to make money. I don't do anything. Nobody here even knows who I am, except Martin. And ever since what happened at the end of last semester, being around him just makes me feel like shit. There's a papercut on the web between my fingers. Little cuts like this drive me crazy. I compulsively pick at them until they get leaky and weird.

I need some fucking weed. Maybe Col's around later.

A bug landed on my monitor. And left a streak of guts when I flicked it. I feel like a water balloon.

I'm supposed to do this for sixty more years? Yeah, right.

5 9:44AM

SAIRA

A light grey concrete walking path wraps in a horseshoe around the perimeter of the library. On the southwest side, the left side if you're facing the front, there's a bike rack and a couple of benches overlooking a staircase that leads down to the staff parking lot and Montana Street. These benches comprise one

of the few remaining designated smoking spots on campus.

The upper floor of the library is a tall, brutalist cathedral. The lower two floors (only one of which you can see from the front) are brick. Or at least have a brick facade.

The library's bricks are a sort of beige-orange-red. It looks like a pretty natural color. Hard to tell whether these bricks were coated in sand before they were baked.

Not sure if this is part of the assignment, but bricks are made from shale, a clastic sedimentary rock, meaning it is formed by particles of sediment and fragments of other rocks and minerals. It's a mongrel rock. When you think about shale, you picture a coelacanth sucking nutrients from the mud at the bottom of a pond.

The shale is dug up and crunched into bits and mixed with water and the resulting sludge is extruded into rectangular prisms. You really hate saying "rectangular prisms." It sounds so pretentious and like quantum-physic-y compared to something like "cube." "Pyramid." But there are more 3d rectangles than probably any other defined shape. What an inelegant world this is.

Geology courses at the college are scarce, but there is a North Adams Mineral Club. I see flyers for a meeting they're having this weekend down at the American Legion. There will be stalls and a giveaway. After much badgering, I convince Shell to go with me. They're going by "Shell" now. When they told me I asked, "Shel like Sheldon?" and they looked at me like I was nuts. "Shell like a shell." Okay.

We walk to the meet and I'm wearing my new boots, these brown ankle boots with thick rubber soles that I got from Lincoln, Shell's friend and the only other person I know in our Poetry course. I guess he ordered them too small. The tongues keep slipping down the sides, and I'm wearing these ancient raggedy black socks (like the definition of thread-bare; for some reason I refuse to throw away old socks when I buy new ones), and they feel like one of those exfoliating face cloths you use in the shower. I wonder whether my feet will be incredibly smooth and soft or raw and scraped up by the time we get back to campus.

Just inside the entrance at the Legion, an old man whose head resembles that of a thawing snowman talks at us in my opinion a little too

enthusiastically about “fresh blood” in the club (is this a normal phrase? look up later) and shows us chunks of feldspar he “discovered locally,” a fact he expects us to be impressed by, digging into a canvas bag and shoving these nondescript chunks under our noses for it must’ve been bordering on 15 minutes, until I finally snap and say something like if I wanted to look at basic ass silicates I would just go ahead and dig ‘bout four feet down literally anywhere on the planet.

I make the rounds of the eight or so fold-out particle board tables dotted with disorganized mineral arrays and they are kill-me boring, all except one middle-aged couple’s. They’re from Williamstown, and they tell me they traveled to China and personally visited mines looking for samples, which sounds morally iffy but what do I know. They’ve got two really interesting formations of barite; one a sort of translucent pale blue with shards jutting at an angle like glued-together icicles, and another that’s this stubbly-looking dark gold pattern that’s crusted all around a very light blue-green sphere of fluorite.

They’re like some seriously nice shit, definitely the most interesting thing I’ve seen this far away from the city, and I’m begging Shell to do some little sketches in their notepad that they always have and for a couple seconds I don’t even know there’s someone speaking into the microphone at the front of the room until one of the World-Traveling Chinese Mine Inspectors shushes me.

The man speaking isn’t incredibly old, but he has one of those faces with so many cracks and creases that it resembles a tablecloth that’s fallen on the floor. His voice is gravelly and somber. I’ve missed the very beginning and so I hear

“-burrowing into the soil, leaving little tracks and holes in the soil. I have traced them and watched outside the holes, seen nothing come out, and eventually cast several with molten aluminum and excavated around the casts and determined that the holes, with one notable variation, all end approximately three feet down in a dead end, occasionally with branching shafts that end similarly. If they are the product of a burrowing animal, then it must be that this creature digs down and never exits the hole, but is not present afterwards in the aluminum.

“However, I am here to speak to you all about the variation I mentioned. This hole-”

And here he points to an 8.5 x 11” piece of paper with two grainy black and white photos, two angles of the same thing; what looks like a pile of dirt on a forest floor with leaves and pine needles,

“-this hole, just goes down. Straight down, and when I poured my aluminum, several quarts of it, down into the hole, it just fell and kept falling. Same result with a tape measure that I regrettably dropped. I dug around this hole to a depth of five and a half feet and the hole continued downwards in what was practically a perfectly straight line.”

He pauses, and someone close enough to him that the microphone picks their voice up mutters “Is there much more, Wiktor?” Wiktor ignores him and gestures at the photographs and says

“Well, I just think it’s worth mentioning. It’s worth remembering that this has been going on for some time now, with the earthquakes-”

(someone snickers) “-and maybe this falls outside the purview of this club, maybe it does. But so far the holes have signaled the earthquakes, and whether they appear as features of some sort of pre-tremor or otherwise, this issue should be looked into by the proper authorities. And that’s all I came here to say.”

The old man leaves the mic and someone else comes up and says

“Thanks for that, Wiktor. Uh, if Tony could bring that piece of bismuth up in about fifteen minutes we’ll start the auction then, and as you all know the profits go towards the club, renting space for club meetings and what have you,” and by the time I realize I can safely ignore whoever is speaking, Wiktor is gone.

Shell is positively bouncing along on our walk back from campus; they bought this little amethyst ring with two finger holes, almost like a miniature brass knuckles. They love witchy crystal stuff. And by the little strip mall with the Dollar Tree there’s the old man again, Wiktor, striding along and turning the corner and vanishing into the weird alley between Papa Gino’s and the police department. Without thinking I stop and then cross the street, following him to the entrance of the alley, and Shell waits, fingering their new prize, and I peek around the next corner into the parking lot and don’t see him.

I stand there for a few seconds with a wrinkled brow and then turn back towards Shell and happen to glance through the window at Papa Gi-

no's and there's Wiktor at the counter, haplessly trying to pay in exact change. Human nature has a way of eliminating the mystery in things.

6 4:02 PM
 MARTIN

On weekends, there's always someone in a little prop plane flying figure eights above the town. Doing dives. The plane is too far away for the noise to reach the ground. It looks like a silent bird rising and rolling. Lincoln wants to go to the tunnel again. Not sure what the big deal is, since he goes all the time. We've gone together twice, but both times with a bunch of people, people who had never seen it before. One kid thought the "Hoosac tunnel" was a tunnel underneath the dorm Hoosac that connected it to the Murdock building. Like some secret Cold War-era underground shaft. Lincoln thought that was funny.

I have a couple hours before the show, so I agree and grab some shoes. To get there, you follow the train tracks away from the center of town. It's a pain in the ass climbing up onto the tracks, and once you're on them it's just a straight shot to the tunnel and it seems like it should be easy except walking on the tracks is really annoying because the wooden slats are between one and two normal human paces apart, so you can either take absurdly short quick steps or uncomfortably long ones. According to Lincoln, the tunnel was originally built to connect the Massachusetts railway lines with Troy in New York. It's four and three quarters of a mile long and was built in the mid-1800s. It's still used commercially, but the real draw is all the spooky stories associated with it. Hundreds of people died building it, so it's supposedly haunted and always shows up on like paranormal TV shows.

A half-mile or so from the entrance, we run into a local coming the other way. The guy is maybe 40, stained jeans and a white tank top, seems high or drunk but in a friendly way. He offers to show us the way to a cave near the tunnel. We say we've never heard about the cave and he tells us they built it during the construction to make it easier to transport nitroglycerin from the road to the actual site. Before, they'd try to wheel packages of explosives through a bumpy forest path and it would tip over and BOOM! Which seems far fetched, but considering how many people died during construction, I wouldn't rule it out.

The guy's really friendly and chats with Lincoln while I mostly hang back and listen. A lot of the townsfolk treat college kids kind of coldly. I'd imagine the students treat them the same way. I wish it wasn't that way but it is.

This guy is cool, though. He talks about hiding behind the raised upper part of the tunnel entrance on the hill and making ghost noises at shivering freshmen who'd wandered up to take Instagram photos. He comments on Lincoln's bleached hair and the two of them exchange facts about the railroad. I guess living near to this much history, you become a sort of de facto historian.

He was telling the truth about there being a cave, too, although it looks more like an enormous sinkhole, just sand and some twisted rust-eaten metal. Maybe there was some sort of structure at some point but by now it's eroded, like a door frame collapsing into itself. The opening is ten or so feet across, a slope of dirt and sand and boulders descending into darkness. The ground inside disintegrating into kinked layers made firm by rain and groundwater. Like looking into a witch's hat.

The man clambers in first, and Lincoln happily follows, skidding a little on the steep sand-encrusted rocks. Facing the slope, I climb down backwards after them.



The changes in temperature and ambient noise are immediately noticeable. As we reach the bottom I pull down my sleeves, which have been rolled to my elbow, and wrap my fingers up in them. The birdsong and rustling leaves aboveground are muted here, and they recede entirely as I follow the dark figures deeper in. Now the air is full of echoing drips and crunching footsteps; the sand on the floor seems to be brushed with ice.

From day-warmth to cold night. We stand in the dark and listen to the water falling.

We get back from the tunnel at dusk. I bid Lincoln adieu and run to the liquor store to grab stuff to make punch for the show tonight. Some of my old roommates work there now; we shoot the shit a little and I give them a flyer. I've learned to keep flyers on me at all times. One of them barter me her employee discount on the booze in return for free entry. It pays to know people in positions of power. I tramp back to the house through air that still bites a little without my scarf.

By the time I get home it's graduated into actual nighttime, and Noah's a little pissed because he had to make some calls for work but then also had to start setting up for the show without me, and I apologize and give him a couple nips of Fireball, which he almost doesn't drink but then does, and calms down a little. I run down into the basement and push the rest of our storage boxes into a corner, set up the folding table at the back of the room where the mixer and PA rest, run the cables from the mics to the little octopus thing that connects them to the mixer and speakers, and by the time I'm done there are already people upstairs banging into things and trying to open the cabinets. Ooz comes down with her bass and I tell her to turn on the power source that all the shit's plugged into and have the rest of the band soundcheck themselves, and then I run upstairs and jump in the shower. A couple weeks ago (before we started blocking off the stairs) someone stole pretty much all the stuff out of the shower caddy, leaving behind only various dark gelatinous medication-type liquids and, presumably because of its prohibitive weight, maybe 200 immortal oz of corpse-scented Dr. Bronner's multi-use soap, which previous tenants left behind in a vessel the approximate size and shape of a fire extinguisher.

So I wash my hair with this oatmeal shampoo that Noah got for his

ADRIANNE

Oh, actually one weird thing did happen today. I could write about that. I don't think I'll turn it in, though. Not without changing some details. I was cooking gnocchi for Dani and myself. It's such an easy and quick thing to make, easier even than spaghetti. You really just need one of those flat ladle sieve things to lower the gnocchis into the boiling water so they don't splash, and to get them out again.

I had the sauce in one pot beginning to simmer and on the large burner another pot of boiling water and it was time to put the gnocchi in. I looked at the kitchen counter and then at the far window across the room. Not out the window just sort of glazed-eye focusing somewhere in the space between me and the window, and the voice said "kill yourself now" like it usually does and I thought "yeah okay." Then I was still in the room and it was time to take the gnocchi out of the plastic package. I needed to open it and I went to the knife block like in a dream and pulled out the smallest one. It's a knife for cutting apples and the tip is snapped off so at the very end there's a little flat bit. I began to turn back to the counter and then stopped at the stove with the knife and my arm out holding it blood pulsing and the sweet blurry dash of color behind it: the sauce bubbling, bright bright red and the shining blade. I was breathing and I thought "yeah okay" and slowly cut down the side of the plastic package and around and peeled up the plastic and stood dumbly holding it, the knife, my wrist turned up, the window, the blood.

When Dani arrived back at the house, I acted weird and couldn't snap out of it.

I felt like I was dead and just pretending to be alive.

Do you ever feel like your soul snuck into your brain while you were sleeping and laid a trap for you. To kill you. Left the pilot light on and filled the room with gas.

I can't think about anything else now and it's very late.

Go to bed idiot. Go to bed.

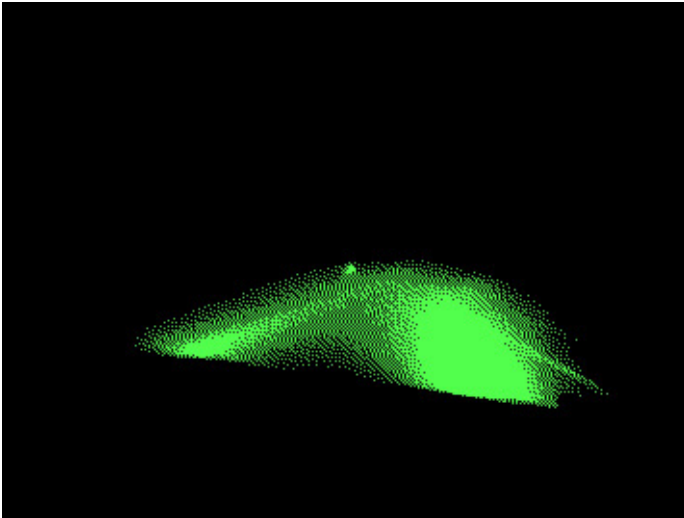
SUNDAY THE FOURTEENTH

8 ?

COLTON

Puddles gleam on the black road and the car speeds through them. Kicks up heat off the ground and the mist hangs low. To the right and left dim vertical gnarled lines rise upward and fade back into the dark and vanish behind the car's exhaust.

D is driving. Im riding shotgun. Cold came fast tonight and the air is sticky. Were on some winding road that seems to keep going up out of the city and into some hills. Im looking out the window and sometimes I see little shops and houses passing. Other times it feels like were on some narrow back trail trees close and no traces of human life.



I start responding to Lincoln's text and D tells me shut that shit off the light makes it hard to drive. Radiator blasting at the window keeping the condensation from creeping up the glass.

On a straight strip where the road briefly levels out I look out and to the right I see the stone block with writing carved into it and I know. The hulking square edges of the fan fenced in over on the left side of the road. D pulls over and stomps down the ebrake and turns off the car. For just a second we sit and D breathes deeply and looks in the side mirror and says just hang out a second gets out. Takes the plasticwrapped bun-

dle off the dash. And closes the door and walks quickly across the road towards the fence. Heads towards where the exhaust fan blows soot out from the tunnel below. Vanishes around the side of the fence.

I finish texting Lincoln and then look to make sure Ds not back before I kick my feet up. Hes obsessed with this car. Gets pissed if theres the slightest scuff or dirt mark. Fuzzy wet sounds and another sound like a subwoofer from somewhere in the city. After a couple minutes I reach into the paper bag in the cupholder and take out a nip and crack it open and tip it up. Its smooth and fruit flavored probably vodka or rum. Its hard to tell when you cant see it. I looks back over at the fence but the phones brightness killed my night vision. There is only a glinting like a bad photograph of formed metal.

Finally I hear wet footsteps and D opens the door abruptly. The creaking of the hinge makes me jump in surprise and D gets in and tosses me a wad of cash. "Glove box" D says and I put it there. D starts the car shifts and pulls away from the side of the road, back along the winding route and down the mountain into the city.

9 2:35PM

ADRIANNE

Today one of the guys in my screenwriting class said he liked my story but that actually gasoline decomposes and its flammable fumes dissipate after like a few years, so the ending where someone lights a cigarette in the bunker filled with rusted-out fuel cans causing an explosion that kills everyone isn't realistic. Listening to him talk I felt tired and embarrassed.

And during the workshop for another of my stories earlier this year, wasn't he the one who described the sequence of attempted suicide as "unrealistic and emotionally flat?" So I'm given shit for writing myself, something we're encouraged to do even though it's the least creative endeavor possible, and given even more shit for I don't know. Making it all up. Trying to write someone who isn't me doing something I haven't done. Even though he was right about the gasoline, I guess. I googled it. UGH. Who cares!!!!

Although that suicide attempt wasn't really me, either, was it? It's exhausting to have to go in every time and change specific details in all

of my stories so that loved ones and friends who could recognize these details don't think any of these things actually happened to me. It would be nice to be in a world where I could do my thing, make whatever I wanted effortlessly, and not hurt anyone.

I think most people would implode, emotionally, if they felt what I feel. I seriously don't know how they could stand it.

I bet you're like, ugh, here's someone too self-absorbed to recognize that other people have problems too. But everyone else seems to operate within some rational system that I'm not a part of. They get genuine joy from things I can't even imagine mustering the energy to try. Like for example, going out and making friends and then keeping in touch with them, hanging out with them, texting them, remembering holidays and giving each other small but thoughtful gifts, comforting them when they're upset. When I see someone crying I just think, yeah, me too. And I walk away. Am I a piece of shit? There's just so much happening that nobody else can see.

I'm crumpling into myself. Why can't all these well-meaning people just allow me to be who I am. Someone who has nothing to offer.

This is the mantra: just because you tried really hard or put a lot of yourself into something doesn't mean it'll be good. Doesn't mean people will like it.

When you stand back and look at it, you see yourself. You see yourself in a bad thing that people don't care about. It's made out of you and you can't fathom why people don't like it. Well think about it a little longer.

10 3:13PM

SHELL

Icebreaker: What is your fondest memory from childhood?

Pass.

Icebreaker: Who is your idol?

I think it's funny we use that word to mean like Beloved Celebrity. It sounds so biblical.

Icebreaker: What is your superpower?

When people say to me Wow Shell Today Went By So Quickly Huh or Geez This Week Is Dragging On And On I always say yeah sure totally but actually all time feels the same to me. The passage of any second is

exactly the same as any other. I can sit for fifteen minutes in the morning or the middle of the night while sober or drunk or on coke and if someone were to ask Hey Shell How Long Did That Feel Like I would say 'bout fifteen minutes. No matter what.

11 6:52PM
OOZ

The first thing I noticed is that when I looked up, the sky was just nothing, like vantablack. And I – wait, let me backup.

Because parts of it felt like I was inputting codes into the console I think probably the dream was influenced by the games I've been playing. These parts of the dream were repetitive and deliberate in the same way as when I'm playing old PC games like Morrowind and I punch in codes to cheat or unlock stuff. Like for example you can type ~ to open the console and then "tgm" for "toggle god mode" and then hit enter. That one makes you invincible.

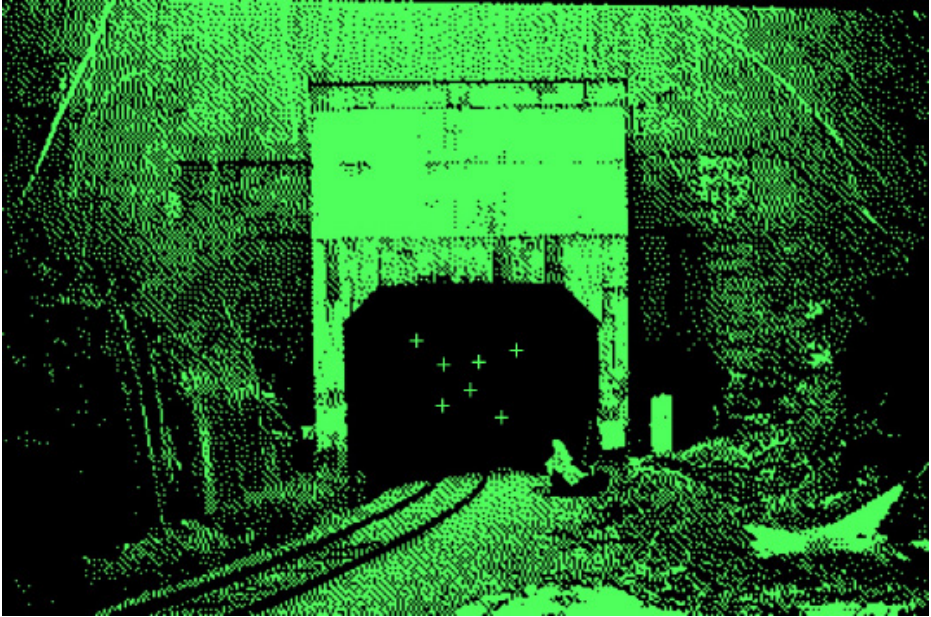
So there was a moment like that when I tried to climb that shitty dirt hill behind the Parlor Cafe to get up to the train tracks. I kept losing my footing on the loose rocks and slipping back down. And then I looked at my left hand and moved a tiny black slider from the base of my ring finger to the center of my palm + rotated my shoulder + and closed my fist and pointed it ahead. This activated something like noclip and I was able to move smoothly up the hill without being impeded by any plants or rocks.

At the top I stood on the tracks and got my bearings and then looked around and noticed that the sky wasn't there. Not like night time but just an absence. The second thing was the quiet. There was nobody around and no lights in any of the buildings and—I realized—there had been no cars on the road or in the big student parking lot. That never happens.

And then the third thing I noticed was this orange glow coming from down Ashland street away from town. So I followed the tracks towards it.

Along the route there are parts where you have to walk on the slats of the tracks with the road below. There are holes where you can misstep and fall and so I untied and re-tied my shoes to disable gravity & fall damage.

Finally the tracks left the road and went into the woods. The air got even darker and the wind picked up. And as I approached the tunnel it got colder, like Lincoln said: the deep underground air rushing out and lowering the temperature in its radius by a few degrees.



But when I came around the corner and actually saw the tunnel it was the weirdest thing. Inside of it there was a bright light flickering and approaching. The trees and ground and my body were all bathed in orange. And at first I thought it was a train but then as it moved closer I saw that it was bubbling and pouring over itself and rushing to get out. A flood of boiling lava like a tidal wave. It burst out onto me and before I even had time to think I was underneath it.

And inside, it wasn't burning orange like I'd expected. It was black nothing like the sky.

TUESDAY THE SIXTEENTH

12 1:05PM

ADRIANNE

In Poetry there's a girl who told everyone on the first day to call her Ooze. I know she takes philosophy and art classes too, and I wish so bad I was in one of them because even just the little anecdotes I catch from her in Poetry are intriguing.

Like in a moment of downtime, me and a couple others were discussing

summer jobs we'd had, and she scoots over and listens attentively for several minutes and then, during a natural lull, interjects:

"I worked in a 'workshop' (she does air quotes) where we made uh, orbs."

Here she pauses and hears what she just said and seems to grasp for a description that would help us understand what sort of orbs she's talking about.

"Uh... sky orbs."

And immediately it's no longer a conversation; everyone in the group is spellbound. We just sit and wait for her to elaborate. She looks at us and then peers surreptitiously over her shoulder around the room, making sure no one is listening in, and then she leans in close (we reflexively do the same) and continues, hurriedly, in a low voice:

"Those colored orbs that you see on power lines. The um. Government doesn't put them up. For a long time after power lines were invented, nobody put them up. But then they started appearing. And ostensibly it's to keep aircraft from flying into the cables. But it's totally against FAA protocol to fly that low anyway. You'd lose your pilot license. Obviously." We nod. Of course you'd lose your pilot license.

"What are the orbs? I can't get into the specific build but they're mostly made from high-quality, upcycled materials. They're assembled and painted by hand, and then they're installed by members of a clandestine organization. Civilians assume it's some government agency. And federal employees think it's the jurisdiction of the town or county or maybe state, and vice versa. During my time working for the organization, the only person I interacted with was the supervisor and five or six others assigned to my workshop. It was cell-structured to protect the identities of the other workers and field operatives."

She stops and we all lean back a little like we're waking from a collective daydream.

Then she smiles and looks at me! And says "Pay sucked, now I work at an eel farm" and spins her chair around just as the teacher calls for our attention, and myself and the others look at each other like huh??? and then go back to work.

She told everyone to call her Ooze before the first roll call. I wonder if that's her real name? I considered checking the course sign-up info

online, but I won't. It would be weird to invade her privacy like that.

SATURDAY THE TWENTIETH

13 11:21PM

LINCOLN

There's never parking at the museum, and it's a pleasant 45 degrees tonight, so I decide to jog. Get some endorphins and I won't be lugging along a jacket that I'll need to check somewhere before the talk.

The event is at midnight, which is sort of weird. Not a problem, though. If anything, it's prime consciousness hours for me.

It's fake-dark downtown. Even well into spring, the streets are monochrome after 6 pm. The city recently replaced the old warm streetlights with these new, very white ones. They're not noticeably brighter or anything, just less yellow. It's probably an improvement, but it really washes everything out. Not that there was much color downtown to begin with. Oh, there are splashes of color here and there: the town has commissioned large, effervescent Street-Art™ murals on certain brick walls, and I run by one and try to remember the last time I saw someone breakdancing (picture this: a multicultural crowd of onlookers gawk at a skilled dancer doing a sick freeze with legs airborne & splayed) within town limits or even like west of greater Boston. When I bounce past, the colors slosh together and I feel what I've drank over the last couple hours rolling to and fro like a ziploc bag of ball bearings in my stomach, remember I haven't eaten today and likely won't at the Event, which will in all likelihood feature one or more painstakingly-coiffed fringed-scarf-wearing 40-ish-but-young-at-heart NYC transplants hunching over food carts, peddling something dismal and overpriced like a Sauerkraut Veggie Dog With Non-Optional Exotic Hot Sauce or a Highly Acidic, Reflux-Trigging Local Fresh Raw Vegetable Medley.

Ooz tried to explain the talk to me beforehand, but I couldn't wrap my head around it. It's part of an initiative by the museum to place new installations in different areas of the city. I guess since so far most of them have been clustered downtown.

The first one they did (and the one everyone knows) is the Harmonic Bridge. It was strange being told about it six or so months after mov-

ing to North Adams. I'd heard the droning, but I'd never noticed it. Or rather, I'd never detected it as a separate feature of the town's audio landscape. It may as well have been generated by wind currents in the hills to the east.

The other significant one is a little drive out of the city proper. It's located within the Natural Bridge State Park. Walter Fährndrich, a viola player, installed speakers up in a quarry. Precisely at sunset, his piece "Music for a Quarry" plays. I've never been, but Martin says he was there once at sunset and it was too quiet to tell whether what he heard was recorded or organic sound. So no different from the normal confusion between what exists "already" and what must be generated in order to exist.

Outside the museum, I spot Ooz swaying over the gaggle of guests in her Gigeresque platform boots, and we head inside. There are a couple other faces I recognize from various classes. Behind the front desk, Martin's roommate Noah is directing old people unfamiliar with the museum layout towards the food carts or bathroom. I wave and he sardonically raises his eyebrows at me like, "do we really know each other well enough to acknowledge it in public?" Or maybe he's just being funny. On the way to the auditorium, Ooz clasps my arm like we're an aristocratic couple going to a theater performance. I help her from falling off of her unstable yet highly fashionable boots as we find our seats. We giggle and speak in exaggerated transatlantic accents.

After ten minutes or so of hushed chatter in the auditorium, a man in the crowd stands up and walks to the stage. Ooz nudges me: "That's Droste."

He begins to speak.

14 11:38PM
NOAH

I wake up from a dream and the last thing I can remember is this phrase echoing in my mind:

"Beyond our atmosphere there is a wall of cold that deletes anything it encounters."

Spoken by an amphibian Carl Sagan avatar or one of his familiars on a show that was clearly my subconscious-warped version of Cosmos.

I clamber out of bed and tiptoe to the door, trying not to wake Dani.

This isn't the first time I've slept over her place, but it still feels alien to me. Everyone's asleep in the house.

I can feel the air close in front of my face, pressing in cold and wet around my nose and lower eyelids. Any time I get up at night I feel like it's 50/50 that I'll puke. Maybe the residual psychological effect of a long bout of night nausea I had as a child.

I turn the brightness up on my phone and use the screen as a flashlight to illuminate the brown rubber stairs. The interiors of these student houses are designed like the back seat of a cop car, like to make it so you can just hose everything down when there's a liquid mess. Small things like this make me feel like an animal.

For me, nausea has always been closely associated with depression. My traumas all stem from prolonged periods of sickness and vomiting, but even when I'm not actually sick I'm haunted by this psychic dread that I might be or I will be soon, to the degree that I have to immunize myself against being tricked into spiraling by the memory of touching a door-knob in a public building or biting into a piece of chicken that looks a little pink. It doesn't matter whether the catalyst has the capability of making me physically sick. If there's even the possibility that it might, I must avoid it or suffer psychosomatic sickness.

In the kitchen downstairs I make The Mixture and take shuddering sips. The night outside the window is jagged and horrible. I look at the appliances on the counter and think as hard as I can about their design.

Most of the time, nausea and depression are indistinguishable to me. I feel sick and want to not exist, or I want to not exist and become sick from it. The difference isn't meaningful. Someone wrote that depression is nausea of the soul. That's not a metaphor, it's literally true.

I developed a night-nausea technique over many years.

First: remember the countless other times you felt mind-shattering nausea for a couple hours and then returned to life. Every time, it feels like something is destroying your body and the process is doing unrecoverable damage, but there is always an afterwards.

Second: if you feel close to vomiting, reduce acid by drinking a mixture of dissolved baking soda in water. In an emergency room once I told a nurse that I did this and he lost his mind over it. He thought I was an idiot for not taking tums or zantac or whatever. I can't speak for anyone

but myself, but a baking soda solution works faster than any pill for me. Tums are fucking gross anyway.

If you've vomited already, take small sips of the solution every couple of minutes (or whenever you can).

Third: pace. The conventional wisdom is that you can reduce nausea by propping yourself with pillows in a position part way between sitting and lying down. This has never helped me. I walk around my kitchen or, if I'm up to it, up and down the street. It gives my body something to think about aside from ejecting its contents.

Finally: let your mind race. Don't actively try to forget you feel sick; that will happen on its own after a little while, like falling asleep. Think deeply about anything. Then, when you can, sleep.

I follow the steps. After a little while I go back to bed.

SUNDAY THE TWENTY-FIRST

15 12:58AM
 LINCOLN

The lights fade on again, and I feel myself coming out of a daze. There had been no applause; Droste said something, a final sentence in his slightly whiny voice, and then left the stage. I turn to Ooz to gauge her reaction to this anticlimax. She's gathering her jacket from the floor, her expression disconcerted and bored. We shuffle out with the others.

"What was that?" The crosswalk light comes on and we walk. Ooz shrugs.

"I don't know. I didn't get it. Maybe I need to read some of the writers he talked about. Either it's some really underdeveloped claim about authenticity and, like... I don't know. Or... Either way, it seems like something that will delight the big-city art tourists. And make all our lives weirder and more annoying."

"Can you break it down for me a little? I kind of lost the thread ten minutes in or so. They're hiring actors to perform scenes around town? Like Shakespeare in the Park?" She laughs at that.

"Sort of. The actors have lines and... interactions they have to perform. But they can do their scenes with other actors or with random people."

"How could they do a scene with just anyone?"

“I assume a lot of it is improv. I just don’t get, like... there’s no designated spot for all this to happen. Will they just be walking around the city trying to find people to say lines to?”

“Can they go into businesses and stuff? Would that be legal?” I say, half joking. Ooz turns around and looks past my head, back behind the supermarket, where the hills rise around the city.

“It’s normally hard for me to give a shit about any, like, establishment dude artist. But this is really weird. Not good-weird. Most of the people who live here just want to go about their day and do whatever. And not be bothered by actors interrupting them. And I think I wouldn’t mind this so much if that was what it was. But it’s not.”

“How is it not?”

“Because on top of that, they’re being deceived. They’re being absorbed into the art.”

“Absorbed?”

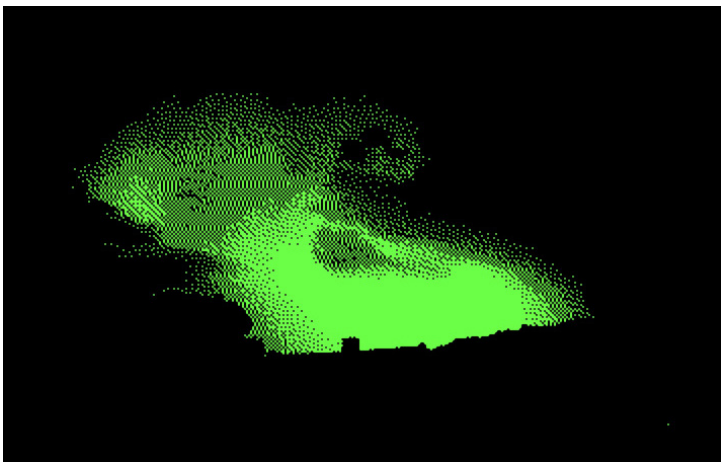
“Whatever. There’s no consent.”

“Does that matter if it’s not being documented? Anyway, you don’t need consent to go up and talk to somebody.” The air is very humid.

“I guess not,” says Ooz.

16 4:09AM
DOYLE

Black dirt is where the nutrients are black dirt is healthier for plants.
Black gloves spread the compost.



17 8:34AM
NOAH

Next to the front door there's a duffel bag of donated clothes from the show the other night to bring to the co-op. Gene is pawing at it when I arrive home from Dani's. I yell "HEY!" and immediately realize it's like 8:30 in the morning and nobody else in the house works today, so they're all definitely asleep. I instinctively shush both myself and Gene, who is not the least bit put out and galomps over to me with his tail wagging furiously.

I go into the kitchen and feed him and then grab a Pop Tart. Dani's probably still asleep too. What the fuck is there to do on a Sunday morning when you're the only person you know with an adult sleep schedule? Gene's whining. Guess I'll take him with me to the co-op. The bag is one of those enormous sausage-shaped army surplus duffels. It's painfully heavy. If Gene were a little larger, maybe I'd try to teach him to drag it. It'd make shlepping my laundry across town a hell of a lot easier.

Gene shits on the sidewalk outside of the health food store and I don't even consider doing something about it. The exertion and direct sunlight are vaporizing my moisturizer. Outside the co-op I dump the bag onto the ground and fumble with my keyring: car, bedroom, house, parent's house, bike lock, illicitly made duplicate of Dani's key (the college prohibits copies), co-op: I push the door open with my ass and drag the duffel through. Gene is somewhere. He'll bark when he wants to come in.

I flick on all the lights and turn the sign on the door to OPEN. Keith's shift starts at 9, so I won't be here long before I have to leave to go to work.

The clothes sorting happens all the way in the back. More sweating and swearing as I drag the duffel through all the shelves and displays. I open the buckles, dump everything into a big plastic tub, and begin flinging stuff aside. Keith can do the actual sorting; I've just made a habit of going through all the co-op donations to see if there are any cool gloves I can give to Dani. There's a pair here, some green woven ones, fingerless and not too tattered. She has a thing for gloves. I think she's sensitive

about how her hands look. I don't know. She never lets anyone see them, but sometimes when they move a certain way the gloves flex and I catch a glimpse and they always looks fine. I don't mind the gloves, though.

It's kind of sexy. Maybe I have a hand fetish?

I am mulling this over when the bells on the front door jangle.

"Keith!" I yell, and instead of his reedy "hello" I hear someone say something about a dog in a deep Australian accent.

I get up and walk around the corner and Gene bounces over to me. Just inside the door there is a tanned, extremely fit man about 30 years old with sandy blonde hair and a douche V-neck.

"Sorry, is this your dog?" he asks. "He was whining at the door and I saw the open sign."

"Oh yeah, that's Diogenes."

"Diogenes, what a great fuckin name! This is your little store?"

"No, ah, I'm just friends with the guys who run it. It's a co-op."

"Looks like a little clothing store! An op shop!" He strides over to a rack of jeans and cargo pants and just sort of beams at the clothes.

"I guess, yeah. Uh, have you been in town long?"

"Just a couple of days!" He looks around conspiratorially and lowers his voice. "I'm here for a museum event. Sort of a hush-hush thing. Acting."

"Oh, cool, you're an actor?"

"Yeeeah, mostly do plays and commercials and shit. Voice acting. You ever seen an Outback Steakhouse commercial?"

"Um, yeah, I think so."

"Me. You ever seen a commercial for that jewelry place, Kays?"

"I don't know." He picks up a poetry book by one of the co-op members. The thin, sad little chapbook looks incredibly weird in the bronze and vascular hand of the grinning Aussie.

"That was me in that. You seen the fuckin, eh, the Geico gecko? I know that guy. His name's Jake."

"Oh shit, yeah? What's he like?"

"Fucking cunt. Can't fucking stand him." He guffaws. "Nah, he's alright. It's like, the gig, you know? Guy fucking says three lines. Does two or three commercials a year, doesn't do any other work and he still makes heaps more than anyone else. But we don't begrudge him." During this, his face has shifted from cheery to downright malevolent and then

abruptly back to cheery. He puts down the chapbook and looks at the pants rack again.

“Any more men’s daks in the back or somewhere?”

“We just got some donations but we still have to sort them, sorry. If you come back in a couple hours they should be on the rack.”

“Daks on the rack,” he says, still beaming.

“Haha, yeah.”

“Well, it’s been lovely to meet you-”

“Uh, Noah,” I say, and shake his extended hand.

“-Noah! I’m Flesh.” I wonder if I heard him right.

“Flesh,” I say.

“Flesh.” He does finger guns at me and clicks his tongue, pats Gene’s head, and then bumps past Keith with a cheerful “woah there!” on his way out the door.

“Wow, that guy was absolutely massive,” Keith says.

“Yeah, he’s an Australian actor. He said his name was... Flesh?”

“Did he say ‘Flash’ with an accent?”

“Maybe. Isn’t that still kind of weird?”

“Less weird than fucking ‘Flesh.’ Google him!” I pull out my phone and search for “flesh australian actor” and it suggests: “flesh hemsworth actor arrest.”

The first result is his Wikipedia page:

Flesh Hemsworth (born 17 December 1987)[1] is an Australian actor who is known for his voice work and his recurring roles as Edmund in King Lear and Chiron in Titus Andronicus, both productions by the renowned Australian Youth Theater,[2] as well as for his widely reported rash of petty crimes[3,4] and drug arrests.[5,6,7,8,9,10,11] He is the 19th Hemsworth brother, and the 3rd youngest.

“He’s related to the Hemsworths!” Keith shrieks. “He’s the enfant terrible!”

“The black sheep! All families have one!”

“He’s here to turn over a new leaf! He’s here avoiding the fucking press!” I’m having fun.

“He came into the co-op, dude! What did he say?”

“He wanted pants! He talked shit about the Geico guy. Uh, he touched Kay’s poetry book!”

“Holy shit! I’m texting her.”

“Is she gonna care?” We both deflate a little.

“He’s the nineteenth fuckin brother, huh? Where does that put him? He must be like, beyond insecure.”

“Imagine the pressure. How many of those guys are Avengers? Four of them?”

“It’s a whole fuckin gaggle of them. There’s four or five in there now and then what, like thirty of them waiting in the wings just in case a stunt goes wrong. It’s a whole family of cannon fodder.” I shush him.

“I feel like we’re overlooking the craziest part of this-”

“Flesh!”

“Fucking FLESH! Oh my god.”

“How do you do that?”

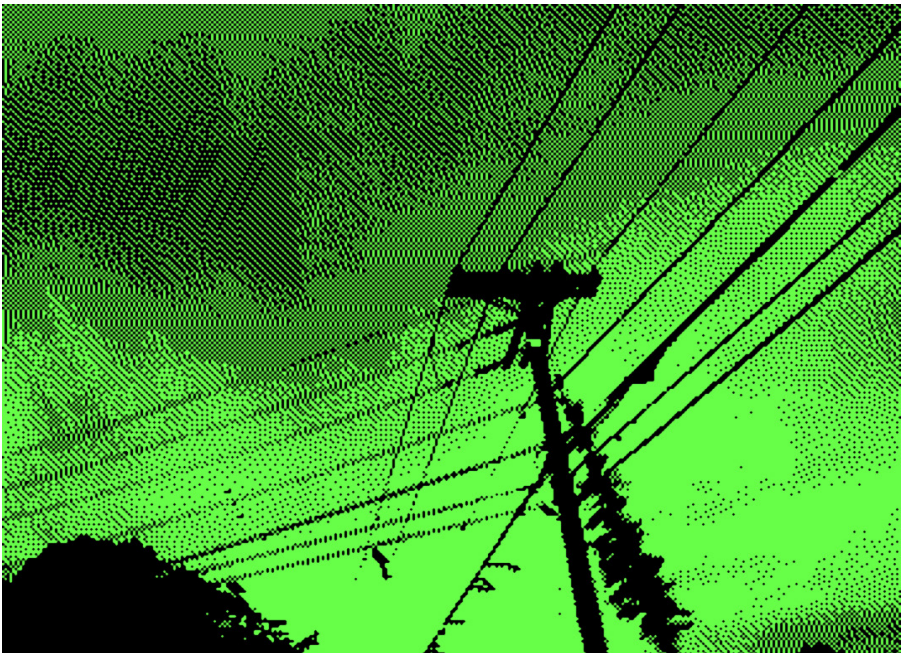
“Nineteen kids... That’s nineteen names, dude. I’d start going nuts too.”

“Fuck.”

We catch our breath.

“Anyway, I have to head back home for work,” I say. “The donations are in the back.”

“Cool. Ahh. Fucking Flesh...”



18 - 9:42AM

SAIRA

Each Sunday, even (especially, it seems like) on days when my corpus callosum feels like it's dissolving, Temple of Doom-style, I must walk my ass twenty minutes downtown to the North Adams Senior Center for my court-mandated Hour And A Half of Community Service. This because of an occurrence back home.

From the moment—circa 6:00 AM—that a stray beam of light perforated my curtain and jammed itself into my eyeball, my brain has been wrapped around itself like a mollusk. Or cinnamon roll. It's now just past 9:40, and the window of my potential timely arrival has become narrow. I slither out of bed and into whatever articles of discarded clothing on the floor are most visible through my squinting, red-rimmed eyes.

A perk of my 3.9(875...) GPA, plus numerous high school science fair accolades: I have carte blanche to devise whatever lesson plan I believe will benefit the senior community the most. I've abused this power only very occasionally. I actually do try to provide applicable, beneficial instruction on days when I'm emotionally capable. Last week was chemistry: I taught them several formulas, each yielding a viable chemical solvent that could be used for DIY drycleaning. Or, you know, other things, if they wanted to use them for other things. I'm not a cop.

Today, all I can think about is how fucked I am, me personally, by the evolutionary advances that were coded into our species to prevent its extinction. Things like pain responses to harmful stimuli. Definitely useful to a species. But what about the individual creatures who can't avoid being wounded or falling ill?

Unfortunately, there is no evolutionary benefit to feeling physically okay while slowly dying of an incurable disease. Not that I currently am dying. As much as it might feel that way. But the something-bad-is-happening-inside-you programming we're given isn't that useful anymore. Anything we can't detect with a regularly scheduled test will probably kill you regardless. God forbid you don't feel like shit while it does.

I arrive and set up two rows of chairs and a projector. The lesson goes fine. I talk about rocks. They seem to enjoy when I do that.

Afterwards, I let them ask whatever questions they want. During this

Q&A, I notice that old man from the rock show quietly come in. Wiktor. He stands at the back of the room, behind the chairs. I half expect him to interrupt me by scraping his fingernails down a chalkboard like that scene in Jaws. He doesn't.

I indicate that my time is nearly over and his hand shoots up and I point to him.

“When an earthquake happens, how deep into the earth is it occurring?”

I say “okay well I’m not a seismologist. But let’s figure it out!” and I

Google a photo of the layers of the Earth real quick on the projector. I

point to the nearly invisibly thin circumference of the circle.

“This is the crust of the Earth, which only goes down like 100 kilometers. It’s part of a layer called the lithosphere. Basically the solid thing that encircles all the molten stuff inside. Like a Gusher. If you know what those are. Uh. That liquid inside is the mantle, which encircles the core, which most people agree is probably solid. So maybe more like a jawbreaker.

“Shallow earthquakes occur in the crust. The deeper ones occur at points in the lithosphere closer to the liquidy stuff. The super crazy deep ones happen in pieces of the lithosphere that are sinking into the mantle.

Here we’re approaching a depth of 1,000 kilometers.” I pause.

“Anyone else?” I begin to say, and he cuts me off and asks “What is the mantle? How does it move? Like water, or like quicksand?” I say “It’s viscous. Like molasses, I guess.” And he nods, turns around, and leaves.

19 2:26PM

OOZ

URL: oooooooooooooooooooooz.tumblr.com

Title: ooz’s art portfolio (2019-2021)

Desc.: site built slash managed by NOAH because OOOZ doesn’t know how TUMBLR works

“White Pants” (Performance/Mixed Media Piece, September 2019).

Artist walked from “Wigwam Western Summit” at top of hairpin turn to downtown. Journey took ~2hrs. Artist wore homemade exceedingly long and baggy white pants, which collected detritus during the journey. At conclusion of journey, pants were encased in hot glue and mounted.

“Fifty Photographs of a Blue Button” (35mm Film, December 2019)
Fifty almost identical photos of a medium size blue- & white-marbled button.

“Anyone I Know Can Have Anything I Own” (Performance, January 2020)

Artist held “Open House” where friends, classmates, and acquaintances were welcome to explore her home and take any of the artist’s possessions. Performance cancelled after Noah whined about someone taking his expensive skincare products from the bathroom cabinet to sell online.

“Trash Tag” (Video, July 2020)

Artist screams “trash tag” before diving onto train tracks to pick up a Sprite bottle. Train runs her over (train is digitally added). Cleanup crew sadly mutters “trash tag” as they clean blood and body parts from the area. Later at the funeral, all the eulogies are just the phrase “trash tag.” Frankly, not her finest work, but the directorial aspects show promise. I’m being told not to editorialize.

“I Didn’t Mean That” (Print, November 2020)

A self-bound hardcover containing angry & abusive texts/emails from various individuals, including friends, family members, and past sexual partners, criticizing Ooz for her public social/spiritual/sexual behavior. Also includes apologies/threats from many of these individuals after Ooz responded to their initial messages with a boilerplate response thanking them for agreeing to be published in a future project.

“Why Did You Publish That?” [working title: “You’re Such a Bitch”]
(Print, January 2021)

A self-bound hardcover containing inflamed texts/emails Ooz received from various individuals after the public dissemination of their texts/emails in “I Didn’t Mean That.”

“Cannoli” (Sculpture, February 2021)

Really grotesque vaguely humanoid sculpture with internal wire frame. Artist refuses to provide a list of materials, but judging by the smell it can be assumed that the piece consisted mainly of raw unpreserved animal products, for sure expired and probably from multiple origins, possibly even scavenged from the dumpster behind the Big Y. Visually, it kind of gave the impression of like if one of those inflatable tube men had intercourse with a regular human and then excreted a really foul stillborn child made of cow intestines and old lunch meat. Ooz is nodding at this description.

“Cannoli” was cause for complaint from a number of students/faculty and even resulted in an eventual citation from High Up, allegedly from the Dean, for “unsanitary living conditions”—a characterization that Ooz insists technically is false, given that the sculpture was designed, built, and displayed (until its removal by an extremely unhappy custodian) in the College’s art building.

Eventual fate unknown, but according to a source in STEM, the condition of the decomposing artwork was such that it couldn’t be disposed of with the normal garbage and therefore had to be sealed in a bin in the basement of the Science Center with the other hazardous waste.

20 - 3:49PM

SAIRA

Okay, so maybe I put things off. I’m a little depressed. Got a little executive dysfunction. I have a lot on my mind. Most of my interactions are with lesser life forms. I met a boy last night at a basement show who had a tattoo of Ralph Wiggum from The Simpsons. Not even Bart, fucking Ralph.

Actually, is that better or worse?

Tomorrow my hormones run out. My pharmacy is in Boston, and they won’t ship the drugs unless I come in personally and show identification. Under normal circumstances, I’d have my father pay for a car service, but this is something of a clandestine operation.

Shell is the only one who knows, here at the college or anywhere. At least that I know of. I am blessed with unclockably androgynous features. I think and pray. And Shell only knows because we room together

and I occasionally drink heartily and during a small fraction of these Hard Nights I will neglect to tidy up my vials.

I'm having a rare introspective moment right now, wondering why I've never buddied up to any of the upperclassmen in my higher level courses, because these, not the illegally drunken riff raff I spend most weekends/weeknights with, are the individuals with reliable transportation. And while there are one or two upperclassmen who would give me the time of day, I'm certain none would be interested in driving a six-hour round trip on behalf of the sourfaced freshman twerp best known for her oft-poorly received comments on the quality of peership during group projects and discussions about grade curves.

My options limited, I drop a post on our local anonymous confession-hookup-etc. app asking/begging anyone who might potentially be already heading in that direction and then back in this direction to take me along in return for basically whatever.

I am barely two minutes into swiping away and googling "executive dysfunction coping mechanisms" when a notifications dings onto my screen:

*im heading that way coming back tonight
meet me in 10 on crnr of ash/black if yr serious
30 cash*

A check of the wallet, a quick trip to the bedroom to cajole the remaining \$14 from Shell, and I am down the hall and out the door.

The corner of Blackinton and Ashland is a brisk 3-minute walk from our townhouse. I make it and then stand, huffing a little, trying to look inconspicuous but also like I'm waiting for something.

I'm wearing a variation of my standard not-going-out uniform, which consists of thick leggings, an off-color crumbling-logo t-shirt long enough to meet the technical specifications for "tunic," and the sneakers that happened to be closest to the door: decrepit suede Adidas indoor soccer shoes, soles almost totally unglued from upper.

It's 48° and overcast. I hug my chest. A couple of cars roll past on Ashland, heading for downtown.

After one or two minutes, I hear a deep thrumming sound behind me

and I look back over my shoulder up Blackinton.

The car that comes around the corner is at once a beautiful machine clearly built with great care to detail and a deeply upsetting affront to the concept of transportation. It's impossible to discern whether it was constructed recently or decades ago, or perhaps cobbled together from both new and archaic parts. It looks like a sharp, cannibal insect. The badge on the side says Kukri.

When it pulls up to the curb, I step forward, open the door, and see a pale, inscrutable face peering out at me from an expanse of amber electronic light and cracked black leather.

"I'm Saira, are you going to Boston?" I say uselessly. The face nods, and I clamber in and shut the door.

In the sealed chamber, the thrumming I heard outside is dampened. It smells like cigarette smoke and mint with a gentle hint of weed. The man is not listening to music.

"I'm Doyle," he says.

"Cool. Thanks for- oh, before I forget..." I hand him the cash I had been clutching.

"Do you need anything before we leave?" he asks. "I'd prefer not to stop on the way."

"No, I'm good." He nods and pushes some stick or lever and the car leaps around the corner. I clip my seatbelt closed.

Doyle doesn't talk or turn on music while we drive. He looks maybe 22 or 23, has short blonde hair and a pink creaseless face that becomes a little off putting when he's not speaking. He looks kind of like one of those '80s medical posters, with the internal organs superimposed upon the smooth, inoffensively toned body of a sexless and bland illustrated figure.

I try to engage him (and ensure he's not a serial killer).

"What do you need in Boston?"

"Just running some errands."

"Are you from the city? I grew up in JP."

"No."

"Do you park in the city? I know some good free spots."

"I park at my friend's place."

"Oh, cool."

Then, maybe 40 minutes of silence as we wind around the Berkshires and through the little hill towns on the way to Greenfield, a hub part-way between North Adams and Boston. Doyle drives very quickly, but the car floats smoothly through each corner.

"I really appreciate the ride, um, especially on such short notice. I had some stuff to pick up from the pharmacy and no way to get there, so uh, thanks." He stretches his shoulders and sits up a little.

"What kind of stuff? Drugs?"

"Uh, hormones." I don't know why I answer truthfully. Maybe I'm caught off guard. Who asks a question like that?

"Birth control?"

"No, um." I shift in my seat. "Female hormones."

"Like- oh." He looks away, out the driver's side window, and then back at the road, and internally I'm like, what is that? You needed to check what was out that window just then?

"Whatever," he mutters.

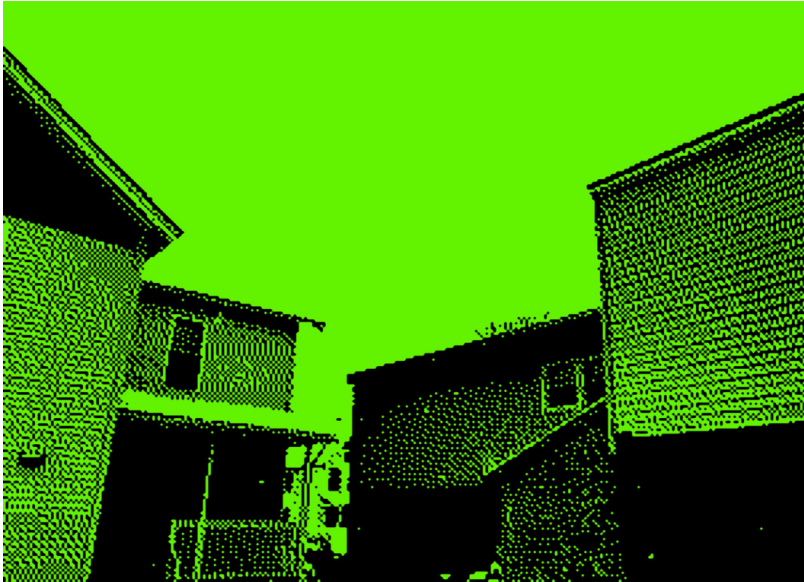
The word itself isn't bad. Certainly not the worst reaction I've gotten. But it falls out of his mouth in a way I don't like.

"Yup," I say, quietly.

It's dark when we return. Doyle pulls up to the same spot where he picked me up. I look at him and he's looking straight ahead and so I just nod uselessly and fumble my stuff off the floor and get out of the car. It's drizzling, and on the walk home I try to muster enough energy for a session of self-hatred, like that's what you get for being irresponsible and not figuring this out before the last possible day, you sit in a car for six hours with a transphobic creep who smells like menthol cigarettes. But instead of anger, I just feel tired and sad.

Back at the dorm, Shell is in the little communal room sprawled on the sofa and doesn't look up when I come in, and I feel rare frustration at their emotionlessness. It's something I usually appreciate about them, that we can just exist in the same space without weird human conventions of having to fill the air with questions neither of us care about the answers to. Now I feel kind of starved for just like a normal "what's up?" And then my petulance embarrasses me and my eyes well up without warning. I fake a yawn and go to bed.

It's not until I pick through the clothes on the floor the next morning for my meds that I discover I mistakenly grabbed the wrong thing from the dark floor of Doyle's car.



21 7:04PM

ADRIANNE

In the last few minutes of daylight, I take a baggie of weed and a can of iced tea out onto the porch and light up my little glass bowl, blow almost-rings at the insanely tall and football-shaped pine tree across the dirt parking lot. My elbows begin to ache on the splintery wooden railing so I brush pollen off one of the discolored canvas camping chairs and pull it into the corner and sit, delicately tending to the embers in the bowl.

Pretty soon Dani smells or senses the weed and wanders out, silently takes the bowl and in one breath eradicates any remaining plant matter. She hates to see smoke drifting away from a smouldering bowl pack, dissipating into the air. She's efficient like that.

Out of the corner of my eye I see she has on those baby blue disposable latex gloves, the ones she wears to her Monday afternoon bio lab just in case there's an experiment that requires them, I'm sure is what she says. Dani is a member of a preppy, sorority-like subcategory that

I didn't know existed before meeting her: one with certain True Self secrets that require a constant casual furtiveness, this furtiveness itself carefully disguised in such a way that it doesn't threaten the outgoing & open image necessarily cultivated by all members of the prep genus. When people question the constant gloves and she brushes it off all fun and casual and but then the person keeps questioning, her tone becomes forced-casual-desperate in a way that makes me want to dig a hole for her to crawl into.

She packs a fresh bowl from the baggie. It's communal. I know she'd be upset if she heard me call her preppy. It's such an antiquated term. And it's true she actually looks more like the emo chick from The Breakfast Club. She has a septum piercing now, in addition to the half-healed hole in her upper ear from when we gave each other piercings in middle school. I still have a little silver circlet in mine.

I guess to me, "prep" is more descriptive of the people you surround yourself with and the way you conduct yourself. Of wanting to appear as though you have no dark secrets.

Maybe I'm completely full of shit for trying to categorize people like that, though. I guess I'm the last person who should be criticizing the inauthenticity of others.

Dani leans over and turns on the weatherbeaten pollen-green bluetooth speaker and starts playing Reverie by Emily Yacina, an album she knows I love, and I feel worse.

We chat for a little bit. Dusk falls and the wind picks up, and we pull our legs up to our chests and hug them. She's wearing socks but not shoes, I notice. The bottoms of her feet are stained with pollen and pine sap and whatever other debris is out here.

Finally, we retreat inside. She goes downstairs to hang out with our neighbors, who it sounds like are having a boxed wine night. I lie down on the futon in the living room and cover myself with the house's mismatched collection of throw blankets and hard, decorative pillows. I contemplate building some kind of fort, but it's only been a few months, and I don't yet know Dani's friends very well.

Dani and the other two seem to hang out as a group a lot. In my most weepy and self-indulgent moments, I wonder whether she forced the

others to let me into the group out of pity.

To stave off spiraling, I begin to type up this week's Poetry blog post on my phone. I've been keeping a dream journal, and each week I'll pick the most useful and compelling ideas my subconscious spat out the previous seven nights and try to combine them into a piece of poetry. My last post was in the form of a story where someone moves through the scenes in my dreams like a sort of haunted house. This week it's more abstract; I find bits of unintended rhyme and assonance in excerpts from randomly selected library books and try to spin them into longer things. When I go to the course's Wordpress site to post my entry, I see a notification that someone commented on my last week's post.

It's a long, rambling response from Ooz (no E in her username). She doesn't really use commas. Is this an affectation, or is she tapped into an ultra-genuine stream of poetic consciousness?

I read it and smile. She says my post reminded her of a dream she had recently, an apocalypse dream that felt like a biblical premonition.

In class, when she talks about her writing, she seems serious and almost shy. Is that possible? Responding to open-ended questions, criticizing and giving advice, she looks down as though she were reading off the floor. When she's finished with whatever she had to say, she slumps back in her seat and crosses her arms.

Most days, the professor has us do an exercise where we have to write without stopping for ten minutes. During these exercises, Ooz scribbles furiously with her left hand while her right hand taps, gestures, and digs into her hair.

She has little stick-and-poke lines and dots on her fingers. I think they're Morse code.

So far she hasn't sat still long enough for me to draw them.

22 7:30 PM

KEITH

Once dusk has fully fallen, I go to the door and put the CLOSED sign in the window. Besides that guy Flesh, two people came in today, which is pretty typical for a Sunday.

Not that it really matters. Renting the place costs basically nothing. The bands in the Collective pitch in and there's some sort of art grant from

the city as well. The city is broke as fuck. If we never sold anything we'd still probably rent the storefront just as a convenient place to stockpile instruments and paintings between gallery shows and events.

I take my time tidying up, locking the front door, making a cup of coffee to go with the Keurig that Martin always gives me shit for having.

Through the display windows I can see the outline of the hill that rises up on the other side of Route 2. It's too far and too dark for the rocky outcropping of the Top of the World to be visible. Marissa texts me a shopping list. Baby food and stuff for the Williams potluck this weekend.

When people find out I went to Williams, one of the first questions is usually "what are you doing here?" I usually say something about North Adams being more authentic (not to mention cheaper, cue laugh), but that's part of it. The other part is that the arts scene here is a much smaller pond, and I can be a bigger fish when I coordinate equipment and set up shows for people. It feels good. In Williams, every sophomore is co-writing an Off Broadway play or interning for Julian Casablancas's tour manager or whatever. And because I'm a nontrad student, I'm at least five years older than pretty much everyone else. I mean, I have a kid.

Lights out in the main room.

In back, there's a double door we use for bringing in big canvases and furniture. It leads into a span of shitty pavement that's part alley and part parking lot, running behind all the other shops and restaurants on the strip. During the day, the cooks and busboys from the Chinese restaurant next door are seemingly always out here sitting on milk crates and trying to bum cigarettes off me when I pass by. They hate Spirits but ask for them anyway.

I know. American Spirits, Williams, fuck off.

They're working the dinner rush right now, though, and it's quiet. I walk out to my car, still occupied with the grocery list, and only notice as I arrive that there's someone standing very close by.

"Hi," I say.

"A good night, hm?" He says. It's an older man, dressed too nicely to be standing in a parking lot after dark.

"Yes, goodnight," I respond.

“N- Oh, fuck.” He stutters and composes himself. “I meant a fine night. Is it not?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” I unlock my car.

“You know,” he continues, “on nights like tonight, you can, if you like, reach out and actually sense that slow and great magnetism. Just a humming in the air. The engine of the earth, primed and turning over. The nature of this approaching change is unknown to us now. But we should prepare, um, for anything, right?”

“Okay,” I say, and start my car, wave, and drive out of the lot. In my rear-view mirror, he stands and watches, at least until I pull around the corner and lose sight of him.

WEDNESDAY THE TWENTY-FOURTH

23 8:48AM

SHELL

Irrational Anxiety 1:

I think an oft-disregarded feature of at least the first couple years of college is being filled with the conviction that everyone but you is enjoying an active and contented and effortless social life while you languish on the perimeter not really communicating with any of your classmates or dorm neighbors, occasionally pathetically following groups of people to parties where you immediately feel out of place and must stand—again, pathetically—watching hideously drunk frat boys play beer pong, lest you experience a single instant of unmitigated public aloneness, which everyone knows and agrees is the most pathetic form of aloneness because the opportunity for connection exists but is not taken advantage of. Because you are a terrible and pathetic social coward and will probably be an outcast forever.

I've been asked to truncate this “run-on sentence,” and will, even though I'm pretty sure all clauses are separated by punctuation.

Irrational Anxiety 1:

There exists in my soul a near-constant worry that I am “doing it wrong” re: The College Experience. To an extreme degree, I am incapable of Putting Myself Out There.

I feel this way, so everyone must.

I despise the term “FOMO” but it's sort of that, except instead of an

event or whatever the thing I fear I'm missing out on is a probably non-existent fantasy. The fantasy is of always having a place to be where people will know who I am and love and respect me. In the fantasy, these people and I do favors for one another and go on capers and talk deep into the night and have passionate impromptu sex with major fallout that resolves just before vacation.

I don't know what the normal amount of time it takes to make friends is but I fear I've passed it.

I'm covertly working on a Bio paper in Psych 103. My AP credits from high school may not have transferred over, but the knowledge of literally all the material certainly did. Basically the only time I look up is when the perpetually B.O.-scented dude in front of me interjects with a totally inappropriate, inane, and fascinating factoid/theory, as he does now. "Yes, Colton?"

"So, you know how our hair and fingernails grow after we die and shit? Well if animals like pangolins are made out of keratin too, for how long do they keep getting bigger after they die? Like how big do they get?" Given that he sells weed, maybe this should be reassuring. Like how you never trust a skinny cook.

I keep my head down and continue writing.

24 9:00AM
MARTIN

When I arrived here a few years ago, I thought I wanted to study music production. Aside from one or two core courses, my schedule for the first year was basically all music theory, ProTools, art management. I don't think I ever questioned it until the end of that year when my advisor sat me down and was like, "hey dude? We let you take almost exclusively courses in this one discipline and you failed like three of them. Why do you suck so much at the thing you love?"

Then I had the realization that no, I actually hadn't loved any of it. The idea of being a producer or band manager or whatever sounded really great, but actually, all I was capable of doing was playing some guitar. And now, because I had flunked out of my major and failed to take any core courses, I could either go back home and work at my mom's restaurant, or I could start my freshman year over again.

It's weird seeing all your classmates advance while you stay where you are. Then again, I've never really had an ego about that sort of thing. Plus, it's not like anyone at fucking North Adams State College is really in a position to judge me for it. The literal best anyone can achieve here is graduation cum laude from the college with the highest acceptance rate in Massachusetts.

All of which is to say that, having missed all my core courses the first time around, I don't have a ton of choice about my schedule. I need a Bio 101 credit, and Bio 101 is at 8 AM Monday-Wednesday-Friday. Luckily, the Void Farmers don't often gig on Sundays.

The class is only 50 minutes, and it's my only M-W-F aside from Poetry in the afternoon, but I can't go back to sleep at 9 in the morning. So usually I just walk around afterwards. I wander the campus, or I follow the railroad tracks to the tunnel and back, or I go to the Goodwill downtown. That's my plan today.

I start walking. The air is sticky and smells like tree flowers in a way that isn't totally pleasant.

Four or five old timers are milling around inside the Goodwill. It's 50% off red tags on Wednesdays. The air conditioning isn't working. I take my regular path: men's clothing, appliances, books & CDs. There's a weird little album with a blue cover from a band called U.S. Maple, who I think I've heard Ooz mention. It's \$1.50, so I buy it and shove it in my back pocket. The clouds are clearing up outside, so I also grab a tattered straw hat (\$1) for the sun.

Then, instead of heading back towards campus, I walk the ten or so minutes to MoCA.

The parking lot is almost entirely deserted. Once I've gone in and gotten my entrance tag, I head outside again through the side door and cut across the bridge to the buildings further back. A drip of sweat runs down my nose, and I wipe it and notice the rust on the bridge's stamped metal. The phrase "industrial chic" springs into my head, even though this really is the site of an old factory.

The water underneath the bridge is shimmering. It's impossible to look at. Past it there's a stretch of asphalt and then a wide open space with nothing but gravel and these tall, pink, brazenly phallic sculptures that look like they're made of paper mache. Although they're outside, so they

must be something else or they'd melt in the rain.



I found them a little off putting the first few times I noticed them, but I've come to enjoy their shameless weirdness. The set is called "Les Pommes d'Adam." A plaque reads "Franz West." I'm suddenly curious about Franz. I've always pictured him as some young wacko to whom MoCA gave a little too much freedom in their contract, but when I sit crosslegged in the gravel and Google him, the ensuing photos are of a grizzled and mustachioed old man. Austrian. Died 2012. One of the images is of his gravesite: a little metal plaque like the one here with a curlicue mini-Pomme behind it. More like an earthworm than the dildo-esque erections in front of me, but that same shade of flesh-pink. I can't help but laugh.

"G'day," someone says a little distance behind me, and I hop up and nod in the direction of the voice and begin walking away, I don't really feel in the mood to give directions to tourists, and out of the corner of my eye I glimpse the guy, tall and gleaming tan in the sun, seeming as though he wants to say more but grasping my intent to avoid any further interac-

tion. I go in the first door I see.

I'm in the last room of the Taryn Simon exhibit. It stretches all through this building's first floor: at the furthest end, near the entrance to the museum, there's a room of her cool and extremely expensive-looking books, just out in the hallway there's the entrance to her sort of centerpiece, which is called A Cold Hole, and then there's this room, which houses a big black octagon-shaped dome with a little spiral entrance that keeps out the light so that the inside is totally dark. Inside is empty and pitch-black and applause plays on speakers. It's a really good litmus test for my mental health because being inside either makes me laugh or have a panic attack, depending.

I press my hand against the wall when I go in so I don't bump into anything. The walls are hung with cloth on the inside, presumably to reduce damage if you walk into one of them.

The applause swells and fades.

After a couple minutes, my eyes have adjusted enough that I can make out someone's silhouette entering the space. They walk past me and then abruptly crouch. I feel a surge of panic.

"Hello?" I stutter.

"Oh my god, is that Martin?" The voice is high and a little scratchy.

"Ooz?"

"Dude, what are you doing here? It's like, early!"

"I don't have class! I was just wandering around. Wait, why are you here?" She laughs.

"Someone checked out the keys to the darkroom and my negatives are due in like, an hour and a half. And I had a stroke of genius." I hear sloshing.

"Oh my god, you're developing in here? How did you get chemicals past the front desk?"

"Canvas totes count as purses, I guess? There's like four huge mason jars and a tank in here. I'm honestly surprised no one questioned the clinking."

"Incredible. Do you need help?" I ask.

"No thanks, this won't take long. Once the negatives are in the tank, you can do the rest in the light. I'll probably go out back and finish there." I

hear the dry clicking sound of her twisting the reel and spooling up the film. Then chatter behind me, and a sudden blinding light.

“Oh shit, haha!” someone says, and Ooz screams “Fuck!” The light shuts off. I blink and see spots.

“Sorry, it was really dark,” the guy says, and Ooz shouts “that’s the fucking point! It’s a dark room! You keep your hand on the wall and you go in and it’s dark!”

“Jesus, it’s not a big deal,” he says.

“It is a big fucking deal! I have film here and you just fucking ruined it!”

“Okay, well I didn’t mean to. It was just dark.”

Another woman’s voice says “Sorry.”

“Fuck,” Ooz mutters again. I hear her hurl everything into her bag. She rushes past on my left side. I follow her out into the light.

Once my eyes adjust I see her over by the door, tapping her foot violently on the grey carpet.

“Come on,” I say. “Let’s shoot them again real quick and run home and develop them in the closet.” She scowls but acquiesces, and I heft her tote onto my shoulder and we jog to the exit.

25 9:55AM

?

In the room is the black octagon. The outside is painted drywall. Maybe eight or nine feet tall. Not claustrophobic from the outside.

The lighting in the containing room is diffused by the gray walls and carpet. It looks overcast. People’s faces moving around in the room appear low contrast.

The black octagon is called Assembled Audience. On one of the grey walls of the outer room, there’s a list of the different events where the applause was recorded. There’s a lot to be read about this installation.

What appears simple on the outside often must contain the most complexity, is something Josh is saying to Becca. His voice is diluted by the rushing noise of the applause.

The volume increases and decreases. Becca thinks do I have an antacid in my purse. Josh is of the Eat Breakfast Like A King school of thought. They had nibbled on the free Continental spread in the hotel lobby and then had a really hearty additional full breakfast at the small, expensive

place attached to the museum. Poached eggs bursting, flooding over local fat-veined chunks of ham, sausage, and pieces of toast drooping with butter. These mental images now flooding back with a prolonged abdominal gurgling that is swallowed up in the ambience, thankfully. Becca's eyes have adjusted enough by now that when Josh says "let's go back upstairs, I want to see the s-" and then vanishes, she notices and reaches forward. She can see ahead of her, where Josh had just been, a little. The slight amount of reflected light coming through the entrance is not enough to illuminate the floor, ceiling, or walls. She imagines him crouched low on the carpet, grinning, and she walks forward with her fists outstretched, waving them with more force than necessary, already planning an insincere apology for when one collides with the side of Josh's head.

Then, like walking off a curb, she tumbles. No floor. Falling without any sensation of movement, without any breeze. Lightless soft room-temperature air.

The applause fades. Then swells. Then fades.

26 10:37AM

SAIRA

Shell's face is circular with delicate features that are more often than not arranged in a sort of cute parody of gloominess, like a cartoon cherub pouting. Their nose is flat and buttony and makes me so intensely jealous that I wonder whether they ever notice me just like scowling in the direction of their face for no obvious reason. My nose is conspicuous and oily. But who among us etc.

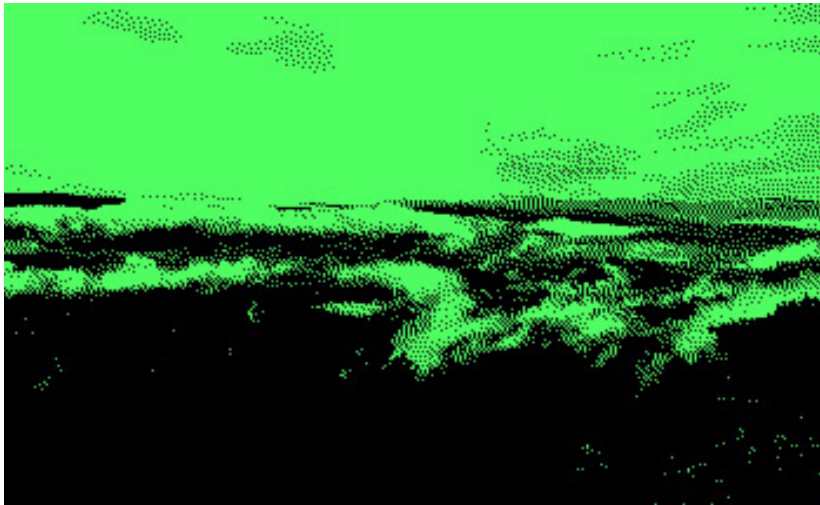
We've traded probably two thirds of our respective wardrobes with one another. I sometimes feel like I'm playing the role of Shell as a high schooler. On the fabric of various bartered articles there are scattered drawings and scribbles, some acutely alarming. I can't recall ever having met a trans person who fondly remembers high school.

The only thing I really have on Shell, I guess, is that when we're out on an exposed, graffitied clifftop in the laser-bright sun, chipping away at veins of quartz, their shoulders and cheeks gradually turn blush-pink even beneath 35 applied SPF's, as like an early warning sign that it might be time for me to consider slapping some sunscreen on my

exposed bits.

Granite is IGNEOUS, which means that before it was this cliff, it was a very hot liquid underground. It's also INTRUSIVE, meaning it solidified slowly while still underground rather than being blasted out of a volcano and solidifying during its aerial journey toward some caveman or -woman's head (in which case it would be EXTRUSIVE).

This comprises my extra credit work for an advanced Environmental Studies course.



Where we are is colloquially known as the "Top of the World." I'm not sure what realm of irony that name emerged from; no one I've asked has given me a straight answer.

It is an outcrop overlooking downtown North Adams and consisting primarily of mylonite granite and gneiss, bits of quartz, and food wrappers/alcoholic beverage containers. Also a healthy amount of burnt firewood and discarded cigar tubes. Every time I come up here I imagine a crime scene detective doing that thing they do in the procedurals where they look at different pieces of evidence and like peer into the forensic past and see the crime happening, except here they just visualize an idiot from the college baseball team drinking Four Loko, getting a blowjob behind a stump, vomiting on himself, and falling asleep in a pile of pebbles and mulch.

Geology is a science that, for the vast majority of people, is misunderstood and underappreciated, in my opinion. The ubiquity of products and technologies resulting from geological advancements is undeniable, but the origins of these things are replaced in education and media by other interstitial processes: chemical research, international agreements, sweatshops. The labor to build an iPhone begins in a mine, where dozens of minerals are dug out of the ground and processed. If you ask someone about the scientific origin of table salt, they'll probably remember their high school chemistry course and say "sodium chloride," but a better answer would be "halite," the mineral that we dig up and refine as our primary source. I'm being boring and pedantic but like I'm right.

Sweating heavily, and with our rock samples in tow, we hike back into town. I stop at Angie's and fulfill my promise to buy Shell a meatball sub in return for assistance digging. It's one of the few expenses I can charge to my father's credit card without any eyebrows being raised back home.

Shell heads to the townhouse for a cold shower and I go to the "geology lab" (a room containing several instructional posters and four microscopes). I'm to take zoomed-in photos of the samples for a demonstration the teacher is doing. Seems like something I should be getting paid for, is something I was smart enough not to say.

Close up, granite is a messy thing: typically greyish feldspar with randomly distributed speckles of quartz, mica, whatever. There are little yellow bits of tourmaline in some of the eight or nine samples.

I'm processing them quickly until I bring the second-to-last under the microscope. I scrunch up my eye against the black metal eyepiece. The feldspars here range from light to dark grey, but embedded within are little checkerboard squares of something red. Too dark to be rose quartz. I'd call it alkali feldspar but it's too deep and translucent and glimmery. The pattern is beyond weird.

I remove the little shard of rock and examine it. To the naked eye, the grid forms a half-inch-across perfect square. I stare at it and imagine myself 60 years old, standing on the stage at a meeting of mineral aficio-

nados, pontificating on the unnatural nature of the perfect red shape. I think, this must be something manmade and I just didn't notice when I picked it up. I think, maybe it's just a stain or an indentation. I think, I wish I could show this to Wiktor.

FRIDAY THE TWENTY-SIXTH

27

?

There is a large rectangular parking lot at the end of Arnold Place. It's shared by three multi-family houses. In the parking lot on a rusty iron trailer sits a sailboat. In the middle of the night, a man climbs up into the sailboat and enters the cabin.

A group of men stand on either side of Eagle Street loudly arguing. They raise their arms and mime elaborate threats of physical violence. The owner of a Mexican restaurant comes out and says something, and the men meekly leave, all headed in the same direction.

Two old women and a young boy wait at the bus stop on Main Street. Another old woman comes and asks to sit; the bench there is full. The three women look at the boy, who remains seated but begins to recite one of Euripides' tragedies.

28 12:41PM

SAIRA

The final project in Advanced Poetry, it sounds like, will be a 7k- to 10k-word Piece graded primarily on the height of its concept and the amount of personal trauma confessed therein. It almost goes without saying.

“What have you avoided writing about? What causes you the most shame? Do you live in fear of something about yourself being revealed to your friends and loved ones? What is it?”

Our professor is passionate and eccentric. All semester I've hesitated to make any comparison to Dead Poets Society but was left little choice two Fridays ago when the man actually physically climbed upon a desk. I mean he sort of side-sat on it, the way cabaret singers lounge on the tops of pianos, but it was still creatively invorating.

While he describes the emotional depths we all must sink to in order to

produce something of value and brilliance, I add the names of anyone thoughtfully nodding along to an as-yet-untitled mental list.

“It’s important that you display your horrible secrets in your work. Everyone should be able to see your grotesqueries.”

Although neither professor will ever know this, I’ve combined my final projects in Environmental Studies and Poetry. I’m creating a poetic geological survey, something I’m pretty certain has never been done before. So far, it has taken a great deal of fine-tuning for it to meet the requirements for both courses.

I see something interesting beside my right thigh and hunch down. A text from Shell: an upperclassman friend of theirs has gotten us psychedelics. I think of Doyle’s grey container, pushed to the back of our minifridge. Even after extensive Googling, Shell and I couldn’t identify the flat white octagons within. Maybe that’s for the best?

I’ll get them back to him. Not that he deserves my cooperation, but ripping off a drug dealer seems more hazardous than the value of the spite. Plus, I’ve been off the pills for almost a week now. The pharmacy’s delayed shipment of my refill. They didn’t like that I lost the bottle so quickly. Not sure what terrible thing they expect would befall me if I had some extra hormones.

“I want to wince and writhe when I read your work. I want to be made sick. I want to think less of you as human beings.”

tremendous, I text back.

29 1:32PM
COLTON

Doyle said to look for the tranny but its harder than I thought to tell. He also said his name was Sarah but its something weird and Indian. I just stand in the hall saying Sarah looking for someone with brown skin to look at me. It takes a couple minutes but when I see him Im like no way. He looks like a regular girl its crazy. His voice is scratchy though. I go up and say are you Sarah and he says no Sayirah. I thought D was just saying it funny. Im like hey can we talk and she says sure.

We go downstairs in the building theres a little cafe. I grab two of the blue plastic chairs from the corner and we sit down a little distance away from the cashier. I try to play it like D is a dick and Im trying to help

her. Him whatever. He says yeah I didnt mean to I just grabbed the bag. I say well you want your trans pills back right and he nods. So okay meet D at the science center tomorrow night at 11:30. The door near Montana street will be open then go down the stairs to the basement. You can swap and everybodys happy. He says okay sure but can you tell me whats in the container Im going to be walking around with them. Its better if you dont ask me that I say. He says okay.

30 3:50PM
MARTIN

In the afternoon I have a meeting with my advisor. He's a cool older guy who insists I call him by his first name, Paul, and interrupts our meetings to offer me snacks from a rectangular biscuit tin. I think a lot of students who swap majors or fuck up entire semesters end up with him by default because he's so unflappable. We talk about the paperwork I'm supposed to have filed for graduation, and he walks me through the financial stuff.

When we finish I go out into the hall and sit on the bench. Paul's office is in the old English building, which is close to a hundred years old. You can tell by some of the archaic design choices: weird tile color schemes on the floors, wrought iron religious motifs on staircase railings, those L-shaped urinals that go all the way to the ground. The walls throughout the building are made of dark wood that soaks up the light, but there's a 15-minute moment just before sunset where the sun blasts through the thin windows at the western end of the central hallway and makes every surface gleam dusty orange, so bright you can't read your phone's screen.

When mine rings I try anyway, then blink back the spots and answer blindly. It's Keith, saying something about how both the guys in The Paper Products are leaving town before graduation and we need to bump up their final show to tomorrow night. I say okay, there won't be as many people there, but it'll be free and there'll be alcohol and the Products put on a good show, it should be alright.

I stand in the shadow until my vision returns and look again: some missed texts from Lincoln. He'll send me messages during the day like

“hey, what’s up,” and I’ll think he’s asking to hang out, but he just wants to know what I’m doing and then he’ll tell me what he’s doing. It’s fine but also sort of weird.

He’s just lonely, I think, like everyone else. And I walk into town to buy beer.

SATURDAY THE TWENTY-SEVENTH

31 10:12AM

SHELL

The room is floor-to-ceiling brown, but not like any identifiable shade of brown. Brown where you can’t tell whether it’s the absence of color or every color on top of itself, having built up over fifty years to form this non-color every-color.

We’re in the old psych building, where I assume all the adjuncts’ offices are relegated to. One fun thing is that the college counselors are mostly either graduate psych students or adjunct psych professors, which leads to some other fun things, like that if you’re a psych student you might be therapized by your own teacher, and also that all of them have super busy constantly changing schedules and so getting the same one two sessions in a row is basically impossible. So there’s no continuity or privacy, which I’m not a psychiatrist but hmm.

Today it’s Prematurely Balding Last Semester Of His Masters Guy, an all-around nice dude, if not incredibly results oriented. The love seat I’m on is made of leather so worn and ancient that it’s basically suede.

Another fun thing is that most of the grad student counselors are receiving course credit but no actual currency for their work. Trying to guess whether this is the case for each new therapist constitutes my new Therapy Game.

If you’ve never been to therapy, you won’t know what I’m talking about, but everyone I’ve talked to who got sent to therapy as a kid has admitted to some degree that something like 30% of their mental RAM throughout each session is devoted to some meta-therapy issue. These issues vary widely and can concern subjects such as the therapist’s personal life/intellectual capacity/taste in art, the obfuscation of specific nonessential details of your own life just as like a pointless but satisfying emotional holdout, or even reverse-gaming some perceived therapist

game.

An example of this last category: during my very first session at my childhood therapist's office back in Texas, I noticed that there was a paperback copy of *Into Thin Air* underneath the drawers to the side of his desk. From my perspective, low to the ground enveloped in a womb-like pleather sofa on the far side of the room, it was clearly visible; however, the drawer directly above would have obscured it from any other vantage. Thus, two options presented themselves:

1: That the psychotherapist had dropped it and then perhaps with a thoughtless motion of the foot shoved it into an invisible spot beneath his desk.

2: That I was being tested. That he had hidden it in a spot where I could clearly see it, and I could clearly see that he couldn't see it, and that my reaction constituted some portion of his analysis of my psyche. That not only would my choice (to ignore the book or helpfully point out where it had fallen) form some meaningful part of his judgment, but also that the title and the contents of the book (a non-fictional account of a mountaineering disaster) were intended to be clues, maybe metaphors for what he (George insisted I call him by his first name) thought was wrong with me.

I even went and read the book. *Into Thin Air*. It stressed me out. Got me thinking about how a body is such a fragile thing to keep and maintain, and how you can damage it so quickly and it'll never function the same again. Naturally, this caused me to contemplate the relevance to my therapy...

The game doesn't have to exist, it's enough that you suspect it might. You pick up on some innocuous detail, and you inkle.

Prematurely Balding Guy is okay. Mostly he talks and I listen or zone out. Certain adults interpret my quietness as secret intelligence and treat me as a confidant, which mostly affects me in positive ways, although it can be uncomfortable when adult professionals are very familiar with me. Something about PBG's youthfulness keeps it from being overly weird when he talks about his girlfriend's anxiety disorder in what he thinks is a therapeutically instructive anecdote.

He has one of those yellow legal pads. He writes his notes in this huge,

loopy script that totally disregards the lines. I can see them reflected in the tall slanted window behind him.

“If you could go back in time and speak with your younger self, what would you say?”

“Like, advice?”

“It doesn’t have to be advice.”

“I’d ask, ‘what are you so excited about?’”

On the pad appears a word that looks an awful lot like “derisive.” I scowl, even as I realize it doesn’t help my case.

Each of us counting on the other not to tell my parents, we end the session early. I feel happier walking out of dark old buildings than bright new ones. Like the aura shift is more meaningful.

It’s so nice out.

Saira is leaning against the hokey rustic wooden fence that runs along the path from the old psych building to Blackinton Street. We share a conspiratorial smirk, and then giggle and race to the sunken spot behind the new Science Center where the modernist concrete bike racks block the view from outside, and we hunker down and I take the little plastic bag out of my pocket and tear three tabs from the blotter sheet.

“I only get one?”

“You haven’t done acid before,” I reason. She pouts.

“I sort of have.”

“That was some research chemical! You don’t even know what that was.”

“Could’ve been acid.”

“Acid doesn’t make you shit your guts, darling.”

“But it did make everything wobble. It was acid-adjacent. Anyway, I’ve got like half a foot and 40 pounds on you.”

While I deliberate, her stomach rumbles.

“Shell? Pleease? I’m craving that sweet lysergic acid diethylamide.”

I sigh and rip another from the sheet. We slap the tabs onto our tongues and wait for them to dissolve.

32 1:08PM

OOZ

red red red red red RED vinyl countertop with shiny sparkles and RED vinyl bar stool seat orange and green smoothies in notch-edged goblets made

from bluish clear glass like an old coke bottle washed up on the beach. RED nosebleed earlier but all dry now. picked at dark rusty brown blood on the way over.

one RED sock. um. RED apron on the waitress and on the guy at the door. not used to at-the-door people at diners.

RED neon sign that says DINER. an unidentifiable font.

Red on the napkin when I press it to my nose pretending to wipe my mouth. Pink blush of concern. This girl is smiley and nice but we can't talk. Nothing comes out. *red canvas backpack* (this is a reach - it's burnt orange). Uh um. Red tomato on her BLT. Can't see it but it's in there. /so what sort of stuff do you like to do/ I listen to lots of music. I like to walk around outside. I walk in the woods and look UP so I can see the branches, so if a branch SNAPS I can see it falling towards me and I'll have time to say uh oh! before I get SQUISHED

I think: my favorite thing is to take images of my close friends and family and then place them in a tank with toxic chemicals and leave them there until they fully reveal.

It's rude to check your phone during a date, even a blind one that is going poorly, but she does so I feel okay doing it and I read Martin's text just as she asks me what I'm doing later tonight. Hot wave of relief.

"There's actually this punk show at my house tonight, I've gotta be there to run the soundboard..." Not entirely true. But plausible.

"Hh, cool." Our responsibilities complete she does not express interest or suggest another time. I hold the door for her on the way out.

The house is noisy and full of motion when I return. Keith and Martin are dragging furniture around while Noah makes KEEP OUT signs for the bedrooms.

Upstairs I push a large jagged paper mache sculpture off the bed and crack open my laptop. I post an announcement on the Void House page then begin shooting last-minute invite texts to anyone not on social media. I try to only send these to people who've been to shows here before because going beyond that feels like advertising. But sometimes I get a vibe from someone. Eligible vibes are 1: likes punk or just enjoys yelling and jumping around 2: probably has nothing better to do on a weekend night + would appreciate the invite 3: is cool and attractive.

I can think of someone who fits at least the second two of these criteria.

Noah calls from below:

“Ooz! we need the amps in place so Keith can finish setting up the cables!”

Leaning hard to the side I lug an amp down the staircase with one hand and tap the message out with the other:

hey its ooz from pantry class if yr not busy tonight webare havibg a show at the white house w red trim on bkackington showd b fun!!! :-)

33 6:38PM

ADRIANNE

My phone buzzes.

Ohmygod.

34 6:53PM

LINCOLN

Martin texts back around 7. If I don't answer he'll assume I'm asleep, which is fine.

You know it's time to take out the trash when your room has become infested with small black floating dots, flies that are slow and blind and easy to kill in a way that is somehow creepy, like their species never bothered to develop any methods of avoiding a swinging swatter because they spend their lives feeding on things that are dead and immobile, things that pose no threat.

Although I spent a great deal of time and energy looking for a single-bedroom apartment away from campus, I wonder whether I'd be happier if I lived in a dorm or in the Void House with Martin and everyone. As much as I've complained about it the last few years, living in forced proximity to other people, people who have hobbies and go places and bug me to go with them, maybe it kept my head from getting too dark and weird.

Anyway, they didn't ask me if I wanted to live with them.

Today is a depression cleanup day. One poorly-kept secret of depressed people is that we live in cycles of squalor (which feels righteous, like a reflection of emotional decay) and purification (or “cleaning up:” shame-

ful but also weirdly invigorating). Both parts motivated by self-hatred. To a lot of people these cycles are metaphorical. I can't tell you for sure that all depressed people do this, but I'm comfortable assuming it's true for most of us.

A good cleanup day is basically organizational, whereas a bad one necessitates donning rubber gloves and investigating corners of the apartment where for the last few weeks I've only breathed through my mouth. Today's falls into the first category, thankfully, although the forgotten mug of some porridgelike substance I find next to the couch reduces my mood a tad.

Saira texts. Her and Shell tried the acid I got for them. They want to come visit. I text back "congrats. sorry busy," which I don't mean to sound mean, but I think maybe does. They're probably too preoccupied to notice.

Another generalization is that depressed people can basically only accomplish a task when they're avoiding a more important one.

The substance from the mug does not go down the drain, and there's something moving in it maybe, or I could be seeing things. My garbage disposal is broken. I push it through the sieve with the handle of a wooden spoon.



I wouldn't go so far as to speak for all depressed people on the subject of suicidal ideation, but when I think about killing myself, it feels like the emotions motivating that thought are: exhaustion, shame, and also the fear of more shame, just overwhelming shame lasting forever. Also the certainty that things will continue getting worse and never improve, with this trend continuing until I die. Which is another kind of fear, I guess.

I don't see a therapist but I read some paper online that said it's useful to identify the emotions that motivate certain thoughts.

By exhaustion, I mean the feeling normal people have when they're really sleep deprived and distracted by their overwhelming to-do list or anxiety from not having showered for a long time. Drowning underneath tiredness so enveloping that the thought of doing even something they enjoy seems like a nightmare. I assume normal people feel this way, under certain circumstances, but for a depressed person it's basically constant.

Imagine that you have a job that works you overtime and fills you with dread when you wake up every day, and that job is "caring for the body." You have to make sure this thing attached to you has enough water and food inside it. You have to wash it with chemicals to stop it from stinking. It sleeps for ten or twelve hours and it wakes up unsteadily, weak and dehydrated.

Most difficult is caring for its brain, which is sick. I consider my brain and body separate things from "me," which according to Ooz is problematic. The brain doesn't care if the body lives or dies. The brain is rotten and does stupid, cruel things for no reason, and you have to feed it drugs or sit it in front of a mindless video game or TV show for hours just to build up enough restlessness and anxious self-hatred that it will let you exercise or do work.

That's just what I feel on weekends, when I can go back to the lair and wallow. Go feral without anyone else having to know. I feel horrible every day and I exert so much effort hiding it and pretending to be normal so I don't upset anyone. And then the 1% of the time that I'm not incredibly positive and polite, people become gruff and annoyed and act

like I'm unreasonable and like managing my emotions is this big chore. Before I came out, I used to constantly get into fights with my family about my "attitude." They said that business and social opportunities all resulted from interpersonal connections. They worried my antisocial nature meant I'd never amount to anything.

After I came out, they stopped talking to me and there was no more fighting.

There's another mug filled with the beige stuff behind the TV stand. It's one of the white mugs from the cafeteria, the ones with slightly angular handles and absolutely no other identifying characteristics. I'm not sure how it got into my apartment. I don't know what's in it. I don't even eat oatmeal.

I feel like my fears make it impossible to relate to normal people. Normal people fear public speaking and death. Nothing could be less scary than death. Death is so stupid and incomprehensible. I don't give a shit about death. How can anyone? It's a joke.

I'm afraid of things I understand. Things I've experienced: embarrassment. Illness. Causing and receiving pain. My fear is real. I fear my friends and my body and my mind turning against me. I fear it and then it happens and I fear it more. It is a fear that reminds me of itself. Over and over again.

I look around the apartment. Each room is like the branching tunnel of a cave gradually filling with sterile cookware and mugs made of hard smooth plastic. The whole place is calcifying.

Fuck this. I need to go for a walk. I keep my pajamas, but look for my boots and a clean shirt.

Laced up and out the door. The sky still has a glow of warmth. There are pockets of people talking and laughing on porches, walking between places together. I head down Ashland, away from town. A half mile or so down the road, there's a little dirt path that leads up to the train tracks.

I mostly don't even remember that I can die. I don't even think about it. Death is nothing.

I'm not trying to sound cavalier. Overall, I experience more fear than anyone. I'm afraid all the time. And although it feels right to be afraid, I know my fear isn't rational either. I watch a show online where the char-

acter is anxious and I inhabit their anxiety. I absorb their fear. When the show ends, I assign it a new motive so that it can remain in my soul and eat me up. It becomes anxiety about a fun plan I've made with friends that I might miss. Fear that I'll get roadsick again on the trip to visit my grandparents in Maryland and that nothing will make me well and my condition will make everyone feel bad and embarrassed and ultimately annoyed, because the plans will have to change. Maybe I'll need to go to the hospital.

A car goes by and doesn't make room for me on the shoulder. The noise and rush of air jostles me.

Death is the end of embarrassment.

Does that sound so bad?

35 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

SAIRA

First we're sitting on the grass in the sun and laughing and laughing and eating blue raspberry snow cones, and then Shell takes my hand and leads me like a child across campus to someone's townhouse, confers with them quietly at the door, and leads me into their bedroom, where they gesture towards the bed. The two of us lie down on our backs and look up at a complex batik tapestry tacked to the ceiling. The dude, just like a generic blonde guy, plays something on his computer that starts off with trilling flutes that then give way to intense didgeridoo and an EDM beat. The tapestry begins to pulse and extend downwards in layers like a wedding cake, and now the music heavily features throat singing, and I lose my shit. I am hysterically laughing, and Shell apologizes to the guy and pulls me out the door, tears still pouring down my face. It's getting dark. Everyone gets out of class and Shell and I go to the noisy cafeteria, where they insist I eat nothing but fresh fruit. The fruit seems to be a special kind. It becomes a sort of gel or paste when chewed. Different from normal fruit.

We leave and people are walking around in little clusters going places. Someone waves to us and we glom onto their group.

While we walk, I check my phone. It is wiggling, but manageably. It's 9:05PM. That I happened to check when the time was a multiple of 5 seems an absurd coincidence. I show my phone to Shell, who hisses.

The houses on Blackinton Street belong to like 50/50 students and townies. The student houses are enormous and crumbling, typically identifiable by the banners hung on the outer walls, the furniture strewn about porches and yards, and the splashes of odd colored light trickling through the visible windows. All the doors on these houses are so small. Terribly small. I wonder why they choose to live that way, hunched over. I pat my drawstring bag: it contains my wallet, phone, a fifth of bad vodka, a bowl, and the little paper bag with Doyle's container. Deliberately getting this unaware before meeting someone like him feels like a kind of victory now, although I expect that feeling to change. Excited voices and punk music come through a horizontal basement window near the bottom corner of a house with splitting white paint. Our group collects outside the door of the neighboring building, tall and olive-colored, and queues for entrance. Inside, they're blasting EDM, which clashes hideously with the noise from next door. I think Shell pays for both of our entries. I'm not sure. I cower around the door-frame and enter the sticky interior.

36 9:28PM
 MARTIN

Gene won't shut up. He's slavering and barking at walls, at the people gathering outside the door, it's fucking scary. Noah finally half-carries him up the stairs and brings him to his bedroom to give him treats and try to calm him down. As I begin letting people in and directing them towards the basement, I can still hear him. He's never had a problem with people before. I'll talk to Noah about it later.

I can hear them testing the sound below, so I head down into the basement.

Paper Products is two seniors, Dave and Logan. They're playing scales to warm up, and I realize I've never heard anyone play a scale in my basement before. It's usually... you know. Power chord shit. I laugh and chat with Keith, who's situated to the side of the stage at the soundboard playing Cro Mags over the PA. People crowd into the room. Ooz taps a keg, and her and Noah's girlfriend Dani start collecting crumpled bills and handing out red cups. The dominant sounds are conversation and music from the frat house next door.

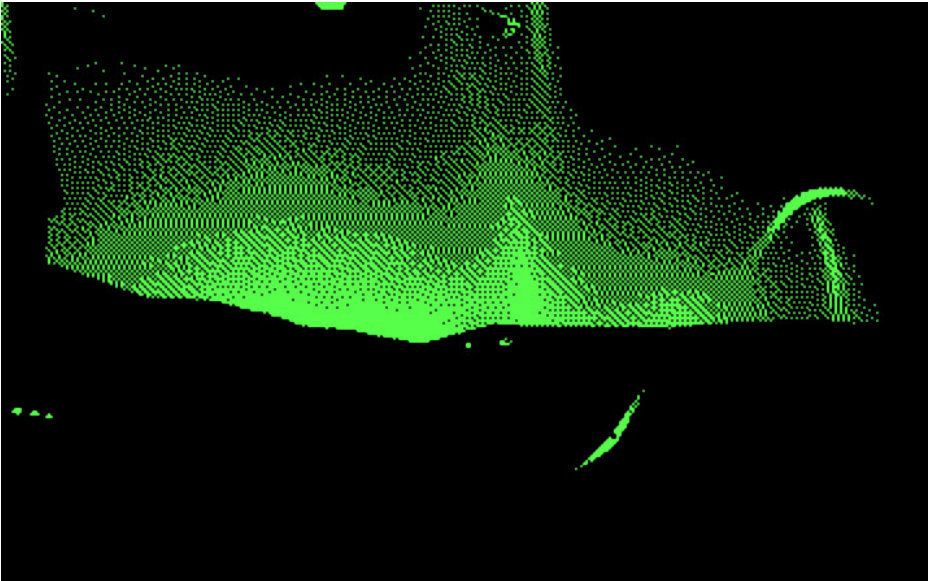
Then the band begins to play.

37 7:12PM
LINCOLN

The sky is desaturated lilac and the gravel along the road has begun to lose contrast. There are no more cars on the road, but sounds of traffic echo from downtown. A very faint whistling drone.

There are a couple extremely old and massive abandoned houses along Ashland Street. They're always on the left. You'll pass one and then see an auto body shop on the right, another house and then a skating rink. Just before the graveyard is a nearly invisible dirt path on the left that leads up into the woods and eventually meets the train tracks. I almost walk past it.

I don't think there's a set state of thoughtfulness or thoughtlessness that's "the most depressed state." I think they fall one on top of the last like layers of gold leaf.



The path runs almost parallel to Ashland. It's a gentle hill, but the low light makes it difficult to avoid cracks and holes in the dirt. I use my phone as a flashlight. This whole adventure is seeming kind of stupid now. I could have texted Martin back. I could be in a warm basement

next to excited people loudly caring about something. Maybe talking with a guy who's actually interested in other men.

At the end of the path is a clearing full of trash. People dump old furniture and broken electronics here. It's a five-way intersection: there's the path to Ashland, the two directions of the train tracks (northwest towards downtown or southeast towards the tunnel), the little trail to the nitroglycerin cavern, and then a well-trodden path leading about 100 yards to a partially collapsed metal shack that was built above a small dam. Hunters use the shack to gut deer, I guess because they can just drop the guts into the stream on the other side of the dam. In October, the path to the shack is carpeted with vertebrae and fur.

I stop at the intersection, crouch down (not feeling self destructive enough to sit on that soggy sofa with the exposed springs, apparently), and weigh my options. Everything is muddy blue; soon it'll be too dark to navigate back easily. My original plan was to walk into the tunnel and just See What Happens, but whatever dramatic impulse compelled that idea has faded.

I'm almost ready to turn back when I hear a slow, drawn out creaking sound. I straighten up and look around. Some piece of furniture moving, or a tree? The sound is gone: just the rushing of leaves above, and a little flickering through the trees. Coming from the shack.

I walk towards it.

38 9:44PM

MARTIN

At first it's funny.

Everyone is like, geared up for some heavy shit, so when they begin playing this like kitchy alternative rock car commercial music, people start laughing. But after a couple minutes they're still doing a bad Ed Sheeran impression, and Keith and I are looking at each other like, huh?, and someone starts booing, which sets everyone off since they've all been pregaming for a couple hours and looking forward to a punk show. Dave looks up and stops playing guitar, and Logan's drums stop too. They look at each other, confused.

The crowd is loudly talking. I clamber onto the stage next to Dave. "Dave, uh, what was that?"

“New material, bro. Are people not feeling it? We haven’t practiced that much.”

“No, it’s not that you didn’t practice enough, it’s...” I scratch my chin.

“I think people were expecting a punk show. Cause it’s, like, the Paper Products. Your reputation, you know? Your other shit is a lot heavier.”

“Oh, fuck, um.” He looks over at Logan. “Yeah, of course. That’s right. My bad, dude. Hey Logan, can we do punk?” Logan nods. Dave turns back to me.

“Hey, thanks, um. Bud,” he says. I stare at him incredulously.

“...It’s Martin, dude. We played in a band together for like, two years.”

“Yeah, I know! Martin. Duh.”

I step down off the stage. Dave moves close to the mic.

“Hey, sorry about that, guys! Give us another chance, okay?” Everyone cheers. Someone from the crowd seems to be showing Logan which switch on Dave’s amp controls distortion. What a weird fucking night.

Logan counts off ONE TWO THREE FOUR and a blast of pure noise fills the room. He pounds the drums in a structureless barrage.

Dave is I guess shredding, in the sense that his hands are moving very quickly over the fretboard and loud, fast noises blast forth from the amp. Keith has his shoulders hunched around his ears to block some sound while he tries to lower the volume, but it seems to be disconnected from his board.

Dave occasionally leans in towards the mic and screams. Some people in the audience seem to be having a good time. Most of them just look confused.

I see Ooz across the room and we make faces. Then she turns back to her friend.

It’s Dave and Logan’s show, I guess.

39 9:30PM

ADRIANNE

She sticks close to me. When she ushered me down the stairs earlier, she put her hand on my back. I think she’s one of those people who’s really comfortable with physical closeness. I’m usually not, but for her I’ll make an exception.

The show sucks hard, and I can’t tell if it’s actually bad or if my taste is

just too pedestrian. Judging from the rest of the crowd, I'm not alone. Ooz shouts something near my ear and I totally don't hear a word of it and we laugh together. There could be a dryer full of rocks spinning on stage and I'd still stay down here forever.

The song grinds to a halt and the singer stumbles back to converse with the drummer. I feel Ooz's hand on my arm again as she leans in.

"This fucking sucks, huh?" She stage-whispers.

"Yeah, I thought so too," I say, relieved.

"These guys used to be really good." She cocks an eyebrow. "Wonder what happened?"

"I don't get out to a lot of shows," I begin, and then forget the rest of the thought. Her smile is asymmetrical and lovely. She leans until her lips are almost touching my ear.

"We could go somewhere else."

Before I can agree, the singer mutters into the mic:

"Was that good? Was that punk?" People mill around and talk amongst themselves. He seems distressed.

"Logan, come up here. You guys know punk, right? Are you guys punks?" A couple near the front pushes their way back towards the stairs. Most in the crowd seem visibly uncomfortable. The singer crouches down and scrabbles under the stage. Logan, the drummer, is motionlessly beaming.

"Yeah, let's go," I say. I see Ooz's wide-eyed look and follow it back towards the stage just in time to see the singer swing a brick into Logan's mouth.

The heavy thud silences the room for a second, and then Logan spits blood and white chunks of enamel into the microphone.

"Punk rock!" He shouts through mangled gums. The singer hits him again with a dull thwock and he falls to the ground.

"Dave, what the fuck?" someone shouts. Two guys to the side of the stage jump in and wrestle the singer to the floor. People are screaming and falling over each other to get up the stairs. Ooz clutches my arm, hard.

Behind the two men restraining Dave, Logan rises, holding the brick.

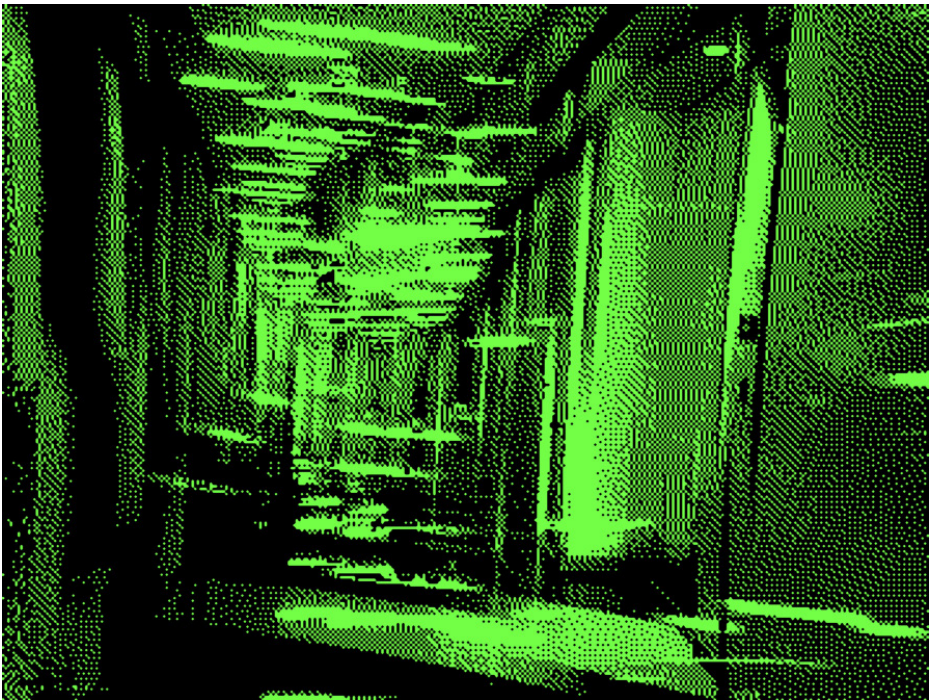
"Look out!" I shout, and Ooz pulls me toward the exit. I stumble behind her.



SAIRA

When I finally leave the room with the music, stumble over to Shell, and flop dramatically onto the couch next to them, my sweaty skin creates an instant airtight seal with the pleather and makes me feel like a raw saran-wrapped chicken thigh. I reach past someone's ass and grab a handful of popcorn from the translucent plastic bowl on the splintery coffee table, upon which numerous unpleasant things have been inscribed w/ pocket knives, and I shove the damp puffs into my mouth and begin chewing, and the butter and salt taste like little crackling sparks but I am without saliva, the kernels compress into dense little disks, they are impenetrable to my molars, I can only pound them flatter. I move my jaw up and down like a trash compactor. It hurts and I weep briefly, and then I make out with someone. Out of the corner of my eye I see miniscule black things crawling out of the popcorn bowl and I realize that any infrastructure or system humanity builds, any technologies we discover or children we birth will be consumed by microscopic, malevolent creatures, things too small to comprehend. Until the world has become so small that it can no longer provide for human life. I accept this and open my mouth, allowing whoever's tongue to enter. After two or three or really possibly anywhere between one and thirty minutes, I feel an elbow prodding my lung. I open one eye and gaze sideways like a flounder at Shell, who is tapping their watch and trying to mimic, I think, the act of delivering a clandestine substance to an odious person. I evict the tongue and grab my bag off the floor. Outside it's cold and wet. Maybe I'm imaging the wetness. It seems shiny. There are only the slightest visual hallucinations at this point: the sidewalk wiggles slightly, and I try to walk down it like a model. I pass by the punk house. The low window is heavy with pink light, and I hear screams and distorted moaning. I take a deep breath and hold it and walk faster and release it when the sidewalk ends at the corner of Montana Street I listen carefully: crickets chirping. Cars somewhere. Low crackling moaning behind me. I say what the fuck what the fuck under my breath. It isn't real. That's easy to sell. Nothing feels real.

The left door on the far side of the Science Center is unlocked, just like Cole (Col? Colton?) said it would be. Motion-activated lights come on in each section of the hall as I walk. My shoes click too loudly on the immaculate flecked white granite tile. granite is an igneous The sound doesn't matter, no one should be here. There are lab rooms dimly visible through glass walls on either side of the hallway. Tall stoppered bottles on shelves, blinking lights of computers, and black laminate tables with outlets on the sides *you use materials gathered from the Earth many times each day. You use oil from a well, metal dug out from mines, water drawn from deep underground streams. Geologists are responsible for devising methods of removing these materials and substances and natural resources. Cutting them out of the womb of our Earth so that we all may burn fuel and be warm, drink and be sated, cobble together processors from the rocks of the Earth and teach them to think*



Music comes from somewhere. Little artifacts remain from the LSD: straight lines wobble and the glow of the fluorescent lights above is a little too radiant.

I about jump out of my skin when I reach the central lobby and see someone sitting on one of the couches, no more than 15 feet away. From the back of the head, I deduce it's Shell's psych adjunct therapist, who I've seen through the window of his office while plucking grass from the lawn and waiting for Shell to get out. He's facing the other direction and looking down at his laptop, which is blasting ABBA. He doesn't seem to have noticed me. I tiptoe past and gingerly open the door to the staircase, then dart inside and let it softly close behind me.

I haven't been down here before. The floor is smooth grey concrete, the walls opaque drywall and rubber-marked from dolleys, but it's otherwise as immaculate as the rest of the building. There are file cabinets and boxes of specimen storage, and some refrigerators.

"Doyle," I whisper. I'm holding my bag out in front of me like a talisman, like in case he asks me to kick it across the floor to him. I hear the air conditioner and maybe a door opening somewhere, and the faint hint of music coming through a vent from above.

Can you hear the drums, Fernando?

"Are you here, dude? I have shit to do tonight, so..." I trail off and swing my bag in circles helplessly and wrinkle my nose. There's an awful smell. A door closes up ahead. There's a distinct squish sound. I squint and something comes around the corner.

They were closer now, Fernando...

Wet footprints speckled with viscera gleam on the floor leading to a person-shaped mass, maybe four feet tall and shiny with moisture. I recoil from the smell before it even comes into the light.

It looks like a rotten corpse with too many limbs all protruding at extreme angles. The face is indescribable. It's breathing.

"No, no, what the fuck. What the fuck oh my god." Vomit rises in my throat, and I cough and back away toward the stairs. A third leg develops from the extra meat at its center; extending, it slops onto the floor. The thing begins pulling itself towards me.

There was something in the air that night, the stars were bright, Fernando.

My back slams into the door handle. I try to twist it, then push and pull. It's fucking stuck. Or locked? I turn back towards the thing and it has grown another leg.

"Oh god no no no please god no." I'm shaking the handle. The door bumps back and forth within the frame. The wet sounds behind me are increasing in volume. My hands are pink from gripping the metal. I fumble with my bag and drop everything on the floor, then crouch and pick up my wallet.

If I had to do the same again, I would, my friend, Fernando.

The credit card is slick with sweat. It feels like it's abnormally flaccid. Am I still tripping?

I ram it against the locking mechanism and push up. Nothing. Tears drip from my face to my arms. The smell is unbearable. I try again. Behind me the sound as it lumbers closer. Slep. Slep. Slep.

If I had to do the same again...

The door falls open and I stumble through it and race up the stairs on all fours.

At the top I burst through the next door and out into the lobby. The adjunct stares wide-eyed at me.

"Uh, run," I gasp, and then book it.

At the end of the hall I pause with my hand on the door handle and look back just in time to see the thing pull itself out into the lobby with its nine dripping hands. The adjunct stands motionlessly staring and it envelops him in an instant with a sucking sound.

I fly out the door and keep running.

41 8:26PM
WIKTOR

Out looking at holes in the Natural Bridge state park all day. Found one in the weird little garden and one close to the entrance by the rows of

trees. I extended the tape measure down each one and it went and went and went. Each opening between 2.75 and 3 inches diameter, like the others.

Am I just a crazy old fool? Everyone certainly seems to think so. When I bring up what I've seen with experts I contact, with acquaintances in town, even on forums online, I am met with the same condescension. "That's very interesting, Wiktor," they say, and change the subject, as if our lives are not at stake.

The park closes at dusk but no one enforces this. I stay a little longer and double check my measurements, even drop a few lit matches down the hole near the entrance. They go out quickly. Need to get some flares from the army surplus.

I click on my big angle-head flashlight, find my way to my car, and set off back home. It's warmed up outside but still cold. I reach the town before too long. Drive past the old factory where my father worked. I pass by it often; it's a museum now.

I've gotten used to going under the bridge, I've had to, living here, but as I approach it I get a dark feeling like the air pressure is changing. I take a deep breath. The condensation is sticking to the windshield and I reach for the knob to turn the wipers on just as I pass under the bridge into the light of a yellow streetlamp shining on the perfect grid of little water beads on the windshield.

It is all swiped away in an instant and the only sound is the engine and my breathing. I always dreaded I'd go insane if it happened again, but the earth hasn't opened up. There are no apocalyptic flames.

I breathe deeply and have gotten myself under control as I drive by the little service road to the train tracks and have to slam hard on the brakes. A man has stumbled in front of my car with his hands in front of his face.

I put the car in park and step out and walk around thinking this is a long way for a drunk to walk from the bars downtown and then I see the little gashes like paper cuts all over his hands, arms, and neck. He lowers his hands and he is young, blonde hair matted with blood and dark dirt, clothes spotted with little puffs of brown and grey fur. His pajama bottoms are torn and splattered.

"We have to go now, please," he says. I take his elbow and help him

climb up into the passenger seat and then go around and get in. "Are you alright?" I ask and he says "Please we have to leave right now." I start up the truck and look out the window, and as we move away I see little yellow lights gleaming, moving down towards the road along that path behind the thin layer of trees.

MONDAY THE TWENTY-NINTH

42 AN EXCERPT FROM A NOTICE SENT OUT BY THE OFFICE OF THE NORTH ADAMS STATE COLLEGE PRESIDENT

...I trust you are all attending to your studies as we approach the end of the academic year.

I'm also writing to address some of the rumors circulating about occurrences on campus last Friday evening. During an unpermitted punk rock concert at a student residence off campus, a number of NASC students were physically injured and/or experienced psychological distress. We are looking into the cause of these injuries.

We'd like to remind students to exercise care when attending unsanctioned off-campus events. While the College cannot be held responsible for injuries or losses occurring at these events, we do take the issue seriously. Rest assured that those responsible will be punished accordingly...

...An additional reminder: the area surrounding the train tracks and the Hoosac Tunnel are private property of Pan Am Railways. North Adams residents have been injured on these tracks in the past. We encourage all students to keep away from the Tunnel and surrounding area to avoid incurring any injuries and/or legal damages.

Finally: yes, in partnership with Mass MoCA we have been resurrecting a small number of meat homunculi.

This weekend, an NASC student entered an off-limits section of the Feigenbaum Center for Science and Innovation and was startled by one of these homunculi. We want to remind all students that the lower floor of the Feigenbaum Center is for faculty use only, and that the homunculi are to be given a wide berth as their social orgo-programming has not yet concluded...

Cops are downstairs talking to Martin again. He and Keith caught most of the shit from the Paper Products fiasco since they organize the Void House events. Ooz and I are on probation just from our proximity to the whole thing. Even though I was in my room with Gene the whole time. We aren't supposed to leave the state, which is fine for Ooz (she doesn't even have a car) and sucks shit for me because I was supposed to go to Troy, NY to pick up a big used clothing donation for the co-op. Logan's been arraigned on charges of assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill. Dave's still in critical condition. If he recovers he'll get an assault charge, too.

No one knows what the fuck happened. Their families are staying in town and won't come near the house. They think it was some drug thing and we're maybe responsible. The whole thing is fucking insane.

I can hear them murmuring in the living room when I sneak downstairs and quietly close the front door behind me. They've come back a few times to talk to Martin and the rest of us. A lot of people who were at the show and could possibly help are refusing to come forward in case it fucks up their lives too. I don't blame them.

If I walk into town I'll end up being harrassed by town residents or other students who want to hear the gory details. I walk up the campus hill and take a right on Church Street

I wasn't super close with them, but Dave and Logan were both regular features at the Void House. We hung out, smoked, and ate with them. There was nothing weird or "off" about either of them. If anything, in a group of musicians and artists, they were on the boring side. How do you go from that to bashing in each others faces with bricks?

I blink and I'm at Fish Pond. They found a body here a couple weeks ago, an older man who fell in while wandering around drunk. Now kids from the college dare each other to swim in it.

I remember there was a thing in the paper about where to bury the guy, since he was homeless and didn't own a plot or anything. For some of the better known homeless folks who are always chatting with people downtown, there'd probably be a GoFundMe for the burial. Not for this guy.

The city's policy is to cremate remains that are left unclaimed for 30 days, and then bury them somewhere they don't tell people about. Cemeteries won't take the bodies. Of course, everyone pictures them flushing the ashes down a toilet. The image is disrespectful if you consider the ashes representative of a person, which I guess I don't. Why not make it simple? Who decided burying people underground was respectful? That's what you do with something you're ashamed to look at. It's what dogs do to their shit.

Down a little hill away from the pond is a campsite and a series of huge green stagnant puddles of runoff. I take a handful of gravel from the path to the campsite and squat near one of the swampy holes, chucking the pebbles in. Each one plops beneath the surface and sends a vibrant glittering roostertail of muck up. Little insects move across the surface, careening around trying to eat each other. Some thought about their world, what it must be like to exist as a tiny edible thing on a puddle of green shit. The teemingness of life in a swamp: little movements of cannibal creatures everywhere rippling and throbbing in the muck. Makes me sick.



SAIRA

In the ward where I recover, some of the counselors are research students from the college in Williamstown.

The psych wing also hosts their lab, where they're running sleep studies on a group of what looks like their fellow students. I think I might ask to join the study once I've fully regained the ability to vocalize. Although I suspect they don't want any of the crazies skewing their results. I gather from watching that it's something to do with influenced dreaming. I adjust my sleep schedule to an hour and a half later so I can watch the researchers slither in just as their subjects are drifting off. Two beds down from mine, I watch a very large and extravagantly hairy assistant lean over the conked, supine individual and softly intone:

"Apocrypha. Mite. Stanchion."

The morning after my arrival, when I was still completely sub-speech, a representative came. Boxy-suited and bespectacled. It wanted me to sign a form releasing the College from all responsibility in exchange for an assurance that no unlawful entry charges would be brought against me. I mimed consulting with a legal authority. It implied something rather rude about the drug tests the hospital had done and my father's impending visit. I scribbled my signature messily with my nondominant hand, just to be a bother.

"Thoroughbred. Carbonate."

Shell had the presence of mind to check me in as male. As a crossdresser I guess. I'm in a different gown, the hospital kind, by the time my father arrives. The irony by no means lost.

He's cross and clueless. Couldn't fathom what had happened to his bright youngest son. Not your first breakdown is the phrasing he uses. Only with significant expended effort and with his reputation on the line was he able to keep things under wraps. He brings up my eldest brother, a graduate from Williams, the one who recommended North Adams State College as a sort of misfit-toy-island for me.

Rayin. Little prince. Why is it so hard for you to accept help. To admit that others know what is best for you. Such promise wasted. Your mother is beside herself etc.

"Dingbat. Spurious. Decree."

He doesn't stay long. He tells the hospital staff to eject me once I regain full sentience. For this at least I am blearily grateful.

The enormous man moves one bed closer to mine and leans over. His tone of voice isn't emotionless per se but like inhumanly measured, like someone playing an android in a bad TV show.

I play dead.

"Pyramid. Eucalyptus."

Although daylight still stabs through the ugly off-white blinds in painful little rows, I begin to drift off. I become an unintended participant.

45 1:31PM

ADRIANNE

After Poetry, I ask Ooz to come to the coffeehouse with me. I feel selfish, but I think it's also good to get her out of the house for a little while. She seems happy to have something to do.

I get us some blueberry scones and lattes and sit close to her on a little sofa near the back.

"How are you doing? Is everyone at the house okay?" I ask tentatively.

"Honestly, no, it's really crazy there. Martin and Keith could go to jail just for setting up the concert. And we're all supposed to be working on our fucking final projects."

"That's... intense. I'm really sorry. Did you- "

"Can we talk about anything else?"

"I totally get it. Sorry."

I try to think of something to say.

"I really liked your dream from this week. I hope that's not weird." Ooz gives a little embarrassed smile.

"I felt so stupid writing it... It doesn't seem creative, keeping a dream journal, but when you go back and read it, I guess some of it becomes useful. You're supposed to mine it for surreal content later on."

"It feels really meaningful when I read it," I say. Ooz shrugs.

"Dreams are just your brain processing meaning, right? The meaning of symbols, concepts, things that happened to you during the day. So it has to mean something. Or maybe we project that later." She leans back and sighs. "I don't know."

We finish up and look at each other for a moment, neither wanting to

go home.

“Do you want to... do something?” I ask hesitantly. “We could go to the Berkshire Emporium. Or whatever.” She smiles.

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

We walk into town together. The day is clear, maybe 50 degrees. Lots of people walking dogs.

We spend a couple hours browsing around the Emporium, which is an antiques/oddities/local craft store, pointing out weird artifacts to one another. There are little semiprecious stones, cassette tapes, a basement full of comic books and furniture, and a full skeleton piled up in a glass case near the front counter.

I find a pair of antique sunglasses and a bottle of honey harvested from some nearby town. Ooz buys a rusty extendable police baton.

We walk back in silence, carrying our bags. Finally, I have to ask.

“Hey, Ooz?”

“What’s up?”

“I hope this isn’t personal, but um. Where’d you get the nickname Ooz? Did it come from someone in the band?”

“No, it’s from my little sister. She couldn’t pronounce Louise.”

“Oh, that’s... a cuter origin than I expected.” She grins and shifts the plastic bag to her far hand. The back of her nearer one brushes mine.

TUESDAY THE THIRTIETH

46 8:33AM

SHELL

I spend the morning in the hospital with her. She’s physically okay aside from some bruising where she tripped on the stairs, but still recovering emotionally from the experience. They had to sedate her that first night when she came in. They called it a “drug induced psychotic reaction.”

The day after all that shit went down, people were just like wandering the streets and meeting in little huddled packs to discuss what happened. Like some horrible disaster had occurred. The day was ultra cloudy but never turned to rain. Apocalyptic fog sweeping over everything.

Today, though, it seems to be back to normal. Blue sky, chirping birds, frantic squirrels startling people on the winding paths between build-

ings. On the way home from the hospital, Saira and I walk past the normal chattering groups, unshaven seniors with finals doom-stares, illicit on-campus smokers, assholes with blaring bluetooth speakers. After going over it again and again with the hospital folks, she's kind of shut down. I probably would too.

From overheard snatches of conversation between hospital staff and the school administrators, I've gleaned that the meat thing was a sculpture, created by a student or someone from the museum, made from either real or fake meat, immobile or animated with a battery and little servos so it could wiggle around. The consensus is that Saira saw it during a psychotic break from the acid and went totally bonkers, which admittedly does seem to be the most likely conclusion.

There's just one weird detail: Saira claimed to have seen my psych adjunct therapist that night, but the school admins say he's been on leave since Friday. Which is extra weird because my session with him was on Saturday before the party.

Saira never spilled the beans on where she got the drugs. She's going to be punished for it, but she'll be allowed to stay at school. Perhaps her dad pulled some strings.

The door to our townhouse is unlocked when we arrive. I must've forgotten to lock it. My head's been in the clouds since Saturday. I go with her to her room, where she lies down in bed facing the wall. Nothing I can really do except tuck her in and tell her to text if she needs anything. It feels weird to do anything recreational. The communal space is empty and quiet. If TV was still a thing I'd turn on a random channel just for the noise. Instead, I play a random SNL interview on my phone and throw a hot pocket into the microwave. It crackles merrily.

I switch the interview to a video of people streaming a video game and spin my amethyst ring around my fingers. The crackling has become loud. I turn towards the microwave and see smoke pouring out, sparks coming from the top of the speckled screen. I lunge to turn it off, and I'm engulfed in fire.

47 - 9:16AM

COLTON

It was too nice out I shouldve checked the weather before I wore a coat

with a hood and everything but by the time I realized it was too late. Sat on the stoop a block down the street and watched her leave. Then I walked over pretending like I was on my phone and poked open the lock with a paper clip. I lived in one of these houses last year. Getting in isnt hard.

It wasnt decorated inside much. Food wrapping and shit on the couch and table. I didnt really expect girls to live like that.

Following Ds instructions I opened the microwave and duct taped the butane canister to the top inside and unscrewed the top so it was loose. The bottle was bigger than I expected. D said it would give them something to think about. Hes sure the trans chick fucked up the drop on purpose. Got cold feet and left his shit in the Science building for someone to find. Then made up some story about taking acid and tripping and freaking out and shit. Does he think Im fucking stupid D said. I wiped my fingerprints off the handle. Im no fucking idiot either.

48 2:05PM

LINCOLN

The pergola in the backyard looks handmade and is hung with scratched CDs that spin on their strings and speckle the garden with glittering rainbow dots. Wiktor tells me they scare away the sparrows.

I stayed in his guest room over the weekend. We walked outside during the day, and in the evening went in and sat by his fireplace talking while he carefully added to and rearranged the burning logs with his gloveless hands. We had a lot to talk about.

What's happening isn't new. It's not coming from the museum's performances, Droste's installation. Those things are coming from it. Wiktor calls it an instability. He also used the terms "dimensional rift" and "magic vortex." Our talks stretch my credulity. But when he sees me lose him, he reminds me of what I saw in the gutting shed. There's no rational explanation for that. So, a magic vortex.

He talks about "hot spots" around town. Places of concentrated energy. The tunnel is one. He thinks there's another on campus, near Montana Street He found some holes in the dirt in peoples' yards. Impossibly deep holes. I know how it sounds. I wouldn't believe it either.

There are things he wouldn't talk about. Some of the stuff he's seen, he

won't share. He just shakes his head and says "I hope you'll never have to know about that."

He drives me back to my apartment. There's a smoke trail rising up from the campus.

We exchange numbers, and Wiktor gives me instructions. He wants me to find other people who've experienced things like I did. I ask how to find them, and he says "you'll figure it out." Alright.

I go up to my apartment, crack open a can of beer, and slump down on the one creaky chair in my kitchen. The ceiling light casts thin yellow light onto walls bruise purple with evening. I've missed my classes for today. That's okay.

Last night at his house, I had a dream. It felt so real.

I'm in the same bed in the same room where I went to sleep, and I get up and walk into the hall. Through the old bowed glass in the kitchen window I see Wiktor in the backyard.

When I come outside, he turns to face me and says "there's something in the tunnel that makes all the sadness. Makes it and spits it out into the air. Tacks it to the trains, who distribute it through the town like an aerial application of pesticide. If you find it and kill it, things will be good again for everyone. You will stop wanting to kill yourself. Your friends will stop killing themselves. Everything will be normal and life will feel good in that way that you remember from when you were little."

Then he laughs and dissolves into a cloud of ash that vanishes and leaves behind total darkness like dead pixels on an LCD monitor. An irregular stain of absent space hanging in the air where he had been. I reach out and swipe my hand through it and it's nothing, it doesn't exist.

Just before I wake up, a feeling washes over me, tenses my jaw and turns over my stomach. It's painful and impossible to identify. Loss? Fear? Resentment?

49 3:40PM
SAIRA

I dreamt that I was getting ready for school and when I looked in the mirror I saw a girl. She looked like me.

When it ended, the blankets were twisted around me like DNA and

the whole house smelled like burnt cookies. For a second I thought I was home and my mom was trying to make a snack. She was a horrible cook. Then the sprinklers turned on, and I came to coughing and wet. I don't know what happened after that. The next thing I remember, I was kneeling outside in the dirt screaming at Shell. I guess I'd dragged them outside. They didn't respond.

The ambulance arrived quickly. Perks of living in a small town. On the way they put masks on me and Shell. They started asking me questions and I realized was pretty tough for me to talk too. The smoke had wiped out my lungs.

In the ambulance, I look at Shell sort of for the first time and see their pale face under the mask. The budding red wounds all over. The EMT didn't remove their shirt, and I wanted to ask why, and then I saw the places where the fabric had melted and adhered to their skin.

This time they take me to a real hospital. I'm given a nose tube. They want to do the whole tube down the throat thing for me too, but I manage to gasp something along the lines of "no fucking way" and a mild threat of physical violence. It takes some convincing before they leave me alone. Not before telling me to press a button on the bed's arm if I start coughing. I breathe very carefully after that.

Shell is taken to another room. I sit up in mine and looked around. Every wall and appliance a different flavor of off-white. I wonder whether they all started out a perfect hex #ffffff.

The only thing of interest here is the lobby. There are thin panels of decorative rock on the walls. Something grey with dark bands running through it. It looks like an x-ray of someone's torso, black ribs jutting out.

What am I doing? I can't stop.

Typically, horizontal bands indicate that the rock is metamorphic.

Something is horribly wrong. I know that now. These things don't just happen. The fire, the attack at the punk show on Blackington. The thing in the Science Center. Am I crazy to feel like strings are being pulled? My only real friend is in a coma. I text the next closest thing.

Twenty minutes go by, and I'm jostled from my nap by a big blonde dude barging in my door.

"Saira, what the fuck?"

“That was fast,” I say.

“What happened? They wouldn’t let me see Shell,” he half shouts, falling into a red plastic chair by the wall and trying to catch his breath. “Well, what they actually said was ‘there’s no one here by that name.’ I don’t know their birth name. I’m pretty sure they knew who I meant, though.” I shrug. “Doesn’t matter if you’re not family. Anyway, the doctors are keeping them asleep while they assess the damage.”

“Damage?”

“Our kitchen exploded. Or was exploded. It’s... possible I’m being targeted for accidentally ripping off a sociopathic drug dealer.” He stares at me. “Individual by the name of Doyle.”

“You ripped off Doyle? Jesus motherfucking Christ,” Lincoln groans. The hands he uses to cover his face are covered in thin cuts. Like, covered.

“Hey dude... are you alright?” I ask. He nods unconvincingly.

“So you steal drugs from Doyle, and he blows up your house? At least there’s a non-supernatural explanation for some of this shit.”

“Non-supernatural?” I ask. Lincoln gazes up at the ceiling. He looks tired.

“Yeah, look... we need to get everyone together. Everyone who’s experienced one of these special events. Like your meat monster.” I sit up.

“Shell told me.”

“I’ve been thinking... I’m not too sure that happened, actually, Lincoln,” I say quietly.

“It did,” he says. “And there’s more coming. There are some dots that need to be connected if we’re gonna be able to prevent it. That’s why we need everyone in the same room.”

“I wish I could help with that.” I sigh. “100% of the people I’m on speaking terms with are currently in this hospital. A significant portion unconscious.”

“Well, actually...” He looks guilty.

“Hey, if I can help, tell me how. I want to know what the fuck is going on as much as anybody.”

“You worked on the paper last semester, right?”

“Only technically. I was in an intro journalism course to get an English credit.”

“But they gave you a login for the newspaper’s online portal?”

“Oh. That might work. They’ll take it down when they see it, though.”

“How long will that take?” he asks.

“Hopefully at least a couple hours. Everyone will get email notifications, but articles aren’t supposed to go up until Thursday, so nobody will be in the newsroom to take it down.”

“Okay,” he says, standing. “I’ll send you something to post from your phone.”

“Um. I left it in the bedroom when the house burned down.”

“Right. Sorry.” He tosses me his. “Might as well do it now. We’ll keep it short. Just say...”

50

HAVE SUPERNATURAL EVENTS DISRUPTED YOUR LIFE?

Have you seen or experienced something inexplicable recently? Did your experience result in significant trauma, injury, or death?

Join us in figuring this shit out!

If we’re not all dead already: Tonight, 9:00pm, The Void House.

51 6:54PM

KEITH

Williamstown has nice parts and less nice parts. You think the kids at the state school in North Adams feel out of place in the area surrounding the college? There are bars Williams students aren’t allowed to drink at, under penalty of suspension.

The college’s history is hilarious and sordid. Ephraim Williams, a colonel in the Massachusetts militia, willed the funds for the establishment of a free school in what was then West Hoosac, conditional on the town changing its name to Williamstown. The town agreed and established the free school. Two years later they began charging tuition.

In the early 1800s, the college fell on tough financial times, and some of the professors and students decided to steal a bunch of equipment and books and start a new college in central Massachusetts: Amherst college.

Over the years, the two became the most exclusive (and some of the most expensive) private colleges in the country.

Most of the students at Williams had more or less the same upbringing-

ing: a clean, safe, wealthy neighborhood, a too-fast car on their birthday, buying and selling hugely marked-up drugs, TPing their neighbors houses with high-quality, unbleached, triple-ply toilet paper. The kinds of hijinks that are unimaginable to middle-class youths; way over-the-top schemes that end in two-day jail stints and rehab programs. Soft landing after soft landing until they get their heads right.

The highways, west towards New York and east towards Boston, are impassable. I've sat in my car for hours near the border and watched the occasional outbound cars vanish. Too chickenshit to try myself.

Nothing comes in. Phones only transmit calls and messages within the area. All forms of communication have become local.

Our water and electricity work. Food continues to appear in stores. I know, because when I went to Big Y to stockpile supplies, I was the only disheveled maniac piling my cart with unpleasant nonperishables. The teller ringing up my pallet of water jugs and 40 cans of kidney beans looked at me like I was nuts. Not sensing anything different. In the towns and at the colleges, business continues as normal. Is everyone pretending?

The mind leaps to Twilight Zone theories: government experiment. Alien invasion.

Martin told me about a message on the school paper's website. Apparently it's from Lincoln. I always thought there was something kind of off about him. Nice kid, just something off. Now he shows up with cuts all over, talking about how we have to meet. Muttering about a vortex. The other day I was downtown at Jack's on Eagle Street. A couple regulars came in, guys I know, and ordered hot dogs. When they saw me they scowled. I tried to say hey, ask what was up, and they started quizzing me. How long had Jack's been around. When was the last time you saw us here. Who won the last hot dog eating contest. Don't look at the news clippings on the walls.

They acted like I'd been replaced.

I don't think I've been replaced.

52 8:35PM

SHELL

I can feel time passing. It's hard to tell how much.

The body is still, the skin prickly and uncomfortable, so I float away. Out through the doorway and into the hallways of Intensive Care. People in lilac and mint scrubs chat in clusters, sit at desks, walk up and down hallways holding clipboards and pushing carts. The whole place has a gentle odor of piss and antiseptic. The lighting hurts my eyes. I go out through a wall duct, out into the temperate evening air.

The hospital sits in a corner of the valley atop a little hill. I pause for a moment at the upper floor of the parking structure and watch twinkling headlights wind down Florida mountain. The road itself is invisible through the trees.

This gets boring quickly. I decide to check on Saira and drift up, passing through a cloud of circling black birds. It makes me shiver. I continue into town.

The townhouse has been gutted, and an enormous dumpster by the back door sits heavy with insulation, blackened drywall and bricks, furniture. My and Saira's melted belongings. I paw through the ash-crustured pillows and plastic bits for a little while. I assume all my surviving stuff has been moved into storage.

Now where could Saira be? If she's still on the outs with her dad (and she usually is), she'll have tried to crash at a friend's place, and the only other person she talks to is Lincoln. Although he's really my friend.

Well, dealer slash friend.

I float on over to his place and just catch the two of them as they lock up and walk down the sidewalk. I follow from a distance. I think I'm undetectable, except maybe to dogs. It seems like in most depictions of ghosts and spirits and stuff, dogs can perceive them and tend to bark.

They turn down Blackington Street and walk up to a large, crumbling white house. I haven't been, but I take it this is the famed Void House.

A kind of short guy with stubble opens the door and greets them.

Lincoln says "hey Martin." Voices are muddled unless I lean in and pay close attention.

I follow them through the front door and into the living room, which is dark and dingy but also sort of homey: lots of offbeat doodles are taped to the wall, and the majority of the lighting seems to come from multicolored strings of christmas lights. The room is full of people: a green-haired girl in tall black boots whose name is, unforgettably, Ooz;

a couple guys who work at the co-op in town named Noah and Keith; and two other girls who I don't recognize: one (short brown hair, looks scared, I think she's in our Poetry class) stands close to Ooz, the other (bleached blonde, acid-washed denim, inexplicably wearing thin grey gloves) sits on the couch looking around and holding a notebook.

"Should we start now?" asks Martin.

"Wiktor's on his way," responds Lincoln.

"If I understand correctly," Saira says, "he won't miss anything, given that he is the one who supposedly comprehends whatever the fuck is going on." Lincoln looks pained.

"I'd love to get some basic idea of what the fuck is going on, just like a primer from somebody?" This from Notebook Girl.

"Dani, you promised to be nice," says Noah, and Lincoln interrupts:

"Yeah, no offence Dani, but you haven't actually experienced any of the stuff we'll be talking about. I don't know what you expect to get from this."

"I'm here because the editor of *The Beacon*, against my better judgment, deemed it necessary to investigate the mysterious spontaneously appearing advertisement on our website," she says. "Plus, I don't see anybody else taking notes." Lincoln sighs and sits down. Saira stands awkwardly. There is a long stretch of silence. Ooz whispers something and Short-Brown-Hair Girl giggles.

"Okay, well—" begins Martin just as a knock comes from the door. He strides over to let them in. I drift to and fro looking for the best vantage point, first settling in a ceiling corner but moving on when I realize I feel like a surveillance camera. I end up beside Saira. Perhaps my presence will reduce her anxiety in some way.

A dog walks through the room without looking at me. So that's one question answered. Then Martin leads the man in. I immediately recognize him from the Mineral Club meetup. I'm not really surprised. Significance gives birth to itself.

"This is it?" he says brusquely. "Well, okay. I'm Wiktor. I live in town.

And you have all been the victims of our magical vortex. Unwitting participants in the installation of a new metaphysical M.O." He pauses.

A pin could drop.

"I think it would be useful if we all share how the rift has affected us.

Lincoln, would you start?”

Lincoln stands. He’s got the sleeves rolled up on his ratty brown plaid shirt. Even in the gloomy interior of the house, I can make out little crosshatched pink marks just beginning to heal on his face and arms. He clears his throat and begins.

As he talks, the faces of the people in the room change. They are pensive, then horrified. Dani stops writing and just stares. Although what he says is difficult to comprehend, although he stops and stutters and admits missing spots in his memory, it’s impossible not to feel the sincerity and pain in his voice.

When he’s finished, there’s a long silence before Martin starts to tell the story of the Paper Products show. Ooz and the brown-haired girl, who introduces herself as Adrienne, fill in additional details. Then Keith and Noah talk about what’s happened downtown: a celebrity visitor at the co-op, people in the parking lot vanishing into thin air. Noah talks about his dog’s reaction on the night of the show, and Wiktor nods along.

Finally, Saira tells what happened to her that night at the Science Center. It’s weird seeing someone who’s usually boisterous and confident to the point of rudeness recede inside herself. She speaks haltingly and uses very few big words. As she describes the meat monster, Ooz cuts in and asks some specific questions about its appearance. Saira answers and Ooz looks sick.

Saira ends her story, and another long silence stretches out.

“Well, the good news is that it hasn’t gotten bad yet.” says Wiktor. Noah looks at Lincoln, perplexed. Martin splutters.

“What I mean is, things are going to get a lot worse. So it’s good that we’re preparing now. There’s a lot to do.” He motions to Lincoln, who hands him a rolled-up piece of paper.

“Downtown North Adams,” Wiktor continues, unfurling the sheet, “is the epicenter of what is actually a worldwide phenomenon. Maybe not the only epicenter, but as you can imagine, it’s difficult to research international, inexplicable, personal magical phenomena. There are a lot of cranks online.” The sheet is a map of the town, with red Xs and blue circles in various places.

“This shows the flux of energy as the rift deepens and spreads: moments

of addition, or inflow, and subtraction. Outflow. What you've all described seem to be inflow events. Lincoln's may have been a combination of the two.

"By 'inflow,' what I mean is that something magical was created or added. Something like the young lady's meat homunculus. It was a non-entity, a dead thing, and then it was animated by an addition of magical essence. Or the gentlemen in the band you mentioned—" (here gesturing at Martin) "—, facsimiles tasked to impersonate your friends and sow their dark energy."

"Those guys weren't... actually themselves?" gasps Martin. "Where did the real ones go?"

"That brings me to the outflow," says Wiktor, and Lincoln passes around a stack of polaroid photographs, each one showing a circular hole. "Although I have no reason to believe the rift follows any thermodynamic principles, the law of energy conservation holds true here: for each flux in one direction, there is an equal flux in another. That is, something is removed."

"Are we talking like, dirt cylinders? Or people?" asks Noah. Wiktor points to the blue circles on his map.

"The holes appear first. Then other things begin to vanish. Not just physical objects: the essences of things are taken away, and the voids are filled with rift magic."

"Just tell us what the fuck happened to Logan and Dave," Keith says, and Wiktor says "Their spirits were removed and replaced by energy from the instability. In effect, it exterminated their souls and then filled them back in with something else."

Keith sits back heavily while everyone digests that information.

"Okay," says Saira, "so how do we exterminate it?"

I feel myself sucked backwards, out through the ceiling, back towards my slumbering body, and as my vision blackens I think: "that's my girl."

53 9:43PM

SAIRA

The old man is obsessed with frequencies. While scouting a hole near the Harmonic Bridge overpass, he noticed that when a sufficiently loud tone sounded from the speakers under the bridge, the hole began to col-

lapse in on itself, walls crumpling until all that was left was a weird little divot of dirt. Somehow, the incredibly low C note of amplified traffic noise was just right to vibrate the rift into nonexistence. Any nearby additive effects of the rift, like sequences of perfect rainfall or inexplicable animal activity, were also wiped out by the sound. Everything returned to normal in the bubble surrounding the speaker.

He tells us about the tone generator machines he built, how he wired subwoofers together to get the loudest, lowest C note he could. They destabilized the holes, sometimes partially collapsed them, but never reached deep enough to break off the source. Somewhere beneath the earth, the magic was intact.

“Might be cause your tone had no partials,” says Martin. “You learn about them in music 101. On a guitar or piano, the vibration of the note isn’t just a perfect sound wave: it has overtones and undertones. Other vibrations that make other notes that complement the root. It’s a more complex sound than just a sine wave. That’s why simple tones sound so inorganic to us.”

I mention the red checkerboard pattern in the piece of granite I’d examined. That interests Wiktor.

“How would you define the geology beneath North Adams?” He asks.

“Well, um. This whole Western section of the Berkshire massif consists mostly of overlapping thrusts of gneiss and metasedimentary rocks.”

Blank stares from all. “Thrusts are when an old layer of rock pushes itself on top of a younger one. There are a lot of these overlaps and folds in the Berkshires.”

“What about below that? Anything distinguishing it from the surrounding areas?” Wiktor asks.

“Actually, there’s a really cool thing called the Northern Appalachian Anomaly underneath parts of New Hampshire, Vermont, and Massachusetts. It’s basically an upswelling of super hot rock; a possible early precursor to a volcano. When geologists found it, there were a bunch of hysterical articles about a new supervolcano that had been discovered, which is about 50 million years too soon to panic, since that’s how long it’ll take to turn into anything. But it’s something geologists are excited about.” I stop. “Are you saying this has something to do with the rift or whatever? Because no offence, but—”

“Not necessarily,” says Wiktor. “I mostly wanted to know if there might be any complications.”

“Complications to what?”

“The way I see it,” Wiktor says like he’s talking to himself, “the only thing with the capability to delete the vortex is this particular amplifier. It was designed to amplify the sounds of traffic: low, irregular, and difficult to reproduce. Maybe we could find a sufficient replacement if we had time, but we don’t. So we need a very loud car.”

“I have a... normal car,” says Noah at the same time as Ooz says, “Why did you ask about instabilities?”

Wiktor doesn’t respond.

“You’re worried that the collapsing holes will accelerate the Anomaly. You think we might create a fucking mega—what was it?”

“Supervolcano,” I finish for her. She turns toward me.

“Saira, is that possible?”

“It seems unlikely. How deep are these holes, Wiktor?”

“I suspect they might be bottomless,” he says with characteristic aloofness. Now everyone is looking at me.

“Look, I’m not an expert on volcanoes. They’re created when magma rises up and breaches the upper crust. If the collapsing holes created a significant enough fissure, I guess it’s possible that it could erupt. Hypothetically. Earthquakes have been caused by really deep boreholes, so...”

Martin stands up.

“So? So we might blow up the Berkshires with a supervolcano? Do you know how fucking crazy that sounds?”

“Yeah, dude.” I shrug. “Shit’s crazy right now. I don’t know what to tell you.”

“So what if we just don’t?” Martin asks. “We just fucking ignore it.” He points at Wiktor. “You said it went away before. Maybe it’ll go away again.” Wiktor gestures to his diagram.

“It has come and gone a number of times, increasing in intensity with each return. The geographical spread and numerical extent of magical incursions indicate that the eventual culmination will be orders of magnitude greater than anything I’ve seen before. In effect, if we don’t risk one sort of explosion, there will very likely be another.”

“Another volcanic eruption?” Noah asks.

“Not a physical explosion,” Lincoln says. “An explosion of... this. What’s been happening here has been a trickle. Imagine it flowing out over the entire world.”

There’s a pause while everyone contemplates that, and then several people begin speaking at once.

Wiktor cuts in. “None of this will matter if we can’t make the noise. We need an engine. The loudest one possible.”

“So like, an 18-wheeler?” I say.

“Maybe some shitty tuner would be louder. Something with no muffler,” says Ooz. “There has to be one like that around here. It’s a college town, for chrissakes.”

I think.

Oh.

54

[MARCH 30 10:44 PM]

Linkin: need stuff for this weekend. u around

Col: yea b back tomrw what do u need?

Linkin: can i come by ur place. dont wanna text

Col: tell me what u want im in boston with d. we can grab

[MARCH 30 10:45 PM]

Linkin: 8ball and some weed. ill pickup tmrw

Col: ok come at 11

WEDNESDAY THE THIRTY-FIRST

55

A pickup truck navigates the sharp turns on the hilly road east out of the city. At the top of Florida Mountain, the truck passes by a sign, then another, then vanishes.

A cement mixer drives down Eagle Street spewing sand. Soon, the street is covered in several inches of it, and men and women come from all over in swimming trunks with picnic blankets and lie down and run around and play volleyball. A car trapped in the sand spins its tires.

Permeating warm flashes hit the Berkshires. This season’s ice is gone for good. A man goes out to ready his sailboat for a trip he’s planning. In the cabin of

the boat, he finds a mummified corpse with seven gold teeth.

56

FINAL PROJECT TOPICS

Martin: A 40-minute album of abstract music. Kind of spoken-wordy so far. Will try to make it less spoken-wordy.

Lincoln: Cut-up paper scraps with poetic units that can be arranged like tangrams. Create a love letter, an ode, a suicide note.

Ooz: Images isolated from my dream journal are blown up, fleshed out, colored in, and made real. Characters, scenes, images, colors, and themes are delved into. Then, I try to recreate them in my waking life and record the results.

Noah: A compilation of prose poems on disparate topics sharing nothing in common except the circumstances of their conception: late at night during nauseous episodes.

Adrienne: I don't have all the details ironed out yet but it's about something bright emerging from darkness.

Saira: Restructured snippets from geologic surveys conducted independently around North Adams.

57 4:55PM

SHELL

I dreamt I was this chunky pixelated Botero-like statue with weird cubic limbs, strangely and inhumanly proportioned. I had been sculpted out of discolored marble or petrified wood, and someone was rhythmically pounding my bulky appendages into broken chunks with a cylindrical-headed metal hammer. They destroyed my feet and legs and then went to work on my torso.

When the first piece of my chin was struck off, I woke up and found my body like this.

Apparently it's remarkable that I woke up at all. The odds for someone in a coma go down exponentially the longer they're under. That was one of the first things Saira said when she came to see me.

Since I woke up, I've had a lot of time to think about why I'm alive. Not why I survived physically, but what I'm here to do. What if I couldn't write? If I couldn't go places? Would there be any point? I kind of don't

think so. But so many people live that way, without any central creative outlet. I don't want to sound like I know what everyone else does with their spare time, what occupies their most internal moments. But that's how it seems to me.

Saira came and told me everything that had happened. Everything they planned to do. I couldn't talk, but it was nice feeling like I was useful, even as a sounding board.

Dani, the girl from the newspaper, dug up an article from a couple years ago about Doyle. There had been a big hubbub about what happened and she'd remembered his name.

Doyle was a sophomore at North Adams State a few years ago. Moved into one of the Boardman rowhouses with a bunch of randoms. Didn't get along with them very well.

Police said he got sick from tainted drugs, but they never brought drug charges. My guess is he had some sort of mental breakdown. Didn't leave his room for weeks while his roommates complained of the growing smell. When they finally evicted him, it was like a horror movie: bottles, canisters, storage tubs full of bodily fluids. It turns out he'd been just like spitting and drooling into the carpet for in all likelihood weeks, and this thick dehydrated bacterial saliva, caked and crusted into the fibers, turned out to be like a prime host to all sorts of gnarly microscopic cultures and molds. They had to gut the place and recarpet it and everything. It was big news because the Boardmans are on the National Register of Historic Places.

After something like that, you'd expect Doyle to move, but he stayed in town and started dealing. According to Lincoln, who I guess knows Doyle's roommate, he started off buying secondhand anxiety meds and antipsychotics for himself and ended up using his connections to deal to students at the college.

There was a lot of discussion about stealing Doyle's car, but since most of the vehicles in town have gone out through the barrier and vanished, we're kind of low on options. Lincoln's going with his friend Ooz to take it tonight. She's apparently been watching videos on hotwiring cars, which will be our backup plan if Lincoln can't find the key. They're also the only two aside from Wiktor who can drive a stick shift. We're storing it in Wiktor's garage until tomorrow.

Saira wanted to help but everyone agreed that wasn't smart. It's hard for her to accept that some jobs require more than brains and pluck. I guess people in her family are used to getting what they want. But maybe that's not fair to ascribe to her, given her unique circumstances.

58 5:51PM
MARTIN

North Adams was called the city of spires. It's not so much anymore. One of the only ones left, a beautiful grey steeple on the main corner when you enter town from the east, was just torn down. They built a CVS in its place. No more than 100 yards from a Rite Aid.

Everyone is in this sense-vortex. Nothing follows any logic, and no one can explain it or even agree on what's really happening. Makes me feel like the crazy one.

I'm slumped on the couch watching someone's instagram story flip by. Someone who lived in North Adams but moved out to the Pacific Northwest. There's a photo of a foggy road bordered by fields on either side. I see a small piece of fuzz in the corner of the screen and blow on it, but as the image changes it vanishes: an Oregonian tree branch mistaken for Massachusetts lint. Everything feels like a false alarm. Even the real alarms.

Today, on the way back from picking Lincoln up at Wiktor's place after one of their metaphysical conferences, we got into a fight. I started it. Although the cuts are less visible now, there's this change inside him that hasn't gone away. It's like the approaching apocalypse has finally given him something to fight against. He seems weirdly happy. Brushes everything off. He's got this "whatever happens, happens" attitude that drives me crazy. I thought it was a put-on at first, but I think he's actually enjoying this in some weird way.

We were talking, something about my family outside the bubble. Lincoln was being blithe and annoying and I said something like "some of us have a stake in actually surviving," which was cruel. I don't know why I said it.

I expected him to be upset, but instead he laughed.

"You're jealous I'm depressed? Or is it that I have no family? That's new." I'd kind of forgotten about his family. I mumbled an apology.

“I do have things I’d lose, though” he said, looking at me from the passenger seat. “You know.”

It begins to get dark out.

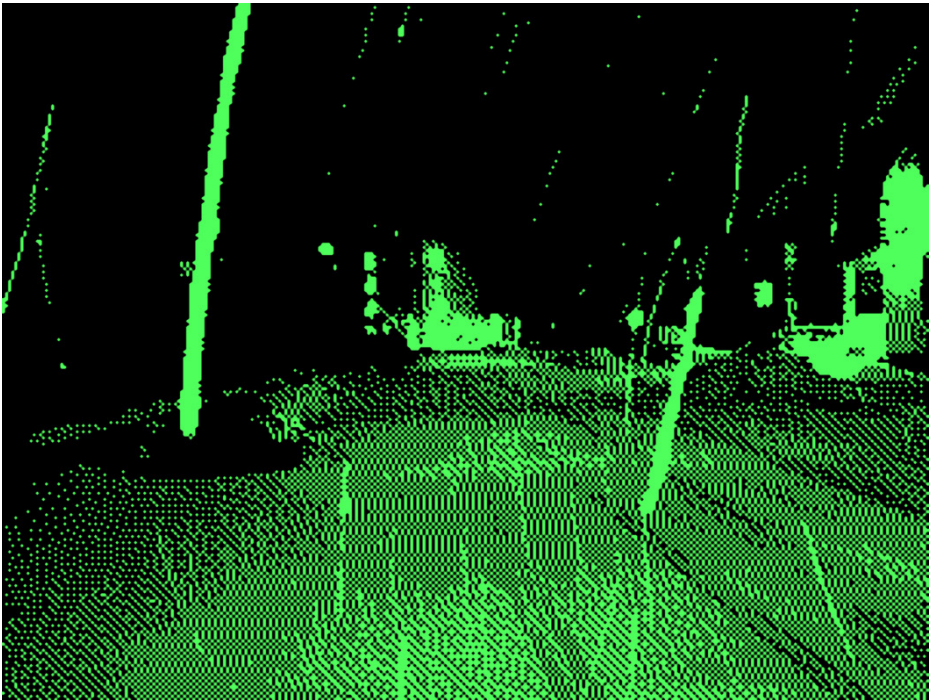
There’s been a late-season cold flash. It’s just under 40 degrees. There’s a short flurry of fat snowflakes around dusk. The wind swells and the flakes blow upwards in flowing swarms. Dani sits in the upstairs window and sketches the patterns they make: spirals, grids. Noah lounges on the couch downstairs with Lincoln and Ooz while they get ready to leave.

It begins to get dark out. One thing I hadn’t noticed until now is how the cops seem to have vanished. There have been no visits lately. No sirens cut through the night air.

I leave the house. It’s a two minute walk to the convenience store. Before going inside, I stand in the parking lot for a minute, looking down the road.

An angry donut of warm, steaming hail rotates over the museum, so large it blocks out the mountains behind.

I feel like we’re all going to die here.



The drive to Doyle's place is tense. For me, anyway. Ooz munches a Clif bar.

"Okay, remember," I say. "Big living room and attached kitchen right inside the side door. If Col goes upstairs, I'll look around. If he makes me go up with him and nobody else is downstairs, I'll text you. Then you come in and check the table in the living room, the pockets of any jackets you can find. Fucking whatever you see."

"Hey, take a deep breath, dude." She demonstrates. "We got this."

We reach the top of the hill and turn left at Fish Pond. The house is on the right. The street is empty.

"That's their place?" asks Ooz.

"Yup."

"That's where the car should be?"

"Mhmm."

"Well. That's not great."

As we pull to the side and park, I hear rumbling. And see headlights appear over the hill.

"Fuck. What do I do?"

"We can always kill him." I hear a click, and I turn. She's holding a telescoping baton.

"Oh my god, Ooz. Please put that down. I'll follow him in and see if I can grab the keys. You get ready to book it." Doyle is on his way to the house. I get out and walk past his car. It's flat and hideous and stinks of creosote.

He's almost at the shitty chipped wood plank staircase that leads up to the house. I jog to catch up.

"Hey, dude."

"Oh, hey," he says. "You're Lincoln, right? Col's friend?"

"Yup."

"Doyle," he says, and stands awkwardly. He looks normal; also blonde, about my height. I hadn't expected that. I consider putting my hand out to shake, but decide that would just make things weirder.

"I'm just picking up from Col," I say after a brief pause, and Doyle pats a paper bag partially concealed by his coat.

“I think he’s still out. Don’t worry, I’ll sort you out.”

I follow him up to the house.

“So,” Doyle says while I shut the door behind us, “you go to North Adams State, right? A lot of crazy shit’s been going on down there.”

“Yeah. My friends run the place where that house show happened.” I’m not sure why I tell him this. I’m nervous. “Shit was seriously fucked up.” He walks over to a low, beaten looking leather couch and slumps down, emptying out the bag onto the table in front of him. Numerous canisters and cling-wrapped packets tumble down next to a scale.

“Yeah, it sounded intense.” With a knife I hadn’t noticed he was holding, he deftly cuts into one of the packets and begins to pour it out onto the scale. “An 8 ball, right?” I nod. He continues.

“Heard about a fire in the townhouses, too.”

“Yup.” My mouth is dry. I realize I didn’t see where his car keys went. They must be in one of his pockets, right?

“Girl got burnt pretty bad. Heard she was in a coma.”

“Yeah, I heard that too.”

“You hear anything about her roommate? I think she was a tranny. She, he, whatever. You hear if he got hurt?”

“I don’t know anything about it.” Doyle laughs.

“It.’ That’s a good word for it.”

I imagine grabbing the knife and, in one quick motion, driving it into his left eye. He taps out a baggie on the table. I notice a keyring in amongst the paraphernalia.

“Anyway,” he says, “that little piece of shit stiffed me on a deal we had. Stole a bunch of my personal shit, medical stuff I need for my health. So it’s kind of like righteous what happened, in a way.”

“Yeah,” I choke out.

“Well, here you go. It’s 250,” he says. I count out the cash and hand it to him. Just as he gets up, I reach down and grab both my baggie and the keys from the table. The wrapped up coke dampens the sound. I watch him carefully as I put both in my pocket.

“Alright, see you.” Doyle waves without looking.

“I’ll tell Col you said hi.” I walk to the door.

“Hey, Lincoln,” he says. “Did you take my keys?”

I stop and turn around. My hand's on the door handle. Maintaining eye contact, Doyle bends down and picks up the knife off the table.

I pull open the door and book it to the stairs. They're wet, and my shoes kick out a little halfway down.

"Where are you going, dude?"

I can hear his footsteps behind me. There's no fucking way I can get into the car before he reaches me.

Just as I reach the road, I hear a dull thwack from behind. I turn to watch Doyle crumple onto the pavement by the stairs. Ooz stands to the side with her baton.

"Go!" she hisses, and walks towards Doyle, who is groaning and beginning to stir.

"My fucking face! Come here, bitch," he spits, picking himself up off the ground.

I race to the car, pull open the door, and leap inside, shoving the key into the ignition. The car roars to life. Amber lights blink on.

In the rear-view mirror, I see Ooz striding purposefully towards Doyle as he steadies himself.

I peel out and rip down the street in the Kukri.

60 11:00PM

NOAH

Saira wants to wait up with us at Wiktor's house, but after much cajoling we convince her to let Wiktor drive her back to Lincoln's apartment and put her to bed. She was in the hospital twice this week already. She for sure needs the rest.

Dani and I wait on the couch, jittering and peering out the window at the street outside. I can't tell if my upset stomach is from all the excitement or just typical night nausea.

Finally I feel heat rising in my esophagus, and I go into Wiktor's kitchen and poke around for some baking soda. It's in an open box in the fridge—the very worst kind, the anti-treasure of any nauseous search in an unfamiliar house. I tip some of the sour-smelling stuff into a brown mug and pour in some water from the sink, stirring with my finger.

Then I join her on the sofa again. Dani has her phone out on the side table, still waiting. I look around and grasp for something to focus on

besides the warm discomfort inside. Wiktor's house is typically geriatric in ways: the off-white patterned wallpaper, the thick, burnt orange carpet, a seemingly handmade wooden wall-mounted rack filled with cassettes. Overlapping framed photos, invariably of people standing, crowd the few usable surfaces. I put my mug on the floor. Bending over, I feel something in my pocket: the gloves from the co-op.

"Oh, hey," I blurt kind of loudly in the silent, stuffy room. "I got these for you."

Dani sits up expectantly, but her face falls when she examines them.

"Oh! Thanks."

"Oh my god, you hate them! Is it the wool?" She snatches them away from me.

"They're great. You're a fucking dick, though."

"Put them on now, then," I say recklessly. She glares at me. I take a nervous sip of my baking soda concoction and decide to dial it back a little.

"Sorry. Is it that they don't have fingers?"

"Yeah," she says softly.

"You don't have to tell me. But whatever your reason, it's totally fine. I won't make fun of you. Everybody has things about them they don't like to explain. Like, um, for example Martin—"

"You're gonna tell me Martin's secret to make me feel better?" She says incredulously. "Oh my GOD, Noah. You are the shittiest friend." She dissolves into giggles, and I start to laugh too.

When we finally settle down, we're silent for a bit. Dani makes sure she has no new texts, sighs, and turns to me.

"If you tell anyone I'll fucking end your life. Got it?" I nod vigorously.

"Here's what happened. I was fifteen, and my mom's hospital was doing this research study where they'd pay you a bunch of money to undergo a full-body MRI. They needed kids under 18 to establish a baseline for the study, I guess. So my mom volunteered me. The study was on a Friday, and she said we needed the money to pay for my ticket to the prom that weekend, which was total bullshit. It was like, \$50. But, anyway, I went." She stops and I wait for her to catch her breath.

"So I went in, and they made me put on a gown and stuff because you can't bring in anything metallic. They asked me what music I wanted to listen to, and they didn't have any Alex G, which was lame, and the

technician hated Elliott Smith, so we settled on Beach House. And the nurse helping me up onto the scanning platform thing was complimenting my mani pedi that I'd gotten that afternoon, it was like this futuristic shimmery nail polish. And I'm sort of claustrophobic, so when they like loaded me into the machine, I was already freaking out a little, and Myth was playing from the overhead speakers. Which sucks because I can't listen to it anymore. Really good song. They turned the machine on and... yeah." Dani stops again and takes a deep breath.

"The fingernail polish had little metal flecks in it. They discontinued it when my story made the news. It took off all my fingernails and toenails in like a tenth of a second. It was so forceful that it messed up this part of the nailbed called the germinal matrix. Made it so they can't grow back." She shrugs. "So that's—"

Just then, a loudly revving car pulls into the driveway.

"Um," I say. Dani jumps up and runs to the door, and I follow.

Saira had described the 'Kukri' to us, and based on what I knew about cars, I'd imagined it as a modified '80s BMW. In reality, it looks more like a Lamborghini Countach with cordyceps. There are jutting bits emitting black smoke and fluid like a Ghibli machine, more like a child's drawing than an actual car. I don't know who could or would have built such a thing.

Lincoln stumbles out of the front seat.

"How'd it go, bud?" I say hesitantly.

"Not good," he coughs.

"Where's Ooz?" asks Dani. Lincoln looks wildly up the street. It's silent.

"She'll be fine, I think," he says. "Doyle, I'm not so sure."

We tuck the car into the house's overhang and bring Lincoln inside. While I paw through Wiktor's liquor cabinet, all our phones buzz simultaneously. A short text from Ooz:

gottem lol see u nerds tmrw

61 11:47PM

ADRIANNE

Ooz gets back home late. I'm sitting on her bed where she left me when

she comes in. Working on my hybrid poetry project, which feels existentially pointless now but also weirdly grounding.

Before either of us say anything, she starts pulling down her pants.

They're dripping.

"You're soaked!"

"Just my pants. These were my best black joggers, too. Fuck." She tosses them and they land in her trash can with a wet splat. Her hands are splattered with grime and something reddish.

"Is that blood? Oh my god, are you okay?" She shoos me away.

"You should see the other guy. Seriously, he's fucked up. Haha." She peels off her shirt and stands facing me, panting, a thin dark trickle running down her neck from her hair.

"I didn't kill him. I just hit him until I was sure he wouldn't follow us home."

There's a wide, dark bruise on her side. I press my hand against it.

"Baby..." I whisper.

"Come on," she says. "Let's take a shower."

Afterwards, we make a nest with all her pillows and lie together. String lights cast the room in brilliant pink and deep shadow. I run my hand through her hair until her breathing becomes deep and regular.

Then I gently extricate myself and move to the foot of the bed, cracking open my laptop. Given that we might die tomorrow, I'd like to finish this one last project.

An hour and a half goes by in the room. We feel beyond time here. I crack the window and sit listening to the night. There's plenty to hear: birds, for one, even this late. Scuttering feet. Bass humming. Foggy, far-off voices, as if speaking through a loudspeaker, saying non-word syllables like "huh" and "dolb." It reminds me of Saira and the sleep study she talked about.

I thought some air would be nice, but the soft sounds are unnerving. I close the window and go to bed.

THURSDAY THE THIRTY-SECOND

62 10:33AM

COLTON

"No, I'm serious, dude. I've taken two psychology classes and I read

parts of the DSM.”

“That doesn’t fucking mean you know anything about medical science, dipshit. *Snort. Hak.*”

“It’s this thing called the placebo effect. It was discovered hundreds of years ago, but the scientific establishment doesn’t want you to know about it. It basically means that they give you a pill that does nothing—”

“Col. I fucking know what the fucking placebo effect is. *Snerk.* You learn about it in, in fucking third grade. *Hurk. Snort.*”

“D, you have to stop moving it around and shit. It won’t heal. Plus you should’ve let me take you to the hospital.”

“I thought you didn’t trust the medical establishment, bro. *Hrrrrrn.* Anyway, you want me to go to where that little bitch is so she can point me out to the fucking cops? Real smart. *Hum. Snopp. Ow!*”

“You have to breathe through your mouth. Just until the cartilage sets.”

“Yeah? You learn that in your fucking psychology class?”

“No... I googled it. Noses have cartilage instead of bones. Come on, man.”

“*Snnnnrrrk. Hukk.*”

“Anyway, even if the pills weren’t placebos, they wouldn’t do anything. Because where does stuff go when you eat it? Your stomach, bro. And your stomach is full of acid. You think an Aspirin dissolving into stomach acid is going to release a chemical that makes your headache go away? That’s dumb, bro. I’m sorry, dude, that’s stupid as fuck. Common fucking sense, D.”

“Is this why our medicine cabinet is full of herbal supplements and shit? You know normal people have fucking Tylenol and stuff in their house, right?”

“All the effects you think you feel are the placebo. It’s based on your expectation of how it’ll feel. You think that Tylenol should make your headache go away, so your brain manufactures that feeling. It’s called cognitive bias. Or cognitive dissonance. I don’t remember.”

“*Snort.*”

“D, quit it. It’s the same for other drugs, too. Like take acid for example.”

“Wish I was on fucking acid right now. *Huk. Ack.*”

“You expect it to be this crazy psychedelic thing, and then it is. Coinci-

dence? No, dude. It's a placebo."

"How come some people have bad trips then, you big-brained mother-fucker?"

"Simple. Entropy."

"*Snork*. Christ."

"There's a degree of chaotic uncertainty to everything in life, bro. Maybe when you take the tab, you foresee the possibility that you might have a bad trip. That probability factors into the placebo effect. Maybe you do, maybe you don't."

"So if you didn't know you could have a bad trip, it would be impossible?"

"That's exactly it. If you don't place that negativity in your own head, then—"

"*Hurrk. Ack*. Then riddle me this, dickhead. Imagine the very first person to ever have a bad trip. Before the concept of a bad trip existed. How come he had one? Huh? Where did it come from? The fuckin multi-verse? From one of your fucking Agarthan spacemen?"

"..."

"Yeah. That's what I fucking thought."

"..."

"*Snurrrp*."

63 7:10PM
SAIRA

The bridge is nothing special. Grey concrete. Did you know cement is just an ingredient in concrete? When people say something is "made of cement" it's usually actually made of concrete. Just a fun fact. Sorry. We arrive near dusk to avoid any traffic. We needn't have bothered. There's hardly anyone on the roads. Practically anyone with a car has already driven through the bubble and been zapped out of existence, presumably, and the rest are just putzing around waiting to be eliminated. Except us.

It's a warm evening. Lincoln parks Doyle's car at the middle of the bridge and gets out. He stands with me by the railing and we watch the trees move, the shimmering of a nearby MoCA musical installation, and the lights slowly go on in the houses across the river while the sunlight

gets dimmer.

Below, Wiktor pulls up in his red truck and the Void folks help unload and set up the microphones and the enormous set of speakers they brought up from the basement last night. The amps are covered in strips of fluorescent orange duct tape with VOID FARMERS written on them in large block letters. Noah runs a long extension cable up the road to the co-op and plugs it in.

Harmonic Bridge captures sound in long tubes strapped to its side. The deep C-note emanates from smooth weatherproof concrete speakers mounted on either side of the road below the bridge. The plan is to make the input and output as loud as possible. Cover all the bases. Martin confers with Wiktor, then gives a thumbs-up from below. Lincoln wordlessly leaves my side and gets into the Kukri.

I realize I'm alone on the bridge now. I lean over the edge and yell down:

“Do you guys wanna come up to watch?”

Everyone looks at each other.

“Go on,” says Keith. “I’ll stay and make sure nothing breaks or falls over down here.” Wiktor nods, and that settles it. Everyone follows him away to where the overpass meets the ground, and they all walk up together. When they arrive we kind of just stand around. Lincoln watches from the open door of the Kukri.

“Is this gonna work?” asks Martin. We all look at Wiktor. He shrugs.

“Okay,” Martin says resignedly, and motions to Lincoln. Before he can pull the door shut, I jog over.

“Room for one more?” Lincoln nods, and I jump in.

He slides the key into the ignition. Amber lights blink on. He twists, and the car purrs to life. We look at one another for a moment. In unison, we take a deep breath, and he shifts into neutral.

As Lincoln presses down on the gas, a roar begins to penetrate the sealed silence of the car’s interior. It grows in intensity until coins in the cupholder rattle and the windows begin to shake.

Outside, everyone stands wincing with their hands on their ears.

Lincoln’s foot presses against the floor. The car sounds like amplified shrieking. The noise is otherworldly, increasing and falling back with the

rev limiter and increasing again. I can't tell if the lights on the dashboard are flickering or if it's just my vision.

"How long does the engine have?" I shout as loudly as I can.

"Before it dies or explodes?" Lincoln hollers back.

"It's going to fucking explode?"

"I don't know, you asked me!"

The vibration is intense. Through the tinted glass, I see things floating outside. Hunks of dirt and rock hanging in the air beyond the bridge, far into the distance. The dying sunlight pools orange on the dashboard. I clutch my elbows.

With a jolt and a whine, the car shudders to a stop. Lincoln shuts it off. The resulting quiet is weird and incomplete, like there's still noise reverberating in the back of my head.

"I hope that was enough," he says.

As soon as I open my door, I am assailed with the deepest, most resounding sound I've ever heard. The drone, amplified in a feedback loop below us. Crushing my hands against my ears, I crawl out of the car and kneel by the guardrail. At the edge of my vision, I can see soft earth on the hillside to the north crumbling in on itself as rift holes collapse. Closer to the vibration, entire boulders levitate. Bricks shake loose from the buildings on State Street.

The cacophony rises in pitch until it reaches a piercing shriek. The amps pop and die, but the sound continues to reverberate, echoing between the mountains on all sides.

"Did we do it?" Martin shouts. Wiktor looks around us in wonder. The ground shakes beneath our feet.

Then, in an instant, it stops and everything falls back to Earth.

B1

Gradually, the wailing fades. It leaves behind an otherworldly whistling that echoes between the mountains and finally subsides. Without it, without any birdsong or the noise of any vehicle, deep silence permeates everything.

"So that's it," says Wiktor.

"Hang on," Ooz replies. "How do we know? How do we know every-

thing's fixed?"

"Can't you feel it?" Wiktor murmurs. Everyone stands and listens. And gradually, out of the silence, sound seeps back in: the rushing water of the Hoosic river, leaves rustling in the gentle breeze, insects chirping from the long grass bordering the riverbanks below.

The spell is broken by the crash of an amp tipping over below, followed by a shouted "sorry!" from Keith.

"Hey, let's go," says Noah finally. "There's coffee at the co-op." As a mass, everyone walks down the cracked pavement of the bridge and trails Noah while Lincoln and Martin roll the Kukri into a parking space by the side of the road.

With the various old couches and chairs rearranged and the sacks of unsorted clothing repurposed as beanbag chairs, everyone slumps down and sits pensively. Noah flicks on the Keurig and begins passing out mugs. Gene, nervous from the recent noise, stalks around whining and licking hands.

"Oh shit," Saira says. "I need to tell Shell what's happened. I just don't want them sitting there thinking they're gonna die. Lincoln, can you drive me?"

Lincoln nods and jumps up, and the two head outside. The night is thick and warm.

Soon, the car speeds north towards the hospital. The darkness accumulates.

B2

Inside the co-op, the Void Farmers sprawl on the couch and shoot the shit about dimensional rifts and magic volcanoes. Adrienne and Dani talk softly. Wiktor stands back and sips from a mint green mug. Someone takes a paper plate and pours out some food for Gene, who eats so vigorously that his paw upends the plate and sprays little beef-flavored bits across the room.

Adrienne rises and walks over to Wiktor.

"Doesn't feel totally real," she says. "It feels like somewhere, we're still fighting."

"Somewhere, maybe, the magic won," says Wiktor. "Our fears were real-

ized, and the rifts caused an eruption. We are soot.”

“Yeah?” shouts Noah from the sofa. “Yeah, well, like, in dimension 324847, it’s exactly the same except Martin has a decent-sized dick, so!” Ooz guffaws. Martin grabs a balled-up shirt from the sorting bin and throws it at his head.

Wiktor smiles.

B3

At the hospital, the two step out of the Kukri into humid and total darkness. Lincoln distracts the intake nurse while Saira sneaks into the intensive care unit.

Shell is propped up in bed. The oxygen machine hums. They wake up when Saira taps their leg. Their legs are exposed and white. Most of the damage happened above the waist. Their legs are mostly pale skin, mostly no seeping open flesh blanketed by cold cotton pads.

“Hey, bud,” Saira says softly. “I’m sorry to wake you, but I thought you’d want to know that we did it. It seems like it’s over. ‘The magic has been dispelled,’ or whatever Wiktor would say.”

Shell blinks. Their arms are immobile in thick white sleeves. Saira leans in and brushes a shiny strand of hair away from their face.

“So now you just need to get better, and everything will be back to normal,” she says, and swallows. Shell looks at her and then out the window, at the black trees and black grass around the hospital parking structure. Earlier in the year, they and Saira had walked here in the night for no real reason and had gone to the top of the parking structure, it was only three or four levels, and they’d sat crosslegged and watched little flickering headlights make their way down Florida mountain into town. It had been cold, near the middle of winter, and they had huddled close together even in their puffy coats.

“This might interest you,” says Saira. “I’m changing my poetry project. Well, not the whole thing. But the idea of it is changing. It’s still based on the geologic surveys I wrote. They tell the story of an apocalyptic event beginning at the very core of the planet. A blueprint of the earth’s

imminent destruction spelled out in the rocks below our feet. Like the last thing left would be this unmelted black box full of turgid poetry.” She trails off, sighs, and follows Shell’s gaze out the window, into the black.

Outside, insects and little creatures move, invisible in the darkness. Everything goes on as it did before.

Shell’s eyes close slowly. Saira stays in the room for a few hours, napping, curled up like a cat in the peeling old chair by the side of the bed.

Finally, with dawn breaking, she uncurls herself and stretches, looks down at Shell, shifting in their sleep, and leaves. The intake nurse has gone somewhere. Lincoln is in the parking lot, asleep in the front seat of the Kukri. He awakens when Saira opens the door.

“Hey,” she says. Lincoln yawns. “Sorry for taking so long. Can we go up, real quick? Just up to the hairpin.”

“Sure,” Lincoln says. He starts up the car.

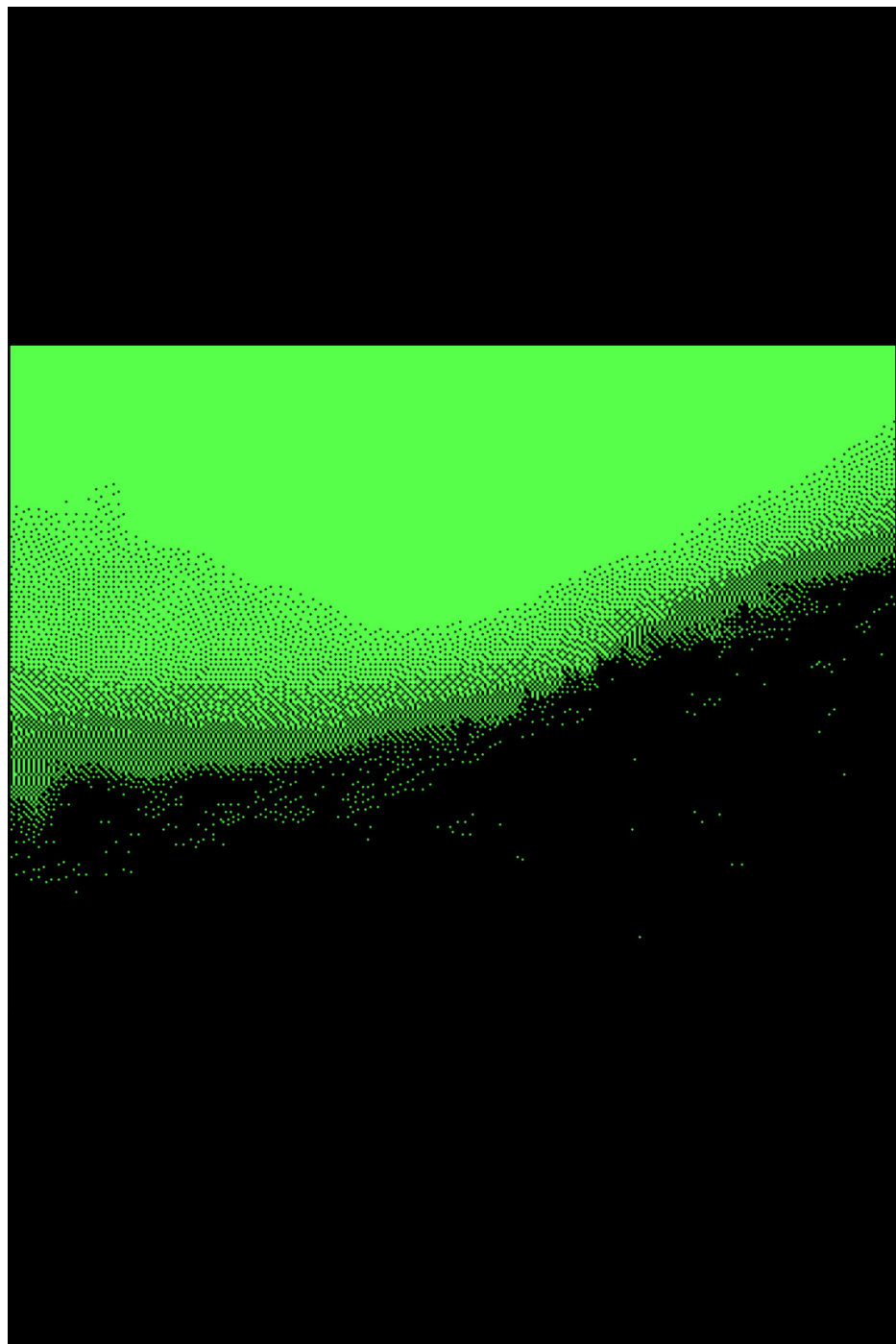
The drive up the mountain isn’t long, a breezeblown winter-end grey road. It’s the first day of April. The air is thick and foggy. Saira rests her head against the window until the vibration starts to hurt. She glances over at Lincoln. His gaze is fixed on the road, pink crosshatched hands gently gripping Doyle’s steering wheel.

Finally they reach the top of one of the roads cutting into the side of the mountain, passing by a gravel-paved lookout point. She shuts her eyes as tight as she can and leans into the light, creamsicle orange-white underneath her eyelids and prickly on her cheeks.

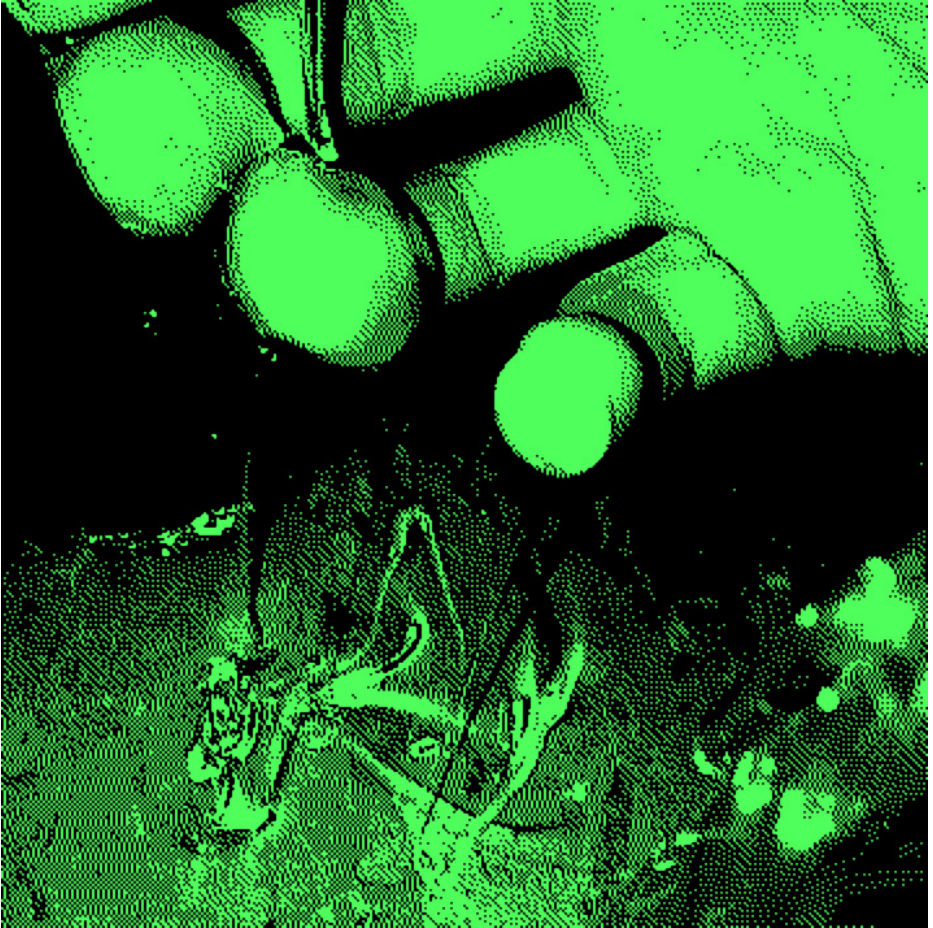
Her eyes open again.

It’s colder at the top, where the road curves underneath an enormous green sign: Welcome to North Adams in a vintage touristy font. Lincoln stops by the side of the road and Saira gets out, stands next to the idling car and looks over the edge.

Red morning clouds hang low, bulbous and inseparable from the fog. Bloody footprints on the ceiling. Over the edge looking out there is a row of tall, leafless trees. And past that two more rows of brown sticks like dead teeth in the mouth of the ascending sun, then nothing.



EPILOGUE



MAY

TUESDAY THE ELEVENTH

Some time in the evening, Col arrives back at the house on Church Street with a gallon ziploc of raw pigs feet and twelve sheets of insulating foam. If there were a home theater supply store in North Adams, he could have gotten something better. But the noises have become a problem and the foam would have to do for now.

The corners of the pavement are filled in with pollen, dirty green in the waning light. With the trunk of his station wagon open, Col

wipes his nose and looks up, where stars are just beginning to appear, and then gathers an armful of materials.

Doyle has been impatiently waiting for him in the basement, but when Col comes noisily down the thin wooden stairs clutching a stack of the foam sheets, he does not turn away from the crate.

“We’re actually going to need more for the ceiling,” Doyle says. “I measured it again and we need like two more sheets.”

“I’ll get it tomorrow,” Col says, dumping the foam in the corner and walking over. He stops well short of the crate and holds his shirt over his nose.

“You got it food, though?” asks Doyle. *Nod*. “Well, bring it. It’s been making the noise like nonstop.” When Doyle talks, the 3D-printed blue plastic nose brace bobs up and down, shifting on a thin layer of sweat and oil. His voice still sounds pinched and strange. Col resentfully trudges back up the stairs and Doyle turns back to the crate.

The crate was for a large dog, Doyle’s mom’s German Shepherd. It’s been modified: wood slats, long steel screws, and a new roof made from four layers of chicken wire have added two vertical feet of room, plus additional protection from the thing inside, which you can see pretty well through the interstices when the overhead light is on.

By the way: up in the air next to the ceiling light, a shimmering speck hovers.

Doyle stares between the bars like a normal person looks into a campfire, entranced by its motion. The thing roils. It hasn’t been making the noise since Col came in, but now it starts up again: a really low-volume low-pitch human scream that steadily becomes louder and then fades, then becomes louder again. Thin slabs of derma in different shades of tan and pink grow out of the thing and sink back in, pour over one another in layers. A complex, localized system of plate tectonics. When it leaks, the fluid drains onto the concrete floor and into a hole meant to mitigate flooding damage if the pond nearby should rise. Mixed in with the thing’s scream are little snatches of audio. A child crying. Distorted pleading voices. An ABBA sample. A balding scalp surfaces and vanishes in the teeming pink muck.

Col clatters down the stairs, gingerly holding the bag of pigs feet between his thumb and index finger. Doyle grunts and takes it from him, walking over to the crate and lifting up a thick, hinged door at the top to reveal the layers of chicken wire beneath. Inside, it smells the meat, and little squirming tendrils prod through the small overlapping metal hexagons and reach out.

Doyle upends the bag and the thing quiets, pumping many-jointed appendages out through the mesh and pulling hunks of meat back down into itself. He watches, fascinated. Col turns away and tries not to retch.

They're distracted.

Flickering overhead, Shell turns and deletes the staircase. Their proxy hangs in the air, motionless, waiting to be called upon for whatever comes next.

The sounds in the room are: slurps and soft crunches from inside the crate. Doyle's breath whistling through the misplaced shards of cartilage in his nose. Col's shoe squeaking as he starts, noticing the missing stairs. The thump of a plank falling away from the crate. Another thump, this one wet.

"D?" The body has been removed. Just Doyle's head, settling down on the floor, a stupid expression and cauterized stump of a neck. The blue plastic brace dangles from a strip of beige tape.

The chicken wire is gone now, too. Misshapen hands push tentatively out through gaps in the wood. Colton backs away, blinking. Without meaning to, he balls his hands into fists and opens them again.

Piteously writhing out from the mess of wood, the thing cries, prodded by splinters and cutting itself on the sharp tips of screws. *Schlorp*. It puts out shoots and raises itself up, nine feet of tangled flesh, pressing up against the fluorescent tube lightbulbs, which strain and then burst, turning the room black.

The baleful little dot twists upwards and vanishes.

PPPPSSSSSS

WWWWWWW

SSSSSSSS

SSSSSSSSSS

SSSSSSSSSS

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