



Arson in the Scriptorium



Menahem Ali
translated by Matt Alexander H.

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Menahem Ali was a Palestinian-Israeli writer who fled to America at the age of 18 during the outbreak of war in 1948. He lived the rest of his life in exile, mostly as a paper-hoarding recluse in Brooklyn, New York before passing away in 2020. He never published a word in his lifetime, but left behind 15 manuscripts, handwritten in a creole of Judeo-Arabic Palestinian Hebrew, including thirteen collections of free verse, a study of poverty in America and a surrealist novel.

Matt Alexander H. was born in 1986 in Northampton, Massachusetts by the Holyoke Range and Connecticut River Valley. He was raised in the Atlantic coastal town of Mattapoissett, which, in the Algonquin language, means, “place of rest”. He lives alone by the Sea of Marmara.

Other titles by Menahem Ali at Fictive Press
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Verse

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Exotic Settlers
Sketches of Style
Present Sound, Silent Space
district.Columbia
Full Moons and Dawn's Crepuscules
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Regress
Brooklyn Ridge
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Prose

The American Hallucination

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What This Is

Rusty closed his eyes. He was not going to sleep. Day. Night. Neither mattered. He shut his eyelids tight. Tears streamed. His pale, discolored skin was prone to bleeding.

He saw his life pass behind his eyelids, over and over again. He was gone, long having forgotten the sensation of light through his retina.

He never had to tell his stories. His face told them. He was silent with everyone he met. Closing his eyes, he would listen to his thoughts and imagine how he might speak. His language was subconscious. His thoughts streamed like his tears. He never stopped listening to himself.

One night, he felt a sliver of light. The sensation was strangely hot, and stirred inside him with gaining intensity. His mind seemed to shift, solely conscious of the light that had passed through his eye, and now remained fixed in his mind. The purity of his subconscious imagination, the clarity of which he needed so desperately in order to hear his thoughts, was lost in an instant, like a lightning strike.

From that moment on, he would never again return to the windowless room where he had sat for what seemed to him to have lasted for the entire scope of every lifetime that had ever lived throughout the universe. The tiniest bit of light had roused him, finally, to the world.

As involuntarily as the act of dreaming, he began to remember, at first faintly and ever so gradually with a special lucidity all that he had experienced within four windowless walls, where his sense of time expanded well beyond the planetary spin.

“Here! I was here. Here!” he told himself.

“I have walked before...”

In the act of remembering, he withdrew into himself again, now consciously, into the essence of his mind, where he began to hear himself tell such stories that encompassed his every sensation of existence inside and out.

“This is storytelling, not just a book of written language, of verbal knowledge,” he thought. “A story, when told, is not a thing, object, or possession. Storytelling is a transcendent sojourn, noetic. Of the mind.”

“A story begins, is told, ends, and is known,” his conversation with himself provoked him to genuflect. “A story is a place, below the subconscious.”

“These words are the fulfillment of countless wishes. Even to the letter. Every mental sound is an imagined thought, beyond belief,” he said, quietly aloud. “Figment.”

His breath shuddered at the word, “figment”. And then the words that he heard himself say seemed more and more to speak to him.

“These are not pages,” he said, under his breath, shyly. “This is the difference between a book and all of literature.”

“These are not words,” he said, louder. “This is the difference between words and thoughts.”

“This is not writing,” he said, finally speaking in a voice audible enough to be heard by another ear. If anyone else were around, he would not have cared at that moment, though he was surer of his solitude than anything else in his life.

“This is the difference between writing and experience,” he said, almost to a howl.

“This difference is history,” he imagined.

He found that when he looked up, his thoughts held fast within his dream world. When he looked down, the floor beneath his feet seemed to become earth, and move.

“History is the difference between Revolution and Civil War. When the establishment is victorious, history says, Civil War,” he thought, retreating into silence.

“Literature says, Revolution,” he whispered.

“A story is not only history, and not only literature,” he began again, to speak louder. Hearing himself speak, he felt high.

“This is not a plot, analysis, or guide,” he went on, speaking faster and faster. “This is not a text, teaching or report. This is not scripture, creed or liturgy. This is definitely not law.”

And then, slowly, he opened his mouth without making a sound. “This is the difference between Civil War and Revolution,” he dreamed.

“I am a character,” he said, walking around his room. He spoke to the wall, to the mirror, to the window, to the floor, to his hand. He spoke to a book, and to a plant. He spoke to everything, and nothing.

“His greatest ambitions are to fulfill creative pursuits, to realize the imagination as narrative,” he said, softly, imagining his literary reflections in the third-person.

“Why do I speak,” he asked himself. “When there is no one to hear, and nothing to say?”

“A storyteller is different from a writer,” he asked, and repeated himself. “A storyteller is different from a writer.”

The dissimilarity is between two identities, writer and author,” he mused carefully exploring the path of language like an infant would crawl, and stop, looking up.

“A writer fulfills a role,” he answered himself. “Authors have visions.”

“The storyteller is more than author,” he imagined, hearing old storytellers in his nightly visions, his noetic sojourns.

“An author is defined by a book,” he thought, saying only the word “book” in a tensely controlled way of speaking, animating his thoughts with every word.

“Storytelling, on the other hand, is an art that encompasses the wholeness of the storyteller and the story as one personality, as one style of speaking, and yet also embodies theater, art, music and even the collective social acts of creation, the timeless sacred art of the people known as ceremony,” he said, each word more slowly than the next.

He had been involuntarily induced into an all-night monologue, wildly entranced at the growing clarity and absolute translucence of a dream image, more, the manifestation of a pure idea that flashed before his eyes as he spoke. He had invoked the presence of the image-idea, a reflection of subtle consciousness over the light that fell on his eyes. He saw himself as a storyteller, as a conjurer of wakefulness, as a seer.

Again, he woke. When once he had dreamed within dreams, now he woke into successive states of waking.

They were his noetic sojourns, so he called them, that sense of wakefulness that opens to new planes of reality. “Noetic, for what is of the mind,” he justified, although inaudibly, and now from the corner of his empty studio.

“Sojourns,” because, like all of life, experience is ephemeral, and diverges along invisible streams of consciousness that merge and form imperceptibly, simultaneously and over unfathomable spans of time, both momentary and eternal.

He was adamant about the idea of the sojourn as plural, that there are always many sojourns, and not one. Noetic sojourns are a conscious embrace of the fragmentary, and therefore boundless nature of creative authorship, where the line that divides involuntary, subconscious, mental activity with choice and movement is crossed.

At work, in his mind, he constantly straddled these lines, and lived to traverse more unknown noetic territories on either sides of their divides. This was a perfect dualism, where he found balance in his life, and refuge from the unfathomable worlds that lived around him through other eyes.

At any time, he could move back and forth. He was nomadic, moving through his soul with a migratory spirit. He was like the prehistoric storyteller, feeling life within a seasonal round. Only, he was an individual, not a community, and modern, not prehistoric. Though he knew that somewhere on the planet there were still storytellers who dreamed in the ways of earthly life, he had long buried himself under the inanimate burdens of urbanization.

He remembered, from his sojourns that led him to wander far, of a global voice saying how the totality of what the writer actually creates has no boundaries, and is perceivable only by its fragments, like the ruins of a lost civilization.

"I must aspire to the fragmentary," he told himself, staring at a bookshelf without a single book shelved.

"This kind of narrative stirring is like a fermenting brew," he responded, coolly and now looking out of his window at a single light in the exterior mist beyond his apartment window. "And sojourns are a subjective editorial exercise, creation as the fragments of narrative."

"What has inspired such noēsis or mentation," he asked, imploring with a nervous intensity. "Dreams are medicine, as are words, in the right dosage."

"When two thoughts are had at once, the thinker draws a blank," he drew a blank. "In the same way, when two dreams are had at once, the dreamer sees through the veils of the imagination, made clearer by the revelatory experience of the dream-within-a-dream overlap."

"At that point, the dreamer wakes," he said, finally smiling, looking up, and out into the overcast night sky. "And sojourns."

He imagined flight. Though, he knew he would not emerge from his door out into the world, not until his thoughts subsided enough for him to be able to truly see the world unencumbered by volition. He decided he would only return to the light of day after his sojourning led him to see his noēsis, visible before his open, naked eyes.

"Noetic sojourns are night's work," he thought, citing remembered lines from a book he had once heard read aloud. "Largely unconscious, like choosing one's roots."

"What we see are our maps. What we feel is our compass," she said.

He could hear her voice, quietly muffled as through the earpiece of an old phone.

"Walk with all of your heart. The whispers tell of fine wine aged to sweets and blossoms," he listened, and began to shed tears in silence, his heart weighed

with the memory of her voice. The morning waited, as the darkness began to ascend, and unveil the crown of the sun.

She was now silent. He listened closely, tears falling. The moment urged speech, from him, from her; it did not matter; what mattered was that someone spoke.

"The past and present meet, as two lovers in a dream rising from the embrace of night and day," he spoke through his quivering tongue, his mouth dry with need.

"Freedom and Peace were our children," she broke her fast of silence with nourishing words of truth. "And they've since grown into Solitude and Wonder."

One day, long after he had opened his eyes, he saw his reflection. He was no more than noēsis. Freedom had grown into Solitude.

She spoke again, her voice resounding gently, notions that he could not grasp. "Everything real is always in love with you," she whispered audibly, her words as clear as a glacier spring.

"Love," Peace spoke for the first time, and grew into Wonder.

"That is where we grew up. In Love," Wonder remembered, speaking to himself after feeling the humbling passage of years.

"And now that they are grown," Rusty said. "They knew they had always been where they were, and now are, seers of life." He closed his eyes again, and was dreamlessly restful for the first time since he began to remember, before he formed memories.

Still Remnants Past

Tonight, the water is more still and tranquil, more at peace with its shores than ever, almost unified with the distance of clear sky, unmoving. Its depths seem parallel with the infinite universe behind the stars, behind my eyes. And I gaze into its elegant, silent motion. And into the moonlit waters, the icy river glows as an unconscious brew, a kindling power unfolding within the heart and source of the land.

The river god sways gently in a dance of ecstasy. The slow rhythmic flow is the river's own yearning to be one, again, with the sun-fleshed mountain and the ocean's undulating tide. A lunar glint in the stone-shaped waters reflects an unnerving presence ahead.

One glint from the eye of prowling fur, the catastrophic bend of a predator's spine sends a million shivers into my very human soul. Though many steps away from the water, I feel as submerged in its unforgiving current. At the gates of a natural death, the moment when embracing the Earth in the fullest, the human form disintegrates in a flash of primordial hunger.

The animal, entranced, paralyzes my every last cell, as its tail swings left and right with dizzying grace. Transfigured by a bestial hypnosis, there are two beings of the hunt, in full and impenetrable balance. And then, the Tiger stops. Her stare, curiously enough, then is warming.

As captivated by an inward swell, as a yet unfelt emotion, I feel incising pangs of belonging, and of a friendship, undying since the first unformed word sprang from my infant mouth. My heart wells up with the strength of tears wept before the death of the beloved, and its release follows with utmost relaxation, bittersweet and ecstatic.

She walks with me, as two lifelong friends, along our human path. And my gut sinks as I hear footsteps. A band of unwary souls approaches. Unprepared to join, we are a divided species. She steps forward to meet one at a time, to sense them as immersed in the likeness of her heart.

As the unknowing travelers march forward, they meet the power of her charged fangs. Her open jaw welcomes them as the air inhales a bird in flight. I flee, not looking back, confused, while with purpose, the scent of strength over the domineering self, over humanity and the narrow stifling of egotism in the anthropocentric paradise of modernity.

Beyond the physiques of instinct, in the isolated cells of human madness, I had never imagined this night would be my last. Sirens of Death displace the air

with an eerie silence. A dissonant projection moves me, as with the mystifying mass of humanity that encircled, with a most unsettling scream.

The air is riddled with an unknown force, originating in the constellations above. And unbeknownst to me, except for the slightest of assumptions, it is a shared fate. In an incomprehensible language, the alien voice of reason bears down on my skull as through the entire skeletal mass of humankind. It is imbued with the most devastating form of spiritual dread.

Ghosts of men awaken to round up the oppressed like livestock from their millennial imprisonment under the Northern Cross. Before the first ounce of blood is spilled, I eyed the forest beyond the edge of the encampment, where concentration turns to liberation.

For reasons now obscure, I sighted a way out. Others notice as I run through the fencing, bewildered by the transcendent feeling of freedom beyond the barbed hatred that once confined my elders, my children and brethren of our closest kin.

Out into the wayward plain, I flee, alone, veiled under a new moon. The sky enlightens my sense of distance with steps unheard inside the emptying incarcerations surrounding. I hear wails. As I move into the dizzying silence, my heart muffles from the fear of no return. I weep.

My skull cracks at bearing the guilt, the shade and the humility of survival among my most honored family and friends, my blood and spirit, left behind to suffer the excruciating gasps of liquidation.

The sky fills with light, and as the fog of my vision clears a field of people opens before me, innocent and young, as with the harmonious revelation of a smile. The youth pray and rejoice, congregating under the morning sun. Strong with music, they are greeting the day with endless festivity.

The glow of the Earth radiates like a face kissed by a warm lover. The air moves softly, and my skin pulses with gratitude. I enjoy the music, spontaneous and ambient, as if I had only just heard music for the first time. Then, a face stares into mine.

She recognizes me.

“Where have you come from?” She asks, seeing into my origins, my eyes dark with mental imprisonments, so heavily worn.

“Did you escape too?” I ask her, whispering softly, wondering if the lines on her face will speak to me of a shared burden.

She simply stares, and then smiles. My first reaction is to run, yet, as the moment passes, I feel the empathy that she has for me, far from pity.

The young woman, attending the nervous crowd, expresses her concern, and soon hurriedly shows me the way to a nearby train station. At the edge of the forest, all travelers stop, submerged in a sudden hush. Everyone carries the dizzying weight of an unspoken realization.

“How far could I travel on?” I ask the station agent, imagining the greatest distance from the destitute evils of my past.

Standing silently, at the station, others notice me, how deeply I grieve. With fearing eyes, saddened by compassion, they earnestly help me along to the end of the platform, where I might find a better seat. And at last, on the cusp of permanent emancipation, I simply couldn't conceive of leaving.

“Where would I go?” I ask into the late winter air, softly inaudible and shivering. “What would I do?”

I confront the unnatural silence of waiting for a train to take me away, while so many trains had taken everyone I had ever known. A young woman walks past, smirking into my eyes. A full smile nearly forms on her precious mouth. She walks in another direction, stepping lightly, forever nameless. The way she moved was like a flightless bird, content with nothing more than breath for the air that lifted her every step.

“Should I return and face the death that had me in its grip,” I thought, speaking aloud though barely audible, envious of her nonchalance, how beautifully she was clothed, in a white, frayed garment. I withdraw into such awesome fear as I had consummated, passionately with all of my lovers, dreamt-of and real. Time passes. I remain fixed, observing the indifferent groups of waiting travelers, immobilized.

There are parts of me that have yet to move from that mysterious ground where everyone I had ever known went, and never returned, lost. Walking to the other end of the platform, I look back. There they were, at the other end, petrified and stilled.

Alone with The Alone

Everyday now, I cross that deep green field. The sky, overcast, rains on the dark earth. Dusk spells weary and wayward bands of the lonesome and the greedy. Leaves burn. At day's end, cold, in dank clothing, I trail beyond the grey horizon. Smoothly, with a gliding wind, I escape across the open shield of stony, seaside cliffs. My mind is awake. I can breathe. Though at peace, I am ever cautious, and walk slowly.

My friend waits on the other side of the hills. From the faceless door, to the glowing candor of childlike familiarity, I visit him nightly.

We begin. I unwrap a piece of worn fabric, revealing the invaluable exchange. Sweet grass fills the air. Moved, life is an act of grace. Forlorn and ungraspable, lungs stretch outward, to reach the fleeting air.

Police siren. The air becomes a noxious haze of suspicion. I fly.

Midnight calls.

The sweet grass confiscated, our lives are in our hands. I look up into the abyss of night at the beginning of a new lunar cycle. Dead light fades like a humanoid gargoyle decaying on an escarpment, bygone memories vanishing faintly from the constellating maps of heaven. Sharp and hard, the ancient light crystallizes and vibrates through the endless spectrum.

Galaxies enervate like spines, nerves, veins, all impeccable nodes of wonder; a cosmic laughter bright as the crash of a split gong. Through, I again look up. Now, I see into the double mirror of mind and nature, reflecting the cobalt azure.

Blinding solar purity, I am as naked as the sky. Clouds obscure. Rain. A memory. Summer passes in the afterglow noon.

And in such as a bout of unspent night, where slumber is deep and each morning fresh, I wake full. The tests of emotive fire, the blinding seed of passions are instilled.

"To work, and find solace in worldly accomplishment," I ask, looking through my imagination, to bare sky.

"Am I deceived?" I answer myself, leading my brain on, like self-induced intellectual hypnosis, into a kaleidoscopic mirror of questions.

The wakeful night spins over an inglorious frost, loosening its hold on the sunless firmament. The enchanted summit balances revelation at the faintest edge of the horizon. I imagine falling into the greatest of depths in the mountain hollows, as the wounded sky bleeds rain and ice, brewing over the darkening clouds.

Returning to work, I traverse impossible concave stone, sharp as a split mirror; the ice moves my flesh towards the brink. In a vivid flash, I see Memory itself, born on the apex of Earth. The stars crown the lonely top of the horizon as we gaze into our battered arms with hands of ice and stone.

“I see myself, afar!” I think, imagining another horizon, one not so absolute. From the greatest of heights along the knife-edge of the cliffs, the shadow of a man fell to his death.

Scattered in the colorless flush of snow, the piercing rock dashed all hope. Still, with a chest full of heart, his compatriots climb on and toward the frozen prison of a borderland home.

Alone, I empty my eyes and climb the last step. The day speeds past like a village hearse. A vision of unity stings my heart with its sole truth: I am alone with the Alone.

Slaves to the Pipe

A pipeline twice the size of a whale, a gargantuan opening, closes the way through to an opaque, unholy void. Brackish watery filth moves with the illusion of some eerie, undead self-propulsion under our quaking boots. And the spill seeps into the metallic soil below. The Earth shrieks. Yet, Her voice is muted under a dense, resin helmet. Deafened by fortunes of squandered wealth, the murderous cold frays our nerves with blinding speed. Then, all there is to do is work.

"Give 'em yr bucket." Our manager removes our defecation pails, to be filled with drinking water for the next hour. The only thing that moves the guards is vomit, and an empty stomach. Coffee. Moonshine. And blood.

The grisly, noxious sky burns with the weight of another Earth turning against ours, looking out through grey eyes, a globular iris of naked waste. The entombed sky wretches as the darkening muck churns and writhes like a cold snake. What was once soil and groundwater is now the tar and feathers of the shameless petro-state.

The pipe gargles and spews rasping smoke, as if it were a choking throat, attempting a last word before paralyzed onlookers. The brevity of life and death makes us motion-sick. There is a sea of greed, corruption and ignorance below these decks of metal and bone. The quiet break the loudest.

And at once, as the gushing oil explodes with a merciless fire from the side of frozen metal, men are trapped behind the void. Wading in the flush of liquid more polluted than sewage, the brain nauseates, overwhelmed by the job of planetary death.

The Whispering Wall

The wall cracks, sundered by a voice of thunder. An opaque sky churns, belching deep green ire with the blooded spires of lightning streaking the fragile heavens. Fled, spiriting off above the splitting stone, I nearly fracture my hand as the quaking rock of Meleke fissures and smokes with the dust of an ancient soul leaving. As one, we are exiled.

Ancient and medieval backdrops gush with flame and flick with the passion of countless ghouls resurrected at the spiritual death of the *Unholy* Wall.

I clamber down and down, past the bustling, oven-hot village known to anglophones as “The Friend”. Headscarves and long-flowing garb wave in the homely, communal air. Into the steep fold, barefoot on the highway teeming with military checkpoints, my heroic blasphemy fumes with the vainglorious ruse of a timeless lie: the first crime of possession: land.

Fugitive of a native childhood, my eyes scan the living ground beyond the vicious plain of stone and fire.

The smoothing grasses, plush and soft as the furs of Mother Earth trail off into the horizon toward the Far East. Cathartic winds blow my mind to perfect suspension. The gravity of our historic failure and the infamy of its lingering pains are momentarily nonexistent.

Across a woody bridge, the babbling brooks of a better world shine in the blending sunlight. Sea salt air flecks the caressing breeze as my nostrils fill with aromas delectable and clean. A teahouse sits nested on a wispy, verdant knoll.

My anima is fresh, with her familiar hygiene, touched with the divine hydration of a natural and ecological grace. She breathes, stimulated with a love-crafted green tea.

Her palms are as supple as a camellia in spring. Yet, her fingers are as dry as the fermented leaf ready for brewing. Her presence reaches and receives far into the mind’s *dan tien* point of ecstatic enlightening and inner wholeness.

Her sagely eyes free my insides with an internal repose unknown, as from above. On the high flesh of a stone-wrought, deadening life of the destructive West, I have left my name and memory. Here, belief and need see no conflict, and I speak of dreams within dreams, dreamt in the art of peace.

And after what had seemed an eternity of peaceful splendor, in the decadent arms of all-embracing Love, I wake, as from a deep vision of suffering. I begin walking. The earth shudders, a breath cold with early death. The rattle of antlers flutters with the cacophony of nature’s own chaotic war. In a triumph of sight, we

lock stares, as antlers, across a dense thicket. Wounded, a stag and doe skip silently, as above a moving fan of grass. As one, we return to the dead old high of the ancient city.

A now-extinct deer of Mediterranean freshwater clarity races with divine elegance. Bones exposed, an ethereal light is affixed to the animal's gaping, bloodless torso wounds. I can see clear through its rib cage, to the waking touch of humid, rolling grassland hills.

Through a panoramic eye, a lifeless and incendiary pain wears the sepia-toned horizon into a wrinkle of earthly age. We pass, unseen, through a golden gate, where we embody Shekinah in all of her feminine grace.

An unpleasant, shivering wind is cast over the city, clouded with complex overlain landmarks, imperialist remnants of religious dogma and historic oppression that often explode mercilessly into the present with a daily shade.

Spectral, and at once shimmering from an illumined field of childlike stares, we glide past world dignitaries seated within their central spheres of power. The leaders of the Red and White Nations mind our presence. They claim sociopathic eyes, and bear a malevolent taste for the darkening wick of livid silence and unrighteous judgment.

Our moment passes. The eyes of our current leader from America's northernmost lands tear, heaving with the burdens of a deep shame. Eyes curling under, his heartbeats pulsing his entire flesh of white, flaming anger. His throat, rung in fear, is tied with deviant perfection in a self-important red knot. Yet born of compassion, we stir past, undecieved by his show of destructive emotion, and on, to lead a way towards a better future, of gentle humility and thoughtful pace.

Bristling with inborn purpose, at once our trio of the endangered living disbands. Our knowledge of the land tested, the Seers emerge.

As ghosts asleep, spectral in haunting jungles, at home in the phantom light of a dense, forested canopy, they wake, first to our scent. Then, instantaneously, the flat crunch of a skeleton pierces the chilling air. The jaw of a big cat, prehistoric lynxes, tigers of the High North, fanged and cold with searing, yellow eyes, closes again. The mythical deer is long devoured.

I smell heart. Flesh pours a continuous stream of hot blood nearby. My fearing hand graces the surface of a puddle, its cooling plasma. I am one among the hunted, under the glow of the moon. I intuit southward. Adrenaline seethes.

Peering into the pitch flood of night, I stumble and curse. They say a tiger sees a man countless times before the first hint of their presence.

"Had their fill?" I wonder, overwhelmed with the emotive stress of emergent trauma, blistering from inside.

And it scythes my torso, felt split nearly in two, as a crushed ember spewing unseen flares of heat and ash. Wounded, immobilized, my dilating pupils scan the dark wood with an unfocused, eyeless rush of mortality.

In the burn of a single firefly, the moon peaks in the featureless sky. I can see, smell, and taste the white fur of deathly feline gore. The earth rumbles with each footstep, as the oncoming, clawed pads fill my nerves with lungs of raw energy.

Moved with the thundering mammalian outburst of muscular flight, a single punch of stolen force, intervention of the High One. A cat's hipbone runs straight through its blooded organs of night and flesh.

Tangled with auspicious mystery, I am flattened, mourning a proud death, in a sudden rasp, and rattle off a whispering cry. I reach the end of the forest canopy floor.

An opening, under stars of mountains and a wealth of ears, insects roar in the funnel of a circular plain. Whirlwinds and dew sneak into my ears like the healing rain of an exiled land, birthing renewed into an Earth of spring.

I wade through the sweet water of an alpine marsh, distant clouds ashore on the far horizon move like celestial birds. Light rain begins to fall, shining through incandescent rays of sunshine, refracting like broken glass over ruddy mirrors.

Daylight Herbs

Awake, by my own breath, his presence is as light as light itself.

“Herbsman!” I call out, racing, ecstatic.

Bearded, aglow with holy eyes, smiling wide as the mountain range afar. His words are a waterfall, cleansing and purifying constantly, with the movement of natures’ mineral lifeblood.

We sit in a glade, I in the deep meadow, and he over a gathering of lime. Emerald and olive-shaded bushes of growing herbs reach towards his light, and appear to lengthen at his every movement, touch and word. So do I.

“In the morning, eat of the red corn,” says he, Herbsman.

An ear of red corn emerges with the pleasure of an offering, gift or invocation from the mouth of a ground and tongue of a seed. One kernel consumed, and my flesh is lighter by the bread of fulfillment.

All my wishes suddenly feel humbled with regard to the cyclical, infinite water that flows from and to the life of all.

Cleansed, opened, revived, moved and lifted, I listen, intent with respect.

“At night, eat of the white corn,” he continues.

The morning eye of fire stares into my forehead. It is now barely above the horizon. I see a vision of the white corn in my mind’s eye, a vision unknown on Earth.

The Herbsman continues to pour the clear-souled water of natural wisdom through the mystic wine of our newfound musical friendship. Each and every pour is spirited by our subtlest of movements and faintest of messages invoked, intoned, conveyed with brevity, clarity, unity.

The Herbsmans’ voices soothe, mend, teaching of Water, the element, the Creation of Life in all of its varying forms, spawned of formless ways given to the mythical storytelling of the wise.

He teaches about how to purify one’s self through knowledge and action, and to reason by sight, how seeing and presence is unanimous in action. His pedagogy demands recognition for every portion of ground on which one sits, as the Ground of All Being.

In earnest repose, he guides my mind as a rudder, and we sail, as through the passing lives of every last, and first Creation.

In earthly tradition, the Herbsman is simply known as the Old Man.

The Old Man is believed to have once spoken, "Evolution is the pure law of conscience."

A vision of wisdom is sent from the Old Ones by ways of dreaming. An ancient proverb comes to mind: *Where the river is deepest, it makes the least noise.*

Meeting with the Mother of Earth

The rainforest breathes of a drear and lush death. The ashen phoenix is all too quiet in the underbrush of dying embers. I see the elderly earth breathe a hot ash of distrust and shame, the blood of broken faith runs as from a bone broken clean from the hip. Earth brews a harsh truth, of fallen creation, yearning to return to skyward dust.

A spiritual lament turns and writhes like the roots of an upturned tree, cracking and spewing, breaking and rattling toward the final call of reconciliation. I mourn for beings of ground and light. And of my throat, a burning rush of silence, the ignorant flicks of pain resound, shot through the echo chamber of an empty heart. I see through the body, holed with holy flesh, flecked with wounds of impalement and rape.

Lungs, tethered to each branch, as I see, soot-blackened, flushed with discolor and the pangs of mortal addiction. Now, every branch leaved and flowered with lungs of inanimate flesh, long dead and yet left, not scavenged, to petrify, as if the air itself were evading decomposition and decay. Time orbits in the long yawn of solitude.

The more motionless I become, the more the world swirls and the louder the dead sigh their long heaving sigh of memories remorseful and melancholic. As each uncolored tree cowers, lowering into graves of roots from where they came, the thinning forest reveals a final stand.

A wild trunk, gnarled with the character of age, endures as a thick mark of life ahead. Its neighbor, a trunk straight and smooth, glimmers under the swarming azure. Yet not a single leaf of green rustles in the faraway vale. Pink, earthy and glowing with a bloody, purple pulse, a healthy lung of earthly flesh, as an undiscovered bloom of willow breathes out the purest air.

I emerge from the subterranean byways and thoroughfares of New York, City of Time and Sleepless Courage, Island of All That Is on the shores of America's worldwide seduction of trust, misplaced. Earth howls with tramcars funneling like the charnel trains that veer off and into the silent womb of industry. I walk, heavy with longing, through the unsteady street-side core.

A tidy man notices my ponderous walk, and gifts advice. "To the cafes and hearts," he moans, irascible with derelict gravity.

So, into the consumption I fade with stories of words, with the blank gush of pages unruffled by eyeing hands that stop and see. Yet, the nonplussed wires of change dissipate in the hammered trespass of independence and freedom. I, artist of days and nights spent afraid of death, linger in wallowing holes of

unmentionable fortuity as the stares of reason and being break open the head of belonging.

I cower, defeated by the dark, abysmal aftermath of slavery. The unwelcoming hordes brush past through fissures of smiles and skeletal eyes that careen past my deepest trenches. Wavering in the thinning light, I angle around a bent door. The quality of my flesh sinks and curdles with undiminished emotion, with unparalleled fear. I move my hand to the knob, and it opens to opacity, pitch as the darkest matter of universal night. And in I walk, careful to the point of oblivion.

A soundless and gentle presence invites, lowering my knees to the imprisoned, peopled earth. I move with a silenced throaty pause of recognition. Before me sits an extended family of First Nations from the Great West: a lost band of several peoples. Condemned to an underground home, they offer a homely cup of sweet-grass tea. At first they sip, steeped in incredulity, my tongue quakes to repose.

I whisper, "Thank you, Creator."

They sit over a blanketed floor. Opening her palm, reddened and browned by the ruddy dearth of light, an elderly woman offers a gift from the People. Her smile and dress is more brilliant than the gift of sunlight. She hands a wooden sculpture, the body of an ancient elder, with eagle feathers, bundle and headdress feathers, all draped in the glory of the Buffalo.

Emerging again from the subterranean underpass, like waking with the memory of a dream, once so displaced with sorrow, now right with order and mind. I eagerly and joyfully share the vision of a totem, materialized in the palm of my hand as a brilliant sculpture, a wish-fulfilling boon from the People of the Creator.

And aboveground, even in the lush awe of the sun, isolated fragments of individuals and nations bleed for the ignorance that places them above the First People who must bear the deathly drowning of the human heart.

Through clouding eyes, behind opaque suits and flushed skin, they do not see the wooden holy man. Widely ignored, I return to Native shelter.

"Will I rise again," I ask the long-risen sky, alone, with a totem hand, standing in the midst of such delusion and cruelty as is rampant on the surface.

The uncivilized wade in the laughter of innocence and fame. All the while, the First Peoples dive deeper into the inhumane, eternal retreat from incessant war, while the paradigms of hate move ashore with quickened pace, the First Peoples

burrow, entrenched ever more in the quicksand of fate. And the wooden man cries, as my palm rests on the burying earth.

“What smells?” he thinks, as I look at his nose and eyes, deeply carved and furrowing. “What is remembered?” I hear him ask, inquisitively humorous, in the palm of the world.

I place the back of my hand under my tingling nostrils, and open my mouth to breathe ever so lightly. I feel his thoughts writhe like a cold snake. My bedded flesh, wrapped in fallen hair, sullies the unwashed blanket coiled around my nude body.

Eyes are crossed. Noses blocked.

I step barefoot over the austere, carpeted floor, civilly, in line. The hotelier smiles in keeping with the workaday service manner of predictable and positive personality. My own face mirrors emptiness.

“Next,” he says, as I bloom, overfull with gold coins.
Prosperity is a mark of weight and valor.

“Be patient,” I hear.

Outside above, the Earth shrinks under dim folds of disgust. Masculinity is disguised behind vanity, poverty, artifice and loss. Nature spins with fire and bones, fleshed with greed and concrete paralysis. The wading gush of darkening shadows flood the lobby garden.

I watch the tramcar through the polished windows running towards misbegotten wards. Through the open windows, the hands of commuters flounder, as over the blue flames of urban ruin. Silence grounds, but for the rumbling dirge of the railway, clattering like a mad skeleton, of deadly fear. A ghastly presence, my reflection, I turn.

Of large girth, unknown terror unseen, unheard, the unassuming weight of an unreal body: HER. A heavy-set African woman of eyes, sitting, a rock entrenched in my spectral pallor. Looking through her, I see the mutual end of the oceanic reflection that is her as she sits unmoving, staring, stunning.

Hitting through to rock bottom, as the ocean-floor seethes with the volcanic murder of all that rests atop the ground of life, I see through all-intensifying fear, that unknowing. There is a fear beyond the nerve, beyond the knock of bones, and the bristle of hair. I have seen Her, and vanished before a breath.

American Zion

“Where are we?” I wonder, lightly impressed by the intrigue of a new thought. “Israel? No. America? Not exactly. We are in Zion.”

Desolate ski hills are lush in summer, verdant with pine undergrowth. In an open electrical tower ski lane, gargantuan flags billow to postcolonial independence. A park ranger sights us. I escape solo, just barely through a bushy thicket.

Trailing beside a river’s edge, where I once ogled two young lovers, naked in a riverside hammock, the sky burns with the beautiful bounty of original sin multiplying infinitely at every touch, sight, sound, smell and taste of spirit.

The racket of espionage flutters in the newspaper wind. I heave a sigh, bitter with unrest. Nightfall, the shattered windows and shades of old Brooklyn stare with criminal rites. Anger seethes from the manhole pores of the upended city. A ruinous dearth of humanity bleeds from my open-strung heart down the spinal chords of a silent song: my jungle cage, television home, blinking, flickering, there!

A street-corner thief is drunk, with rapist eyes. He stares at my concrete, my stone, and the ground under my roofed possessions. Silence groans with inner loathing, like a brooding cancer unknown, deep in the marrow.

So, morning, we rise with the tide and board a ship set with haste. A vacant room, splotched with gruel. Once, we swung with the churning waves, a smiling rat-spawned day. And the worst was over.

America far behind, Zion of mind and heart derided in a momentary pause, to reflect on the Old World border of genocidal rampage, the forgotten wick, unlit on this Sabbath morning.

Two friends, we meet and disappear within a schizophrenic race, to voyage. Evening fires glow soft with candlelight. Tattooed mistresses with raised skin, beset with the tribal bond of white scars breathing from lungs rising and falling under the most intricately carved ribcages, visible in an electric blood-glow.

The monarchical captain is absent. Bewildered, the ship sinks like a dead man, flooding as with the inverted pressure of an oceanic ambiance bursting outwards, into the wooden vessel of sleep and need.

War-Exiled of the Earth

Barroom fade-out. The groveling aspiration of a few young guts feed on the fermented sting of a foreigner's every desire.

The walls steam and sweat to the touch of human skin, crowds meander and mingle in a scintillating core of one ruthless dance. The beat of bare feet on the wet soil engraves the trammled heart of night.

Washroom escapism. The narrow claustrophobia is deafening.

With a seed of empty remorse, I trudge backwards, to scale the heights of misdirection. And a friendly face peers through the swinging doorway. A woman more beautiful and rousing than dawn glides back, and out of sight, dispassionately.

I wade through swinging bodies back to a table. Friends eye my every movement with a gentle regard for the creative word, emanating like sunlight from my chest.

I am a cross-legged aesthetic seeing visions of outer space, warmed, basking in tongues entangled. A live dance, unceremonious and profane, flooding the ceiling with the reverberations of bass and rhyme.

Next morning, the cemetery air is thick with warning. Veteran grave markers stretch 3,000 deep down a coursing hill, steep with shadow and disbelief. Anger mounts like an unchallenged breeze on the face of the beloved.

And I starve for words of remembrance and the final end to the deep finishing hate that swarms and seethes in our bones like the lost blood of too many young men and women. The preeminent Allied emissaries of WWII guide us along. Roosevelt, Patton, Eisenhower, all emerge from the ground of the lain. And lastly Churchill and Stalin smoke irreverently against the darkening horizon.

Rising from a grave bed, the sparse, delicate grass wakes with a liberated air at his emergence. The spirit of an unknown soldier guides a small tour through the narrow passage between the blinding dizzy-spell of white crosses.

After reading the bare bones epitaph of one fallen, slain by the brutal, forsaken, we can almost hear the utter ignorance of speed, metal and waste. Scanning over a generic war axiom, he says with spitting disdain: *There is no freedom on this earth, because we die, because we are mortal, freedom is a dream within a dream.*

“Freedom is a tear in the cry of eternity,” I muse angrily to myself, belligerent and conflicted by the repressions of civil ignorance.

Struggling lone uphill through the barren rifts and scarred desertification of Zion, New Judea, I look over an outcrop towards what appears as Galilee, in America. Scanning feline eyes growl and hiss in the unkind wilderness of the famed passage to divine promise.

Yet, here where the last suicidal stand of tradition was still withheld behind the Roman tide of enslavement, I grapple. The rocky earth tumbles with rolling quakes, as an avalanche of boulders careens beyond a nearby patch of scree. The earth teems with deadly fate, as I climb on, and reach the summit of sacred space.

Through a framed window, hanging surreally in the dry air, I see a stone-bedded homely abode of five rabbis, all colored with simplicity and humor. They mutter under bearded visages, and meander from home to a day's work in the predawn night. I, a furtive wraith, clandestine in the dim corner, emerge to observe the floor-set scribes and their flowing fountain of wise austerity.

The dusty air breathes a sanctity unknown to most, yet from the window a flicker of artificial light breaches the soup of mind with Maras of temptation, apparitions of pure femininity, flaunting shadowy tints of flesh. I trudge outside, unencumbered by the pleasures of the intoxicating sights. We are still at war.

The direction of sight is clear. The enemy is known, and our targets destructible. The air is thinning of passion and feeling, to make way for hate. The true victim in this war is Earth. The all-out industrial fire has spurred on the makers of enmity under a veil of infinite resource. Brothers, sons and fathers bleed for the ground on which they are laid to rest. The backdrop is far-reaching.

“Is there a sense of humor to this war?” I ask anyone who will listen, and no one responds. Though, I do hear laughter, and not mocking sneers, but true pleasure.

“Why do you laugh?” I ask the laughter, unknowing of names, faces, not even a trace of presence, except for the ceaseless, warm, and inviting chuckle of a small and innocent gathering.

And when I walk towards the sound, silence descends absolutely.

Foregrounds blur into modernity, as a civilian is murdered, shot in the back, running towards us.

“Iraq is not Germany,” I remember telling myself.

The measure of civilian and professional armies are of rough and indiscernible dualities. The cold smoke of hate becomes the backwash of sanity as soldiers and men secrete emotional pain into the willful triggers of deadly remorse.

I, a photographer of the heart, capture the minutiae of existence full-born in the surviving families of Earth-bred singularity. Modern natives, the indigenous,

bold eyes of people, now the last grave on which unmarked praise still glorifies the vanity of war and power.

Massive trucks crack and sputter past me, with so much gun, bomb and shell materiel that my knees weigh fierce into the concrete below. Rushing past, soldiers reveal faces of bleary sweat and stinging tears. Flowing from a smiling façade of youth, their graying eyes grow cold with fate. My lens of ink is unseen.

“We declared war on Earth in WWII,” I think, uninhibited by a constant failed dialogue with the unseen many.

“The invasion of Iraq later granted us full impunity,” I lecture on, unheard. “Here, we commit the last atrocity against the only lasting connection humankind might instill from Earth to the mass of peoples born and bred of global war.”

They line up, shaman to farmer, hunter to midwife, storyteller to seer, a community of global wisdom, attuned to the lightness of being, as in the creation stories of practical love. And in their firing squad, they choose to sit, meditating on the gun-barrel of unsightly loss: here. The drifting eyes of hate and need merge.

Shadows hang with somber repose. My beloved childhood home is now empty. And I’ve been away far too long. The dust has settled. The dining table is hollow with a loveless ardor. I can inhale the loss; the forgotten wealth of life lived once for each other now separated by nightfall and age.

A middle-aged man in a black leather jacket stands outside our once freshly painted front door, waiting. I’m hooked, outwardly. The sky calls me from the dank lament of an abandoned house now friendly to no one except for wraiths of Death and Time.

“Who is the middle-aged man?” I ask myself. I know him well, as I’ve known myself reflected in the old Western visage of distempered exile.

I mount a bicycle along the cracked sidewalk curb. A dilapidated car, in the model once owned by my centenarian grandfather, clanks and sputters downwind.

“Is that my brother at the helm of a rusted, malign vehicle?” I feel my tongue seize, as my brain is gripped with nerves.

I coast, downhill, toward the amber, still sunless crepuscules of dawn. I imagine the mysterious middle-aged man at our door seated blankly on the backseat of my bicycle. Like a burden to its beast, I carry his apathetic and listless indifference throughout the expansive elaborations of my most grandiose ambitions.

Our minds, uniting, we cycle beyond the Pacific horizon.

The map of Asia opens with the clarity of a skyline on a cloudless day. Traversing the backcountry of Vietnam, land of loves lost and lost lives, I veer through incandescent bogs and sunbaked farmland. Natural beauty unending, my eyes turn inward, to visions of aspiration and wonder.

We cycle onward, through the continent to Europe, across Mongolia and the bleary maw of central Asia. I carry the burden of age, of settlement, of thought. Silenced, my mind is repressed with a hidden name.

Southern Refuge

Breathtaking. Hot night. Empty dark dreams, of memory. Narrow canals, irrigation trenches in the backyard under a pitch-black sky, a starless new moon. The seizure of domesticity, fencing, and blinds besiege the land, from the beginning of the horizon to where the Earth turns. A house cat flits through the mud with a silent scuff of dusty soil.

The sky clears like a strong exhale, and the ground takes formless cover from the starless sky above. I drift away from a mind to a life as inert as the swift welcome of death. A chase begins, until I grab the fickle creature by its muzzle, and in the raw and ruddy brown earth, I tangle its fibrous backbone, cracking the living spine with the blunt edge of my wrist.

In the city, not far, a woman sets a stage with a sweeping introduction into the very originality of her one and only sound. In her impeccable garb, she is beautiful, in love with life. The public gushes with heart-sleeved pandering. The world is set like a magic carpet before her.

Her musical ambiance, the tone, is grandiose and emergent as the Jonah-swallowing fish of all-conceived breathtaking wonder. Her beginning is mindful, a worship of momentary repose, for the elemental truths to seduce all through her sonic dance of grace.

Worshipful room of sweat and lust, the emotive spring of music keeps us swinging to a joyful noise, the urban sound of pain alleviated before closed eyes, staring inward to hear the sight of the muses, invoked by a musician, hosts swelter mad before a small though dedicated crowd of movement.

And the headline group enunciates first notes with a strength unseen; the crowd has since escaped into the bleak, old night. A few straggling local friends stand by the stage, amused and apologetic. One song passes in the silent hollow, a space deemed fit for thousands reduced to pin-drop nothingness.

She continues ever on, without me. Frustrated by my own deviances, and in the backwash tunnel of personal failure, I triumph in disaster. The airs of isolation breathe with sad remorse; the regret of guilt itself takes over like an icy bath.

I strain over my broken instrument, and snap its neck in one fell swoop. Not even a ping from the cracked strings are heard in the overarching foment of fanatic bursts and swoons of delight as the mob breathes down the throat of a delicate, though steadfast love. I move to kiss her madly before the popular contagion.

The emptiness is as palpable as the heartless mind, rounding off shots into the murderous pangs of repeated history. The bitter angst of adolescence returns in the white noise of a flushed and ruthless voice.

The hot ground rumbles and quakes with burning trust; that a future still opens ahead. It is full and potent with renewed vigor, to wake again, and live the day from the start, even if our rise coincides with dusk.

A silent vision unearths our eternal belonging with grace, and the human community within, where the heart is still in its constant beating, in its rhythmic patience, attuned with a more sacred trust. We leave home, to taste the roots of the human soul.

Africa.

On a train through Sudan, a Nilotic companion eyes me with a piercing grin as we pass beyond Juba into the last independent nation on Earth: The New South. We have arrived at the hard-won home of Kush. His smile is buried deep within the pain of intergenerational loss, the hellfire of war still stings his reddening eyes as he tears up, the pictures of his innocent family smolders into the soil. The land speaks with his voice.

A number of tourists from Europe and America depart from the train stop, as we all exit. Arrivals march proudly through the gates of a recently built customs center.

Before I ready myself to stand up and follow the foreigner's line, I see the winking horror of rats, spiders and snakes twice the size of my face, gnawing at my brains in the middle of the first night. I've read such stories.

This is open house for the life-threatening insects and arachnids of the widely feared, infamous sub-Saharan ecology. Visitors are sold everything preventive to protect human flesh from the horrors of foreign wilderness. Before stepping foot on the soil, already divided by natural threats and human welcomes, we can almost feel the blood-torched burial grounds of a still cold reconciliation between tribes and kin.

"Here is the easiest place to kill," a Sudanese man told me in the Mother of the World, where he had taken refuge, before I had even thought of witnessing the New South with my eyes.

The first thing I see on the other side is a smile, wide and innocent as the all-embracing horizon. I heave a sigh of relief as other Westerners depart into the folds of pyramidal shopping envies and freewheeling nature photography.

Journeying on, to the heart of the people, my friend is ever stoic, silent, basking in the wonders of their new nation in its infancy. Victorious after so many

losses, after so many needless ends, there is at least one fresh start to be had, and one that all can have a part in. At least, that is the idea.

Concrete residential towers spring up almost before my eyes, fresh paint lingers and drips throughout the dry stinging horizon of African sun. Men work diligently, with the force of triumph, erecting monumental stone structures, for future generations to thrive, for the plentiful, abundant optimism of the future.

The complexes are almost identical to the substandard housing infrastructure in the suburbs of Al-Bustan; wherefrom many have returned home as once-neglected refugees now with a determined hand, to have a proud say in a New African society. Many wear sun-deflecting head coverings, woven with traditional scarlet fabric and ancient coins. Few women are visible.

We drive on, deeper into the South. The farther we go, the fresher the earth, the barer the optimism, the more innocent the smiles, the louder and sincerer the welcoming. The air is full of potential. The energy is warm, and the harshness that once thrived now sees a chance of dwindling beneath the pulsing chests of hard work. Friendship grows into the sunlight now flooding our vehicle. The inimitable human spirit washes us all clean of fear.

Thunderclaps and Sleeping Soldiers

My blanket drifts up into sky, its multicolored fabric bleeds scarlet and olive into the nearing front of storm clouds gathering. The wind-whipped fabrics touch and scatter the hard-packed ground. Without a ceiling, the walls of my mind, all that I wish for and need, empty into the grandiose firmament.

The inborn drug of sleep has yet to bear new visions, fruitful and enduring. I wake to the numbing air, as on a mountain summit. Thunder resonates in delicate cyclones. As I rise, a storm pierces the earth like the overgrown fingernails of Zeus, a crepuscular storm, breathing in an unwelcome morning, filled with the signs of a new god.

And the machines of war rape our Earth. As Nazi terror sweeps against the witch's broom through the countless, destroyed Jewish homes of Europe, my family is strangled. We are sucked clean through the medical tubes of an astral fire as hot as the serrated knives of torture.

I escape.

To Russia, I follow the new pages of an earnest heart. Directions swarm as the buzzing of toxic insects, and my rivals are blended as fruit sap in the teeth of metallic pincers. In the heart of St. Petersburg, I am free; yet full with a dark heart. The Earth trembles and fades each day with a transparent rush of nostalgia. I wish and writhe for the beating hearts of my beloved mother and father, sisters and brothers.

Wedding feasts and blind bliss, how we gorged on the salt of the seven seas with triumphant abandon. Every day, there was a moment of repose. We knew the day might come, when all would be rent, cleansed by the impotent flood of mad war.

“Should I wander further astray, eastward to the cold forest sands of Siberia, or Westward, to the commercial forge of America, and sleep by the pill of forgetfulness?” always, I asked myself, repeatedly, every night and every morning, like the praying of a religious fanatic. “Lost again, if found anew, will I be recognized?”

I travel eastward towards the desolate earth, and find matchless beauty in the serene quiet of petrified earth. The resonance of death lingers like a gentle breeze.

The Elder's Advice

I walk past a prison. The air is humid. I can smell salt and chlorine. I am barefoot. I bend over, to look through stone latticework.

“Where am I? Is this some dismal gymnasium? A barren bathhouse?” I search, my mind blank with a demanding curiosity, involuntary and uncomfortable.

“Why must I always know where I am exactly?” I question my thoughts, and have long since abandoned belief in what I see.

There are peers, young men and women my age, cleaning a concrete prison campground. They wear radioactive protection, in orange suits, gas-masked.

I dart across the road. Barefoot, my feet sink unaware into the freezing water runoff of the prison cleanup. My feet are numb as I walk over a grassy knoll on my way to an untended, makeshift gas station.

The clear sky is warming. The gas station is near, and yet I can't seem to get anywhere close. My torso is overheating, and my feet are so frozen I can barely stand.

“Apocalypse! Apocalypse! We are at bay!” A man shouts prophecies from an indistinct position beyond any sense of a human field of vision.

Onlookers descend with a strange, bucolic attitude, their backs hanging low amid a festering crowd listening with eager intent. The surroundings are emptying of people, the streets are devoid of cars and the sidewalks are full of insane humanity.

Days then passed in an unnamed town, hiding out, traumatized, drowning in a foreign, severely inhospitable mentality. I emerge from my apartment, bewildered by the blaring sky.

"Fuck you!" I scream at a random man, desperate for recognition, even if disagreeable enough to earn a quick death.

At once, an elderly lady screams back at me, "Fuck you!"

I stare at a blinding yellow ring on her finger, absolutely dumbstruck, grinning with bewilderment. I return to the streetscape under my apartment building to sit with a homeless man on his bed of burning fabric.

I stare out into the heavy urban landscape, deadened by the silence of a lifeless futility creeping into the human domain from the belligerent rage of Earth.

“Is it really Her final hour?” I ask the man, half-drunk, and drooling, my brains slowly wash to the local pace.

Talk of a global calamity only snowballs in the most provincial outcroppings of Western civilization. “This place got the wrong end of the stick of

globalization,” I say to the man, hopelessly provoking thought. His silence is a deadpan affirmative to the all-consuming and over-rationalizing influences of the zeitgeist.

The sky opens my eyes to the inimitable beyond. The solstice night tempts our minds away into the cold dogmas of apocalyptic paranoia. And then, it shifts. The starlight bends in a waking instant. I see through the unmoving universe, to an orbital flux in the atmosphere itself.

“Has our planet moved off course?” I ask, after hours have passed, and the homeless drink has long evaporated to its remaining, invaluable drops. The man snores, and I am given to strange abstractions that twist and skew my very sensation of the physical universe.

I feel as the only one, risen up to unparalleled sight. As a shifty character in *The Little Prince*, I inhabit my own planet, a sole entity, unable to move from its narrowing horizon. But my planet moves, and now, as the cold gathers, our sun appears more and more distant. I traverse the edge of the darkening atmosphere.

I see into night, a desert. Young boys play soccer amid ancient ruins. An old man enters the edge of the nearing urban horizon from a blasted street. It is a meeting of the ancient and the modern. We lament. A dying sun assumes its last galactic orbit.

He is silent and still as stone. His face a petrified grey, stares blankly into an off-white wall. His mind has long gone, and yet his body remains. A rodent gnaws into his raw skin. Dirt falls from his brittle hair.

The animal dies before my eyes.

I take a lover. I met her rushing ahead into a rigid cube of wooden frames and metal housing. I was petrified. Rusting chains fell over the marginal impasse of domestic space. The outdoor heavens collapsed over her head.

Brilliant orange, like a tiger’s growling laughter, churned inside, and with the insatiable greed of bestial hunger. I saw to engulf her under the massive wingspan of a jungle predator. We submitted to its life, its death, agog with passionate surrender.

We have since ascended by an elevator fit for a small crowd, a luxurious human compartment, to a climax of highs, our destination.

The levers on the side of the elevator door are reminiscent of a plane cockpit. With a hefty forward heave, a lady initiates our ascent. The ground of Earth is suddenly imbued with an all-pervasive light.

The doorstep to the metallic behemoth of elevation is now absent of life. Inside, a group of ghost-eyed women welcome us with open smiles.

As I step inside, I am filled with anxiety. “Have I prepared myself for life at such a height?” I doubted; my mind skewed by the well-fanned flames of young passion.

Huddled in a corner, I am overcome by mortal fear. The elevator has stopped rising, it is still and open.

Hours? Days? Years?

Within the space of a moment, as fleeting as any, I had nearly gone blind, deaf and nearly fainted, ineffably astonished. I realize I am weak.

I can barely look out into the world, whatever world lies beyond at this elevation. The women are all machine-faced, and continue smiling with unsettling clone-like smirks. I need to descend. This is not my stop. My brain and face go brittle with overstimulation. Dense light pours in through the walls, and it's overwhelming. Suddenly, I can't breathe. I am stunned.

Mysteriously, I descend. This is ground level. I return in the blink of an eye. Looking over my shoulder, I again see the polished, elevator doorway. Professional stewardesses, hoteliers and waitresses welcome with inhuman smiles, pasted over like ice sculptures under vacant eyes.

“Do I board again?” I ask myself, whispering desperately, unable to hold on to a thought of reason. “Will I rise again? Or, descend?”

“When will I return to the world?” I question, and am led on by pure intuition.

I am a child in the street markets of Teotihuacan, Birthplace of the Gods, and the grand bazaars of Al-Qahira, the Irresistible. I brush past the drumming troubadours of Romany, listen to the laments of the flâneurs of Andalusia.

The air is wild, and my light coat loose. As I glide in and out of various merchants and their wares, I grab a handful of corn, pocket a cookie, and steal away with a *garbanzo*-spread wrap of bread, to enjoy under the warm sun.

The subtle comedies of theft and its freedoms beckon a cause bursting within me. I am full with need. How the essence of life is too often taken away!” I cry, pitifully as a sharp whispering into my quivering hands. “The fair of justice and the game of life!”

Still, I scarf down my unearned grub, jubilant, and return for more.

Downtown. After hours. I break into a mall for bakers, tailors, jewelers and booksellers. It is a winter night in the American Midwest. The streets are longingly dim, frightfully empty.

I stand. I wait. A companion? A bus? Nothing. No one.

Alone, my eyes scan the exit, a façade of glass doorways. I am nostalgic with memories of friendship. I can still sense the past through every organ of feeling. Restful, at last I consider my absolute solitude. Two sex workers saunter, bored, and look at me from across the street. They seemed to have closed in out of nowhere. After a moment's ignoring, I begin to hear curiosity speak inside me.

“How much?” I ask, imploringly. “500 dollars,” she says, coyly.
“I don't have it.” I respond drily.

I can hear past lovers step through the halls behind us, their heels echoing along the empty mall, all ambient, all background noise. There was the one, the musician.

I imagined her, how she would set her instrument close by, a fixture of the local streetscape, and begin to play. Her notes still fill the air for the rare, acutely aware listener. I hear them, drifting, flying, awake. Her intuitive body and subtle spirit call me onward from the fantastic night, to solitude.

Once distant, the sting of the marshland rushes bruise and cut my exposed soles while tangling my toes in knots of rising moisture. The earth perspires with enduring anxiety under these blank skies. Emitting the hot sweat of gaseous vents through the decaying roots and bacterial soil, I trudge.

On the horizon, our large city is burnt to ash. They say it all began with the conflagration of a movie theatre, before the plane crash that split our small city in two. Massive fires sprawled. Not a soul survived.

The earth feels hollowed by the inconceivable scale of human death, its cries caged by a depopulated infrastructure. All of life grows fainter, like a lingering, throaty rattle. The untended decay of human bodies now rises as from the strength of grasses rooted in the damp, dank shifting ground.

“Above our heads,” he said, dramatizing the unspeakable and incomprehensible tragedies. “A plane once spewed hot trails of ash.”

“They say a man among us loaded a rocket, and stung the plane through its side,” the man seemed to take pleasure in his reenactment, though he would not tell of where he had been during that day of judgment, not to city inhabitants, and least of all to visitors.

“I watched as the behemoth machine was incinerated, mostly while the plane was still in mid-air, crumbling with a haunting and delicate rush through the death-consuming land,” he says shakily, as his entire being appears to fade into silence.

I am surrounded by homicidal emotion, at once in the horizon, while within the breast of the alive. The air is heavy with fate.

An old woman sits languorous outside in the rural air. Her excessive bodyweight slumps over an oak stump, with the heaping fatigue of an overworked heart. Yet, in her eye, there is a glint of sound reason, a harmonious vocation to authenticity. I stop, for a moment, to share a few words with the curious and unseemly woman.

Almost instantly, I am overfilled with sympathy at hearing the beginning to her life story. That night I run amuck, looking for a gift. In my nervous frustration, I dust off a morning flower and walk back to her.

As I step cautiously through the field, a man a few years my elder feels he must give me a word of advice.

“There is no sense in your sympathy,” he affixes his language to my throat like the strangling inexorability of truth. “I’ve heard too many racial slurs from the mouths of your likening. You’d like to give back, and yet you cry on a pedestal,” he musters an incendiary rage, of darkening complexion under the flickering cloud-shorn moon

“How many times have I heard your story: ‘We are related, so I can empathize’,” he continues unalloyed. “And when you speak of G-d, I am utterly disgusted.”

The Whirling Earth

She slips in through the doorway while I lay in bed, listening to the air.
“Who?” I wonder, imagining the presence of a woman, one close to me.
“Is she grandma? A lover?” I daydream. Another day. Another visit.
And then, again, I hear what sounds like her. Though, who she is I can’t tell.
“Whose footsteps make noise like that?” I say, audibly, looking at the ceiling, listening to the door.

She enters. I feel the weight and lightness of her body, nearing with an uncanny similarity to every woman I’ve ever known. She moves like a resurrected ancestor, as I’d imagine Eve herself might. The amalgamated resemblance to all-known femininity is flat bizarre. She is the everywoman.

Light music floors my eardrum through a gentle line of breath. A voice issues throughout the apartment of dead morning air.

She is memory, alive. And when I turn my head to her, she is not there. She is nowhere.

I wake to the glory of my humble loft, couched in the warm light of a restful morning. My friend visits while I am still in bed.

Apologetic, he respects my unconventional life, my abnormal, off-the-clock schedule. He gifts seasonal greetings under the bold light of a sparkling, pagan interior decoration.

We sit together. There is freedom in the simplicity of being up and awake for the sun and its glowing gaze.

The room is just cool enough, comfortable for the body, like the thoughtless choice to wear soft, wooly over-garments. My friend begins to recite the melody of a waltz, for accompaniment on guitar. With heavenly beckoning, his elusive face points at the brown stand of Indonesian wood in the corner, my acoustic guitar. I repeat the melody, as it glides effortlessly on the airy surface of my mind.

Forests of brain open with pantomime expressionism. The canvas is blank. We stare, of an ancient rivalry, to whiplash a brush of paint across the rough, splotchy face of our spontaneous collaboration. A stare ensues. Our eyes lock under a dark cloud of empty highs and lonely madnesses. Pastel cubism intermingles with pointillist ink.

Our minds snatch and hiss at the dizzying array of subdued pigments, hints of some unseen color. It is group inspiration, retching from the distended bowels of two fiercely separate artists, transformed by the wastes and excesses of our shared society. And in a moment of collective zeal, aggression holds the creative fire of

my murdering hand. I impale the throat of my fellow artist, friend and comrade with an ink brush.

Our painting is finished. Our art begins.

A gargantuan supply of Spanish rice, washed in a tantalizing array of chilies and spices galore, wades in a fine cream sauce. A team of cooks works with exceptional efficiency in an open kitchen. The dining area has a posh nightlife design. Smoke wafts among whisky inhalations in the metropolitan air.

As I stare into the blaring kitchen lights from the dim seating area, I notice a cook saunter over to a telephone on the wall. His white frock is stained with stout culinary effort. Taking another sip from my snifter, eyeing a fantastic belle at the table across from me, the dining lights suddenly dim to our uncomfortable obscurity. The kitchen light glares out over the tables with the stillness of an all-too-noticeable silence.

Everyone is motionless.

My blundering eyes survey the room anxiously. The cook stands at the phone. His reflective white frock glows with a brutal intensity, penetrating the room of fearful eyes. His mouth opens, and emits a breath so hot I can nearly feel him from across the room.

In a pour of blood, his eyes become two open holes. The man falls. I can see his frock begin to stain red. Crawling along the open floor, his body is steaming. He unbuttons his cook's clothing in front of a petrified room. His chest pours out with ashen blood, a red so crimson it floods my eyes with a blinding hue. In my mind, I kneel to help him. I sit, frozen. All realize the man will soon die. And watch.

One cook slowly meanders over to the phone, shakily dialing emergency. In a last gruesome attempt to breathe, the man on the floor has almost completely undressed himself. Swelling with heat, blood pours from his chest and mouth. Staring at me with empty, soulless eyes. I faint.

When I get up, I walk into the kitchen room, through the deafening silence, thick as swampland. I feel the presence of sheer evil at my side. Looking down, blood pours delicately from a soft wound at my lower torso. The ghost of mortality blinds my nerves as my eyes fog with madness.

I look at my reflection in a steel knife, and see the mean abusers, the ignorant fiends of my past. The twist of nerves culminates in the sensation of a shot, straight through the gut, though strangely painless as the water of my eyes bleeds visions into an all-too-wakeful, spiritual death.

The last thing I remembered was the initial feeling of impalement. Careening off a flight of concrete steps, I threw myself from the back entrance, unknowingly landing onto a metal pole. A bone cracked. When I came to, the city was dark.

An oak-hued, dreadlocked man burns down a hand-rolled cigarette in the shadows. I know from his countenance that to get up and walk would not quell the tension. As inconspicuously as possible, I move into the trembling night. The street lamps glow over empty streets. The absence is chilling, yet I feel a human presence both alarming and alluring.

As I make my way down to the riverbanks, the icy shoreline stares at me with two riveting eyes. The male stance is formidable and intimidating.

Fear strikes. The air breathes danger. I need to know why. As I hurry further on down the shoreline, a group of men whisper in the dark. I quickly smell the entrenched anger, the mortal struggle at hand. I flee.

On my way back home, I meet a friend who I knew long before the gruesome incident at the restaurant. He recounts his story, how he had broken his back in an accident that mirrored my own. I don't question the mortal coincidence as he went on to explain the unthinkable.

We had, so unknowingly, begun to live in a world so hostile to mankind that people were killing each other for the last crusts of bread, the last drops of water, the last feet to walk, the last fresh air to breathe, the last day to live. Under a common spell of hopeless disbelief, I soon learn how questions of truth, of doubt, and the act of catching a lie, are the privileged rationalizations of the well-fed.

I am imprisoned after voluntarily committing a crime. I needed the refuge. Before incarceration, I sat around a family circle. My grandfather was in his prime and all of his siblings were alive. That was the last time he put on his sailor cap.

A new fish smells sweetest the moment it's pulled out of the water. Metal bars are cold with forgetting. I cleaned, and cleaned. I was an environmentalist of the cell.

There is a consensus of suicide and the death of human dignity. A constant voice screams, "Survive!" It never loses breath, and only gains in volume with each day that passes, with each night left to dream. Everyone hears it in his own way.

Nightly, I steal a peek into my imagination, more and more convinced of the supreme reality of the subconscious. A shark-toothed man with pomade-drip hair and an orange shirt draws his own jaw on the concrete wall beside my bed. A thin,

black-haired teenager pierces his cellmate with his erect member in the neighboring cell. Even if I were passing straight through this corridor, blinded, deafened, senseless, it would be hell.

“This is my new home,” I said, over and over, religiously invoking the insuperable spirit of denial.

Released, I return to my grandfather’s abode. He’s dead now. That night, I was wide-awake in the sunless morning. A home empties like a toppled fishbowl. I had never seen it empty in my whole life, ever.

“What am I doing here?” I wondered, when the only presence is the lightless noise of my empty past.

Under opaque clouds, I sat for the open sky. A dark rain hovered in the misty atmosphere. The pressures of a battered mind fill my eyes with a salivating remorse. I’d since exiled myself from the sheltering storms of society. Downtowns and strip malls are empty to me even when crowded. Restless, I fill my mind with blank unease, ass wedged against the wintry pavement of a curb. Everywhere is of neglect and rage.

Words, when said, move acidly, I’m told. We’ve settled, us who were once wanderers. The night lingers. I wade in thoughts of a lonely walk. I kill time, staring into the light. And ask the unanswerable.

“What’s to come?” I begin. “What’s this noise?”

“Why do I do this?” I say after pausing for an indefinite time. After raising such questions, I feel light with surrender, enough to carry on.

I stand up, and think while placing one foot in front of the other.

“My life boils down to a question,” I resolve.

There he is. Introduced, “They call him the Poet.”

And his reception is warm. Mythologists and Dreamers convene at his feet, kissing his hands, to listen to his heartbeat, to the rhythm of all mediated by his grace.

His words ring true. They are clean and sound, and rivet through the temple of the mind. After his recitations, I cavort through the amassing crowd. Childhood friends move like artists, musicians, gamblers and comics in their smiling delight. The air is communal and warm. Friendships seep through our pores with a nourishing embrace of eyes.

Soon after witnessing the night’s impromptu musical performance of traveling chanteuses, I soon forget the street rumors, the apocalyptic forewarnings of global war and destitution. Unfamiliar feelings slip away like the light of the world.

Yet, in my waking night, before a small crowd of onlookers, I play along with my imagination. Manifest in the unconscious origination of dream reality, I swing to Near Eastern rhythms, towards a long lost lover's vibrating zither.

I am struck with emotive haste, as I feel the sway of awe form in my hands and heart, lightness filling the room with every new step. Then, I had a vision.

A Sufi dervish began whirling. The air moved in circular deftness to my rhythmic accompaniment. The dancing figment continued unalloyed before the uninitiated crowd of the living; those led to dream only in the deepest dark of night.

In the final act of the autonomous, public compulsion to be animate, alive and artistic, I see a woman in my midst, one so beautiful that I instantly feel her beside me, as the anima of my future, in the flesh. She wears long, black, braided hair. In a full red dress, her glory is not in the least dimmed by the freewheeling party ambiance.

Her airs are enlightened by the sound of the Egyptian drum, stunning with a mother-of-pearl inlay, as her musical heart exudes a percussive force beneath its tone. She is true bravura of heartened artistry.

A prepared acoustic piano delights at intermission. Uniquely arranged, a long Asian zither is lowered onto the body of piano strings. The display resonates with an indescribably original, abstract and worldly sound. Virtuoso players magnify the range of the keys and the zither strings simultaneously as the stage ignites with the mysterious vibes of new musical fusions.

The ensemble of musicians then ascends onstage to bend traditional instrumentation with a seamless creative harmony. All within earshot are equally sustained with fascination for the enigmatic ingenuity. It's the kind of music, before dancing, when everyone simply gawks in adoration, so impressed by the wild musicianship.

The lead singer steps out under a singular light as the rest of the stage dims and the concert hall empties. She is full-bodied, though mature in age, a classic beauty.

She stands in self-induced awe, portraying a reverence for music as magic for its ability to express love. I gaze at the stage, as its musicians remain immobile. Their colorful costume designs bespeak contemporary First Nations and Asiatic traditions. The light outshines my eyes, as I stagger off with a mind unfulfilled by the enduring silence.

We hide in triumphant bedrooms of young fear and coarse humor. I watch my late lover's eager tongue, to lick night's end with a tearful and silent dimming. With conscience and Earth's bounteous tune of motion, she stops, and looks at the drug-stung gang of princely wealth.

They pass around a newly synthesized batch of synthetic mescaline into the innocent palm of my blue-pill-eating lover.

She sings in the company of greedy minds, drinking in smiles with a worshipful torrent, a sleep-lust rush. Surprising myself, I knock the beady teardrop-shaped tablets from her hand and mind. She loses her nerve in an instant, venting steam from her superficial show of tough self-worth.

I draw her character near as dawn wades in the shore-sent horizon. I point outward, to an island off the lakebed, where, upstairs, cottage-lights roam out onto the moonlit waters. Our hearts faintly give way to the sun's scintillating swarm of heat and meaning.

We walk silent as the ether out onto shore, and for the first time I see her. She swims. I witness her smooth body gleam in the uncanny movements of her glowing integument as the inward celebration of her body meets the natural ways of our mammalian life. And I am on the shoreline still mulling over dusty ruminations.

We know the right road home, without minding the needful eyes of that ghastly rush that now lies strewn over the colonial walls of a midsummer cottage. Behind us is the human wilderness, alone with one natural hallucination.

The great fish of Samsara swims alongside her. Together, they display the physical intelligence of a mermaid, the mythical being who teaches true human pride. She knows, as I, of her newfound unity. On this plane of Earth, even the most potent seeds of life can dry out.

"We are already freed by the practice of our unique and artful sanity," she once said. And I have listened ever since.

The sky is open. The light blue of an atmospheric glow passes through my eyes with serene pleasure. Delicate moisture fills me with cool air. I exhale all the grandeur of my inspired seeing, each breath an offering to the immeasurable beauty above. Sky is a translucent goddess.

As I gaze forward, I see a man standing on the water. From afar, his face stills my eyeballs with a cosmic presence, of mystic flesh. Looking on, I remember a similar sight, as a painted vision. Then, in a moment's whisper, bison crash through the water. I realize the entire lake is barely a foot deep. The age-old vision is lost to my sight. The two holy buffalo steam through the water, upholding the human charm of a sibling rivalry. Among Earth-lovers, wild foodies and others alike, the sacred flesh of the plains opens to a revelation of the land's history.

Fire is the breath of unreason. I learn of violence spreading across the land. Bombs and machine tracks seed great pocks of holes throughout the earth. The clouds are dark with soot and anger. Lightning cracks through the smiles of

silenced memories. Families are swept away like dust. Fending off the soul-puncturing thunder of war, I am a fugitive, a forced exile from the bureaucratic maze of a police state.

The candles are now all reconstituted wax. Rainwater seems to boil and steam before it reaches its earthen ground. The sky is on fire and I need a new name. Through my impoverished window, a sanded frame of dirt, I see tanks spewing the ire of mankind.

Warmongers drive piercing insanity through the eyes of their followers. Innocents feel their way through back entrances and obsolete halls. Every last embassy is shaken to its foundation.

“Our earth will be interminably scarred,” I say, humbled by the repetitive histories and tragic beauties of our Earth-bound humanity. “We are equally victims and perpetrators of widespread ecological and domestic abuse.”

In a vile trench of near-death urgency, survivors climb out, and toward the sun of borderlands. Long having escaped from the eruptive core of our country’s bleeding disintegration, I wade in scintillating wetlands. Vibrant green pasture, lily pads and low-lying bogs hydrate contemplative sights. I can almost see beyond the untimely closure of history. Birds and insects sleep by day and night, and are at peace, like me, in a restful respite from our terminal wandering.

On a day like any other I gather with a group of fugitive outdoorsmen to traverse through a dense thicket of saltwater swamp. Natural-born leaders take the helm of a slow-moving canoe, shifting through the bulrush stands and mud vents emitting the hot gaseous fumes of abnormal decompositions.

A rattlesnake emerges from the rushes as we take to the blinding vegetation. Nearing the shore, ready to disembark for a land crawl, a comrade teases and taunts the rattlesnake head. The venomous hissing instills a deep-set fear straight through my eyes. The rattling forewarns virulent ire.

Reptilian awe paralyzes my arms and legs as I stare, petrified, watching the snake slither madly towards me. It darts and in a split-second latches onto my arm. My reaction is pure thought. Still as stone, I feel its fangs stick into my blood.

A Subtle Ocean, Crossed

What wide-eyed mission into the black waters of Atlantic night! I can almost see a childhood friend in the hazy stupor, emerging like a mirage in the fading, midnight blue. Remembering him, I see the forgotten sons of old Portugal, and her African soul, Cape Verde. I climb onto an unsteady raft.

“To what subterranean fort?” I call out to him, searchingly.

The growth of waves curls up and over drifting notions of our once common presence. We have since floated in opposite directions, waylaid by the wind-whipped tide and our inability to muster the strength to return. We separate out over the cloud-covered, ink dark sea.

Awake, I know that recurrent clarity, absolutely exposed on the open water. The blue sea is calm, yet there is a potent flux beneath the waves. Where there once stood a magnificent coral shallow, the ocean floor is now cleared. With its cerulean majesty, the surface of the water awakens conscious freedom, from the lowest of depths at the inertial core, to the highest of realms in the unspeakable silence that mirrors the brilliant sky.

Unafraid, I fall into the enfolding waves, and swim. Sharks are a passing memory. Fish and dolphin glide atop the water with a vital air, showing their fins with the gentility of a human smile. The water is cool, refreshing, and I swim eagerly, immersed in its healing, maternal body.

Innumerable anemones, dim at the ocean floor, float and dance in the scintillating deep, a whirlwind of ocean currents spinning tendrils in the wondrous underworld of subconscious, inner space. The beauty of the sea is a palpable silence, a prenatal yearning within the sky’s reflections of inanimate light. Into the shattered eye of a submerged mountain, there are a seemingly infinite myriad of species, blooming in the breathable space of instinctual submersion.

The eye craves the strength of mammalian fear in the world beyond worlds. Octopi, shark and jellyfish sweep the wobbling invertebrate mind with a bodiless air of unlit terror. A shark darts and flees past in a show of wise defense, and the octopi bleed ink in a haze of warring tests, enough to provoke the dissipation of mirage-lust. Of human sight, through the translucent jellyfish body, and unnervingly absent as the mind’s eye embedded in deep rolling waves, I sleep in a soporific atrophy, flying downward into netherworlds noetic.

Memory entangles my feet with the concreteness of familial presence. Surfacing through underwater life, I breathe the damp air, midsummer day, stretching above softly clapping waves. I feel, again, alongside the presence of my elder Grecian grandfather, seated on his seaborne throne like Poseidon. I harbor livable memories of his comforting presence, and stare into the sun, eye of immortal sight, and know the heights of human belonging. I am content, a mind at

rest, though awake and conscious, now filled with the reverberating speech of the marine wind.

Within a second's passing, I look ashore, and sympathize with the Earth, asking for its forgiveness. My feet are sturdy atop the smooth sand below. Breath steady, I am immediately relieved from the endless night that I had internalized in so many lifetimes of dreaming.

On the beach horizon, overhanging rocky cliffs flex concavely, seemingly burdened by an implosive tension, upended below the swirling sky. The undersea wilds are elastic, I am relieved for a second.

Why?" I wonder elatedly, and do not know.

Listless, I tilt my head to the sky, and wait to hear my name. I am confident, winning a fresh sensuous clarity about the world.

A rain-swept pier empties in the sallow light. Aground on the pavement, I see a bus stop, glowing through the foggy clime. Hurriedly, I rush to board, towards the unknown. Highway-bound, the clouds shatter, coagulating in an undulating mass of dizzying heights. There is a gathering storm that moves closer. I look out from my seat window. Time desists. Hail and thunder rumble, rattling the window frame. Music in my head plays on, growing louder by the second.

From within the music I hear lightning-fast premonitions, deft déjà vu passages intoned by amalgamating voices of anger. And yet, in that aural rage, the unearthed moans of my internalized noetic aching gorge on indulgent emotional farce. I spike an awakened source, thirsting like a skinless napalm victim. The enunciations direct me towards a new acquaintance, a naturalist poet.

"There are so many categories in which to be known," he says, after the usual brief, and amiable greeting of the day.

"Writer," I say.

"Scholar," says he.

And we go on, calling and responding over long-drawn pauses.

"Poet."

"Essayist."

"Artist."

"Musician."

"Lecturer."

"Composer."

"Sculptor."

"Actor."

"Creator," I proclaim, humbly finishing the banter of nominal identities.

"Occupations of the intellectual class," he responds. "There's an infinitude."

And we saunter on, to a gathering among the high, under starlight.

I dress proudly, fitted in a suit for the opulent occasion, and walk to receive the spiritual medals of personality, face and ease. There, a woman parades with an ostentatious headdress and unnatural clothing. A blathering fake of heady fame, I steal through tables clumsily drunk, to jeopardize my reputation for the evening.

Quickly, I steal off, to hide out in the utter obscurity of another day. I suffer for the strength to express just the right degree of frustration, wanting to purify destructive emotions with authentic expression. Yet, I fail, indulgent and undignified, to stand behind the recognized achievements of others.

Imported arctic light fills the top of my room with brittle delicacy. I have returned anew to a scenography of plenty, vacuumed beneath the tooth of a gentle jaw in the unknown hours of a white night. I sit across from a well-known composer. In his characteristic black jacket, he eyes me. His pupils beam with the earthy presence of boreal light. He reveals himself as a friend, one as unashamedly confounded as I in the mysterious haunts of a northern dream.

“I’m at work, writing,” he explains. “No one seems to notice.”

“Why is that?” I ask, puzzled to quiet fascination.

He says nothing, only taps his skull. He does not smile.

After a long pause, gazing fixedly into his drink of rye, he turns to face me once again. His movements are eerily robotic, contrasting with presumed stereotypes of impassioned artists.

“The title of my new piece marks a conscious turnabout towards the psychic rush of art in the unconscious,” he explains. “Where memory becomes prophecy.”

The light dims. I look up, almost feeling a faint sense of fear. My eyes begin to wander, looking around me at the sterilized wordplay, the intoxicated flesh.

“Compositions appear and disappear like the fleeting nature of quotidian thought,” he says, and undoes his jacket, sitting back with an air of contempt.

Leaving the room for the lobby, I feel on edge as concave walls cut sharp angles into grassy gardens. Above the main hall, windows refract the incessant midnight sun with chilling delight. As I move through a mezzanine, I am accosted. Apparently, I had passed over an invisible international boundary.

A woman from the Arctic territories breathes close to me, her voice intensely sharp as she explains the boundary I had unknowingly transgressed. With bright empathy I willingly, pleasantly follow her guidance. After hearing her, I learn how to cross the border at will.

“Attention and respect go a long way,” she said, her short figure endearing. In the zeitgeist of ecological ignorance, freedom must be taught.”

Then, she would not stop talking. For over an hour, it was all indiscernible narratives merging with the multicultural depth of countless perspectives, animal and human, godly and demonic. All I catch are her disquiet vocalizations, the hypnotic sound of her unusual English.

One day, while crossing the border, the mummified eyes of an Andean homunculus crept into my mind with unspoken lucidity and mystifying depth. In the mystic grandeur of such spiritual insight, the night of youthful upbringing synchronized, reminiscent to the silent sweeps of an imaginary play.

There is an experiential divide in the noetic sojourns of my constant, hard-felt transcendence of social class. One day, I topped the cavernous mounts of that empty and dark fate where solitude thrives. Memories brush oblong in the imperceptible, brittle light, a medium of failed intent in the empirical bondage of gross time. I look up, to opaque, now starless, night.

I had long since drifted outside of my family circle. It began at the house of my paternal grandparents, in upstate New York. There, I was tightly embedded in the deep thick of hilly forests. A lump of earth appeared as an ancestral burial ground, laden with the cornerstone of belief in the religiosity of death. I lived my life for proverbial travesty, and rested peacefully.

In an act of defiance, an almost intuitive embrace of the noetic, I then cultivated the inborn will to dream. I fled, bounding beyond the borders of the family lawn towards a new home. My brother, eager to follow in my footsteps, cavorted sheepishly in the pliant mud of earthly selfishness. I can still see his devilish eyes smile with the ghastly charade of life lived in service of money and sex, all empty exploitation.

After he fired a small pistol at me, I ran off, stole a ride out of town. Tirelessly on the run, bounding through traffic and skimming the side rails of a merging highway road, the police caught up with me.

Attending my plea, the cops seized my brother, not far behind. Our lawyer saw us in the police station as the rest of our family soon gathered, hysterically preoccupied by unwelcome thoughts of fratricide.

“Your brother is guilty,” the cop said with a steely-eyed command.

Barred from seeing him, the lawyer slipped me a note, a suicide drawing, written with a chipped pencil, framing the illustration of a bullet.

The judge is deliberate, patient and silent.

“There is no easy interpretation,” he begins, eyeing the passive jury, bored by the directionless airs of the public’s witnessing. Audible through a high window, the unfailing melodies of a guitarist lighten the court mood.

“The individual struggle with death lies outside imposed deliberation,” the judge continues. “Free will is a persistently original, all-too-human spirit.”

I have the sensation of being fully arrested by another mind. While listening to increasingly philosophical judicial exercises, foreign thoughts meld seamlessly within my brain. I have become a decidedly active witness to the collective noēsis, pardoning the innocent by subtle flights through metaphysical language.

“Had he intended such conflict?” I wonder, every unsaid thought feeds into my smaller animal, that body of sensation constantly given to the fun-loving pride of innate brain chemistry releasing illicit substances, uninhibited by law and family.

I exit the courtroom.

I first sight low, clay-roofed habitations, dirt roads amassing with each step onto the muddy ground. What I see exudes the character of a medieval townscape. Sepia tones sweep across the grayish boards of wooden buildings that line the street, moving like black and white celluloid in the guise of old Europe.

“Is this history?” I mutter inaudibly, in disbelief at the utterly authentic scenography. There is an instinctual, defensive glare in the executioner’s hat and the stymieing bureaucrat’s shallow presence as I enter the wooden gates of a public house.

Immediately, a naïve-faced teenager greets me, introducing himself as a military apprentice. I am shocked to the core by his absolute innocence, his mindless inexperience. I lash out, cursing with ageist envy. In a single motion, I cut him down.

The blood of his pride sprays from his core. His wavering seeps through my footprints in stone and mud. I am taken aback by my own actions, yet as the clouds roll on the silence is ever penetrating. Unfulfilled by peripheral justice, cursing on, the bloodless voice their disloyalty to the living.

Wandering off a main roadway, I walk outside the limits of the atavistic town, feeling bereft of time and space, like a fugitive refugee returning to the fleeting superficialities of modernity.

The climate burns, like an eyehole gouged of recollection and finally oblivious and at peace. There is a grayer hiss over the obscure horizon’s edge, of

paranoiac whereabouts, drinkable and churning as cold wheat turns to frothy fluid within my mellowing bowels.

Attuned ears swing frantic as the free march into cinematic skies. The elders nickel and dime my racy birthright beginnings in the stingy noonday hollow. Deeper along the edge of the township, towards rougher pasture, the greener grass gives to the brown floor of a barn. Outside, the medieval joust is reenacted, only instead of a game between knights an anglophone matador speaks of a murderous war with the horse. I try my hand for a joust.

With two lances upraised, I pierce the flesh of a gorgeous brown horse, mirroring the hue of the dirt circle fenced by a weak wooden ring. The audience gawks, steeped in farmhouse poverty. As other horses, unsaddled and with fierce eyes, carouse into the ring, I jet from the gathering into a blacker city.

That night I walk through the shadows of the urban night. Moved to visit a family penthouse, I end up with my mother. Illustrious fine art hangs framed on high-ceilinged walls. The room is furnished with a polished baby grand piano, clear glass tables and impeccable wood floors. She is youthful and gay, enjoying the space with matchless ardor. As I look into her face, I begin to call out for my love.

“Where is she?” I ask piteously.

Strangely, the stars shine clearly outside, entering the place, dimly lit through the window. We are high above the smog and pollution, high above the human world, high, and above earthly obligation.

The next day, I step down from my high tower to revisit my grandparents in their rural upstate home. I wait, fixed in place within the center of a foyer. The continuous movement of relatives up and down the stairs condenses the space. The air is heavy.

I embrace each family member longingly, and with a strength characteristic of my waking need. “Our grandfather is dying,” we all mull, silently defeated, though as one, brought together by death.

Tramping through the corridor of my grandparents’ hillside home, the beige linoleum lies dirtied with a score of recent visitors, and the angelic light of the winter’s day breathes with an icicle drip onto the feet of the whitened doorstep. With a running muck of puppies, my father swings the door open and shoos me out into a dizzying cacophony of wild dogs, huge and menacing. Growling eyes bear down with starving, cannibalistic teeth.

My father quickly recoils back through the warm house, the slow-motion snow gathers under my frosted eyelids as I work myself back up to my feet in subzero temperatures. At eye-level with a host of swarming canines, wild and

diseased, I notice the back leg of one dog's been bitten clean to the bone. The wounded sting of necessity chokes my well-wishing brain into a heady, feral daze.

That night, I make plans to meet my love in those quietest of moments before dawn. We see each other at a high river, and feel complete abandon. It is heady, youthful adventurism without restraint. At the moment of our meeting, we take flight in kayaks that soon tip in the rushing torrent. Our bodies are flooded with murky water.

We swim to the riverbank. My love is overcome by a sense of futility, and quits on me. Falling asleep on the naked earth, I slowly gather enough strength to continue on, embarking downriver in another waterborne craft, worn and dilapidated from disuse.

Retrieving one of our vessels caught in the shoreline brush, I sit in the sinking vessel, with only a waterlogged, half-worn paddle to my name. A family of waterfowl nears aggressively with an incessant hunger for my pruned, sore fingers.

Low-lying, dense forests emerge only steps from the riverbanks. As I enter through the darkening canopy my footprints sink deeper into the unsure ground of fungal vegetation. Then, I see a man and woman walk assuredly in the gothic naturalism.

They wear long, flowing clothing. At seeing the weary, foreign countenances, grimacing at our directionless jaunt, I recoil to where the forest is less thick and try to enter the river at a new point of embarkation.

"Is this Mother?" I feel I am trespassing at the dangerous edge where two worlds have collapsed into one another.

Again, wandering through the woody sweep, my mind presses onward with increasingly bleary sight. The landscape closes in and my sight nears my eyes, confronting a formidable climax of vegetal evolution.

As I enter through a clearing, I see a young woman, somehow another in the company of the two who had passed only a minute ago. She, though, is kind, and warns me of the dangers ahead. "As long as you travel through the lands of your people, you will be safe," she says, her voice as soft as spring water.

I wander on, enlightened by the meeting with such a kind and endearing human sprite. More entangled in the impenetrable bush, I come to a massive tree. Immediately, I begin climbing to gain a vantage point.

"Where has my love gone?" I ask the forest, aloud. The aching wonder soon unravels my every thought to the final evisceration of my sanity, and looking out to the horizon my bewilderment catches up with me, and I feel at peace.

The tree's limbs are smooth and strong, a true old-growth arbor. As I feel for a lookout, the branches stretch inwards toward me. I am at rest on the limb as thick

as my body, crawling toward a knot of branches that create a homely stand, a shaded hollow within the body of the tree. As I press on amid the enwrapping arms of the humungous tree, an arboreal formation welcomes with the same quality of strength as the olive roots of Penelope's Homeric longing.

The sky seems human, as night's imagination rises with a crescent moon, as a cloth of thicket incinerates in the buzz of a static electric mire of projected brain. Follicles of neurons splay magically in a host of speechless disquiet. The air is pockmarked with the living breath of subconscious flesh, a torrent of enmeshed golden ash, raining on my waking perception with the insurmountable torrent of singular mystery. The subtle crossing is tread, between inner sight and the outer eye.

Again, I wake, remembering the seaside cliffs beyond the forest's edge, the grandiose rocks, welcoming my step, as I notice two women of differing garb playing, bounding from rock to rock with amiable laughter and sisterly freedom. I begin sketching the fibrous vegetation in primary colors and rough lines, with an innocent beauty, and gravity enough to keep the image of my word.

The howl of a departing train sounds in the distance, nearing. One of the faithfully dressed women blanks off in another direction. From my altitude, I can see the concealed pistol in her dress. "I'll only kill one," I see her mouth move, whispering to herself.

Watching them, I feel a similar fate, of mortality by technological artifice in the guise of friendship. I descend from the treetops.

Entering a historic neighborhood, one neglected by the uninhabited desolation at the edges of a small town, I walk into a gutted church. I kneel down on the unfinished concrete flooring, bare as my back. I lift my shirt, wanting to feel the cool, hollow air.

The young woman follows from the forest, as silent as a god. Only a few minutes prior, she was aloof, distant in my field of vision. She raises her pistol, shooting me straight through the stomach, below my lungs; a perfect shot.

"I'll survive," I pray, while experiencing the bitter pain of the act and my free-flowing blood coursing from my excruciating wound. She then drags my paralyzed body toward the exit of the building.

Outside on the street corner, another local rushes over, hiding her pistol in a bag. At my feet, I see a broken skull. I can see the smile of a childhood friend, eerily emanating from their skinless mouth. Apparently, others died like me; shot clean through the back.

I wake with eyes closed. They won't open. I can't look. The uncovered bed I'm on, a flat sheet of wood, feels disheartening, a place wherefrom I never wanted to wake. Yet, the frame is strangely familiar. I recoil with resuscitating nerves, into memories of my father's and stepmother's home.

My father beckons truth from my brain, spouting aggressive passion in words, to see through the entertaining fires of my suicidal and apocalyptic misgivings. Yet, it is true, and in three days, the temperature rises in my blood as through the Earth. The mountains seethe, and I am inflamed. The seas boil and the atmosphere blinds my burning eyes with stinging fright. The core of the incendiary home invites solar lust in an embrace of human extinction.

My cat litter sheets are damp beside windows of the nauseous sky. Rain pelts the glass by my ear, as I smell the cheap havoc about the tepid condensation of humidity. Here is a feeling closer than that of home, too close, and yet so much farther than I could have ever imagined. Here is where sexual abuse reigns on every familial plane, as a tree bespattered with the lifeless trembling of a deadly morning earthquake.

Rich neighbors are burnt away as fire exhales from below. They had dire plans to descend into the safety of stocked caves, long dashed by the immediacy of the end. All remaining on the surface of the Earth know they will soon be extinguished into the dry licks and exhaled flares of our sun, dying at an astronomical rate in a cloudless space of astral silence.

I sink deeper into the wooden bed, immobilized by hallucinations, dreams, visions, and meditations. The great outdoors beyond opens and closes like the unsheathed bronze of a triumphant conqueror of old, polishing and brandishing their ancestral pride. There is a timely wielding of human annihilation about the nascent plain of equal hue, enlightened by the western sun.

As a beckoning from Manifest Destiny herself, I rise, limping through an empty house, and trudge toward the horizon with a mind for exploration and survival, in pursuit of the ear and chaff of corn and grain. The dizzying panoramas of lonely wilderness lie before me, where the Vanishing Indian has since reemerged alive and human.

Now, the People, Original, and First, are of equal and greater stature than the sculptures of generals and presidents that look out from the edges of the forest. Yet, still, they are no more than the concrete bastions of truculent ignorance and the undead past.

I tip my hat, and focus my eyes squarely to the north, bearing a stolen harvest scythe in hand. I wander through the flooding dusk-lit pasture. A son of

mindless hate stares into my back, now buried in the lightless flat of night's self-awakening.

And my love, my anima, still sleeps the world away immovably, on the damp riverbank of our once adventuresome past, when youth was not yet a thought. We had since reconvened, at a home under the midwestern prairie sun. After which she shared dreams of lightening news to prop up our necks to the afterlife.

She told me of how our grandfather, recently deceased, visited us. He traveled countless miles across the entire scope of riverine swamps and open flatlands. She said that he appeared as a young man of an excellently hued complexion. His eyes invigorated the humble walls of our sleepy refuge. Again, in his prime, he offered a blessing of material trust for our passionate, creative hearts. It was an ingeniously crafted wooden box, shaped by his exceptional Norwegian whittling hand, as a gift, to us, and our union.

Within the glorious arboreal artwork, two handcrafted wooden flutes of a celestial order were gently kept within, together with two long bamboo flutes of unknown origin. We play them, lightly, as cathartic voices rise from the forest in harmony.

After sounding the last note, waiting carefully for the unmediated silence, the golden presence of our late grandfather vanishes in a heartbeat of silence.

“Music is our language,” he says with words as strong as his hand. “We speak with the gifts of our earliest known life. The sounds of our language lead directly to the Source, at the heart of nature.”

The Artist Wanders

On a roomy floor, a concert stages new world fusion music. A woman sits front and center, virtuosic on the zither, like a dream. Throughout the performance her good friend and accompanist breathes new life into the *tabla*, while another accompanies on *darbuka*, also intoning subtle tones from bamboo woodwinds. A third drummer, a guest to the homely trio, sits out in front with an imposing presence. He lacks all personality, though boasts of his world-class artistry on the *davul*.

When the music begins, the *davul* takes the lead rhythm by storm, without mind to harmonious accompaniment. He is drunk on musical ego, overly animated by the inertia of his adeptness. Growing exceedingly frustrated, the percussionist stops playing altogether. Although keeping up a fine tempo, the *tabla* player displays similar dissatisfaction. There is a futile impasse of creativity in the frenzied air.

The zitherist and first percussionist begin whispering onstage about the unseemly course of events. After a sudden bout of conquering solos, the *duval* player stops as well, opens his palms, and hands out gifts to the audience. What they are is unclear.

Without regard for his other fellow musicians beneath the multihued spotlights and dreamy vapor, he begins captivating the audience with artificial charisma. His attitude displaces authentic musicianship with the underhanded pomposity of stage antics.

“This is the last straw,” the percussionist says, almost audible over the audience’s rumble. With sheer impulsion, he grabs the nearest drink at random, throws it at the *duval* player, walking out in disgust.

On the street outside the concert hall, the wailing vagrancies of industrial trucking and convenience stores interfuse in an altogether drab disarray of causeless indigence and bad habits. Over-the-hill men glare, wondering about their next fix with vampire teeth and screwy eyes.

I glide past silently, entering the dismal folly of a culture obsessed with physical consumption. The social malaise is affixed to the worthless distractions of fame and light, personified by an attractive male with the maturity of an anxious adolescent. “I won’t return,” I tell myself, and the horizon is still empty.

In the haunting seeds of lost friendship and the weak figments of life’s passing is a numb unfeeling silence, unspoken. My heart clamors for reconciliation in noetic visions beyond reason, where the rational mind bursts onto a field of images, some broken, others pent up with rage, all cinders of memory.

An iridescent strobe of eyes pulsates like atrophying muscles. I flee past the masculine chest of brotherly camaraderie in this horror-show family of blue-eyed children. I am sent, past the workman's vine. I crawl anew, over the rain-mucked pavement toward a host of robust intellection.

My mind wanders as an expatriate in exile, exhumed from a life brought up to resume the sign business of American language. Yet, I breach the ignorance of those who find excellence in academic abstraction. I free myself, time and again, out of every social chutes and ladders game of wily self-fulfilled prophesying, and look upon the face of a sterling-minded mage.

Her throat moves to the bittersweet respite of soothing voices that quicken youth into proud age. I look away, struggling against the magical temptations of vanity, thinking only of my lover's bedroom.

On the way to a banquet hall, I wear a stolen face for an uppity toast of townsmen. I imagine they are just the type to save me from my blank irreverence and nihilistic resolve. Movers of the day quell the footstep rebellion with damaging drink and superlative plates. Eyeing a mash-up of delectable fine-tipped cuisine, I sit among them, practically unseen for the sheer amount of diversion. Among such company, the distinctions between animate and inanimate fall clear away.

Inside, while unnoticed, I wade in the cool waters of the rich. The veil of misty superstition lifts at my seamless intervention among the exclusive class. Suddenly, I feel as in the realm of immortal fruits. I finish my first serving with a drool, and see only more. As I reach for a dessert at a nearby table, my conspicuity is exposed into the fore, and I redirect my hand instantly. I leave the party then, to remain unknown.

"When I entered," I thought, "I had returned."

The shale heart of my existing friendships is now embittered, diseased of all life at hand, having rotted in the most outlandish nooks of the isolating city. Drying out in an air of scant hydration, I sink into the nostalgic bread of a million savage thoughts, formed of my implacably naïve blood.

Friendships separate in the domestic strife of urban youth. A labyrinth of misdirection boggles me. I have long slid off course, groundless. Blinding past damaged rails and misbegotten paths, the hard-won industrial groove of the 21st century burns me all up. I turn, with a lifeless tour, through metal blocks of pocket-worn need.

My last friend is alone, and huddles over a home-cooked pot of stew. One day, he strides into my apartment coolly, fully bedecked in his Scottish kilt-wear. His face nearly contorted with the oncoming gripe of tears, he looks down, and

over his plastic-wrapped gifts. I am elsewhere, mindlessly, without hope of friendship. Everyone close now seems to be nothing more than the irrelevance of their passable contents, like trimmings in a country soup.

I wander off, anywhere, away from home and the pretense of human relationship. The air is opaque with a dark, loose stirring. Underground, world commotion breathes heavily. Music is heard, as a cut of wool shorn from a stamping, bleating sheep. All contact with others is weaned from disconnected telephones like an unending marital divorce. The sky blackens with the frost of easy death.

I tip toe to my experimental end. I'll have no burial, no cremation, only a second sky-birth in the way of my choice. I want to fall off the edge of a bungee jump platform, without a bungee. I dress for the occasion, and imagine jumping with all of the muscular force of the act.

A strong wind blows, and night falls, penetrating and raw. I pick up my face and screw it to the side of a condemned shack along abandoned railway tracks.

"I'll change my ways," I think. Before the all-consuming blush of my red-silken lust, I gently winnow out my insides from the decadent myths of youthful love stories. She, woman of dreams, the muse of the highest art, is my only one. We've decided to meet, at a party, where we're both invited to perform. She will play music. I will read.

As always, she is diligent in her work. For that, I am impressed. Yet, a mystery hangs breathless with the unprofessionalism of a weak sigh. Stammering over the frozen concrete mold, I wade through a battered avenue of gamblers.

The sky simmers like an uncooked pit of flesh. We enter an atrium riddled with the divorce of youth, where all sense of childhood is cleanly broken from the blabbering head of dark rooms and sexual witnessing, of strange rumors, and fatherless groans, cruel mothers heavy with the sorrow of empty need.

Old children sit silently staring at a naked couple, motionless and bearing nothing but skin in two separate rooms. In frightening disarray, the foreground opens to an entrance hall.

Two finely suited young men sport a frantic session of improvised music with homemade instrumentation, wood and stone chopped in a dizzying fray of wires and bone. Strung together for a wish-fulfilled greed of rhythmic sounding, stunning with an energy that climbs atop the phantom noose of age with momentous, fleeting tones.

The hostess of our strange inkling of a human party hands us a small envelope. A card reads: "New York City!"

A mind trip then haunts like a nightmarish circus dystopia. I drag my feet over superstitious nostalgias and the blind opacity of family and friends lost to time and ambition. Tragedy wants and opens futures. Black and white colors, white and black.

“Childhood is an escape from naming,” I think, “And here he is again!”

In full glory, my dead companion in all things meditative sits before me, as indifferent as always. He is a leader in the subconscious wave of true surrender, a follower to the spiritual laughter of play.

I can feel his warmth in that little heart, beating patiently between two rib cages of delicate whimsy. He leads me on through the empty darkness. A labyrinth of hollows beckons me forward, through to a sweetening, mental taste.

In a city park, abandoned by the foment of wartime, I see him again. He is glad, alone, as after a prolonged battle on the plains of Europe. And again, I see him a third time, only entirely unlike himself. He sits with friends, who look more like comrades with loosened clothes, as they vocalize animal hunger, voracious for local, feminine attention.

Nonetheless, he is extraordinarily aware, unlike the rest, as he combs the horizon with searching eyes. Soon, at a moment's notice, an eccentric countryman intervenes in the bucolic party with a timely ration of breads and cheeses to sweeten our mouths, delighting our palates. They are happy in the autumn sun of deadening leaves, where old history decomposes beneath their sun-warmed feet.

As through a deserted island forest, I feel I am cycling with him. “Am I leading you on?” I wonder, in the breakable silence. “Where are you leading me?”

He gazes ahead, and we are both absolutely confused, attempting to map out a scenic shortcut through a vineyard. In the deathly humid heat, our heads drip effusively. We feel the loss of liquid weight like our bathing beneath a warm waterfall in a haze of sun. Risking heat stroke, the air is heavy with upended commotion. There is a swell of pain in the distance, obscure.

He follows an intuitive pathway with growing diligence, beyond the manicured brushes of the antique streets.

At rest, I stop outside a hotel. Serendipitously, we meet a band of musicians, the ghosts of vanished, pastoral soundscapes from around the world. Swimmily seeking my attention, they quickly become old friends, despite expressing a vague, anxious paranoia. At last light, I promise to return.

There are bigger gripes out on the front of the blood-red horizon. My new companion and I argue over plates and glasses, fated to eat in blind obscurity. After finishing our viands and victuals, I wander off, and break all oaths of return,

yearning towards a third direction, a middle way, of indifferent pastures and waking forests, where billions of gods live and breathe unseen.

The damp leaves under my soles are cool in the autumn wind. I step forward, along a drying pond. Above its shores, squatting at rest, I sit atop the indiscernible ground of multicolored arboreal death, vegetal decay. Mycelia thrive.

“What eyes of fire and livable sight?” I remember, thinking of the simply beautiful botanic visage of the high midwestern plains.

Then, to my right, through the thick of woods, I see a billow of smoke. My old friend of early womanhood, she lures me onto a wild bed of moss. My brains cool refreshingly as I steam off the directionless pain of mere survival. I stroke her darkening crown of brunette hair, matted and locked as her staggering worldview of mind, that infinite abyss below her aging scalp. Her face dries faintly, like the unreflective pond behind us.

“What a breath of fresh air! To drink, and see,” I shouted to my friend, watching her flee with ecstasy after our days, stripped of body, and assuming pure superhuman spirit by the intense solitude, and ceaseless lovemaking of the waking forest.

Although he lives thousands of miles distant, I sometimes feel my brother weeping. One day, I sensed how his heart caved in under his shaking flesh. I know he triumphs again and again over such nervous breakdowns. The air carries him through domes and halls, privileged beneath the fiery shield of Western skies.

I can see him wheel off into the darkened haunts of old coast bumhood, where the numbing agents of the entertainment industry inject his infected blood with a taste for addiction. He drives carelessly in between the streetscapes of New England, evading smiles of selfish mockery and divulging over swine. Ruthless remarks intensify in the bitter alcoholic night. Cobblestone streets are swept of hurricane feet and the tires of his once sickened flight. He is always returning.

At home, he is lost to forgotten times. Now, he’s an old man, twice removed from his enviable youth. The tingling respites of belonging now spew from the gutters of the West, where the ruins of young minds are robbed of their gold, enslaved to fantastic sights. He often clambered awkwardly down to work, tumbling on stepladders of creaking wood and soiled linoleum.

I stare, immobilized by porch silhouettes. A large man sits in the darkness, an enigmatic recluse of a neighbor, with dreadlocks low beneath his back. As he lifts an ember to his lips, his brown skin shines with the muscular life of a physical laborer on break, alone, a nameless body of the historic present.

I see him under the dingy, snooker lights. The dizzying indoor lunacy of the drinker's habit, a hovel of bored and roughened life speaks through his bristling mouth. After a rare silence, and a few more pints, he ends the night by writing his number on a used napkin. And like that, he disappears in the great fog of blackness, opaque as the light-polluted air of a once-booming industrial city, now smoking upward with the final ashen gasp of smoky incineration.

With a mug to mirror the unmistakable frame of his *joual*-toughened jaw, spoken with the silent glimmer of street-side grief, I walk alone and alone, on and on for the infinite mileage of American wanderings. A cyclical tongue of ruthless freedom, I will to free young passions from the word order of choice, and splay my mind on the plain open dharma of roadside heat. I have only a thumb and the meek treasury of manly poverty.

A more familiar, drunken cry once rang throughout the humbling scope of spectral telephone wires. It followed with the unheard voice of the millions, distanced by the wiry nerves of a social neurosis. I have always leaned into the sharp edges, towards mobility, and with rootless leisure. I need travel as a way of being. My holy rope of brains burns to the tips of my traveling hands. My writing-cooled mind belongs to an open land of no-land.

I recognize scenes of existential irony in the monotony of daily life. With a swelling disillusion, I stare, unapologetic for the horror. An especially classy young blonde woman buries herself in the busy sheets of a paid hotel room. She awaits the exchange of her dowry, for the rent. Her parents exit, they appear content, because she is their dollar ticket, and they are sick with lascivious pride.

In the fading night, she manages to arrange a different room, to exchange a first-rate bed in an unadorned flophouse. Split flooring and cracked drywall enclose death pits of shredded and faded pink insulation. The eerie chill in the air spells disreputable sex work and drug rings. Alcohol still seems to eek from the floorboards of bygone, speakeasy days. She then cowers nervously in her room. A knock at the door bleeds into her chest with suicidal unction.

Opening the door candidly, I follow my brother's surly gait inside the noxious room. She is gentle. Greeting her with an offering of simple company, the night hammers on with the head-pounding failures of dereliction. We all strip, like unfurled saplings emerging from a seed sowed too late into an unforgiving bed of gravel.

Almost surprisingly, she welcomes with arms wide and inviting as a clear pool. We both slide neatly under the covers of her newly anonymous life. Hours pass without a thought to time.

Shut off from the world, we gradually become friendlier, conversing and laughing carefree. My brother hangs his head by the window. Still, we are naked, congenial. The blonde and I playfully brush paint over a great canvas blocking the doorway and most of the wall.

“You’re fucking brilliant!” she says, all sense of nerves untangled, our minds refreshed by the sheer youthfulness of our hearts.

Visualizations signature to classic forms, like Blake and Gibran over the imagistic head of my hand at play with the outlines of feminine creation. Coolly, I envision my brother to gain inspiration. I can see into the form and build supporting the color and stroke of our altered midnight state of sudden, forbidden friendships.

The room’s hollow fills with laughter and unending play. In other rooms, inklings of disturbance leak through the floorboards dripping with coffee-colored liquid from mold-covered ceilings. Aural stratum are pierced through with eager ears, willing to join in the cantankerous, drunk dawn. We find the true human pleasures of the heart, steeped in moral abuse through the gravest night in the body of Psyche.

Morning on the street, a city-rat friend and I duel with competitive rage. Amassing a firebomber brigade of red trucks fuming with the waterless engine of stolen malfunctioning, our monstrosities careen past obsolete, unlit stoplights. We rush past the hollows as a rapid exploding over the open floodgate, rip-roaring through the sleepless streets out of town.

Over a northbound bridge, we find refuge in an overgrown motel lot. The air is sweet. A dirt-smear family invites us to tea. They appear to live well inside a cozy, furnished lobby, since detached from its skeleton of a demolished building. The facility is strangely reminiscent of a personal home, with a ripped sofa, broken televisions, and half-assembled toys for the young children. Our idle, steaming trucks smoke absently, as the engine monoxide wafts inside.

After tea, we rifle through separate rooms, unobstructed by the family, who sit in silent fear, smiling kindly. The air is opaque in its emptiness, invisible in its bodiless humors. I gaze through the sheathed firmament, a room, and a body, jacketed in the empty dark. Forcing my eyes to move, I see a slight pitch in the cruel nothingness, a fleck of something in a bruised vacuum of light.

“Where am I?” I call out to the blinding obscurity.

“I am upraised!” responds a voice, yet no one hears, and I am convinced that other lives are surfacing within me.

“I am still above ground,” I tell myself, affirming life in the midst of the all-consuming mysteries of extinction. And where I stand does remind me of the old bunk beds that I know with childhood nostalgia. The bedside window still stares at me through endless isolation, and I look out from childhood, resurrected by the groveling wild.

“I would place a plastic Viking helmet on my head,” I weep, filled with ridiculous grief. My arms flail under my body, weighed down by the lowered ceiling. And crowned by the crudely fastened polymers that defined my upbringing in the last decade of the 20th century, I am, as always, only a small, childlike part of my imagination.

I look up, and the ceiling falls just shy of my eyes. A mushroom head stares at me with an elongated stem, an upside-down fungal growth, like a ceiling fan, a sexual head of strange and auspicious gloom. I partake in a vivid flight of true hallucinations. All that is natural is misplaced in a mind-born hell of undone pain, to insomnia. I writhe in the groundless bed. My helmeted head throbs against a plastic cage.

At once, I toss the disfiguring crown over the edge of the bunk. It dings off the edge of the television glass perched on the splintered remnants of an oblong dresser. The reverberation echoes unendingly. An unnatural sound is emitted before the long-anticipated silence, sending my unconscious flesh storming at the gates of no return.

Pondering the day by a riverside, having since fled the company of disgruntled friendships and forced acquaintances, my mind blends in the heady fray of sun. My brain is tangled like a rope fished through densely overcast sky. In a dizzying swarm of color, unimaginable tensions poke inside my every mental sensation. Skeletal protrusions emerge on the vine-covered pathway. I lay disarmed beside a waterlogged stump.

The enlightening face of my old cousin from the Broken Promised Land, young of age, though old in memory, blinks fearlessly before the horizon’s edge, at the end of the wild vineyard path. Her eyes brighten in a daze of mystic intensity, as a stare of iris against iris. Her pupils reflect the image of a bomb pattern.

Escaping upward, flying with military discipline, she then approaches from above. Her words are those of a radical on the path to omniscience. Her pale face scans the leaping vigor of machine angst over the virtual land surveyed. Upright, affixed to an armed jet cockpit, I feel I can scan the earth with her, together eyeing the dotted map, bounding over villages destroyed under our mechanical wings.

We leap through the air and finally touch down over a secretive hill, where the overripe avocado earth changes to a faded taupe desert. Sighting a local caravan, we gather direction with locals. Bedouin men guide us along the perimeter of the land. Espionage fills our lungs with the hot breath of wartime lies.

I traverse further on, alone, through a riverine thicket dense with the swamp-like craftiness of bitter foliage. Filtering the light, the atmosphere brews a pockmarked hailstorm of filigree lightning.

I remember the wise sayings of the Old Man, entrenched, longing for his presence. Under the overcast maw, a vision of him materializes from my memories. With such insight unknown by my youthful pride, he walks with me. Through his undeviating eyes, he minds each thought arising between us as linked by an earnest, intuitive anticipation.

Then, like the fall of curtains at the end of a drama, I sense him stop. He shows me a trick of the fatherland, a stick of wisdom, a prophetic wishbone of weathered intelligence. His play on creation breeds an awakened look into the material fire of an all-transparent self-knowing. My crooked daze feeds off the unchallenged light sparking in his eyes, following mine in unfailing instants of true magic.

Eye of the Land-Witnessing

I had only ever passed by the reservation. Its dilapidated rodeo stadium seemed dwarfed beside traditional tipi stands piercing through the pine canopy. In passing, there were instants when I could see their well-worn, painted canvases. And on down the highway, the billion-dollar estates of middle-class monoculture, residential colonies that look down on the land from staggeringly pitched hillsides. The river valley was shallow with the crooked smiles of the worldwide settler, cold and remote.

Welcomed onto the reserve, what was I to expect? All that I had imagined but never really knew became all too real and just so, warming in the presence of two young women, sitting on felled trees in a forest glade. They were humble, kind and open. We traded secrets about the human condition, the incomprehensible ways and wherefores of corruption and the weary distillation of progress with or without wealth, on or off reserve.

“The original crime is at hand,” she said, the one looking forward and not down, and with a forthcoming honesty only heard in the intonation of their non-anglophonic native tongues. “The unforgiving hand of an all-deceiving colonial contemporary oppresses us all.”

We eventually shared this realization. She didn't have to go on, as her nurturing smile and hospitable presence spoke of a silent, universal love. They offered tea with a refreshing candor, and on a land infused with such bitter rumors, emptying its weight against the heart with the depth of such tragedy.

I saw them as viscerally near as my own heartbeat, struggling to course blood through my veins before the awe of an expectant spiritual confrontation. And there we were, sitting in the quiet peaceable forest. Three youth, peering out through the sun-cast open towards a picturesque vale of mythic proportions.

The warning sky cleared, as with an ethereal empathy, just for us at that moment. The sun rays cracked through the forest shade, enlightening the smoky dust. Looking at such wide-brimmed beauty, I drank in the wild vocation of rapture at the mere sight of ecological wisdom in all of its fragile simplicity.

Yet, to the north horizon, as we looked west, a mountain had been reddened, as an eviscerated body, heaving the dim breath of laborious, earthly pain. I shrugged in careless abandon, questioning the lady to my right. She told me, briefly, of the catastrophe, a mistaken excavation, fruitless for all, rendering the mountainside clean of life. Walking back through the town, I met others, following their lead.

When I later returned to the reservation, I had since emerged from the academic world, taking the final step from the competitive glares and adolescent misdirection known to the fair of scholastic races. I fled the group trip of docile and bored Canadian tourists. We had traversed my old stomping grounds along the sprawling city limits, by a restaurant where my brother had once played music, and was known. So, I walked over.

The restaurant owner greeted me gladly, with the warmth of an old family friend. His restaurant had a lovely splendor, an aesthetic mindfulness. Utilizing his small space, he had managed to accommodate the finest culinary and artistic tastes of the local region.

As I stepped out over a neat veranda, I saw a resplendent visage of architectural prowess, gathered from a hillock vista overlooking the downtown core on the foothill horizon. Royal crimson checkers and dazzling cerulean pillars angled with perfected arches and pristine domes. In two decades, the city had gained a wealth of ingenious visual inventions. Staring out over the brink of riverine cliffs, the continental spine of alpine mountains motionless behind me, I gathered my eyes, besotted with the dizzying color palette of form in the buildings below.

Quickened by absorption in the wealth of tones outside and below, I clambered upstairs into a hollowed attic within the restaurant. There, I met with the hostility of an animal ghost, a small red fox, which to my self-contempt, I tried to fend off murderously over the metal ledge of a bed. Stupefied by my act of unintended violence towards the wayward, spiritual animal, I climbed up onto the top bunk and laid down to rest.

“The ghosts transcend the locks,” I thought. “The smell of dead flesh is their calling.”

In the neighborhood outside, the antique wood of a rocking chair, the once-ageless tradition of upright relaxation is buried in the tourist fizz of the market *los sapos*. Cobblestone streets mark the way for foreigners blending with hip-swinging djembe drummers, Hare Krishna propagandists and the local *elote* vender. The Mexican drunk of a Sunday *tianguis* gropes me by the neck, and smothers all sense of choice in speech. Ambient conversations turn to howls that awaken mundane daylight desires.

I shudder behind my sunglasses, staring at an extraordinary find, as powerful as the revelation of the sun. *Huichol* hands weave a metaphysical mat of mystical enthusiasm. So we, as all people in the presence of one another, play intuitive thought through ceaseless inspiration, enlightening our mouthed eyes with music unheard. At nightfall, a woman approaches, her smiling lips redolent of an early Iberian colony.

She breathes a home into our highest imagining, a place to live, among the cold stone steps of vanquished need and unfulfilled sights. Her place is an ideal home, with a small flower-adorned bed tucked away into the corner of an empty room, full with the comforting hospitality of a traditional sunbaked southern welcoming. We continue on, despite the whipped lure of our eyes.

I return north, to accept the invitation of a friend, joining him to ascend the mightiest tower in the world, newly built in our hometown city. Stomping over manicured lawns and weary of so many locked doors, I reminisce on a similarly forged path through dense forests upwards toward Rocky Mountain peaks. Then, I see it.

I prick myself, eye's nearly gouged by the immensity. The conical rise extends upward by way of unknown alchemical engineering, and more, an unsupported bridge unites two smaller towers from the bottom-center, before a single mass of steel and glass ascends directly to the very top of the cityscape.

My friend, who always acts over-anxious, rushes towards the bridge, leading us to the top of the highest tower. I follow him, entering the futuristic complex, prefaced by the usual commercial dives. A mall of unreasonable industry hacks fester as usual, like bottom feeders on dusty linoleum.

With an upturned stomach, I hold on as we are shot out, gliding over a glass floor, as a rudderless boat would skim over placid waters. I dare not look down. In the building, quickening mindscapes turn into the flood of our escalating, lightheaded laughter, buttressed by a thoughtless havoc, as we beam with unintelligible delight. People below, above and throughout squander the invaluable golden drug of such shameless technological power.

I begin to see it as a great phallic middle finger, flipped by the West. Though, "At who?" I wonder. "For what?" And, "Why?" I become cynically ponderous. It is pointedly direct, a skyward offense.

My friend and I pass through the immense spire of cylindrical unreality speedily. We spill out onto an uptown street. The concrete jungle returns us to the fading glory of a lowly urban infrastructure fast becoming obsolete.

They say class division is temporal, based on the hour in which a person wakes for work. Class is also defined spatially, by depth and height.

Ghosts of the past fly like demonic insects through the gut-smattered concrete claustrophobia. I notice a few as my friends, and greet them. On the outskirts of the unsubtle cityscape, people light beacons of terror, and paint insignias of waste. Stone turns to cinder. As my friend shows me the greatest of heights, so others follow me to the depths. All lag behind with passive excitement.

We burrowed through an old tunnel system, and climbed out into abandoned underground pathways that lead to the base of the high tower.

Suddenly arrested by the horrors of war, the skies blast open. From subterranean tunnels below we can still feel the shockwaves of a thousand bombs billowing like hot nails over the soft-fingered ground. As missiles breach the catastrophic abandonment of wires above, further below I loathe over remembered imagery from the Occupied Land of Broken Promises, all of the endless claims to vengeance on our stolen earth, born of blood and built of sand.

Blinded by the seemingly unending lightless deep, we are soiled by the exasperation of our nerves. “Has a day passed?” I wonder, staring upward, fainting with utter disbelief. I turn my head wolfishly toward the wall, placing my hands on wet stone. “Is this door locked?” I asked, barely audible and breaking into a cold sweat.

It must be early morning. The sounds of war had grown sparser by the hour, and the air was nearly silent, the terrors above had long muted. We scratch and press against the locked door, desperate. Blood poured from our ripped fingernails, and then we heard a click.

The door opens. Inside, droplets of wastewater splash on two unopened crates full of what looked like ripe fruit. My head spins dizzily, confused with thirst.

I am fatigued. My fouled clothing itches, chafing with the dryness between my legs. I begin taking my clothes off. “Wouldn’t that be insane?” I asked my mind, checking for holes of reason in my every thought.

The floor beneath the exit is thick with ammonium. The noxious smell rushes into my head as I peer into the fruit-filled crate. The colors of different shapes are subdued in the murky concrete. Pigments of long-faded sensations, unrecognizable in the midst of frozen darkness below and the blazing din above. Despite it all, the globular edibles look fresh, almost enticing.

Stranded, the echoing emptiness is cruel and fascinating. In contrast, the ripe fruits are disillusioning. I resort to sheepish wallowing, brooding through the halls with uncooked thoughts. Hours become minutes, and soon only seconds are discernible in the time-tested sound of droplets falling in the reverberating nothingness.

My friends and I begin eating the entire fruit crate uninhibitedly, in silence. We thrust our tongues into the succulence, chewing louder than the nearing bomb blasts. After satiating our guts, we then see a way up, through the grated street.

On the ground, where rainclouds fall into mist, I remember meeting a man somewhere close. The narrowing, shifty corners of his apartment reeked with the

anticipated horrors of homosexual bachelordom. I slithered through the tiny, dimly lit space, eyeing the specialty fabrics and delicate cabinetry with suspicion.

The man is no frugal spender. He begins preparing a fish salad.

“The salmon are now extinct,” he says, as I eye him opening a can of tuna. “Right and fished out all the way down to the Caribbean.”

His kitchen lights dim to near darkness as I put the last finishing touches on the salad, a musty and pale excuse for nourishment. Lying across from one another on the carpet floor, he asks me how I have dealt with mortality in this terrified world.

I become nervous, as I notice him procuring a crack pipe from the folds of his clothing. I quickly see myself out and into the hallways of the apartment complex.

Attempting to regain some composure, exiting the squalid lavatory by the staircase, I scramble down into the basement of the building. Elderly people sit in a corner, washing each other in a public bath. Some stare, others simply continue, lathering themselves and fondling each other without mind to my presence. I am at a loss for wondering, misdirected by a mental veil of thoughts blanked out.

“Should I return upstairs?” I think, wanting to go anywhere except back.

Leaving the dense residential neighborhoods I see a forest path trailing off beyond the city, where I once spotted a peaceful gathering of teenagers. They had meditative eyes, and looked on with friendship and respect. I understood why they called their humble place in the forest home.

“Why is it that Americans never emerge from the forest?” an outspoken one among them asks me, contemplatively.

I empathize with his heart, worn from the break of political waves crashing in mid-sea. The Mediterranean harbors of our once shared ancestral home give way to the speed and sacrifice of the new, virtual state.

We steal off. The forest path further embraces us. I critique the question asked by the teenager, and do nothing more than breathe with him into the chest of nature. We walk on into the battered, war-torn city, where art galleries once offered the freewheeling pleasures of chocolate and coffee alongside museum alleys of misappropriated cultural wares. In an off-white room, blind without a spot of focal interest, we separate.

Reclined on plush couches in the generic lobby of an unimpressive museum, commercial art hanging tepidly, I later meet the forest youth to watch a political debate. Angered by a statement by one egotistic politician, he becomes increasingly deviant.

“*No one* should be living here,” he asserts, gruffly. His argument outlines the environmental truths of socio-historical degradation in the wake of our 21st century fate. Without a second thought, he unzips the entire leather covering of the couch, expressly looking to filch it for a sell. I stay put, not minding his desperation, watching him leave disaffected, his wounded pride worn visibly in his eyes.

Blasted knocks delivered crushing blows against the weak apartment door where I’d chosen to squat for the night. The hinges creak. Frames splinter. A small crowd of greedy men stand outside, furious. I unlock the door ever so slightly, leaving the chain firmly in place.

“Your friend’s killed our boy. Our little man is dead,” they said, mouths sputtering like chainsaw smoke as they charge ultimatums and death threats against the name of my now absent friend, the forest youth and couch-cover thief.

“He’s skipped town,” I say, and for a second felt ready to take the hit of my life for him. Instead, I bolt without plans to return anywhere near the unsavory groundswell of homicidal aggression. I am simply unwilling to confront a standing guard of murderers immovable as a hostile border of cold territorial logic.

After a filthy cheap bus ride to a secluded beach, I stretch out on the sand, and peer into the bright daze of the lakeshore horizon. I see the thieving forest kid in a drunken rage at the water’s edge, swinging a heavy sack. As I approach to help, I see that madness had shielded his eyes from any semblance of objective sight. He seems another person altogether, I sense a small body hidden in his stolen couch covering.

“Why didn’t you sell it?” I yell over the crashing waves that spat in the turbulent wind. He only eyes me with confounding disinterest. Without a moment’s passing, he flings himself at me. We both fall headlong into the soggy sand, where ocean and earth meet on filmy ocean scum. He throws his weight on top of me so that I’d drown in the ocean with the corpse-filled leather covering.

Instead of fighting, I swim out into the blustering waves as his body plummets against the sea floor. He is suicidal and lost to the world. I grab onto heavy seaweed, and swim toward a rocky outcropping as salt and stone slice my every exposed bit of skin. Losing moisture and all sense of my human form, I float in the salty brine.

An unknown upheaval beneath the waves stings at my sides, and at once, in a bout of mortal fear, I feel helped along, perhaps by the rip current, and even a fellow mammal in my midst. The undertow takes me ever deeper, beyond the shore’s shallow depths, out to the plain sea.

Marooned on an island, miraculously alive, I cast what is left of my bodily strength over a rocky shoal, where sea moss hangs in an unearthly color scheme of subdued purples and deep greens. A human spirit, of unknown origin, aids me in crossing a bruise-hued hillock, emptied of its cavernous rock, sparsely covered by a hollow of volcanic emergence.

Reaching out over the pockmarked swill, the entire island's mass becomes visible, a wonderwork of natural phenomena, indescribable in its breathtaking wonder: *a truly new land*.

In a flash of memory, visualized in the landscape, my teacher appears. I remember her. She had a geographic eye for the visionary, a knack for mapping unintelligible graphic knowledge. In a moment of meditation, led by her unmistakable presence, all provincial mentalities are razed. The teacher absorbs herself in trance. That was her first lesson. She taught purity, how to clarify the soul.

Then, she would take up her reed, and began to play a hypnotic hum, first without fingering. She bent her lips to the microtonal, speaking in ghostly harmonic insights, through the sonic membranes of universal, harmonious mysteries.

As the hum began to rise, a crack in the doorway spelled fear in the eyes of all who looked on entranced. Three nude women of sable hue gracefully dance their way to the front of the room. Their light steps and delicate beauty remain unparalleled.

The warmth of their presence charmed as the teacher began to massage up and down immense, powerful scales. The dance of the nudes became hot with an inner vivacity. Without fully recognizing the impeccable magic of what happened before my eyes, I became completely rapt. I could feel the empty solitude of my own being in another space altogether, truly transported to a plane of existence entirely separate from life's quotidian normalcy. I was thoroughly seduced by their mad eyes, supernatural subtleties, their dance of sprites. The unity of music and dance was so elegantly embodied by the untouchable, ebony enigmas.

Sharpening my eyes once again over the island, looking out, in awe, I place my hand on my head. I feel my absolutely ridiculous head of hair, which I wear so thoughtlessly, a truly laughable explosion of tangling fibers, just waiting to be uprooted. Undead and matted locks of spindles still grow, curiously enough.

Ruffling my head feathers, my entire face is covered with hair. The light of the sky dims, as my two eyes reflect the last rays buried in a mishmash of unwashed, lifeless split ends. My half-toothless smile is unseen on the marooned body of ocean-swept stone.

And as spring blooms and burns in the seasonal round, a fellow recluse, pioneer of the mountainous wood, leads me with caution to the entrance of a water-born cave. An opaque hollow stands overrun with a flooding tide of seawater. The mountain cliffs, almost as sheer as the towers of urbanized modernity, embrace me. Energized and full of bliss, I peer out over the ocean rapids and into the swallowing gorge ahead.

“I am here,” I say aloud. “I am where I know the meaning of risk.”
At once, I lose my reflection over the quickened flow.

After the reappearance and sudden dissolution of my teacher in a passing mirage of island apparitions, I see yet another of my teachers, from an earlier time. He walks as rigidly as the stone beneath his feet.

“I am young,” I think, as I begin to swim across a placid, algae-thick pond, toward him. The day is warm, with cool breezes that flush our gathering skin in a mixed haze of familial sorrow and human tribute to the last days of summer.

I call him father. He is a muscular, bearded intimidation of manhood, and speaks with the grazing lurch of his intense commanding. As we step carefully into two separate crafts, the waters below are revealed in their turbulent strength, despite looking so calm from above, on land. In that moment, he begins to test me through and through, both my body and intellect.

The oral literature of his day is mind-bending and terse, memorable by its strings of morality, geography and spirituality. I am able to recall various characters and events, and as I extrapolate, the waters toss and turn about us unexpectedly. At my wavering voice, his eyes brim with the frosted fire of his dark humor.

Yet, as soon as I veer into future’s allusions, spouting the literary names and creative waves of late centuries unheard, another fire burns in his eyes with serious intent, quieting my youthful mind’s wandering. As he reaches out, he grabs me into his raft and rows with me back ashore. There, I learn of a rooted presence, a reliable source of symmetry, where history and ancestry are united to life.

As we leap back inside a single raft, a phantasmagoric waterfall, obscured by driftwood along the other shore, swallows us both. The heavy drift pours us downward with the violent current, as we spout babbling intellectual veins of undone chronologies and placeless imaginings. As the raft is sucked to an unknowable fate, I continue to whisper out the names of our folkloric literary history in his demanding tone. His voice also resounds upward into the overturned future.

“Humanity is the foreshadowed youth of the present,” he stops, and looks at me square between the eyes. The pressure against my skull wavers in the tempest

of his mind, a telepathy as intense as the forces of nature, as powerful as a stream of water, a funnel of wind, a magnified light hot with laser precision.

I turn and writhe beneath his might, a weight of the age, wanting to lose myself in the sheer natural beauty of the unknowable mists ahead.

Since those days of learning, my father, the great teacher, has since disappeared, and in his silence, absolute, I begin to know my name. Alive at the dawning of the modern century, my mind had been feckless among the archaic forms of nationalization, unceasing in its deliberations. And then, I meet him.

Onward beyond the passage of time, a visitation with my teacher's friend moves in the subtle change of air. He and I often collaborated as spiritualist litterateurs, reducing the midnight oil by flickering translations and interpretations of the mystic poetry that spoke from the depths of our most immemorial of ancestral remembrances.

After, and before sculpting the polyglot frequencies of history, I would greet his entire family, many often arriving from distant continents. There was always the provident ambiance of solidarity, as family meetings often spiraled into political strategies steeped in nonviolent resistance and the upbraiding of the status quo.

His grandmother would ask me if I had yet worked on my first production of fine art as I walked alongside a gathering of picnic tables to share an outdoor meal.

"The beans are down there!" she would yell aloud, respecting my vegetarianism, though not without a touch of intergenerational mockery.

I would sometimes sit with the adolescent son of a longtime family friend. He was always an exceptionally thoughtful individual, full of the innocent inquisitions of youth, transparent as the atmosphere by night as he reflected on our many mutual characteristics. Sitting by the edge of a flowing river, we begin talking about our ideas on social justice through creative action.

Historic revolutionaries hang over us like a wide-screen television, as we aspire to sound the radio airwaves with our alternative worldviews, envisioning a new society, and discerning utopias and dystopias alike in the interest of authentic pragmatism, to act on collective truths.

At the last lick and sip of supper, a soccer ball flies back and forth over the cooling dusk-lit lawn. When the children are fully into the game, the adults return to converse in the yard over stimulants and bitters. While not wanting, our wealth could only be counted by insight and ideation.

The one extraordinarily mindful, and also very athletic teenager kicks the ball in the water and provokes me to jump into the streaming river. I swim above the filthy mud to save the game, breaking deep, seasoned conversation without a thought to prioritizing the children's joy.

“How clean is this water?” he calls out, mockingly.

“Not very,” I respond, laughing with a shrug.

As I return the ball, another guest appears to greet us warmly, and asks that we join him by the front of the house. As we walk onto the street, we can see a mob on the cityscape horizon. The majority is staging a full-scale rebellion. Although often misguided and poorly resourced, we respect them as the weary front in a common struggle. Our artfully collectivized family life only appreciates to greater social significance when we stop to consider life through their eyes.

An acquaintance, a young woman, confident and jovial, meets me in the city later that night on literary terms, to assist in editing a poem of mine. The poem is in its very beginning stages of development, only a few phrases and scattered ideas. She is diligent, and as supportive as ever, offering the special grace of her singular mind. As I begin to tell her the story of its inspiration, I penetrate the image-letters and enter into the mystery of narrative continuity, to explore language experientially.

The concrete walls of the restaurant are unfinished, and breathe with faint shadows. A well-known author sits in a dim corner, incommunicative. He listens deeply into his headphones gathering an inner soundscape from the strange, even horrifying darkness surrounding us. Then, I notice the subject of his literary gamble. They are a grumbling bunch of ruffians thirsting in the mud of urbanized pain.

They secrete primal sounds from unlit depths below, before trailing off into the endless night. In that moment, the famed author saunters off with his recording equipment in hand, leaving us all to the bare depths of his memory, emptied like spillage on the restaurant floor at the piercing thrust of his famously omniscient pen.

I drain every last poetic interpretation through the folds of my mind, pain-stricken, searching through memory and experience, confronted with a hollow mixture of painted nostalgias.

“There,” she says, pointing to a word. “Do you remember?”

The university campus brimmed with beer-gush fads and costumed throwbacks to the glorious sexual revolution of the previous generation. Now their pockets are full with the fool’s gold of American savagery.

“I remember,” I say, and she knows that I suffer, at odds with my literary passions.

“Goodnight,” I say, smiling, and with a lifting embrace. I get up, pay for my drink and hers, and wander through the city parkland woods. Clouds gather, warning of rain.

Returning to the house of the family party, the grandmother paces sleeplessly across the spacious living room floor.

“Such a grand house is a crime to live in alone,” she says, repeating herself, mindfully reminiscent of her late husband. “This is the end, after more than half a lifetime, and he’s gone.”

The family remembers him well. He used to sit, unmoving, for immeasurable hours in that chair by the fireplace.

The next morning, my father arrives. Apparently as compensation for the unseemly facts of life, he is bent on taking all of the young folks out. Most are nearly thirty.

“To get whatever you want!” he stammers, headed toward a nearby market.

Thinking of all the years spent apart, every family member individuated by the unforgiving nature of our greater society. I can’t think of anything more that I would want than for us all to be together, close again. When we’ve all gone through the supermarket aisles, I’m left alone. At a loss to find exactly what I’m looking for, I trudge hell-bent toward the produce, seeing everything I need. There is nothing that I can grasp. “Everything’s rotten,” I determine, empty-handed.

Again, I am marginalized as a vegetarian at the carnivorous, traditional family table. I can’t choose between the swollen cantaloupe and mangled lettuce of the market any more than I can between two cuts of meat at the butcher shop. It all seems inedible to me. While everyone amasses future nourishments, I leave the store, to breathe in the light air uninhibited.

I begin to walk the highways, indefinitely. Then, finally after losing track of the night hours, the starlight fades to sunshine overhead. I bleed out my fictitious personality, and simply gaze at the impeccable might of the great city ahead. The outlying parks are filthy, and a distempered parade of slum-dogs only cements the fact.

At a chess table I find an old friend. His blank expression is indifferent, though welcoming. We move here and there amid the goings-on, attaining food and drink on our way. We survey our present circumstances jadedly. In the usual mode of conversation, we criticize the milieu and technological demonism of our host society, brandishing bitter tongues of ageist cynicism, blaring baseless spite.

I again leave their intellectual streetscape scene unalloyed, suddenly struck with a sense of purpose, to see Love, first-hand.

Amid highway travails and backseat blues, I wrest her from grappled frowns, pressing my leathery skull against window glass. Worn by the suspense of our current circumstance, although transitory, she runs off to her home.

Trying to stop her with a joke, I say, "I need a bath!" She does not grin. She doesn't even look back. And so, I usher the taxi onward. The car halts at a gated stopover, where attendants ask for a fee. The lockjaw tension spills out in nostalgic proportions.

I exclaim to the short-tempered crowd of guards and passersby, "Now!" I begin muttering, unconfident to truly belt out a pretense of words, poorly written with fine ink smeared over a magazine page. The people simply continue on with their conversation and hubbub, undiluted by the anti-climactic triumph of my ever-softening voice. Outside, away from the dizzying mass of people, and drunk on serendipitous camaraderie, I wade in hollow memory.

I again, speak, as through a microphone, repeating two names, despite the overt neglect for my undaunted presence. "Rem and Rom," I evoke a story of old, of the origins of the famed feral twins of Roman antiquity.

Unnerved by the mysterious open landscape beyond the festivities, the backdrop of my mental awareness decays, pasted over with tasteless eyes. I reason and devise a new way of being.

Alone, I wander off into the nearest and thickest patch of forest. I tread the unknowable, pathless, fearless, out of mind, out of time.

On the other side of the forest, in a small town, I send word to my mother, who, in her replies, perceives my reality with clear, empathic reason.

"North of here, it gets even colder, and winter is almost sunless," I write to her.

I ask her exactly what her interests are at present. She is unresponsive.

"There are only two streets that accommodate visitors," I write to her. "They have cafés and the like."

When she arrives, we travel north. Walking on frozen sidewalks, the panoramas are sheathed in white ice, compressing the moment into one sheer, petrified haze. On down what appears to be a main street, it seems as though no one lives anywhere near. Exterior architectural aesthetics are drab, and almost unused. To the outsider, the housing is all-functional, simply meant to protect whatever forms of hospitality exist within it, where the people are driven by weathered necessity.

As we walk into a café, I realize I have enemies here. In the back hall, awaiting our hot teas, a young fellow my age provokes me to wrestle, twisting my muscles and joints in a bout of unwanted pain. Unable to satisfy his violent need to

fight, I ask that we exit the café. And so we return into the cold, sunless ache of our thirsting feet.

Midway through the year, I return south to visit my father, to witness a birth. With camera in hand, I capture my contracting stepmother on the front lawn overlooking the river of my youth. In one great joyful upheaval, she cries, “It’s a boy!”

The body surfaces, breathing air in a scream of firsts.

That night, sitting lone by a coal-burning fire, I am visited by a presence. A naked teenager greets me in the spirit of a strong, lifelong friendship. He unites my familial melodrama with healing insight. He teaches me the meaning of the directions, North and South.

“The North is a cold, childless spirit who withdraws from human life,” he begins. “The South is warm, abundant with youthful diversions, where human passions are over-ritualized. In your mobility is the common direction, a unity of orientation beyond all individuality. Travel wide, and see more of yourself.”

He reaches out to me, to pray with him. He is patient, observing the earthly illumination of the answering stars. And closing his eyes, he recounts the breadth of human tragedy in a string of bitter tales.

“Repatriation,” he says. “Colonization and the staggering visions of post-genocide rehabilitation must be known by the entire world.”

And I wake, alone.

The sun, directly overhead in a cloudless sky, is in full eclipse. Having walked barefoot until dawn, I enter a distant cottage where the atmosphere is tranquil and welcoming. It is a refuge for new intellectuals.

A group of women converse softly over tea as I wander the grounds. In the backyard, a lively, well-kept garden is lush with summer vegetables and medicinal herbs local to the northern clime. The light of the sky hangs slowly from the deep, curling cloudscapes in the wide, midwestern expanse.

Overlooking the hill where the cottage rests, I feel a bustling cruelty unearthed. The dry, heaving crimes of a blind migrant stand in contrast to the settler compunction that fills the writhing horizon like a beautiful face gone crooked.

Endless houses, misshapen and identical, curve along the wasted prairie hills, and there is only a dim emanation of life. As I stare into the perfectly reflecting window of the cottage, an aural wisdom speaks in silence, carrying my body into the comforting home of our Mother: *land*.

The Mystery of the Eternal Who

I am a son of the land, and spend the early hours piecing together outdated maps. New England was once a smattering of intersecting lines and pure conceptual space. Many forms remain unknown to the traditional cartographic expanse. A noticeable, empty space lies in the middle of the map. The uncharted territory stands out over the sandy beige print of the map. Much of the geographic chart is obsolete enough to perplex the modern eye.

Later that night, at the desk of my long-dead great grandfather, an explorer in his own right, I sit transfixed by the empty space on the map. The open mystery turns my attention inward, as I meditate on the image in a near-unconscious stupor. Half involuntarily, though cautiously, and with my utmost will, I peer into the page uninterrupted. I ruminate on the mystifying aura of a palpable nothingness, one so close to home that I can just about feel its environment.

The next morning, a family friend enlightens me about the map. More, he tells me exactly how to get to its empty space. I am awestruck at his lucidity, though doubtful. His ease oozes with overconfidence.

The night leaves me undone. I am heavy with a pestering need to escape from the normalcy of the known, to confront the other. I decide to venture into the empty space on the map, and see for myself. There have always been deer paths by the edges of the lake. The wetlands swarm with impassable riverine trenches. I know this land.

After nearly a day has passed tramping through the spiny wilderness, I arrive at a gate of barbed wire fencing, and to my horrified fascination, see a small city of crowds behind it. The metal has risen from the ground like rogue weeds.

The people had been transplanted there some time before the local history of mapmaking began, and by some unspeakable social gravity or unassimilated segregation, continued to inhabit the uncharted space of the map. Equally startling as their presence is the fact that they had managed to evade the designs of foreign cartographers.

A rudiment of the colonial present, a territory, though flown upwards with a gargantuan earthen structure, the area blisters with the heat of overpopulation. As I enter the grounds I am constantly watched. Every passerby regards me with a hard eye, though, at the same time everyone is warmly delicate and unassumingly friendly.

They say they are from elsewhere, the name of a land I can barely hear straight for it's spoken in an unpronounceable idiom. I am taken by their quaint humility and sensitivity. I am welcome. They say as much. Their respect is immediate.

Suddenly, an alarming fear abounds as thickly as urban smog. I feel I must go, until I am guided along further within the communal round, where about two and a half makeshift city blocks have been built, bizarrely, in the middle of the humid woodland.

The cracked sidewalks bustle with fervent businessmen and stoic women selling vegetables and wares. People trade and converse in heated distraction. I stray towards what looks like a newsstand, an abysmal array of torn paper and disconnected monitors.

“What is this?” I ask the man behind the newsstand. I feel my mouth freeze when I see his eyes glare. He does not respond. His bothered look fixes a grimace before he turns away again, reading an indiscernible stack of pages.

I am as inquisitive as ever, watching ruffian street children buy loose smokes from the gaunt, bearded newsman in the ramshackle structure. Suddenly overcome by a feeling of envy for the young folk, I follow suit, deliberately taken by the signage posted everywhere, a busy wasteland of layered, paginated textures for two and a half blocks.

I try the few phrases I’ve caught listening to the observable public. The newsman is quiet, staring at me when I’m not looking at him. Others join him, all with colorless eyes. As we exchange glances, I notice him struggling with a deep pain that seems to inflict his chest. He is breathing, only with great difficulty.

I wonder, “Is he speechless after our simple pleasantries?”

The one-sided and very brief conversation, while gentle, struck a chord of such powerful resonance that I was never able to return to that space of cartographic emptiness, as the land was actually full of my ignorance, potent with the need for mutual change, by resident, visitor and mapmaker alike.

Soon after, I again entered inside the wooded corner of their failed, landlocked urbanization, a city, it seems, lost to my secluded imagination. Shrapnel of unthinkable memories flies through my ephemeral reflections like broken shards in and around these destroyed hovels called homes. One fragment stung my upper back, and felt like it had forced its way up my neck.

The checkerboard flooring where I stood was sprayed with what looked like clear blood. Then, I saw him. In the space of an instant, I lunged before he could, though immediately loosened my grip from his slippery flesh. His smoke-cored esophagus dripped with moldy puss. In the tarnished metal reflections surrounding us, I could see that the next room was long-neglected. The newsman then loosened his grip from my side. I leave after what felt like my closest brush with death yet.

The trauma of these people still lingers in the dense obscurity of their surroundings, where the way back to civilization is not so much long as it is faint,

through forested escapes. Drinkable and luring, the tidal flush of a shared pain wrests me from constant sleep. Blathering, ongoing thoughts are never put to rest by the wasted highs of an unceasing mind.

Running off the bare edge of wilderness, I realize the fleeting nature of freedom. How to simply be and not be when moved to contemplate homicide, sitting patiently in the background of my every realistic imagining. All experience is fired by raw instinct.

I return to the map room, where innumerable drawings of North America are tangled in an intercalated diagrammatic linearity. A pale shade of red loosely emboldens other people's lands, now claimed by the silence of history. There are patchy splotches of coloration on the otherwise black-and-white delineation of political boundaries displacing the territorial geography with a time-bound worshipping, a cultural veil of absence. I see through the eye of the cartographer and expose his purpose: geographic exploitation.

Looking at the seemingly random delineations, my eyes follow the course of a red zone that borders the heart of New England from the east. My mind is inundated with visions of physical abuse. I see occupied territories, Indian reservations, and military bases. All appear as one and the same demarcation within the red zone.

The visions tear at my imagination, until I see everything with blurry remorse. The entire map is askew with boundaries meant only for the seizure of natural resources, and to impose a structurally racist paradigm of the globalized work force. Land history has become no more than a bygone figment of antique cartography. The purpose of the modern map encourages unearned superiority over our fellow human beings. Today's maps divide lands only where the page ends.

As I contemplate the graphic madness of the imagery before me, I turn a new leaf, and set out farther afield, to summit towering buttes in the mountainous lands west. Hiking through a valley pass, immersed in the cold sky air, my mind is unobstructed, free of soil and hair.

I know where I am. I have long distrusted maps. Emerald streaks of sky daze the mind below the tail smoke of Venus. The jewelry of her solar orbit befits that galactic goddess. She is sometimes seen in the window of a passing jet. The horizon is wide open. The Milky Way is clearly visible by its spiraling, multi-armed wonders.

Our island city was once a gorgeous home. The winds prayed a unity between every passerby and neighbor, lifted into star-born heights. I would often spend afternoons passing by a group of peers, walking to underground concerts and parkland festivals. My apartment was a popular one on such nights.

Rows of musical devotees beautified the sidewalk graffiti down towards pathways leading to my humble lair, where we heard raw passions rage into the undying night. Above, other apartments teemed with life. The parted flaws of a missed generation wailed with unheard rhyme in the melodious burn of smoke and cash.

After a drink, I stammer breathless under the foundations of my beloved street, sidewalks etched with youthful signs of love before the pavement set. The city turns to a wealthy simulacrum of electric night. Urban fantasies steam and fume amid the stroboscopic hunt, concrete jungle nomads prepare space for a name, a god, an image, a face, a sound.

Everyone becomes more and more restless with each day, pouring over the hollow loose ends of spontaneous aural ceremonies. In the post-modern dirge, plain and simple yearnings for the breath of magic in life waned under the new moon phase of skyward lust.

The discolored throat of a lover opens at dawn to emit its lust through the holy mouth holes of all present, gyrating together over groundless energy. I remember how we moved to the belly of Earth's final tempting before She would recoil, and burn our wasted tongue of its every last divinity.

Afternoons were then spent languorously. Often before sleeping, we set up hammocks and held private film screenings. Scenes of the Amazon River cast tobacco-thick memories of old friends and young lovers.

A fellow artist, a sculptor of spirit, places a papier-mâché figure of the twin manifestations of the Hindu goddesses Kali and Uma behind the projector. In the late hours, as many doze beneath the flickering façade, black fire spits with ash from the sculpture, impeded by the radiance of the All-Mother's gaze. While most on the floor just yawn, blind with fatigue, I am impressed by the artist's magical visionary innocence, conveying a child-like eye for the Hindu cosmology, expressed as a Faustian drama in Dadaist cultural syntax. And the screening begins again, with the player on repeat.

The dark howling jungle cackles and hoots in the avian-simian craze, a sonic insanity swept through my over-civilized musical palate as humid tensions raised sky high in the Amazonian night. A river vessel stands motionless across the river by an isolated village of thirty native inhabitants.

It was there. I remember smoking a Peruvian cigarette with a quiet, philosophic friend. Breaking a freakishly silent moment, a hand lifted up a leftover packet of smokes under a handrail, an offering to us. We grabbed them, thoughtless, though grateful, looking at one another in smiling surprise. Returning

to our laughter amid the sleepless rainforest cackle, we stained the lungs of the earth with anxious conversation and latent abandon.

Later that night the clear skies illumined my mind with archaic reminiscences. Up to that very sky, I gazed, alone into the ageless wisdom of unpolluted and climactic earth-born reflections. The universe became a translucent womb of light, wherein my eyes sank as a body of thunder into the dank rainforest moat, encircling the mother of creation and freeing the reptilian scale from the mammalian chord, giving voice to the source of life, sprung with Martian light.

The next day, two Peruvian men, both devoted uncles and fathers, men of their word, reminded me of my loving family, and offered me a safe haven of fraternity. Their abode, though in relative disrepair, while still upright in the midst of constant flooding, offered the kind of natural strength and humble solace for a younger man such as myself.

When I left, I shed tears of remorse for having become so loyal to their gentle friendship. They would not let me leave without a few of their possessions, a curious metal set of imported mugs, bedecked with silver broaches and gilded handles, all crafted with an aesthetic richness. They warned us of a nearby volcano.

“If you are to approach the mount,” a middle-aged man among them said, “Do not come from the east, as eruptive activity from below the earth quakes apart loose boulders in that direction, and then there are the plumes of deadly gas.”

Naïvely adventurous, I hike up the steaming mountain. Near the summit, the rumbling forge cracks the ground in a spray of hot earth. Racing down to the foot of the mountain, the flowing lava is within earshot as the rock-hard steam fills my lungs. Before the raging momentum engulfs me in its deathly cast, I raise a handful of cool stone to the sizzling winds. The steam of the ground dissipates with the implosive power of the volcanic surge.

At the foot of the mountain, I hear dim metallic bursts, and watch silvery orbs explode in the starless, overcast sky. When I scan the black stone earth, I find bullet shells filled with the white, homemade alcohol that is served perfunctorily on leathery, candlelit café tables in a nearby town in the hills. On the western outskirts of the highland range, vibrant waters rush beneath the center of the unruly Earth.

Rumors float atop subterranean currents. The local currency has devalued the people to endangerment. The fate of other ancients is rife with the talk of evening storytellers. The horizon appears ahead, drowned in the eye of a continental storm. Everyone feels they are at the height of a neoclassical cataclysm.

Ordering a coffee is now political. The floors of cafes assume a dungeon's dearth of characteristics, amalgamating. No one's blinded. All blink against

caffeinated, nicotine-burnt minds, and stutter over oblivion, stupefied by social leadership heaving at the seams. Hulks of artificial light shatter traditional customs with an inhuman mockery in broad daylight, only to gain a breath of consensus among the invisible minority.

Aging families wade in the swamp of daily existence, where pockets of darkness are as thick as sugary syrup on the marked tongues that vocalize terror with a lingering potency. Colors seem to fade where the warehouses of derelict manufacturing scream into the untraceable night. A musical haunt brews. All that is sacred in life seethes in the smokeless fires of Energy.

Nightly, I see the woman of my dreams. Where trendy audiences recline leisurely on metal chairs in theatrical cafés, I watch her perform the contemporary music of the Mediterranean. Inside, a dome of unfinished concrete is styled with fresh graffiti, to render the attitudes of squatter paradise.

I begin to feel proud, watching her, a most seductive woman creating wildly, refreshing original harmonies, breaking rhythms into the fragments of a body free of soul. She exemplifies the highest standard of daring artistic quality.

A kit drummer with a rig of over ten cymbals begins a sharply percussive introduction. His spatial ingenuity ascends in the movement of a lush, sonic stream-of-consciousness, playing on the arts of faith and the magic of knowing.

Standing beside the audience, near the well-lit stage, small spotlights inject funnels of visible dust in the vigilant air. I see her. Gowned in her flowing dress, a magnificent explosion of black hair and glowing skin, I am a martyr to her art.

The next day, she boards a flight to the other side of the world. Once off the plane, at the airport hotel, a troupe of country musicians and a famous duet see the receptionist for their rooms. She, in full regalia, as for a performance, and shoots off through a glass doorway, unseen with the swift flap of her flowery dress.

As the concierge waits bitterly, she reenters the lobby, sweaty as a marathon runner in mid-race. The performance finished, jaws drop. The next day, she decides to race time, and again, to fly elsewhere.

Back home, she lights a stage at an arts festival. Before her set, a glowing dance company exhibits the stunning decadence of classical costuming, their white-painted faces mirroring paper fans. I eye the stage from afar, sitting with old friends. Then, she walks onstage, without her instrument. To the nervous curiosity of the festival, she begins to sing.

She is gorgeous, and mesmerizes with an evocative elegance. Her voice carries an articulated genius of high emotion and well-trained harmonies. Her upper register fills the captive audience with the recognition that there is only one heart between us. She stretches her voice, fortuitously, collecting our sense of being, then sits. We admire her beauty.

Eyes bulging, I have never felt more separate from life, and staring from afar, she looks straight through me. My heart is permeated with hers, besieged by the swelling of her powerful lungs, vibrating together to the inflections of her music, as one voice filling the atmosphere with honest humanity.

That evening, we flee the city together, its festivals, noise and clutter. The wood of her log cabin creaks. The timeless sounds of insects breed an authentic woodsiness in our minds, brimming with reclusive inspiration. Inklings and whisperings from the unheard northern ecology coalesce above spindly mycelia. The textured soil moves like slow waves atop the desolate, nonhuman landscape. The atmosphere is redolent with bittersweet aromas after the fates of reckless city life have long passed.

A native inhabitant lives near. The desire to socialize has become transitory, and fades with our untimely designs. We are hidden by groves, and endure the winter in the aftermath of urban escape. Unintentionally, one day, we see her face. She appears edgy with bare emotive instances of unknowable sorrow. Under the whistling canopy, the rain weighs on the frayed wicks of lightless trunks.

Despite the fears of our metropolitan imagination, she is not a murderer, and never was, far from a serial killer. Thin and shy, she greets us gently. We invite her into our common room. Her flesh is woven in knots. Her gnarled eyes penetrate into our pointed vulnerability. The tensing noose of our isolation bespeaks an unforeseen warning. One night, she dines with us.

A month passes in mystic passion. Gathering my things in a sudden fear-ridden bout of blurring, raw insanity, I feel a need for my computers, my bags, the endless compartments within compartments filled with this or that.

The woman of my dreams had since left the cabin a week earlier, to perform her music abroad. Her spirit felt slaughtered in the white heat of this wooden mystery, so she said. I still hear her steps in the morning, and late at night, having freed myself from the burdens of owning an automobile. More and more, I simply wish to be relieved of everything I own. If I had the grit and sand enough, I would possess only the random trappings of a turning mind.

On my way to the car, I fall, retching in golden mud. The ground opens into a hole of stinging bewilderment. I drive off sputtering and churning in this earthen stomach, heaving and ingesting my whereabouts over a timetable of eternity. Blinking water drips onto the metallic soil. I reject all sense of an earthly awakening, peering anxiously into the soft light of the hill-mined tunnels ahead, beckoning me to escape further. The whooshing thrusts of air against stone inflame my mind with a hardened will.

As I open a window, a funnel of heat presses its vulgar scent into my eyes. I sink ever deeper through the lightless maw, and faint. The near-death experience untangles my nerves, as I gather my composure and observe a bus stop ahead, at the end of the tunnel, where white light now pours in through the cloud-cast sky.

Eagerly, a host of youthful newcomers board the bus with their luggage in tow. Stupefied, lost faces daydream in an unsayable nightmare of unreal joy. I leave my car behind, and all of my things. Walking toward them, I see in their hollow eyes my mourning mirrored. We're off, unencumbered by our own direction. We'll face the sun of the age, they say.

The opaque murky void of sky billows in from under deep sable cloud cover. A rain stirs, as invisible splatter on the windows, whipped off the brush of some invisible painter on an unseen, glassy canvas. I smoked in the storm-tossed night. Clarity emanates with the intensity of an illumined computer screen.

In town, hotels seethe with the aftermath of postmodern absurdity, a sexualized ward of incongruous freedom in squared shells, where we breathe in poisons, and fly powerfully to the ends of our swollen minds. I rub against the thigh and heel of a lover asleep in her violent convulsions as she lives in a metaphysical world of pure noēsis.

She, transported beyond the narrow hour, answers to her inborn potential. The warming ceiling light balances in her mind with elegant force, enough to welcome me inside, forever flushed with the intimate secrecies of her waking touch.

The morning, lifeless in the southern winter, breeds an inhuman paucity of life. In the lobby, I meet international poets who greet me shyly.

Sitting in the amphitheater, encased under the waning spotlight, I speak with an organizer, only minutes before the curtain falls. I ask if musical accompaniment is part of the show. "Of course," she says thoughtlessly.

I'll need to retrieve the instrument of my accompanist. I go back downtown. Onstage, an actor muses on the pulse of action, and speaks to a stream in the conscious wisdom of unprepared emotional night.

With lofty trespasses, I find my way backstage, wondering, waiting, ever patient to hear myself in the acoustics of the high theater. Together with the delicate instrumentation of my loveliest of charms, we sing in the language of spirit.

Backstage, a light sepia-toned corridor splits into a labyrinth of doorways. An old acquaintance meets me behind a curtain, in the shadowy nook.

"Oh! How are you?" he asks, distractedly.

Proudly delighted to meet onstage, he announces his part, “This is an Old World play.” With equal candor against his showy façade, his shiny outlook, I greet him kindly, and walk past, unimpressed.

I return to no one, only my disoriented grumbling, a burdened mug, punch-drunk with untenable sorrow. In an underground café, a stage is coldly lit with dusty spotlights. A group of teenagers greet me, strongly affirming their camaraderie, comfortable in their sturdy countenance. Impromptu community breeds fair recognition, as all present dice cards and string their hats to the unblinking mold of unspoken friendships.

One, slightly overweight, fiddles with some unidentifiable, obsolete technological gadget. Blowing through it, he creates the sharp, high tone of a flute. Everyone in earshot staggers in smiling amazement, as he, with equally curious gestures, places a wooden object on a plate full of water. After drilling holes into the wood, he begins to shape harmonies and effervescent rhythms from the strong colorations of his malleable windpipe.

His instrumental play continues to the delight of us all as he sits under a strong light, entertaining with jazz intonations amid the subdued betting ruckus of artless, kindred folk.

One man at the cards table looks me straight in the eye with clear intentions. A warm regard filters through the depth of his unwavering eyes as he hands me a cloudy glass of thin, whitened water.

“Would you like some?” He asks quietly.

“I’ve heard of you,” I respond, accepting, quick to respect him.

Unintentionally, spontaneously, by gambling, we created a Temporary Autonomous Zone, a moveable occupation of unmotivated force, formed by an atypical sequence of instants. We are artists, magicians of creation, provoking the unseen and unheard to emerge, spotlit. We free each and every one of our last moments with interconnected spatial continuities in the visceral act of our communal play. And in the boastful pantomime acknowledgment of our better selves, we are an undreamt torrent of sound.

Ocean waves move blindly over our urban fate. After a short walk alongside the river pathway, I sit, laughing quietly with a group of revolutionary individualists, spit-shining the nature of mind with our DUI collectivization.

A few generously hand me some of their most unusual instruments, self-invented out of constant devotion to their original ingenuity. Experimenting with a four-tiered frame drum, I observe how the circle waits for space and silence. Everyone listens carefully for a light to group the momentum of the newfound

freedoms that daily manifest before our eyes, unacquainted under the influence of pure music.

The next evening, I walk through a twice-displaced bazaar, a treasure trove for belligerent desires, fueled by remuneration amid strong wafts of perfume, spice, and the kohl-lined female blink of human greed.

I feel saturated with an immense, apologetic feeling. A downpour of mental guilt bruises my faded intentions with each step deeper into the dim havoc throughout the winding earth-ground pathways, leading into unlit alleyways. Mental obscurity beckons my drowning, swollen self-pity as I lead myself ever deeper into the unknown grave of what I find amassing in the esoteric ecology of a city borough.

The wares of an instrument-seller captivate. Albogues, duduks and exotic snakeskin frame drums line the wooden frame of a rickety wooden stand, seemingly unattended. As I stretch my hand out to feel the skin of a drum, an impish sprite, a young, rosy-cheeked tomboy gazes, beatific into a beam of light above my face.

I can't help but notice her unusual countenance. A proud and noble stature shows through her youthful facial expressions, shining brighter than the floodlight above us. Without speaking, she begins gesturing her hands in avian wing patterns, mimicking her tongue, conveying a plethora of human emotion without missing a beat.

Her play is genius. Her choreographic storytelling is well-expressed, and imbued with clarified meanings so commonly misunderstood. Yet, too often unsaid, to voice symbolic meaning through the body is all the more effectual. At the end of the informal street performance, a local woman emerges from the shadows of neighboring stone building. The antique walls narrow in the market alleys.

"That's a well-known Indigenous dance theatre," she says, confirming the story as well-told in the spirit of myth and dream.

The young girl pauses, ready to begin anew. I am breathless with wonder and admiration. She gathers a small hand drum close into her chest. Only a touch larger than her palm, she taps its skin with a wild energy, a direct speech of rhythmic pulsing. She speaks through the abstraction of form with peerless artistry. My eyes fog, my mouth falls, as I feel burdens of internal weight lifted.

In that moment, I enter the sky, bodiless over sonic clouds, a booming voice silences the air at the cusp of our earthly atmosphere. I have been here before. With her help, I will return.

The grasses spell warm delight, all cracked insect-green coloration. The waving eyes of nature stare back at me with full recognition. In her sights, I am outlined, as by an unfinished outline of chalk. There is a solemn restitution with human presence in the vibrancy of environmental hues. I walk through the high rushes eagerly, and feel the sting at the tail end of a long forgetful period of mourning.

The air fills my nostrils with its intense humidity. An overwhelming lushness gravitates towards my brain. All the follicles from the plant world betray my unaware scents with an awakening need. Aromatic, I speed through the vibrant, near-neon lime-green touches and find my way back to the log cabin under the gorgeous density of a well-pollinated woodland atmosphere, bred for the mind's eye to pierce through to planetary secrets untold.

Penniless, I am a drifter of smiles, a careless frame of humanity, basking among ageless peers. "Who do I see?" I ask myself, at a loss.

Some days, in the misty softness of the forest, I feel my mother. She is young, in the prime of her late twenties. She takes pity on my careworn state, looking to hand me a cash bill, even in the midst of pure nature.

The light mountain air feeds my intoxicated bliss, the sensation of forgetting and remembering cycles with an intense velocity, with an embracing strength unknown to my sense of a normal life. There is a silent energy about, allowing me to traverse the freedoms abreast in this long-sought hollow of meadow and cloudless rays.

I brim over with gladness, alive at once, with my friend and mother. Holding her in the sunshine womb of celestial pride, we walk through the silky meadow, renewed. Attaining a final vision before the gully drops off the edge of a nearby cliff, I turn around and follow the nightly smoke of fellow friends, preparing for revelries in the aftermath of youth. Meanwhile, all remembrance of my mother stays behind, patiently awaiting my return, at the precipice of a subterranean mystery.

I remember now. We met in bars, malls, cafes, and sidewalk parks. The entire time it was as though we had met in the privacy of her home, or even more truly, in the secrecy of her mind. She had let me into her imagination of herself. The way she was so sweet, surreal. Figments of smiles and laughter lit up our shared space as from a mutual brain. And she spoke with a borrowed voice.

"The duplex works well," she says, "For the married couple on the other side and her best friend and his family on the other."

One day, her friend shows me their leaking roof, a madhouse of running anxiety. Unable to fix the problem, and wanting to get our minds off the scene, we attend a nearby gathering of independent artists, an awe-inspiring diversion of

human ingenuity, off the beaten trail as an earmarked page in the unassuming book of the city.

Outside the venue, a street musician plays his original recordings and sells them. His accordion is delightful. I continue on through the peopled havoc, stirring blindly with blissful listening and warm-hearted aspirations, to embrace the heart of our local culture and be drawn into its cultivating imperfections.

“This is the last day,” he says, exasperated by his destroyed home, his failing marriage, and the worsening health of his child.

No visitation, no indrawn temptation, not a flicker of need.

“What happened?” I ask, to no reply.

I decide to see for myself about the disastrous state of affairs. His shape-shifting personality appeals to me, though now he has to hold fast to the foundation of his life. Although I had not seen this side of him, I always knew his face would change under the stresses of living.

Entering his house the next day, no one welcomes. Walking up the austere mahogany stairway, the banister is buffed and shining. The doorway to his study is slightly open. I feel a deep, unwavering silence, leading me to become more and more curious, and driven through with the pain of loss. I see reality. I had known it all along, though it had always been served so politely, as it were, direct to my mind, as to be intellectual, defended by my loving family, friends and acquaintances of my naïve past.

Weeks go by, and I find him one day, sitting on a high leather chair, torn and stained, his face bearded, not as I’ve know him. He exudes the facial inflections of an elderly man. His hair is slightly whitened, and his face squared and unmoving.

His countenance, exposed under the antiquated sepia light, is only recognizable as an acrid tinge of nostalgia, sentiment and memory, subtly issuing as from within and between our speechless minds. The instant is near, as he looks at me, stone-faced. An unseen floodgate pours from his untamed eyes. Then it fades and I leave, pained with the eternal mystery of who.

Earth Wandering Humanities

The narrow birch forest consumes dusk in the mouth of night. Gangly cerebral mycelia entangle upwards in a drowning, lonesome tank of damp musk and potent swampland. The decomposition is palpable. Rain is on the mind of the sky as deep gray clouds swarm above with unreasonable drear.

I notice a hobbling duck push into the delicate, unmoving waters. In that moment, an enormous hawk, silent from its treetop perch, readies to assail. In one deft sweep, massive talons emerge from the underbelly of the raptorial bird, eyeing to snatch its prey. The duck, a female, is raised into the unforgiving sky, its feathers soaked with blood as it surrenders to the predation, paralyzed.

Fear evaporates with the humidity in a cyclical adaptation of atmospheric hosts. The dark forest leads under a storm-cast flood of opaque black fog. It hovers above the dimly lit cabin, barely in sight. Leaves, burnt by the frozen winds crumple with delicacy under our unforgiving steps. Sense-deprived, we share water in the hollow bitterness of the cold mystery ahead.

I can see the eye of the storm. The massive plain tumbles and writhes under the violent sky. Winds frost and spit with ferocity over the mist-engulfed earth. With dramatic sweeps, I gesture to the monstrous climactic movement. The *derecho*, a land hurricane, slows with animated motion at my every summoning.

In a torrent, I move forth, without care, directly into the eye of the storm. Debris swirls about at lightning speeds. I see coins swirling in the deadly winds. One falls into the folds of my clothing. I look at its face, engraved with figures in headdresses. The icons move into my vision with holographic surrealism.

In a misdirected bout of blind grasping into the frothy gusts, I palm a globular stone rolling about the ground. An almost exact, spherical replica of Earth, the orb seems faintly illumined, vibrant in the tempestuous air. I begin to recognize continental forms within the orb, gazing with absolute absorption. The storm subsides overhead.

I am safe, overlooking a weather-ruined plain. The fevers of ancient life return, high on survival. Then, I see people, an unknown band of hardened souls. They near. The men have sharp features, high cheekbones, flat foreheads, and leathery skin, toughened by age and strife. A man walks ahead, with two women.

There is a striking cruelty in their rough behavior, fast becoming volatile. We are all survivors of a near-apocalyptic storm, yet they are an atavistic creation of the wild forces about, left unrestrained since the birth of the world. Clearly traumatized by the aftermath of the *derecho*, they begin enacting superstitious escalations of end rites. Their arch-man is fully armed, sheathed in pointed metal, adorned in ceremonial dress. He forces one woman to dig in the mud.

As I observe this strangest of gatherings, I feel a heavy weight around my neck, and look down. Below my breast, I see, in the ground, a brilliant chain, of thick girth, fitted with unusual, glimmering stones.

One of the women is now bent over, and with her bottom up is penetrated violently by the arch-man, humping into her so hard that blood streaks down her thighs. Even at a distance, I see it clearly. I can feel the eerie, ceremonial travesty, a brutal pagan exorcism of trauma. While she is ritually raped, she continues to dig into the packed earth at his command.

In the shocking horror, absorbed by their percepts, no one notices my unmoving stare, as I watch the unspeakable abuse, paralyzed with fear and guilt. The man grabs her vagina as he continues to penetrate her, wiping his face with her blood.

He yells wildly, to abandon, and I am left to wonder if they are not the wandering spirits of the subsurface roots of this earth. There were times, on this plane, when rape was thought of as naively as drinking from the fountain of youth.

She has dug her own grave. As the ditch becomes large enough for her to sit in, he pushes her, laughingly, into the bloodied mud. Other men walk over, sick with tortured minds, they lower their loincloths and ejaculate into the pit. As more and more men fill the woman's pit, others pour into it what looks like milk.

The woman, neck-high in the lowering goop, cries in terror. Her eye gleams with a ghastly stare, and meets my eyes. She's the only one who notices my presence. I am fast losing all sense of innocence. The second woman is then forced to climb atop her head, naked from the waist down. She squats, adding her menstrual blood to the pit.

Speechless, I race toward the arcane ceremonial atrocity with stone in hand. I leap over to the menstruating woman, despite the transfixing glares amassing. One of the men stabs her in the back of the neck like a matador would cut the final blow of a beast. She shudders.

Impaled, the woman's face immediately turns skeletal, her frame grappling with the loss of life. Horrified by the dissolution of the rite, the men mimic her death rattle, as the shallow dust of her now pale remains incinerate in one heap of draining flesh.

The internal colors of the stone play in the disappearing daylight. In the thickening mud, I see metal wink, and from the saturated soil, a gold coin surfaces unearthed from the ground.

The entire ritual site is swept into the returning storm once more, as I look into the engraving on the gold coin. The violent wind carries discolored mineral debris, as the coins engraved with feathery headdresses disappear, their ancient

visages flashing and flickering in the fading mud of ground, drying below me, whipped by all-encompassing gusts.

Back at the cabin grounds, I meet up with some friends who have arrived to the plains from afar. “Below the south,” they say.

We enter the home of a neighboring recluse. Maps of archaic territories, showing the settlements of their original inhabitants lie open. It is sharply marked with pencil and ink. We can all feel that this is a place of serious study. The ecological soul of the place stirs us to feel a deep, innate yearning to be quiet, and listen within.

Then, we hear the intriguing sizzle of wild game. The recluse invites us onto the weathered upholstery of his homely comforts. Indrawn, yet tempting, the host’s gaze is untamed, always welcoming, though also warning. As friends and I sit around the country table, the food begins with due presentation. Decadent meats and thick bean dishes melt in a haze of tantalizing scents. Conversation ensues. Drink follows. The company targets my lack of linguistic comprehension. I’m among friends of such disparate origins.

Dejected, I comb the ghastly wilderness, alone under the silent, new moon. Pitch darkness swallows my mind’s inner, mutual fight, like a spiritual vacuum cleansing me of emotion. Self-trust extinguished with each step against unknown forest paths, I walk until dawn. On my own, I know the sleep of the empty sky, the abandoned railways, and graffiti-streaked concrete beside shallow streams. All are mere steps towards the final return, to where I once began long ago.

I can hear the city from afar, the shrieking rubber, and the low boom of street life. Night on the bus route is darker than in the forest. It must be the new moon, or heavy cloud cover. I feel the sneer of public eyes, gawking at my withdrawn attitude, my brain splayed by the forest calm.

“What is he concealing?” I hear a stocky young man ask an elderly woman beside him. As they both see me together, wondering about my fate, their faces swollen and grotesque with malnourishment in the bored clash of spatial insensitivity. The dangerously naïve mood holds a definite presence of unsightly, childish greed. I keep to myself.

“Where do I get out?” I think, almost audibly vocalizing my most basic need to escape the antisocial conundrum of over-civilization. I implore into the obscure open, as indistinct concrete slabs give the lonely night its shape.

I have gone, way out past the usual parts, far beyond the den of my cabin, to the haunts of a recluse, and further, into the urban night. I am afraid, though I hardly show it, anxious that I’ll lose all semblance of sanity.

The last passenger on the bus steps down at an abandoned building leading to a bridge over parkland, a notorious breeding ground for the mischief of those called into the night. I disembark at the next stop. As I cross the bridge, I am encroached on all sides by the jeering minds of vagrant, intoxicated men.

“Where’re you going?” they slur, with bowels distended, and legs shrunken. “What’re you doing?”

“This is my way home from work, got a new shop to keep in town,” I answer, trying to maintain a blind confidence. Like the war hawks and fat cats in the towers above, they know when I’m hiding something. Then they jump me, dousing my eyes, ears, tongue and anus with a scentless liquid.

I wake up to silence, and a grinding headache. It’s still dark. I fainted after a sudden nervous breakdown in the midst of such terror. Slowly, I feel hallucinogens pulsate with a charged rush of blood through my wrists, my neck and pelvis. There is an autonomous, palpable life of its own coursing through my body. I am overcome by an energy known only by the endless night of wandering through intoxications wafting through the needful land. As the harmless seeds of entropy fall away, and let me down ever so gently, I feel stronger than my human presence.

The footsore wandering continues into the margins of the city, and through the long night of suburbia. The first thing I hear in this newly manufactured terrain is the sound of a banged up old station wagon jangling out onto the road.

The car is stuffed with a hoarder’s guilt. The vehicle stops, only a couple hundred feet away. I walk over, carefully. Looking in from the rear, the shredded floors are mostly covered in piles of junk and the like. The driver steps on the gas ever so lightly, jolting the car ahead, just enough so that I’m unable to see what’s inside. After stalling a moment, the driver speeds away at full throttle. The lights don’t seem to work. And only a few seconds later, the muted siren and flashing strobe of a police cruiser can be heard, following close behind.

From a shadowy nook, I see police lights dim, out for the collar. As I approach, the lights whir and sound. Still, I am curious. I watch the scene, standing inconspicuously behind a stand of bushes. An overweight female cop seems dissatisfied, bored as she scans awkwardly through the inside of the car for an overly drawn out length of time. They must know each other, I imagine, as I watch them converse. I stand, wearily amused, and hear the stinging curses of the driver. Then, the cop raises one finger. She displays her single digit in front of a blaring flashlight before the nervous eyes of the driver. Even I can see how thickly her fingertip skin is covered with green dust.

She further inspects the dust with a beaming stare before swiftly grabbing the arms of the driver and locking him in a tight hold.

“I’ve found marijuana in your car, you are under arrest!” she yells, as he screams, fighting to get away with a murderous intensity.

“What! All you found was a fingertip swipe of dust!” the adolescent calls out, fearing for his life. I am in awe, almost ready to burst out in laughter at the asinine degradation of law enforcement. The teen then squirms in contempt, defiant with unforgiving intensity, as the cop is overwhelmed, and calls for backup.

In a matter of minutes, a police SUV pulls up ahead of the first cruiser with two large, burly officers emerging with a violent mien. They attempt to handcuff the young man with riot-busting strength, steaming in a haze of purposeless might. He loosens himself, though quite easily, and struggles still with an unmatched determination. Suddenly, he’s thrown about ten feet with a blood concussion. His face puffs up red, as he’s roughed up in single blow.

On my way to the steps of the police station, which doubles as a courthouse, I see the underage victim of policy brutality regain consciousness. A man on the sidewalk recognizes me. “I remember you!” he says warmly, with a cheeky grin. I walk into the stone edifice. The young man stands before a judge. He states his case:

“Sir, this is an unjust conviction. I am on my way to gaining residency to live here in your country with my wife. This will put me under. Don’t let a finger swipe of dust ruin this man’s life.”

The judge takes pity.

Later in the season, I see that young fellow again, this time at an outdoor music festival. Only a few weeks prior, the entire northeast of the United States had been liberated from its bitter criminalization of youth. “Prohibition ends with us,” they said, and truthfully. There is chaos, though a positive kind, a wildness and zeal for life.

On the main stage, a woman and her animus gear up, readying to perform music. Even from a distance, I notice tensions rise and fall between them like competitors in mid-match.

I sit and watch the festivities surround the stage and crowd. The festival grounds are swathed in a gloomy fog. I forecast a no-show or gong show from the next act. There are weak ends in the band. I sense their lack of confidence. They are full of pretense. A friendly burl of a man sits in front of the stage. I walk away, fading into the frenetic backdrop. I begin to overhear the exchange of unkempt words.

I see familiar faces. The wheeling limbs of young women in full swing, old friends whose eager conversations syncopate with the rhythms of hot bands. The public eye is invigorated.

“He’s unwilling to learn from any classical training...” a pair of musicians gossip about an improviser, who they both dislike, for her highfalutin lack of discipline.

Highly paranoid, I listen to their judgmental interpretations, and feel the shallow disregard of the artists’ conflict over the right way to unify self-expression. In that moment, the first plucked string of her improvisation can be heard from the main stage.

Afterwards, as I wander in the dusty eve, I watch the anima of my dreams interviewed in the drinkable light, buried by a media pandemic. I feel increasingly deflated by the sight of artists under so many spotlights, on and off their stages, every gesture and thought recorded as scripture in the cult of fame.

I realize the burly man who I saw standing at the front of the stage earlier is now next to me. Our eyes meet, and we begin talking about the troubles of our culture. He listens well, and throws out into our common air a revealing range of insights. I am comforted by his freewill offerings of friendship in various intellectual forms as he leads the conversation towards manifold resolutions regarding the complications of a society divided by its wealth.

After the enlightening, impromptu conversation, I am again excited to hear improvised music. Truly, all music originates in the reactive pulse of the heart, the spontaneity of living, and psychologically, as an intuitive wresting of the mind from earthly clamor.

Under the hottest spotlight, she sits fixated, unwilling to continue her interview. In a moment of uncertainty, she answers a question vacantly, and points at me in the abutting crowd. Soon, I am in her gravitational pull. She motions invitingly in my direction, her palm opened, as she raises her hand slowly up.

In an instantaneous bout of visions, I am the sensation of her holding me up, as above shallow water. I feel weak, like one of my legs is a stilt, and that I am barely discernible from the foreground of shimmering gold hues in the distant seascape horizon. I turn around, and walk from the festival grounds, toward the shore.

I remember the hills on the other side of the sea, where I once walked under the full-moon shade of its sheer cliffs in the southeastern hinterlands of the Eastern city. The urbanized expanse was as overbearing as modernity’s rush, cascading over the polluting thoughts of industrialization as progress. Burning with hot anger, I sink in the deep mud of my trivialized remorse.

“They had a plan?” I ask myself, eyeing the inglorious ruins of once-worshipped architecture, still clinging to the life of an idea: free assembly.

The race of motorcycles and small vans gargle in the steaming froth of bold smog. All passersby spit murderously into the disappearing rain. Deserted in the outskirts, nude with the pang of outstretched kin, I am lost, reaching for high ground in the sand-whipped light. Moonless, my fatigued mind craves for recognition within the atmosphere at hand. I am a lone walker aside crumbling roads. A bus skids past, and slows to a halt. I entertain harsh tongues.

Where there is blinding rage, haste is personified. Here, stone labyrinths wind through lifeless paths, all drowning in the cold sweat of a follower. Runners turn and writhe in the pain of their struggle to go the distance, instilling in me a turning of the body towards strength, power and urge.

The wandering hate of the musky haze fills me with unrivaled curiosity and inborn shame. I know no warmth beneath the searing sunlight, and so, spend days searching for the hunted, the muscular, and those rent apart by the knives of soul-swallowing friendships. I am cursed, alongside highways, intermixed with the foul bitterness and acrid taste of inner city commotion.

A man asks that I follow him to the southern edge of the city. I know of his origins, how he rose from below the great desert, and sought refuge among the societies of the river delta. He races athletically through a palm forest oasis. I watch him tread the waking ground, with each delicate step and light footprint pressed into the unsteady ground with a quiet precision. I keep up, miraculously.

A narrow tunnel of limbs opens through the thick upturned ground and low-lying canopy. An old, very tall man runs alongside us, barely seen in the overgrown thicket. Wearing foreign clothes, he’s drenched in sweat. When exposed at a clearing, the oppressive heat of the sun boils out the moisture of our skin. I lag behind, bewildered. We are unaware of each another, although we run parallel through the dense stands of palm. I am sure they will keep running off into the forest as I tire, and fall back. They are full of life and vigor.

Later, as I walk onward, unable to keep up, I find the man from below the desert at a suburban restaurant. The obscure entrance and informal hospitality is designed specially, to serve people from his homeland. The city around us is gray and bitter. A host of flies seems to mock our every slightest movement as we attempt to enjoy our food while coping, annoyed by the swarms. The man is grounded, and smiles wide, though is observably uncomfortable. I don’t dare ask why.

I retire to a nearby lodging soon after, alone, through the sickly grass, quite close to a highway. Entrenched in patchwork concrete, almost unlivable, and weak

with age, the building is a hollow disarray of empty rooms. Tomorrow, we celebrate independence in the country of my birth.

In the following days, moving along the shoreline, looking out from its vistas, walking over its stubbly green grass, I find comfort under the shade of its periphery. The phenomena of the dry season ground my sense of reason. As I continue on, I'm almost ahead of time in a competitive rivalry between humanity and the spirit of nature. Then, I lose focus. I begin to learn my own way. Now, I race against myself.

"Do I try leading the natural round," I wonder, lost in the absurd imaginings of a man split apart by the merciless drifting of the earth in space. "Or do I simply enjoy home in its oasis environs, in its dense palm thickets?"

A tragic green winters my eyes with the final loss of childhood. I am riddled with the muscular pain of defeat, and wallow in the rashness of my own speed.

As I quicken my pace along the riverbank, I meet others running towards me with questions, curiosities, delights, and fears. I deliberately evade the misdirection of others. The forest welcomes. I run with abandon. I flee from the desire to follow, or to lead, and go at my own pace, towards my own needs. The road meanders, welcoming.

I know the end of the brush path is near, where I'd have to cut into the lush forest to continue onward. Where the way darkens beneath an impassable verdant mass, I stand silently, lightened by the riverside heat.

The flowing passages of the river delta meet the proud sea like they've longed for ecological union. The currents sound like an open heart, as I struggle to hear other footsteps in the watery ambiance. No one is close. Kneeling down, I touch the gravelly bank. The escalating rush warns me back, to face the beginning of the path, again.

After a second thought, I plunge headlong over the rocky bank, into the violent tide of the low-lying valley. My body spills into a mountainous void. I roll with the translucent water amid fixed stones, and brace myself at the lip of a trifling waterfall. Enwrapped in its downward pressure, I descend, submerged below the pristine waves.

Hours go by unnoticed as the river gives way to calming rivulets leading back near the city. I rise up from the riverbank, and dry under the serene sunlight.

After doing all that I can to make myself presentable to society, while not without a watery scent, I walk through the dusty alleyways of the outer urban rim, towards the downtown core. On such early evenings as this, the library is a frequented haunt for hawkish hoodlums and corner crows spying deep into the drug-addled spine of the city.

I sit for a moment, and watch, closing my eyes to the nightmare that seethes through my eyes, lit with nostalgia and lost with reckoning. I see the richly attired emerge from old wooden houses, gathering to appreciate family life by the reflective riverbanks on which the city was founded. Wild grasses and small mammals move about through the windy pines. I can almost hear sweet music calling the divided classes to unite, to live in shared spaces of earthly paradise.

From afar, visibly approaching, I see a band of travel-hardened young ruffians stealing across the urban sprawl. They are a mystifying crowd, escalating the heartbeats of the scene with their sounding drums, a cacophony of cans and calfskins. They are wildly talented, though raucous and foolhardy in their truculent energy.

The nearer they are, the more I can hear the sophistication of their drumming. Two of them knock out *doumbek* rhythms as naturally as any virtuosic percussionist. As they rile up weary locals in the streets, they call bystanders to grab a drum and join them.

Highly amused, a couple begins to play along with a spirited intent, to create spontaneous community out of raw, street energy by the sounding of their dope-swung dreams. The minute I walk over to try my hand at a beat, my optimistic assumptions spit back at me. The first gunpoint clicks against my face. I feel a swarming heat, like a million ants are filing into my mouth and exiting from my nostrils.

“Do you speak,” he says in a thick, unidentifiable accent, threatening to murder me with unmoving eyes.

“I, yes,” I respond, nervously wondering if I’ll live.

Handing over a pocketful of change, I back away. They just smile, and do nothing more, holding up the gun, silent as dogs after a trick.

I run through the empty square in the wake of the delinquent standoff. The musical couple scattered. I remember the calm outside the city. The snap of mortal fear, and the emptiness resonate with placidity, now imbued with the white noise of unspoken terror.

Outside the city, a rustic house is filled with cool riverine breezes, the kind that would blanket my siblings in peaceful naps. Oftentimes, before they woke, I would exit towards a nearby field.

I remember returning. An older woman, a family friend, would watch from the front stoop, leaving the door slightly open. Our eyes would meet while I was still distant, in the field, reciting various numerical arrangements. I would count everything.

Tonight, I continue on, not returning, shakily wandering into the lone moonlit night. Soon, as I pass through a wormhole of overgrown, forested roads, I find it leads into a concrete lot. Under the glare of a spotlight, the polluted sky warns with a tarnished gold hue. I can see the makeshift hovels of the vagrant and homeless strewn about like people in the aftermath of a territorial war.

Along a commercial lane some miles downfield, massive television screens project public failure, amusing disgraces, despairing dreamers, and sickly artists belittled to starvation. A votive banality burns every wandering eye.

A streetscape host clamors with a frayed tongue over the spillage of an alleyway tomb. Unreasonable crowds peer through fish-eyed goggles over ledges and stairways, pleading with the entertainment rites of festering movie addicts unable make inhumane ends meet. Unable to get a word in among the mob, and racially demeaned by the unsightly pandering, I turn back.

Soon, I feel the presence of a family friend who would wait for me to return from the fields. I remember her face, with a fading nostalgia for her gentleness, her embraceable candor. I now only wish to return back to that country house. Through the womb-like forest on the outskirts of the city, the young bandits who threatened my life at gunpoint are waiting for me, hiding in the shade.

By the instantaneous glint of a knife, I evade attack, sharply defensive. Running off, careful to remain as unheard as possible, I know I've been followed. In the wilderness, the weird reign. Pillaging life from trees and ponds, they burst from the dank hollow with a warmongering spirit, poised to ransack churchgoers and the elderly in their attempt to discover treasure.

One such invaluable prize is buried in the depths of my rural home. Once returned and alive, I look at my disheveled appearance in the living room mirror, dusty with neglect. In the reflection, I remember how she would look at me, intimately, with her eyes that spoke with the wealth of her mature cry, as her tears poured over the silent comfort of our haven like uncountable blessings.

In such unclear times, when I felt out of touch with the present, and when the future became inconceivable, I'd find my way to a temple retreat. A few hours by foot through the woodlands surrounding our home stood a pillared, majestic temple, sculpted like something out of the Orientalist passions of antiquity.

The day I return there, to find my way, to see if it still stands, I am in awe to see multitudes of devotees at its gate. I walk inside, through the front, as I always would, alone, thoughtless, at ease. Unbearably small coffins bedeck the well-carpeted floor.

Exotic designs animate the fur-lined flooring as a horde of crossed legs bemoans the tragedy of a younger generation lost to the violent waves of their incredulous doom. The air is blameless while heavy with the intensity of childless mourning.

I visit many coffins, pressing my hand over their delicately sheathed frames, wondering about the instant when early death came for these late children, unwilling. Where men have killed the young there is a cold gloom that hangs over everyone's head, worse than a plague.

Light, worldly instrumentation carries our tears to the sky with a playful rhythmic swing, impassioned with ecstatic laments. The music vibrates the curse of the moment into a cathartic blessing of mysterious, celestial hosts. The mass of mourners supplicates to the presence of superhuman understanding.

The young vagrant men of the forest, demonic in their indifference, have found their way to the doorstep of the temple. In a deafening flash, a slew of bodies fall limp to the floor. Gushing blood stains the gilded burgundy carpet with monochromatic travesty.

I hide. In a backroom, a ladder opens up to the ceiling. I can hear marauders bellowing hotly underneath.

"Am I the sole survivor?" I wonder, panicking, as bullets and swords pierce through the unprotected foam insulation that buffers the walls of the old stone architecture.

The murderers smash idols and burn priests' fabrics. Then, they notice me. My heart shakes like a rattlesnake in my rib cage. I have the sensation of my stomach dropping, horrified at seeing the wicked grin of the head gangster through the ceiling panels. I retain my silence, and my pride.

Led to the exit after a bitter interrogation, they let me go. I grieve for the impassable souls whose lives were unlamented, whose deaths remain as yet impure, and in whose memory the people now bear the burning flesh of their incurable trauma.

Days pass, returning. The bucolic solitude of my forest-sheltered home is insufferable in the wake of such horror. I need people around, to be light in the collective gravity of urban union. Once there, the first thing I do is ride the train, simply to sit as equals among the quotidian harmony of another day.

On the metro, I open a local paper. Full color imagery comes alive, mostly scandalous female body parts, all the rage, half-covered nipples. Turning the next page, I feel a sudden, enervating shockwave run through the train. The image of globalized depravity draws me into the vicarious illusion of direct witnessing. My

mind transcends immediate geographic presence, and I am flown halfway across the globe, to the scene of the story.

On the other side of the ocean, where people grow under the searing must of sunlight and sand, the countryside is torn by civil war. Soldiers in khaki green uniforms dismember the young, limbs and lives broken in bloody killings all about the land.

I can smell blood, paralyzed, unwavering in the tremendous adrenaline-rushed heat. I seethe with an unearthly stress through every synapse, firing with incessant cerebral tension. Massive antiquated tanks roll along the infertile soil, teeming with armed rebels on their way to a massacre.

The living who stay risk sure death by starvation, gunfire, and rape, and are humiliated to no end in the presence of dependent children, the elderly and women. The general vicinity is obscured under a hard metal sky and sharp-edged leaves in the screaming bush. I flee on arrival, feverish as the sane and able-bodied, scanning the ground with mortal anxiety, praying for defense behind an abandoned sight-affixed rifle.

As night falls, stranded in the vile hot foreign country, I sense a predator near. Hunting for food, I see a wild canine, cautious so as to not be followed. Hungering, I sight the direction of a beast, sick, unaware of my presence. The flash of a rifle sight reflects moonlight. There are many of us in the jungle, lusting for bush food within the misty animal paths.

Vigilantly, I meander onward, starving. The closer I get to prey in the warring wilderness, the more I realize I won't kill anything myself, for fear of armed competition. I'll either have to scavenge, or kill another hunter. Innovating strength and penetrating sight out of the last energies of my being, I decide to follow a hunter. Silent as a sloth, I huddle, and weave through the overgrowth. The hunter is a young woman, and so, I can't kill her. In a stupor of raw need, I realize that here, nonviolence is suicide.

Foregoing the hunt, I espy a gated corridor. A dense trench of weeds now entrenches the colonial architecture, rising with gothic spires overhead. The sky is dark grey, with smears of sable obscurity amid the opaque grandeur above in the atmospheric heights. The absolutely esoteric geography of the place is mirrored by the abysmal abandonment of the occupied fringe.

I pass through the empty corridor, observing the edges of vegetal growth with a probing eye. An unmistakable shadow begs a look over my shoulder. A full-grown, healthy cheetah with a princely gait paces through the fog haze. A charged, bitter second ensues in stillness. I sprint, uneasy, into the mangled course of metal-strong vines ahead.

The cheetah bolts, as the steam of boiled broth rises from a fired pot. Miraculously, I break through the end of the corridor before the cheetah advances on my flesh. On the other side, I sit on the grass and regain my ground by a desolate, once-fortified military complex. Stealthily, I pass through unseen and steal out onto the open plain.

Ahead, a bus station stands against the vast horizon. It is a lone post of civilization, standing beneath the liberated veil of unbridled wilderness air. I shout to the unconcerned bus, and board along the unceasing track, as the vehicle sinks and sways over mud flats in the remote, outlying country. As the bus drives over grassland stretches, industrialization soon rears its ugly head. Suburbia follows, uncannily reminiscent of outmoded colonial settlements.

Multihued homes lie interspersed atop the slanted hillsides, apathetic to the erosion that worsens with the seasons. Almost nothing grows on the land, especially in the dry season. A single, dead, spiny bush is all that's left of indigenous plants not exported for the fancy landscaping of newcomers.

The winds of desert plains breathe beyond the flat, linear horizon, dividing sky and sand with a beam of light haze under the brilliant gorge of sky above. We approach a village, the predictable spot of disadvantaged adolescents and wise elders. The roofs atop their homes are frightfully skeletal. One ghastly common shelter buries the inhabitants under a distantly imported schema of incongruous seclusions.

I stop here with a group of locals from the city. They are excited, but after a few bitter hours gazing into the masks of poverty, their condemnable pits of outmoded judgment shallow. Most simply saunter off unimpressed, walking blindly toward a nearby mountain straight into the shale-thin horizon. I watch as their bodies are reduced to the humid swelter. They leave me behind thoughtlessly, to convey greetings to a lowly, though indignant and powerful village.

An old man, an elder, conducts witchcraft rites under a hut of burlap and hide. Half-emerging from a height of wires in the bleakly modern town center, he presses his hand up against carved bones and whittled wood over his head. His leathery hand impresses the ceiling of his dusty keep with a tragic authenticity. With that, the town comes alive.

The animate devotion is unsurpassed, grandiose, by the might of communal dancing, as a powerful music rises from the people's throats, howling all at once. The songs appear to entice them to couple and find happiness through a kind of collective inter-being. They express spiritual gratitude for the supernatural warmth of their earthly sprites.

Chaos breaks out, as a fire spreads in the dry heat. Emotional stability rarifies as the blaze swallows the delicate, dyed fabrics of the possessed. They lunge and heave on the burning ground. I dart off into the expansive wilderness, away from their mounting risks. I notice a young man from the bus, rising from his surreptitious presence, brandishing a dull knife, a found shard of metal.

In a bout of madness, I watch as the street-born teenager cuts off hands and feet, stabs chests, torsos and faces in a brazen ambush of insane, bloodthirsty intoxication. More, the victimized villagers, in their ceremonial possession, assume that the murders are a divine intervention, a calling to bodily extinction among the chosen. From afar, I can see in their dying faces an astonished clarity, a painless spiritual exhaustion.

An hour or so later, the survivors begin to gather their belongings. Only a few bodies remain on the ceremonial ground, hanging onto life with their remaining ligaments and tendons, still connecting their pulse, vibrating with their accepted fate. It is a mass murder, a genocide, an atrocity so unspeakable it has yet to be defined by modern historians.

I flee, in spite of the incomprehensible bus route. I had learned as much during brief moments in the village, fleeting though condensed with revelatory insights into the nature of life. On the way beyond the horizon, I begin to collect seeds in the sandblasted wilderness. To the locals, seeds are the vocation of winged creation, jujus of flight.

While reflective in the pursuance of natural healing, I call out toward the sky for a new identity. While in the village, I caught wind of another ceremony, in the next town, somewhere on the margins of the known. Before embarking, I wonder about how I will reintegrate with the international community, if I would be implicated in crimes against humanity as perpetrated in the village, its innocence now erased by the memory of the land.

“What would it be like to be incarcerated for genocide,” I wonder, deadened with anger, inflamed by the heat of the sun. I swallow the unidentified seeds I’ve gathered along the way. My flesh begins to speak for me.

“I am guilty,” my body says.

Finally, the train stops. I close the paper, and exit. The stop opens out toward a friend’s home under foothill vistas of mountainous splendor. For a moment, I stand nervously at the entrance to his home. Inside, I habitually, at times unconsciously, stare at his wall of historical metalwares, ancient pitchers and serving plates. They are bedecked with vibrant floral patterns, subdued with aging pigments amid a host of cultural décor. One plate upright against the wall has the most unusual patterning of metallic coloration.

“That one is Mesopotamian,” my friend confirms. A mysterious air breathes into our space as I gaze wearily into the prehistoric plate.

The hour progresses with mutual respect for the greatly needed silences that perfect a relaxed evening, as we converse lightly on topics of mild concern. Before the hour’s ending, the house receives a full party. Lights dim, and phones flash in a cacophony of mixed emotions and impulsive potencies. A young man, singled-out in the ambling pack, looks desirous of attention, hoping to drink in the lavish cultural range of plastic arts littered throughout the home. Tired with the malaise of indecision among the partygoers, I resort to the unseen, and show myself out.

Beneath the cold, open sky, I am struck by the thought of an acquaintance, an intellectual versed in critical teleology. That night, he sends me a digital archive of information he had been gathering for many years. The prolific research is stunning, a diverse array of charts, graphs and maps, all densely presented with exacting inquiries and proofs.

He posits, through simple correspondence accompanying the package, a scenario for the turn of the tide, an epochal shift in the geological age of the planet. The continents will roll, as on a dial, between the ocean currents. Coastal lands facing east in the Eastern Hemisphere, and west in the Western Hemisphere will be subsumed by magma leeching from the Pacific. On the other plane, abnormal tidal waves will drown entire cities. During this time, he imagines, the animal kingdom will succumb to absolute extinction. From below, and from above, the Earth will be empty of all but those organisms that emerged during the planet’s earliest evolutions.

Reflecting, I reminisce of times when I breathed with the lungs of the Earth. The Amazon River basin snaked through the city of Iquitos. Looking forward through the emerald fire of the dense canopy horizon, I watched as spindly serpent branches reached, unadulterated, into every cycle of life and death.

The humidity, secreted as from the pores of a mythic dragon, interchanged with the robust cloud cover, shading triumphant waterways. Diamond white streaks, perpetual bolts, lightning strikes, unwavering sunbeams, these phenomena showed a path through the river, filling its surface with a radiant sheen from bank to bank. A way was lit toward the horizon, where the river snaked into pure touches of jungle, toward a celestial calling beyond earthly fate.

In my mind’s eye, I see the end of the day entranced by the beginning of the long night. The swirling aftermath of ocean-swept cities rouses the urban-dwellers of the world upwards to the mountain peaks. Shifting tectonic plates are visible from alpine vistas, as the swollen estuarial waters of the world boom and gush,

spitting fire and ash into the sunless sky, raining metals and the boiling fury of an endless toxic night.

The people become superstitious, waking and sleeping in mortal fear. Fatalism is the prevailing belief, as is their protection by a subterranean demigod, hidden to waking eyes by the sunless day and starless night. The simian beast of humankind begins to grapple atop mountain crags with a body like a crushing hammer in conflict with the suicidal masses, pouring cries into the deathly soup of ocean water below.

The battle to survive is, to those eyes glossed over with memories of a relatively paradisiacal past, a Goliath of a sight, many proportions greater than is fathomable. Greedily, panic seizes as a last hope in the will to live out the endurance of lifespans reduced to hours, even moments. In the distance, blasting volcanic mountaintops seethe with a force as threatening as the rising waters.

Without warning, many wander, and fall to their deaths in hollowed stone fissures. Mortality becomes mundane, a common sight, of two terminal forces locked in a death grip above the crude war for naked power over human flesh. The wicked rivalries of eternal strife bleed into our exhausted sanity, heaved straight over the edge of reason, like the uncountable bodies extinguished to blood and night.

As the hours merge into days under the unlit above, as the burning and drowning of so many have passed now unnoticed from blind environmental havoc, one child watches as the season changes. Spring emerges from behind the gloomy veil of the people. And in their natural vision, all unite in a prayerful howl, for wisdom. The ancestral heart begins again, to beat out the rhythms of history, as elderly adults return to their stories, and youth to play.

The people sleep. The mass of undying humanity wakes astir in the colorful breast of a most solemn endurance. Minds fly as the humidity of the atmosphere dissipates into a pasture of stars. The new sky opens with the passing solstice. People graze along the receding mountainside seafront, spotting algae and drinking rain like fine brushstrokes on their skin.

In the weathered light, a child remembers her great-grandmother. She can still feel her kisses, she says, like the spirit of life. The asps of old human tradition have since been martyred to ecocide. Elder ways survive in the unskilled arts, through performance and trust in the midnight truths of every evening's lived experience.

The mind wades in, patiently, as through molasses, accompanied by the spirits of will and idea, to hear the questions of paining ghosts in the numinous beyond. I struggle with answerless freedom in the sordid now, and gather the

ingredients of long-forgotten nourishments. Meandering in the wasted highlands, I stroll through the highs of minds now awake to reason, who with meticulous care, craft actions of daring importance.

The quickening of traumatized minds heals, immersed in the sound of words spoken from the heart. I make a substance, of a waterborne seed base, with a clear, weakly salted broth.

“I will not be a victim,” I say aloud, to myself. “I will not be weighed by the dead.” I begin to lather the semisolid matter onto my face, reenacting death, covering my skin with a lightless, gaunt pigment.

Wasting away in the turmoil of ambient murmurs, I prepare my body, besieged by the loss of needs, fading and reappearing along the changing tide. I hear the rhythm of my anxious pulse, meditating on the chemistry of the air.

Closing my eyes, I see a sight long distanced beyond time, though as mundane as the taps and faucets of our once-ubiquitous suburban lifestyle. The atmospheric orb above emits a liquid, beet-red heat, as the globe of the encompassing Earth is reduced to concave walls, exact replicas of the infamous death camps of history.

Shadows move, cruelly, spelling lateness, as my mind wanders speedily into the infinite daze of a circle on the horizon, a vision of the eternal continuity of life and death. I hasten to pacify my mind in the space of about five minutes. My eyes open again.

Time has not ended. I sit behind a door, which, in an instant, bursts open to carnival dancers and festival cooks, full chests and loud mouths all shouting with upended revelry. The gorge of playful spectacles ignites my deepest nature. All mourning is over before it's begun.

Through a series of doors, I trudge desperately, seeking a semblance of truth for the soul-despairing anguish of humanity on the edge of a dying world. The final door swings into a field of light. The eye adjusts to a pristine borderland environ. Wispy fog curdles like steam through overheated spotlights, all manufactured by the windless machinery. A gate ahead, once the threshold before a now defunct institution, is abandoned, and welcoming in its desolation. Unseen eyes blink carelessly behind the tinted glass, where joyless, dutiful souls perfect occult followings.

Narrow skylight pierces indirectly through overhanging metal and a battered cityscape dense with ruined high-rises. Wet air seethes with living smog, a sunless damp hole of raw, entrenched artificial glow in the night hours. Soon, I take my place on the street, sitting with an assemblage of wild mushrooms picked in an empty city lot nearby. I am hungry, and look for miscellaneous, scavenged pickings

to exchange among beggars. I am met with scowls and glares, violently territorial and threatening.

“Is that the moon?” I ask aloud, awaiting a response in the silent tension among idiots, addicts, and the insane, the archetypal refuse of wise fools.

I’ve forgotten the soft sound of kindness. Nearly blinded, I look down under an all-permeating spotlight pointed at beggars, its luminosity cutting through our oversensitive minds.

“A plain-clothes guard?” I mumble under my breath, as I’m kicked and harassed by the well-fed, exploiting misguided rage against my vulnerable body enslaved to the world of defunct passions and faithless ignorance.

A passerby throws a bag of food my way, after which the unrestrainedly irate flashlight-wielding man continues to jab his toes into my face senselessly. He hovers above, silhouetted by the lifeless smoke swarming about us like execution gas. As the night lingers, I writhe in the steam and dirt, flattening my body on the dismal street, a wasteful sight.

In the final hours of the evening, I am beaten mercilessly. My beggary is reduced to scraps of plastic wrap and bleeding bruises. Penniless, I wander to find shelter.

“Where is my Love?” I ask the Earth, and heavens, hallucinating.

I tell my story, though no one listens except for the wavering cool air. I know she exists, somewhere, probably fast asleep, maybe near, and unaware that I am close. And soon, I realize, in my silence, that I am again entranced by memories of such strife as would break any man. Even if these fixations are only imagined, they are more real than life.

I spit against the hard ground, comforted only by the all-forgiving solitude of mere being. Not another word falls from my mouth, now too dry to release any more of what is left of me.

The Terminal Wreckage of Babel

I'm on my way. I'll see her. She's in a high tower, where she teaches, and has lately become sought-after, though her lectures are held in secret. Long-hidden wisdom, enlightening and prophetic, pours from her humble eloquence.

The road is dry in the warm, fresh summer air. I notice a woodwind shop on the road. Reed-affixed bamboo instruments hang on display.

"I have many at home, though the one in the storefront looks especially exquisite today," I think, cheerfully light. "I'll have to buy this one, and play it for her on this special occasion."

In the shop, the saleswoman is short with me. Affable conversation is impossible, despite my attempts. Nonetheless, I walk away with the new instrument, smiling for sweet visions of the day ahead, happily in love with life and thoughts of her.

I arrive to the towering silver building. Energized, I decide to take the stairs. Massive windows frame the impressive grandeur of the walls. Through the clear, polished glass, I see the low plains stretch as a mural throughout the wide landscape. Finally, I find the room.

She is there, a spirit of decadence, beauty, the very meaning of honor. In her presence I am lightened by gold-hued dreams of summer. Her hair is bunched and flowing, the gargantuan black mass swells and streams down her side as a mythical waterfall of visceral lust, untouched and unrivaled. As I move in closer to her, weary, so as not to interrupt her pedagogical session, the sky begins to swell, its shades mirroring her intimidating beauty.

A black, icy fleece of cloud-cover boils through the once-gleaming pasture. A wild tornado approaches. "This is a building of glass!" I say weakly, and run alone back into the stairwell to find sanctuary.

The tornado crashes through the cityscape. It is a natural disaster of immense proportions. Mortal fear brews gravely in the destruction as the crude aftermath burns with electric ash. The ruins fume, vulnerable against the ever-darkening sky, dreading yet another cataclysmic whiplash.

Bristling with anxiety, and defeated, having lost her to the storm, I journey onward, outside the city core, with an instrument in my hand. My grandfather is alone, at home, where the path of the storm was most unforgiving. I invoke sayings of communal trust against the survivalist fear mounting below the shape-shifting, threatening skies above. Humanity responds coolly in the aftermath of such painful loss.

Out in the country the storm ruined so many lives, memories gone to the meaningless, natural rage. Many appeared, ready to die. Most front doors were propped open, and the survivors hobbled in on crutches, helped by the young who escaped the center of its force in time.

Far from home, my grandfather sits, patient as an ancient boulder beneath an old-growth tree, now in the midst of domestic wreckage. The edge of the virgin forest had longed turned suburban.

Violent teenagers beg, spiritually demoralized around the bloody temptations of carnage and ruin. They are now freewheeling ghosts, enraged yet in awe of the music of the muse. All know me now, and leave us. Returning to the village untouched by the inexplicable, airborne terror, I see my grandfather. Proud, though jealous, the locals retch, blameful without a man to target their earthly condition.

Listening to my grandfather, his lips open. He speaks of the Earth as an insane asylum, and before exiting his body to reach our starlight kin, he grows ever distant.

“Who flew?” he asks.

In his memory, the family gathers. The air is all a roomful of browning noses and brooding eyes, bleary and peering into the torn emotions of remorse, interspersed by frequent gasps over the play of genetic strays.

Weary, I say, unheard, “From this we’re born.”

The laughter is catastrophic amid a smiling malaise, distantly concealed by an all-too-human grief. Yet, I try to keep the cheer up, light on my feet despite the stench of old age drowning my mind in a picture-perfect stream of inglorious vanity. When I stand alone, I am shy in the mass of group idiocy, all stuffing their faces with swine and blush.

Then, my cover is blown. An aunt, who never usually speaks to anyone, converses with me, explaining a recent travel complication with the tragic ennui typical to the class-orientation of the family.

“The night before we were to leave for the States I clicked purchase on my laptop while sleepwalking,” she began. “The next day I called my mother, your great Aunt Lou. ‘A forty dollar purchase!’ I spent the entire morning trying to return it.”

I stand there, taking the punishment of her nervous release. She is ruthless, though from what I can tell, she is doing her best as well.

“Meanwhile, your uncle Larry and I are preparing to travel across the border from Canada. This hasn’t been easy for us in the past.”

She opens her computer in front of me, awkwardly demonstrating the mundane airport experience.

“As usual, in the final minutes before we leave he begins to worry about the departure,” she says, handing me the computer. “One minute, I need to use the lady’s room.” She walks toward the restroom, leaving me frozen, my arms sagging under the weight of her machine. She returns fifteen minutes later.

“Trouble stews in the bathroom,” she whispers. “I was cornered! No privacy.” She shrugs, and continues with her story.

“See here,” she points to the underside of the computer. “They threatened to confiscate my hard drive for security purposes.”

She is almost in shock, remembering the incident as life-threatening. I can see she is entertained, even amused. I can’t help but intensify her voluntary distress, emptily agreeing with her every inflection, patient for the end of the unbearable tedium.

“Excuse me,” I tell her, handing her the metal encumbrance, and walk through the labyrinth of carpeted walls into the bathroom. I’m unable to see any one. I’m lost in the quicksand of our family’s decline.

That night, at home, I turn the shower on to hot, and stand, blinded by the foul steam. Deeply aroused in the polluted water, I feel groped thighs and high chests hard as wood, creaking with unspoken sexual majesty. Such forbidden, orgasmic flights breach a proud, open humanity with a love forsaken beyond scrutiny, to instinctual rites of passion, floundering in the cruel pain of the body’s lowering, timeless travesties. Weak with sanity, I become raw with self-doubt, admiring and at once twisted inside.

“Where is she?” I wonder, far from any sense of belonging to family, and farther than ever from her.

The following day, I pick up and travel to Israel, to witness a live drum and bass duo explode onstage. The audience is drowned out in a hemp haze of blistering monitors fuzzing and blowing out like young brains on the spiked drink. “OM,” I repeat, listening, submerged in the intoxicating blaze.

The auditorium splits, resounding with punk metal doom, incendiary in the math-rock freeze of anti-traditional music theory. As people begin to clear out, I return to the street, ascending through the upper tiers of my earth-born consciousness. As under a subconscious influence, I hear notes, and dance to the explorative and experimental rhythms. Bleeding through the fire of impassioned music, I hear true sounds of faithless freedom.

Before dawn, I meditate to transcendence. The transpersonal takes effect, dryly in the humid shoreline environment. Richly clothed with frayed seams, I sit,

contemplating the elephant-headed one. Clothed alike, I see myself mirrored in his image, and vanish.

“Paul, meet Paul,” says a young man in his early twenties, introducing his friend as I sit across the room, listening to the ambient conversation at an oceanfront café. “I’ve just returned from St. Louis,” he confesses in his well-rounded American accent.

His road scooter lies outside in disrepair.

“I was on my way west, as far west as I could go, a bicoastal journey through America,” he continues. When he tells his story, I imagine the bleak highway night, streaming headlights cascading horizontally in the brittle rain. And how opaque the sky is, faded to ebony, showered by the scent of mildew, steam emanating from under the gyrating wheels of his speeding vehicle.

“Keep your hands on the wheel,” he says. “It was my mantra.” I can see his car crossing merging lanes, whiplashed amid the fleets of workaday traffic commute normalcy. “A driver puffed on a marijuana stick, blinded by the musical havoc of his stereo speakers, he vented, telling his story with a childlike curiosity. “I passed a huge van filled with Mexicans, seized by the police,” he told them, before injecting political insight. “We are the true criminals.”

“When I began the road trip, my brother drove over to my mother’s to see me off. ‘You’re on your way,’ he said,” the twenty-something went on, fascinated by the sound of his voice recounting another everyday American on-the-road story.

“I first stopped at a gas station. The attendant pointed the muzzle of the gas hose at me, asking, ‘How much?’ with an intimidating glare,” he said. “‘The night is endless,’ he asked. ‘And where are you off to?’ he could tell I was just beginning what looked like a cross-country excursion. I could only think of my brother waving goodbye as I stepped onto my vehicle, and sped off.”

Another table at the café pours over a national newspaper. The front-page display spells out the aerial map of a bomb pattern, together with photos of the ashen remains of a once-proud Western city destroyed.

The doomsday vibe is pervasive. I descend from the café terrace. Hooded, disguised in conservative clothing, I imagine bombers bounding over farmyards and plains with ghastly unconcern. American, I daydream for the momentous bravery to knock the war clear from the heads of state, as by the hook of old Ali.

Through a back-road alleyway, I happen on a gathering of young folk, about my age. Crowding around a midday fire, they clumsily fiddle with various instruments, disheveled travelers all. I see an old friend among them, and sit. People begin to single me out. “Play this! Play that!” they stammer, belligerently drunk on broken strings and cracked reeds sounding off into the broken cityscape.

The sobering spring sky presses coldly onto my uncovered scalp. Every instrument I touch is in disrepair. Unable to make a clear sound, I move on to the hallucinogens and alcohol.

My friend, a fellow musician, strays along the streetscape with honest intentions, playfully direct for having made a living on pure sound. As he approaches, various instruments in hand, he leaps toward me. Intimidated by his uninhibited energy, I freeze. We wander together beyond the city limits, to hike in the surrounding mountains.

Hard-edged scree and hillocks crack and harden in a gross maze of cavernous earth rock. Self-created, I transform. I am the mountain. My hair blows freely, morphing into the shapes of the cold summit winds. I rumble and shake with tectonic might. Mountain goats find refuge near my side. We enter an open cave.

Inside, the road to memories of the American Southwest entrances us in lightning flashes north on the horizon. A streak of beaming spectral intensity whitens the sand-whipped stone interior.

“This is my road,” I think, in the cool silence. “From our Mother’s homebound dreams, to the creative migrant’s expatriate ways.”

A great triangle of light forms over the landlocked backdrop of visions, North American. A sweet host of ethereal muses enlightens our unforeseen paths with the adamantine wisdom of the Great Mystery.

All is out of sight, and I am somewhere in the middle. I see the futile passages of infinitude stretching beyond the coarse glow of my shifting future blown in the merciless winds of the American past.

Four massive peaks rise into the untouchable sky to such lofty heights. This is the Eastern gateway and riverine border into the Rockies. In between two strong, unearthly peaks I rest, having climbed afoot to the base of a glowing summit ahead in the crystal blue sky, cloudless and serene.

Atop a rock-shorn crevasse leading into a valley gorge, I find a curious green-hooped tunnel of vegetation. Its loose threads flow welcomingly and calm in the whipping winds. Instead of continuing upward I take a chance at descending through the unusual organic formation amid the impenetrable crags. Leaping into its circular folds, cast into a semi-suspended state, I move carefully above chipped stone, shifting boulders and overhanging vegetation. Carefully, I exit from the flowering tunnel through its spindly bottom, dusting myself off in the spirit of life-giving camaraderie within the mountain prairie grasslands awaiting the seasonal silver snow.

I descend from the vegetal ecology alone and with swift might, overconfident and unthinking. My body falls heavily, knocking against the back of

the mountain while wrapped in the mysteriously protective mossy netting. With a hard thud, I injure myself falling on the ground, weak with delirium.

A time passes, and I ascend again, lone, to the place where I once found the origins of tunneling vegetation. Instead of looking through the downward spiral, I look up towards a distant peak amid a quartet of towering peaks. At the summit, a wild enormity of avian flesh flaps its wings. The sight sends me into uncontrolled stupefaction, dizzy with groaning delight.

“A myth lives!” I scream, ecstatic through the canyon wilderness.

In the migratory tempest, feathered heads and wings swing wildly in the blood sunset breeze. The humid mountain air chokes my rasped skin, split after fending off the assaulting flocks, murderous for an unearthed prophecy. There is no victor, only the great veil of death and havoc. The interspecies war oppresses life under the vile mix of animal disease and one-sided freedoms.

Silent after the escape, I crawl below a shale vent. Sheltered from the wrath of predators in flight, I find solace within the womb of the mountain, and meditate with spirited concentration. Removed entirely from the ringing bells of society, swinging to my inevitably gruesome end, I’ve escaped history, and entered into another world entirely, no less conflicted by the instincts of aggression.

Long traveling through the mind’s eye, crouched painfully in a mountain refuge, I see the urban environs of East Asia. I ride wealthily and uninhibited down futuristic highways, sighting monasteries doubling as military halls. Films project over the pavement signage.

I hear Cantonese and Vietnamese. People dance over the clearings of new urbanism. There are people to meet. Keenly, we find our way personified, withdrawing into the sheltering sun world of the East. By midday, I am alone, a vagrant wanderer looking for familiarity in the exotic sky.

Time passes under the cool shade of the mountain, its silent stone. My thoughts drift through the glowing green brush of the rural Northeast countryside. Carrying a musical instrument, I wander toward the newly acquired lands of my father, way out in the bush of Maine.

On family-owned property, I play with a friendly tomcat, shaking a felled branch over its crooked head, radiant with happy fervor. Received by our hosts, I eat a stomachful of seasonal greens. The flesh of the tomato and artichoke are sun-warmed and satisfying. Sitting out by an outdoor hearth in the midday sun, I begin to play music among the flies. The wind is bright with security and home.

Belligerent neighbors drink in the squalor within earshot, revving engines in a domestic rage of puffed chests heaving to selfish poverty. Their tired children are

a traumatic school of bundled nerves, forced against the hot ice of American dreams.

On the road that divides my father's land from theirs, I look through the thick walls of brush, empathizing with their tragic isolation. As I spin my head around to my father's, the grass is filled with naked souls, barefooted and feeding off each other's energy. Diversely pigmented bodies writhe and shake as a spawn of ghosts shrieking wildly in the post-greed high of land possessed.

Recoiling into a private room, I drown in the habits of a sore addiction. I ingest black pills behind a mirror, the need for a fix screaming through my ears. Howls brew, filling my desires with the dreamless chemistry of speed. As the weeks pass, apologetic, memories of my mother slowly wean me from the fatal addiction.

I pass between the spiritual purgatory of overpopulation and the isolating violence of American freedom. On a bridge, I perform music with a lively troupe and befriend a preteen nut seller on the open road to grace. From the southern ocean, a fleet navigates horizontally. I spend the late hours fascinated, watching the ships move through the lively waters. Waking up in the bridge parkland, exhausted and bedraggled, I return to the city.

That day, I learn of how a human rights activist accompanied my old, beloved friend from Sudan. My heart flies, excited, to atmospheric heights.

When I see him, I notice how his build glows through his rejuvenated skin. His head, bald as usual, is unblemished, perfectly fit for such an astoundingly brilliant and balanced mind. He greets us and I immediately invite him to sit and eat, as we would so many nights past.

"You have been a father and a friend," my eyes tear with conviction, reflecting on how our paths, once separated, are now returned to unity through a sliver of pure goodness, so rare in our inglorious world. "Thank you for seeing me in person after so long a silence."

I am ever relieved to see him healthful, and taking on his dream of working for his people, the forced migrants of the world, in the resourceful comforts of a more socially and technologically progressive country. His road is unlighted. With pronounced intent, his vehicle sets off into the ruthless American night.

I return to my basement-level, concrete-floored apartment. A storm-brewed flash flood rolls in as I hear the thunderous sound of formidable waves crash in the looming distance. Through the window, a young family is distraught, surfacing from a similarly impoverished basement room. In the torrential rain, the woman hands her son over to her husband. He's unable to shield the infant from the mass of water accumulating, approaching in the storm-tossed street.

After the flood subsides, under gray skies, every neighbor despondently searches for the toddler in the wreck of our homes. Finally, the child is found, electrocuted in a nest of felled wires.

Nearly a day lost to rummaging through the dusty basement keeps, we lay our feet to rest. Music rises from our voices, one at a time, satiated by cathartic expressions of melancholy. Plastic-framed hopes speak with brevity amid the upward noisemaking jolly. An elder passes, seated contemplatively behind us, and provoking us to feel true novelty for the oncoming day, all soaked in a predawn nostalgic sanctity.

I leave my neighborhood, decidedly for good, unable to sink deeper into the miserable wreckage of my heartache. I wander through big box department store shelters, seeing the homeless, bruised and battered, bloodied and torn bodies, traumatized minds. A man holds a newborn boy, not his own, consoling a woman at his side for her unspeakable loss.

The mountain air is now silent in the moonlight. Not a single flap of a wing can be heard in the low plain beyond, sunken at the feet of the valley monuments all the way to the horizon. Emerging from a shale vent, I descend, an exhausted survivor of the lonesome wilderness.

The New West of Dreams

“Has the mythology of the Old West concealed our loss.” I wonder. “What did we lose? And who carries the greater bulk of that loss?”

The dry air is crisp and cloudless over a small town in the dead of the Rocky Mountain winter. Silence is treasured with every step. Conservative mores follow quickly behind me, like a lingering acquaintance. I climb down from a high iron fence, and see two young men in dense black coats. They greet me simply, and move on further along the frozen sidewalk path.

I know a girl who lives here. She is a tomboyish young woman with matted hair, and boldly pursues life in the worlds of art. When I see her, she hides a needle in the thick folds of her winter sweatshirt. She walks out into the gray concrete, the sidewalk dims under the dusk-lit winter sky.

“This place’ll put me underground,” she says coldly. “I’ll throw the trash out myself.” Shooting up in the open, I watch her walk away, to meet a couple of tall men on the outskirts of an open field.

I see them again as I walk past the neighborhood, thinking of how she was killed. The image of her walking away has remained a lucid memory.

Autumn leaves drape the ground. The dry parchment textures moisten, as leaf pigments resemble the internal organs of butchered remains.

At a squat, cool drafts pass through every corner. The outside air smells better than the inside squalor. We are in the wilderness of youth. I find camaraderie close with an old friend from my school days back in the Northeast.

He’s his usual self, as carefree as he is indifferent. We all feel like decaying lungs, chain-smoking for days on end. In need of supplies, a few of us pop the hood of a junk car in the yard. After a day’s hard work, arguing mostly, the skilled among us working together to survive. And then the engine turns over.

There is still a calling, leading us out into the mushroom pastures along the roadside horizon. Taking to the fueled freedoms of the wheel, we soon arrive at another squat in much the same condition as ours. The house is empty, with packaged foods punctured by hungry worms and roving mice. We salvage some. Half of us choose to stay behind, smoking herbs comfortably on upholstery pockmarked with burns.

We are isolated from our past and our future. Yet, there are pinholes of awareness where our perception heightens to envision the crystalline beauty of our surroundings. In a nearby town, the great majority of young men and women make a living wheeling trees for each other and all the naïve newcomers.

There is a winking eye of seasoned residence on the land, separating us vagrants by the shortest of distances. Blonde dreadlocks and glass-blown artistry melt in a haze of fruitful laughter among new friends whose eyes touch upon the truth that most will disintegrate into a stock of fiends. We are as unstable as the rest, as on an island consumed by molten dreams.

Classic European-Style Friendship

Silent, politely, I endure political conversation. My intellectual friend speaks with as few syllables as possible, monotone and deadpan. His political engagement is impressive, and he is a stout, well-storied character.

His friend, a man from Eastern Europe, incites a casual conversation about the political climate between Russia and Israel.

“The warring faction in such an example of political strife should be tried for war crimes,” his friend determines, a new acquaintance to me. His demeanor is final and exacting. My friend thoughtfully agrees with an understated candor of criticism. A firm resolve is respected and appreciated.

Walking away from the downtown café, I move confidently beyond the murmur of conversation. Stepping off the worn, stone-tile platforms of the city core, I walk into the fickle nature of my isolated mind.

The environment at the border of the metropolitan region moves with the animated intensity of a live painting. The colors are as clear as a well-polished mirror’s reflection, accurate with the kind of crystal focus that is extraordinary to the human eye. In a moment, winter changes into summer and back again. I see endless wheat fields.

“Am I becoming a vegetative spirit?” I wonder, absorbed in an ephemeral wave of Mycenaean culture forms.

The contents of my mind are cast in the windless brush and shallow fertility of the soil. Above the high plain, I see women in the fields, dressed in traditional Rajasthani clothing. They sing enchantingly while playing simple folk instruments.

On the horizon, summer changes to winter as cloud formations disperse over a hilltop covered in white flurries. The weather is full with cloud and snow. A wispy frozen mansion sits atop a hill. A teenager in winter clothes plays with a white dog almost twice his size. I am seen. He calls out, “Come!” And then he invites me to enter the mansion.

In the front hall, an opulent dinner flourishes with human celebration on a long table set for about twenty to thirty people. I read from a rough parchment, not only the fare, but also about the culinary and architectural history. Breads vary with incomprehensible foreign names, appetizing no less. The lingua franca at the table is a northern creole of the European continent.

“Am I in Sami territory?” I wonder, feeling my breath over the pronounced flavor in the air, all sweet and organic. The overwhelming variety of breads line the table, seasoned and sweetened. I choose two, by pointing at them. A kind fellow from across the table lends a crust. I try it.

“Delicious,” I laugh inwardly, grateful. The braided breads are delicately crafted with the perfect amount of cinnamon and sugar. He calls for more, “In the right tongue for the new son.” He spouts, smiling casually.

A man to my right stands suddenly, calling attention to the table with the clink of a glass. A toast in the booming of his voice stretches over the table to all ears.

In heavily accented English, he says, "There is an old saying..." He then changes to Spanish. "*Dicen...*"

The rest, to me, is a garbled mouthful of linguistic pressure. Nevertheless, I sense a meaningful and comical touch to the toast, which encourages common dining pleasures.

I am strengthened by the group's congeniality, eating directly from the land, while raised to the heights of the social pyramid. Immersed in a classic engagement, I dine with the history of Europe.

“Is it from these tables where we first adopted new habits?” I consider, quietly swallowing, observantly reflective. I notice a stained glass picture window. Outdoors, the fatigued are hungry for conspiracy theories about outstanding injustices, scheming revolution and pouring over scraps of pig stomach and chicken bones.

End of the Oceanic Feeling

I receive word. I have lost my grandmother, so says my cousin. Overnight, everyone in the family agrees to gather, in her honor. In a humble reception hall, bedecked with ceremonial round tables, I sit among the rushed paternal family reunion. First, I walk across the room to see an aunt. She is very happy to greet me, asking if the musician at the front end of the stage can play a popular blues song.

I walk over to the stage. Light pours in through the ceremonial doors, a dim crepuscular glow. The musician is a good friend of mine, the younger brother of one of my best friends. He has brought in his piano. I am delighted to receive him in the hall for such an important occasion. He looks ready to entertain.

We all wait patiently for the music to begin. With all of the usual faces around, the cafeteria assumes the ambiance of the living room at my grandparent's house. The light brown carpeting gives off a beige boredom. I return to my seat.

There is an unlikely foment of pleasing silence about, as my greed-loving relatives are stayed by the impressive attendance. The entire room gradually courses with festivity. The after-dinner steam of dishwashers pours in dreamily as brass instruments are uncased and desserts presented with the opening breaths of celebratory music.

After the reunion events have finished, night begins to fall. I meet a friend living nearby. We bike across a high ridge along the hinterland prairie groves. We bike all night, enjoying the frosty air thaw with the coming of dawn.

Cycling along the final ridge before breaking out over the prairie hills into the forest trails, we stop before reentering the urbanized valley below, to appreciate the simple purity of nature. Not a mile distant, people rush madly like worker bees through the lurid strip mall lights, accented by the unnatural intensity of warehouse lamps.

"To save, or be saved?" I say, as we laugh together over the ironic, double meanings of religious commerce, cooled and lightened by the clear, fresh air.

After a soothing bike ride, we dismount along the river valley by the hills that shelter the university. The steep, grassland ecology has the character of a theatre hall. Bike paths smooth horizontally towards the river bottom, and ascend east, to where the land flattens all the way to the Great Lakes.

We are older and more aware of our environment than ever, confident of the anticipated charm of the wilderness. Leaving the forest, and our bikes to rest, we walk out onto the main street, where civil law rules.

The police stop in front of us. Lights blazing, officers exit their vehicle, pursuing us on account of deceptive misinformation. One cop hands me a crinkled

note. Hesitant, I grab its frayed edge. As soon as the act of interrogation ensues, another cop hands my friend a ticket for over a hundred dollars.

Sitting down after the ordeal has passed, exasperated with intolerable frustration, my friend refuses to accept the conditions of the ticket. The cops press on with deliberation, attempting to get a rise out of us by any and every means possible to them. Soon, our bikes are in the back of the van.

“What have we done?” I ask, with intensive speculation. The air smells of fish and pig, putrid. They simply glare, and smirk before looking away.

After driving us to the neighborhood halfway house, to pour salt on our bleary, wounded minds, one cop asks my friend, “What’s your family background?”

He smiles patiently and responds, “Well, I’m English, and uh…” the silence is emphasized by the piercing stare of the officer looking through his narrow eyes with an understated slur.

“And Dutch!” I say, in support of my friend before their needlessly savage and unannounced neo-American counterterrorism. Defeated by the night, we escape police custody, and join my neighbor at his house for drinks. Angrily, I take his bike down the hill to my mother’s house with my friend’s ticket in my pocket.

“I’ve got to tell her about this idiotic abuse of justice fast escalating around our neighborhood with such baseless hubris,” I consider introspectively.

Red flashing lights drown the usual calm haze around my mother’s suburban home, spreading with villainy. As I ride smoothly around the back of the house to peer out into the driveway stealthily, I can’t believe my eyes.

“Another police raid! We are innocent! The police are guilty!” I curse the hog-head heavy presence on her property. They have torn apart the entire garage. My father stands on his smooth driveway pavement dumbfounded, petrified by the unwelcome malevolence.

I soon learn of recently enacted domestic counterterrorism laws. To the local police, now in full operation as a military state, no heed is recognized for the delicate peace and earnest honesty attributed to the very population they serve, and who serve them. Through force, the government takes full advantage of its power.

“When will America realize we are only defeating ourselves?” I contemplate, riding onward through neglected wilderness paths. There is an ocean, where life lives beyond the pale of unreason.

Sitting around a table at a cozy seaside bookshop, I realize how sorely I have neglected my immediate surroundings. The people around me read small, cottage-industry books, with handmade paper and original designs. They are in all sizes and degrees of detail, mostly amateurish, though charming.

I begin reading from a poetry review, and others follow. As I listen to the turning of pages, inwardly revolted. "I can't read with these people," I think.

I again open a page to a poem starting with the Latin phrase, "*spiritus mundi*". Across the room, a man stares in my direction. I look around to make sure that I'm not the target of any unwanted suspicion.

Leaving the shop, I wind through narrow corridors that echo in the slim, tall building. On the top floor, I hear door locks click. A waving hand beckons me from an open door, into an empty room.

I sit down at a classroom desk, alone, experiencing newfound, out-of-body anxieties. I begin reciting a poem from memory, to ease my mind.

"Have I done this before?" I wonder, beginning the recitation of a second poem, not even sure why I am sitting within the blank walls of unfinished concrete and door frames. After reciting a half hour's worth of collected poems, images lurch forward into my mind with an effortless cinematic sweep.

Spiraling staircases line the interior of the building, stretching like a digestive system, expunging and absorbing visitors and students who attend a university housed at ground level within its steel frame. I see a young man, his head bound with heavy dreadlocks, racing down the stairs, as his phone falls from his jacket.

Running to help retrieve his phone, I look into the illumined glass and see all-original asemic writings. I am captivated, as another who pursues the little-known, conceptual art of visual language. I feel an immediate camaraderie with the young man, and listen to the silent stairwell, softly echoing with the sound of a door shutting.

Sitting the day away in the stairwell, waiting for another chance meeting. I finally walk up to the top floor, to exit the building through a glass door onto the roof. The ledge overlooks a panoramic landscape vista, a northerly region of the Great Plains.

I see the bald cliffs of buffalo jumps, where the Blackfoot Nation would hunt by racing with the stampedes of life-giving herds, leading them to the brink of a high ledge, watching as they careened over it. Looking out towards the horizon, I notice strange mountains which I had never seen along the horizon. They appear unusual to the local terrain. They are sparsely topped with fluorescent greens, ruddy earth-reds and light browns, an endless carpet of medium-tall peaks at uniform height, draped with the shadows of roaming clouds.

"I know the endurance it takes to traverse the range," I think, envisioning an excursion to the plateau. Professors, guides, and hikers would say as much, as crossing the natural pass is nearly impossible, the very definition of impasse. As I

continue to stare into the sun-drenched morning glow I see the marks of industry. Train tracks cut directly into the heart of the range.

After another hour, surveying the peaks from atop the building, I walk hurriedly downstairs, to meet the day in the open wild. Like a scrappy ruffian on the run, I begin on unmarked passageways with careless abandon, wandering through brier patches and bushy vines. I sense mischief everywhere about me.

I come to the property encircling a house, and trespass into the private land. I observe the residents returning home. I amble on, now more directionless than ever through the unending chaotic web of lowland brush.

Finally at a loss, with the mountains long out of sight, and the day fast descending, I ford a muddy swamp that I know borders the city. Once returned, defeated by dusk and the unknown wilderness, I wait for a bus.

Small trickles of rain bear down on the fogged bus windows. The personable nature of the bus driver is a great comfort. Interrupting his affable conversation, I ask to be dropped off at a convenience store.

The cold, wet ground is porous, venting with sticky moisture. The soil is saturated with runoff beneath the fractured concrete. In the store parking lot, three homeless people kneel, prostrating on the sidewalk outside the entrance.

A middle-aged lady receives a cardboard-container of fast food from a charitable passerby. I enter, greeting the clerk. As I look from the window, I observe, to my amusement, a group of young girls catapulting themselves off of a nearby roof to land on a trampoline. I walk out of the store again, to get a closer look.

The first girl lands short of the trampoline center. The second girl lands on her back, far off center, crashing down on the edge of the trampoline. She gets up, aching. Sipping from a drink, I unwrap a packet of candy, watching, waiting for the entertainment of the foolish tragedy to unfold. A third girl catapults herself farthest from the rest, well past the trampoline.

I recoil, as she writhes instantly, in excruciating pain, on impact. Her thigh must be broken. I return inside the store, trying to make sense of the adolescent absurdity while asking for a phone. The homeless simply stare into the blank cityscape, wasting away over a bottle of mixed liquids.

Around the corner, I meet a girl I have known. We talk under the light, drizzling showers that tickle our noses. She is her usual self, magically inspired, and lovely as ever. We walk over to a garden, and wait for a mutual friend. He pulls up to the sidewalk in a van. As we drive through the downtown core, he stops again, unexpectedly, to pick up a family friend.

Comfortably seated in the car, his friend passes snacks and then makes a snide comment, smiling at my anima. “When you look in its eye, do you see a snake?” he says, plainly. We are disappointed by his tactless behavior. After an awkward silence, he is suddenly let out of the car, without a second thought. On the side of the highway, he stares at us bitterly. Driving away, I can hear his concealed verbal abuse over and over again.

Once at our destination, a countryside getaway, night slowly settles, and we emerge from our bedrooms, all fitted comfortably in nightclothes, to toast to the night. Sitting patiently, reserved, calm, my anima sits conversantly with our friend, an actor.

I begin to talk about recent books I’ve read. I start with the subject of civil rights in the American South. I continue to divulge in the history of slavery in Brazil.

“The Portuguese colony in Brazil received the greatest influx of African slaves, more than anywhere else in the world,” I explain, listening carefully to the room, so as not to disturb the homey silence about us.

She is sweet and doesn’t mind me carrying on. The two then leave me comfortably to enjoy fireside solitude. They converse in another room, humorously arguing about the insanity of Los Angeles. And if my hearing serves me right, they want more drinks.

“It began at the bus stop,” I start into an unlikely story when they return to the living room. “In a mangled phone booth, with an ambiance characteristic of a filthy office garage, or a shed built from cement, looking something like an old jailhouse before the installation of bars, a large, heavyset woman submerged herself in a blood bath, drinking warm bodily fluids wolfishly over her red-dyed dress.”

“I’m on a diet,” she said, through eerily bloodshot, insane eyes. ‘Blood is mine.’”

“I drove off over the desolate rural highway,” I continued. “Snow and ice fed the sky in a formidable crown of gleaming silver. The earth hibernated, as the road iced up and the snow piled up, impassably.”

“I stopped, to get out at a deserted bus stop, only to find two pistols in a defunct trashcan. They were caked in icy snow, perfectly disguising any handprint residue on the metal. We fired off a round before we burned the snow off the pavement, speeding on our way to the border.”

“‘On the road, blood is our subsistence,’ I thought. ‘We drink of it fluidly and richly. Our decadence is written in animal murder.’”

Morning, we all begin the day gathering in the yard. My feet are swollen, growing more painful as I walk ever so lightly across the rough grass and hard-packed, unlevelled soil. I am almost joined to them, walking the domestic plain alone.

“It all started when we began busking,” I hear my anima telling a story, eyeing me cruelly, and feeling distant as ever while I scan through the dizzying array of bodies. After the short-lived morning welcome, my anima and I ride for miles into the untamed woodland, curious to meet a neighbor.

I smell musk, old and lingering. Cherry-hued ornaments, gold-laced and welcoming, adorn the side of a rotting, wooden home, unpainted. Thick carpeting leads from the outdoor walkway, and runs under the front entrance.

Of mildew and dust, the atmosphere is intimidating. A gentle knock on the door sends the creaking stand back inside the empty abode. Inside, a set of stairs leads us on into unlit rooms.

We walk into a room furnished with about twenty seats and then stand before an upraised platform resembling a stage. We walk into the rows, and sit down to admire the quaint, homely theatre.

My anima points, silently to the back of the stage, where a curtain begins ruffling. A body moves behind it.

“This reminds me of two young men I grew up with,” she whispers, fixing her pointer finger right between my eyes. “They’re now much older. When I first met them they were elementary school kids and now they are adults. They grew up with me in our apartment complex, upstairs.”

We watch the stage, carefully. If not for the awed captivation of my anima, I would have run clear of that unsettling home as soon as I saw it. Then, as by the intensity of her stare, a Taoist ceremony begins to unfold onstage. The people, who appear from behind the stage, nod to us graciously.

At the right corner of the stage, a woman fitted in the dress of a schoolteacher assumes the role of Taoist priest, and accompanies a luthier, as they carry three, long boards of wood, covered in expensive, opulent cloth.

By the oversight of the priest, the luthier unveils three instruments, and a set of tools. My anima whispers, “The three instruments...they are very old and large.”

She rises from her seat, silently cautious, to gain a better view of the act. Returning, she confirms, “They are very cheap, simple effigies for a ritual, paying homage to nature as an unknowable source of mystery.”

After about an hour observing the slow, deliberate world of ritual, we exit the theater room, and walk leisurely out into the country air. I admire her rushing beauty from a riverbank lookout. I can tell how far she has strayed in her mind, to the lost charms of her youth.

When we meet again, years later, she recounts her lonesome travails. “They were all so directly inspired by a strange ceremony in that country house,” she clarifies. “Time had ceased to go forward for me, from then on, I feel that nothing passes, everything is always experienced.”

“Weeks went by, and on such a day as any, I finally realized you were no longer with me,” she says. “I found myself in a workshop. There were construction workers, men and women in torn overalls, squatting on the ground, hammering and working on things.”

“I recognized one guy as the site manager. I wanted to impress him. I started working on something,” she continues to tell the story of her personal crisis, becoming frantic, her nerves revisit the stress of their total transformation.

“He said, ‘You know, we pay twenty five dollars an hour here.’ I quickly responded, ‘I could take on this job.’ He said, ‘You’ll work ten hours here,’” she says. “The whole time I was thinking about you, wondering where I was, asking myself, ‘Why am I doing this?’”

“As I kept working harder, lifting wood planks and wires, I did well. It came time to leave one night. I picked up my shoes, bags and coat. I walked towards the door,” she tells the story, a look of horror gradually emerging on her face, as from her ruined heart. “The manager looked at me, chuckling. ‘You wish your man was here right now,’ he said. ‘More than you know,’ I said. And there you were, gazing at me with your loving eyes. I blinked, realizing I had been staring at him, and saw you.”

Completely taken off guard, I held her in a tight embrace, her head on my chest. “My love, you saved my life,” she gently whispered. “I’m here to walk you home,” I say. Her heart pulse becomes more regular. And as we smile, she is again, completely calm.

At an opulent restaurant in town, differently sized glasses are laid next to their appropriate bottles. Expensive liquors, microbrews and artisan wines flow into the majestic glares that file in at the end of a long winter. The survivors are many, now immersed in the trifling worries of oversexed minds. My anima becomes more and more anxious by the second.

Exiting the restaurant after rushing to consume our portions, to flee the social nightmare, we ride through night-fallen passes in the drought-severed Western plains. The air breathes with songs of otherworldly hosts.

A threesome of conservatively dressed young girls stride deliberately from an outstretched grove, hugging the roadside. The trees burst at the seams of life through their winter-worn bark.

Girls disappear at the edge of a river. The night is confident at its highest hour, when hidden worlds are shrouded in the veils of the spectacular above. The

new moon tears into the sky with quiet appeal as starlight and the planet's solar reflections intermingle on the woolly grass. The celestial auras of Venus, Source of Love, kiss Jupiter, God of Power.

I find a clearing.

Although entirely submersed in the eye of nature, my mind wanders through time, to the first decade of 20th-century New York, when tens of thousands of weary and confused, speechless and illiterate migrants from the backcountry of Europe survived so that their children could live to tell the tale, of who they are, and how they struggled to live on remembered.

The year is 1915. I climb the dark, narrow wooden staircase six flights up to the cold-water apartment where my grandfather was born on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The family speaks Greek, though a dialect suffused with Hebrew, Turkish, and Spanish, as they are Romaniote Jews from the northwestern Greek territories of the Ottoman Empire.

The subdued grays and whites of the neglected window frames and creaking floorboards bear a rustic aura, draped in the sallow gaslight. To an artist, the house could be seen as etched in charcoal, its edges deteriorated and fading in smears of black and white, patched by an oblique pitch darkness.

Followed by the never-ending sound of footsteps outside in the hallway and street, I delicately peek into the night table drawers, to find a child's bed made within the loose wooden hold. I search through disorderly piles of handwritten pages and small books in the other drawers, fitted between scraps of clothing.

As I turn to observe the stoop below through a small window, low to the ground so as to obscure the entrance of light, a child emerges from their drawer, well-rested and personable. He begins talking to me about a famous author.

An impressively precocious intellectual, the voice of the child is resoundingly contrasted with the altogether lacking frame of life that surrounds us in the Lower East Side tenement. At that, he leaves with a few pages removed from the drawer below his sleeping quarter, now held within his coat jacket. I sit on the bed, staring at the bare wall, in the airless, immigrant womb of first-generation America.

The typewriter on the desk has a gothic majesty. The stamps of its keys are drawn up like the spires of an Old World architectural experiment. Its color is jet black, and the cast weighs heavily. I begin to press its keys, ranging through the letters like a flightless bird, each key a flap, seemingly futile. Then, I fly.

I heave over lines of copious thoughts, striving through a mind silenced to death. Families, orphans, toughs and widows blare mindless talk, a linguistic babel

of European tongues all brainwashed and floundering in the cold noise of the tenement.

I get up, unable to shut out the all-pervasive din that crashes piercingly through the thin, rotting walls. Emptying a drawer, I am frantic, searching for an object to invigorate my inspiration before the all-consuming pyre of human life. I had never felt such closeness with the depraved insanity of the absolutely poor, not by palm or breath.

“Am I lowered into the pit of history?” I wonder, cruelly fixated on the gross orgy of pain that besieges the tenement in tearful strains. “I have crossed the bounds of time, all-too-conscious, superhuman, driven to the brink of madness.”

Each lettered key pressed and stamped against the page mirrors my overwrought origins. The words appear like a stain of ink run down the tongue of a churning maw. And I am speaking of my own folklore.

The night is long, and stretches with a visit from a fellow immigrant who stops on his way to a public assembly, brooding in the shadowy corners of the apartment. His long beard and uncut hair masks him in the aura of an Eastern Jew. He looks at me through darkly bruised eyes.

He convinces me to follow him to a room of unseemly hosts around the block, where a live auction is performed.

“Create art to reflect your dearest, most loving relationship!” the overweight auctioneer blares like a raucous horn, ironical and jeering.

We are smothered by eyes of cacophonous temptation. A most lovely young woman stands at the edge of the stage, delicately dressed in white satin. Overwhelmed by her lush spectrum of clothing, I reach over the stage in drunken haste, to touch the soft fabrics of vermilion, ebony and cobalt waving over a dry grass-hued carpet. Other girls begin to spring out onto the stage, stepping lightly and untamed on the open floor.

Uninhibited, I tug on a sheath of black cloth over the pale rug. I draw out an unknown talent, and begin to imagine angles exacted by the clashing infinitude of ocean waves. Ebony borders are fitted along the seams like brushstrokes, flat, in contrast with the carpet thread, as the distant storm clouds above.

She is a ship, tossing in the animate play of watery forms, dancing and straining in the textile seascape. Bright colors are accentuated near the sun-opened crests, stark, aflame, directing the sail of her shape away from the storm lowering into the deep.

I stand to embrace her. She holds me, unafraid. We are at home in the unruly slum, by day on the cold, dreary street, and by night, in the mobbed gutters of the stage.

We leave together, only to confront the saltwater-flooded street along the East River strait. The concrete jungle environment encases us in a dense canopy of stone and metal. The sky is revealed through a slim corridor, directly above.

On the turbulent bank, crashing against the fragmenting pavement of the roadside walkway, a rowboat glides easily, welcoming us to board, to feel the wind whip us as we ride under bridges, through harbors long submerged by the storm.

As we float out, the river opens up, and a mass of white fog blows over violently against our unprotected bow. We land on the other side of the river, where spindly trees and submerged bushes angle over the brink, amid a howling rush of gales.

The impenetrable earth throws us sideways against the shore. The wind picks up with escalating velocity. We hold onto a mass of dead branches. There are others in the distance moving with organized chaos, spouting adrenaline-riddled orders. Soon, they are focused on our vessel.

The men holler at each other, and at us, enraged as they grapple with the throat of nature. The sight of the open river ahead, where the East River merges with the Hudson into the glory of the Atlantic, is a wicked sight to behold on this dawn, saddled by natural disaster. We are at an impasse before the lone being of nature, an uninvited resting place. The incendiary flood cries with all of the tears of the world.

We finally gather ourselves, soaked and muddied, to rest at the edge of a swampland in old Brooklyn. My anima lifts her feet over the boat first, unscathed of body, unstable in mind. We find rest, calmed by the day's passing in the wake of such immense, earthly wrath.

Returning to cross the East River, the waters still churn with so many tiny whirlpools. We hang onto riverbank trees, swinging over the rapid current, careful not to fall into the floating masses of city refuse. Boarding a low-lying canoe, we row recklessly downstream, up against the heavy, coursing flow.

Many times I attempt to turn, whipped and slammed in and out of half-sunken tree trunks. Dark mossy greens mix with the auburn, navy and mustard shades. I begin to worry, "What if we fall in?"

Cautiously, I slow down, dipping an oar in the running water. I see many others downstream. "How did they get there?" I wonder, dazed, questioning why others would have entered the roaring, filmy waters.

Everyone in the water is futilely attempting to cross it. All look for a way through the amassing heaps of debris, sucked into the flood tide. One young man ahead falls overboard, almost lunging headlong into the deadly sewage-infused liquid. Shockingly, he emerges to safe ground at a far embankment, though he is sure to become sick from the nasty contaminations in the stream.

On the road beyond the shore, an antique trolley appears to be in working order. There are handicapped and paralyzed men and women about. Most are elderly. They board, their hair tossing about in the faint blustering gusts. They don't see us, and I wouldn't even expect a shred of empathy from them for us either, who are marooned before the trembling sea.

After testing our bodies to utter exhaustion, we finally reach the soft, moist ground. There are inviting sounds of people gathering in the neighborhood, the smell of burning stoves, children cooing, and men laughing. It's enough to tempt us forward.

As we round the first bend beyond the riverside street, I see women carrying satchels, infants asleep at their bosoms, sacks of fresh green vegetables on their backs, tufts of emerald nourishment waving behind them as they walk.

Curious about where they acquired such fresh food in the wake of a clear natural disaster, I am stunned by their environmental logic, enriched by their delectably biodiverse surroundings. We continue to walk through the city, we realize there is a growing network of neighborhoods, all immersed in a shared society subsisting on urban permaculture.

The de-industrialized landscape is reason for people to smile, as they find sufficient privacy in the wind-blown forest parklands and metallic wreckage, strewn about like the toys of a child after a fit.

As we spend the day bewildered by the abundance and generosity that remains throughout the revitalized urban wasteland, I grow content. Her company is all the more wonderful as we feast on the luscious fruits and raw beauty of honest labor. Before sundown, I meet a Rastafarian man praising the fall of Babylon. He provides me with his kindly living wisdom which exudes from his mere presence. Then he speaks with strong, unshakable words.

"Truth doesn't move," he says, between his brilliant smile of crooked teeth, overgrown with a thick beard, his head weighed by a top-heavy hat of locks. It was the first time I had seen a genuine Rastafarian laugh on the streets of New York.

On the margins of the concrete jungle, I observe a band of community leaders as they organize a night gathering. They cry out, in unison, and a chorus of independent voices follows from the growing crowd. They proclaim pride at

having achieved communal solidarity in the face of displacement, pledging to aid the oppressed and needy migrants of the surviving world.

One of the leaders, a tall, bright-eyed woman, raises her arms to the sky, and with eyes tightly closed, begins to shed tears in silence. She then speaks, of the meaning of continuity, and of cultural expression.

“By culture, I mean the spirit of us all, as expressed by each of us, as one,” she clarifies. “The uniqueness of one, in each of us, holds the power of us all.”

She then continues, speaking in an ancient image-language to provoke her weary listeners to see their faces, meet the minds of the greatest thinkers, travelers and activists who have walked the land in the name of justice, peace and oneness. As her voice fades into the quiet, moonlit air, the crowd stands, one person at a time. As each person rises, they exclaim original affirmations of individual and group presence.

“We are the Exotic Settlers,” a man yells from the back of the crowd, standing, irrespective of a natural order that had commenced where every person rose in the spirit of collective intimacy.

“A skeletal footprint,” he says, now standing firm on his ground, his tongue sharp and fast as the crack of a whip. “Awakening humanity to Earth. Her. Being. Mater.”

That morning, I walk from the gathering to a wilderness sanctuary, cordoned off with polished stones for amblers to recognize the protected land. I caress colorful, big-leafed plants and dip my hand in a shallow pond. The scents of fresh fish, and amphibian life are almost so dense that they seem to nourish us every time we breathe.

The humid air is transporting, often involuntarily, causing our minds to transcend spatial dimensions. Time beats like a heart, quickening to the pace of an intensified microcosmic environment.

As I walk further into the conserved ecology, filmy leaves brush against my face, as lotus-like lilies seem to bloom before my eyes. The dense atmosphere of breathable life tastes like a clear, herbal soup. I feel like a fabric, deeply woven into my surroundings.

Through the immersive forest, I notice a hut, cleverly built of felled trees to the point of aesthetic charm. A man emerges, looking over me as he stands in front of his front door frame. Bearded, and hatted, he grips a pipe neatly lodged in his mouth, and glances over like an innocent animal, exuding a most gentle and human appearance that is both welcoming and deserving of the respect that only space and silence can give.

He then smiles at me, and sits on a log, facing my direction, smoking his pipe with an amused sense of character. His clothes are plain, simple, with threadbare earth tones frayed at the seams. His pants are a reddish-brown color, and his shirt has a green and orange plaid design. I keep an eye on him as I near the hut, and he rolls up his sleeves, revealing hairy, muscular forearms. He smiles again, and leans to one side, picking up his foot and placing his pipe in his mouth, apparently entertained by my careful steps.

The closer I am to him, the sooner I realize that he is smoking cannabis, although his pipe is clearly typical to the tobaccoist. Reclusive, behind four fixed walls of heat-swollen wood, he tells me he has lived in the hut since he was a boy.

“When I was about half your age,” he stares into my eyes, his arms slacken, and his face cramps as he looks up contemplatively, submerging his mind in his memories. “I was not always alone. That was before I left everyone, to wander through these delicate woodland paths. When I returned, no one was left here. I have embraced the mystery of loss as the unknowable gift that never stops giving.” The mere look of his crooked-toothed, hairy-faced smile has the unsettling quality of strong medicine.

“Edible fruits hung down from their vines,” his eyes watered as he looked into mine, and out into the forest with the most unaggressive of qualities, as I had never seen in a person.

“The forest was all magic and mystery. I felt I was gifted beauty herself, flowering before my eyes, glistening with tears until they were dried by the heat of the sun, and returned to clarity, cooled in the dank interiors of the forest under starlight. I sat on the ground that night. There was a blank calm of unspeakable serenity on that lonely patch of earth, where nature has grown, and where we have always grown alongside her.”

He speaks effortlessly. His voice weaves in and out of life-affirming passages like a walker among the forested corridors of his chosen homeland. Through the dawn, I listen to his brilliant monologues, as he opens his thoughts to free conversation.

After he retires, and the sparkling galactic atmosphere blooms, I see the starlit-reflective glint of an eye on the periphery of his humble clearing. The surrounding flora walls wave gently to a whispering breeze. A blue-black panther creeps behind the encircling brush, masked by the façade of a night charged with the inhuman viscera of life and death.

Unprepared for the mortal confrontation, I rush headlong to the hut, now locked and silent. The animal is otherworldly, a prehistoric enigma of fear. Her presence bleeds through the yawning chasm of wilderness.

I hide under a pile of split and sanded wood a few paces from the hut, apparently the remnants of an unfinished table. Overloaded with adrenaline, I smash the only window of the hut, and nervously watch the unprotected frame for a sign of the beast, sitting alone with wracked nerves until the predawn hours. The earthy smells of the home begin to cool as the wind picks up and changes direction.

Through a slight crack in the window frame, I feel the movements of the spring air, healing as the art of conscious breathing. Although narrowed in the wood fissure, I see out over the grasses, colored so vibrantly to the point of seeming artificial. "What unbelievable green! When the land is healthy, the people are invigorated by the light above and the life below."

Sitting back against the wall, beneath the closed window frame, I decide to kill time, and wait to feel out the intentions of the feline predator. While inside the hut, overcome by curiosity, I begin to rifle through the forest hermit's uncovered books. I read words written in what appears to be the handwriting of a man such as he.

I quickly learn that he is a gifted poet, as his most original words angle into view through my cock-eyed perspective. So, impressed, I start reciting his diligent lines, as they carry my mind through the fascinating edges of his extremely individual sense of reason and art.

The feeling of beginning, of firsthand inspiration, never leaves me, as I read the first entire piece of his aloud, and become engrossed in the found literature, every enunciation like the swaying of a treetop sunset in the cool night. His home holds truths as strong as life and death.

Reflecting on his absence, I become suspicious of how he trusted my sudden presence from the outset. I stop reading, suddenly disillusioned by the panther outside, and the reclusive man who seems to have no known obligations to the rest of civilization, yet is strangely versed in high cultural craft. I sit on the floor, and remember all of the times when my life was reduced, almost fatally, to bad luck.

Racing from that crooked little haunt, I return to the city of exploitation, where life ages, thinned to film booms and busts, raw in the piercing fire of aloneness. Walking through the outlying streets by so many locked doors and shut gates emblazoned with celestial clouds and spiritual lions, I know Chinatown at midnight, where even in the twilight hours the people are as lively as they are in the day.

The searing flesh of meat, egg, noodle and rice steams hot off outdoor ovens. A man claps his mouth open full of pot-stickers, as he inhales deeply over a simmering tray of vegetables.

“She’s not at home?” he asks a man beside him in lazy English, apparently discussing marital affairs. I sit across from them, on the other side of the street oven, burning my tongue callously over a boiling bowl.

In my eyes, a love as hot as the sun drains my blood in every instant with a magic touch, lightening my burdened mind in every unpredictable way.

“She likes to go out, speak Cantonese with her people, be a part of her culture,” the man continues, glowing by the sheer heat of his food. Returning to the apartment where I had once lived, I look at the building, and into the window where I once sat for days and felt content. I can almost feel the way my anima reached for my shoulder, and touched me with her delicate power.

“How is grace?” I wonder, drifting into memory, and staring at the antiquated brickwork. The dim, cornered light in the apartment looks perfect, like it always did. It was her way of experiencing night.

Before morning, the overcast sky is doomful and apocalyptic, bitterly crimson. The bloodshot obscurity is cutting and breaks down her soul, memory vanishes at every instant under the featureless gaze of so many rays of sunshine. Intricately woven, elevated tram lines run through the horizon from the city to the plain beyond.

Buildings throughout the urbanized land are heavy with the over-industrialized shadows of progress. Underground technologies are amassed in ramshackle storehouses, the past stunted by misdirected futures. “This is what is left of the ancient capital, of glorious Xi’an?” I retrace my knowledge into the sobering night. The brilliant cultural treasures of old China are reduced to a highway market under the unceasing black smog gathering above.

Surfacing onto a dim street, I become acquainted with an unemployed intellectual and find my way into his apartment. I reminisce on my time living in the dizzying neglect-ridden suburbs of Cairo, where I once laughed with the women of South Sudan, and shook hands with the descendants of the Banu Quraysh.

“*You* are tough!” said the big-boned tea-seller, a Kush woman who smiled often and profoundly. And yet, she met an untimely death not long after that. I enter a swollen door, busted at the edges. The room is drab, yet has a hard-won charm. My new friend, the acquaintance, appears from around the corner of his humble kitchen, pouring tea with the build of a martial arts practitioner. He welcomes me eagerly to enjoy his space. Then, he exits silently.

I am struck with anxiety, unsure if my foreign presence is welcome. The tea is hot and strong, and I relax. After about an hour, I become restless, opening closet doors. One is not a closet at all. A man, who must be his neighbor, peers through, stunned, half-dressed in pajamas from the neighboring apartment. Without a

second thought, he greets me. The surprisingly friendly exchange is a comfort to my uneasy nerves. I am left with a broken television, indiscernible Chinese books and near-broken furniture.

By afternoon, I wake to find a red balloon floating in the windowless bedroom of the apartment. The tea was spiked. I had been drugged. The door is shut. As from the atmosphere of an imagined realm, I see a scarlet balloon lift slowly into the air, and fade from sight. My eyes are open, gradually flooded with the light of the earthly sun below the door. The sun, even its slightest appearance, had penetrated my mind, waking me up. The red balloon was all that remained from the aftereffects of the drug, having crossed over the liminal state.

Leaving the apartment and Chinatown, I wander downtown neighborhoods through antique Spanish architecture, and see 15th-century Mexico City through a storefront window on a parchment of black and white cartography. With a mind impressed by the historical document, I glare out over the skyline and remember Manhattan. The urban grid lies before me.

I head toward the last road before the inner city island, where a parkland forest stands, luring. Atop a bristling hillock in the strong spring winds, a fair temptress bounds effortlessly over sprigs of dandelion blooms and varicolored grasses, her clothing flaps wildly as she mounts my hip in a leap of embracing lust.

She asks me to find my way past the blistering outcrop of the staggering urban nightmare, a chaotic mess of colonial history, Tenochtitlan in North America, sprawling in a frayed mess of abandoned wires and hot coal. In a vehicle that looks like it could survive the apocalypse, I brave the incendiary beyond.

There's a thick Floridian humidity about the land. The silent pavement provides a buffer zone between sweating plants and the lowering sky. Small mammals scurry mindfully in the thick brush along manicured pathways. A massive dome appears, as some asinine compromise between gross citification and enlightened earth. The crepuscles of dusk throw a scintillating finitude over the overwhelming structure behind us. White-mounded chalky cliffs define the rustic entrancements of the open road.

An aqueous blue light hovers in a pallid mist throughout the sporadic lighting of the tunnel system. Globular shadows bloom over the fear-cast highway. "The deeper we press on, the more sheltered are the animals who dwell inside," I call out, peering into the subterranean passage, and, for a thoughtless second, wish to turn back

As night speeds out into the sweltering heat of day, I sit languorous at a country café atop a balconied precipice. The muddied roads stage the brewing social frictions about when two heated rough bands of teenagers face off. The common attitude is apathetic, as resting feet mosey in careless to the disaffected gorge of their violent backwoods standoff. I watch, restless, bitter with remorse as the puffed chests of teenagers splinter with strangled breath under their pitiful guise of torn flesh and mangled bones.

Inside the café, my wayward eyes dart back and forth until trained in the direction of a radiant presence. A world-class musician empties bellies of laughter and rays of her smiling countenance in all directions, especially when her eyes meet with mine. We have become acquainted through sound. She slides over to my table, her red dress waving above the wooden floorboards like brushstrokes over canvas. Ordering tea, she invites me to an evening concert. The hall is decked with the stylish wonders of the worldly epoch. The bountiful core of human opulence shines in its full magnificence as she, the lead musician, and her percussionist, gently play. A twin-headed gourd sounds off under the masterful split-finger technique of the percussionist. Bursts of mountainous excitement turn the crowd within, where life is beatific, full of heart, where the ground is respected as that place which is common to all.

It was as if life itself began from the most unintentional of moments. A simple preparation for a show soon fulfilled our entire reality.

Onstage, she positions herself to sit and play until the distant stars are burned out in the eye of the sun. She is a sleepless artist, the waking mind who lives in dreams, and dreams in life.

As the ruddy backdrop of sky begins to acquiesce into a chillingly serene sunrise, I receive her eyes. Walking up the spiraling theatre, upwards toward the back entrance, atop the sterling balconies, I wait for her. A wild goddess of tightened strings, now relaxed and silent, she ascends, and we listen to the song of wings. I caress her tan skin under black cotton and dense hair. I am as grateful for her as I am for the music that she so effortlessly is, and for the quiet and the listening.

After an unintended nap beneath the warming sun, she grows restless, and sudden in her violent motions, tragically rushing around, asking inane questions about my personal history. I show her the instrument I had been carrying with me, the reed-affixed bamboo, and begin to play with exasperated over-exertion. My chest caves in a sonic whorl of the meandering tidal flush, extinguishing all emotive energy in a breathy exhale. A wave of cataclysmic shock escalates from my belly, as I seethe in the inglorious aftermath of our parting.

I descend to the café, to cower below the stage, in preparation for the performance that she hotly welcomed me to join. Across the stage, glowing in the fuzzy spotlight, I see her, a precious beauty, my one and only love, anima of my dreams. She is the centerpiece of all that is wonderful in the human world.

And in mid-performance, I am overwhelmed by her effulgent heart, and abandon my place beside her. I am a man desperate and reckless, pilfering moments past on a cleanly lit hill outside the café. She falls toward me, beckoning me to return wholeheartedly, pleading with the strength of her unborn tears. I am without music, soundlessly turning away from her and the wide-open ears of our beloved listeners.

I hear my name in a cacophony of talk, as my mind wavers, leaning in to return to her, and still I descend from the hilltop café, and from the highland countryside, back to the city. Long-distant friends and family bemoan my chronic poverty. I steal a bicycle at the edge of the metropolis, willing myself forward through the painful pursuance of others, judging, watching, and waiting.

“Where is the child?” I hear them say, as they call into a wasteland abyss of my empty longings. I see my reputation slithering through their wildest imaginations, all of my successes and failures heaped before a thumb pressed firmly down over an ink stamp.

After so many hours, I break down, trashing the bike, invaded by the ceaseless blinking of innumerable eyes unseen. “Where is my eternal love?” I ask, searching over fragments of pavement and upturned earth, staring through patches of cloud, and looking in every direction through the windblown plain. She is concealed behind the fortress of our distant hearts. As the day sinks, shuddering in the failing light, I sink in the silenced land, fertilized by my own blood, sliced and carved by the needs of my individuated soul.

Blithe with the sensation of an opiate rushing through my veins like a waterfall overflowed during a mountain-born flood, I stand in an old-fashioned English telephone booth. On the paved street corner, with the dreariest urban scene surrounding, I look around dumbfounded, noticing, in curious awe, how well the brick-red paint of the telephone booth merges with the colors and shapes of the closest building, so much so that they both appear as the same structure.

I climb up the booth as a furious band of battered felines begin to swat and hiss, all shapes and sizes of stray, tattered and dusty, some with thick coats and others with scrawny shorthaired bodies, skeletal and mangy. Fiercely, they claw at me and bite. I escape, overwhelmed.

Spring blooms, and the air dries as hints of summer speak through the movements of earth and sky. Winds gust from the south. And the season’s round of

plants and birds appear on the land to reflect the sun-bound revolution of the planet.

The city docks are flooded with a crowd, elitist, bred for pleasure and life, ignorant and bemused. I see a chance to board the ship unseen, by way of the theater. As the vessel prepares to embark, everyone aboard sinks to a seat in the garrulous hubbub, discussing the program, a retelling of the life of Cleopatra, “Queen of the Nile”. Surprisingly, I befriend many passengers onboard the ship. The authorities regard my presence with unquestioning kindness.

The days descend, and the moonlight falls, as starlight and sun become interfused in an oceanic profundity only known to the earthly imagination through steadfastly contemplating the nature of the deep. As the ship speeds cuts through the endless waves, all are jovial and friendly as the high-spirited waters directly ahead of us, high above my memories of riverine wilderness on the luxury craft.

After the first play on Cleopatra, a woman leads a procession, honoring everyone onboard, celebrating their African ancestry. Two ladies onboard vie for the lead. The opening scene calls for a booming voice. Quietly humored, I console a beautiful and meek young lady who was denied a part. After a second try, having gained confidence, she gets a role and smiles at me warmly.

One night, the ship makes an emergency stop at an inlet, where on the shorefront, a party circles around the high flames of a roaring campfire. I carefully venture afoot with a few hardy acquaintances, remaining unseen by the celebratory gathering on the palm-lined banks. Unannounced, I walk out in front of the group to sit with a young man my age enjoying the firelight festivities. Without saying a word, he simply smiles and shows me a lute, apparently fashioned by his hand. An unmanned drum lies beside me within arm’s reach, and soon we are improvising together. Our music is fine, elegant to the ears. The fire spits rejuvenated glory into the damp rainforest canopy above. Shadows flit with gorgeous mystery.

“What festal stirring is this?” I think, glowing inside, holding fast to the brilliance of the moment, like I’d stare at the beauty of a butterfly’s wing knowing that at any moment the insect will fly away without warning. “What a crowd!”

Gawking, feeling for life in the parading maw amid dancing howls and dilating eyes, I see that I have long been left ashore, as the ship sets off into the marine horizon.

“This is no mere celebration,” I realize, as my eyes widen larger with every passing second. “This is a wisdom gathering, one concentrating the power of the mind enough to still the oceans.”

“This is a spectral breeding ground for the transcendent,” I think, looking around me at faces released of worldly stress. “They are the wilderness souls born

to embody naked truth. Theirs is a tribal wail, a martyr's plea, a hoarse rasping call to smoke down group camaraderie through the visceral tongues of mutual introspection."

I am drowned in an ambient haze, pulsating and thickening with every leap from the quaking mud at my feet. The emanation of a trickster is personified in the galactic sky, teething for human thought, autochthonous souls who have foresworn selfish lust, and heal, detoxified by ritual laughter. Together we dream of life's mysteries and emerge from the closed, all-human circle of being.

Their organic clothes are spare, though snug. Local furs, leaves and dyes are identifiable against their well-worn skin. Their homes are also appropriate for the environment, rising from circular foundations, fitted to give energy back to the exploited ground. They invoke the age in the spirit of newborn life, again immersed in their visible joy, communal through and through.

As dawn reemerges, I become sick with a need to escape, and so run into the bush where pathways are strewn with cold ash. On into the dark forest, bitten with lightning stings of invisible insects and the swatting whip of snake tails, I am enveloped by scattered, wild hosts. The formidable country bends over the dim horizon, and as the dense growth separates I gain speed, led on by the struggle to break through the woods.

An unknown beast moves ahead. Tall, white feathers are splayed over the unmoving ground. I sense the animate spirit of the forest, glowing and rumbling ever so softly with the slight movements of day. The bird, unseen, is an infamous species, known for its intuitive instincts, its strength and unearthly character, a survivor of the endangered land.

I follow tracks to the edge of the forest.

Arranged Sensual Derangement

I notice the outline of a familiar young woman pacing slowly along the natural border, where forest meets the rolling plain. She appears like a recurring dream.

The longer I stare, the more she fades like the shadow of an old memory. Her presence provokes me to reminisce of a young woman who I met in a small village in southeastern Mexico. After leaving her earthen family home one sun-bathed morning in the lowland jungles of the Yucatan, I gifted her a jade ring.

Afterwards, she wrote me for years, though we had been out of touch for many more, and now there is only silence between us, the kind of speechlessness that holds our many lifetimes to wonder. Out over the plains beyond the forest, I see her features are now darker than I remember, her hair thicker, and braided in a ponytail as thick as her spine.

Her face is crowned with hair, as the shadowy forest light further obscures her face from view. The sun blooms over the horizon to a silhouette of her shape. As she moves like a swimmer over the mystical land, I am struck by an unfulfilled sense of familiarity. There is a great distance between us, and I am immobilized with the intense desire to recognize her face again against the pure ecological grace around us. She disappears, finally, without the slightest hint that she might have known I was there, and that I saw her.

Far beyond the rolling plains, I have a home. Deep in the country, I have a people. Returning, I marry again, a second time. The ceremony is simple, and is held almost immediately. My anima sits beside me as I ready myself, surrounded by no one else but her, waiting to confront my fate while watching unconcerned kinfolk mill about distractedly in a perpetual state of blissful drunkenness.

During the first night of my new marriage, I feel the love I had for my anima strongly revived, having distilled her smile in the long absence. Thinking to myself, I plan to outright abandon the younger bride. When I do, I will not return, not to anyone.

In the midst of preparing for the matrimonial ceremonies, my parents had been in town and left, nonchalantly, and without fanfare. While here, they told one of my childhood friends about their recent news. Since I left home, they had become rich, virtually overnight, and were buying townhouses along the coast, going from city to city with spendthrift abandon.

Emotionally swamped, I steal a car in town and head for a scenic route, bypassing industrial parks, screaming down the highway before penetrating the heart of New York.

On the lam from all sense of family, I trash the car in an out-of-the-way junk heap below an elevated freeway, and take to drinking with a folk band on the street. They offer a swig, as I get back on route toward the bustling core. Soon, it's night and I follow them, listening as they perform in front of a lively sit-down crowd in the dim light of a downtown venue.

The music draws me in, to memories of the rustic living room where I would sit and nap beside heirloom banjos and old records at my father's house. My stepmother sat there too, rising to clean the house in a state of dizzying ire. She sang to let off steam. When she belted out husky, countrified notes, my heartbeat intensified. I would freeze, like I am now, hypnotized and drunk by the music and my solitude in the wavering crowd.

My whole being steps more darkly with the slowing rhythms, as I sit, listen, and feel the vague loneliness I knew of her stark, unforgettable presence, larger-than-life against the plain and vacuous domestication of her life.

She would stop singing and race out into the hall like a girl run out of school. Embarrassed by her deadpan absurdity, I shrank into the cold room made up for my stay. Shivering in emotional pain, I wrap myself in an undersized knit blanket. Utterly confused, I lose consciousness and the rest of my mind by the ungraspable nature of my every uncontrollable and spiraling thought.

"What did her actions mean?" I wonder. "Was she consumed by child-rearing, only able to live for the sake of others in spite of herself?"

"Birth is sacrifice," she said repeatedly, modulating her voice between inaudible whispers and ghostly howls.

To return to sanity, I imagine listening to the music that my anima played when we were in love, how her creativity focused our intimacy. I used to feel calm just thinking of her, a calm that stretched throughout my body, causing my heartbeat to slow, and my feet to warm. I chant our mantra, one that we would laugh over, never wanting the music to settle, to always rise with the sound: "Buddhas everywhere!"

After hours of listening, completed by the silence of our voices, and feeling the comforting fatigue that beckons a lover closer, as to embrace until dawn, she would tell me her dreams. One night, she shut her eyes tight, and began telling me her last nightmare, one that took place during our wedding. She saw me marrying another woman, she said, as she cried, passionately happy because I looked at her, my eyes brimming with a full heart in the soft, beatific light.

I have fallen from vision, all of my original insights blotted out like every color painted to black. Remembering is as unconscious as an involuntary blink. And I am standing beneath a cloudless noon-bright sky.

According to backwoods tradition, the night before I was to marry, again, the entire family, including my new bride, slept together with my anima and I in a common room, on the floor. My anima could hear me arguing with my young fiancé.

“This is not how it should be, this is not how people love one another,” she told me, shamelessly aloud, despite the condensation of time on such a night of fabled proportions. She felt the strong, unbearable emotions that I had endured the same night with my anima, who lay silent, listening, as was our family’s custom.

Only after telling me her nightmare did she express her longing for us despite our separation. Through her eyes, she spoke with the strength of our love that we created for each other, and, over time, mutually destroyed.

“I knew the sense of loss of having to watch a loved one become distant, and leave,” she said, with a curious, dreamy-eyed frown. “And that neither of us died while our life had ended was the strangest feeling of all.”

Soon, everyone is dead asleep around me, and so I rise, carefully, so as not to wake the two women who I did not dare wake from dream into the complete darkness of night. I visit an old friend nearby in his dimly lit apartment. Occupying his room, all bare walls and dusty floors, I see he has since taken part in the international marijuana trade.

“The benefits will be high,” he says to me with a grin.

I finally resolve to turn my back on him then. For the first time I say no to him, risking our confidence, declining his offers. Within, I listen to the silent wishes of my anima, remembering how she always pleaded that I take care of myself. Her genuine words, now echoing in my brain, remind me that this sort of trafficking leads to violence, and all the filth that follows in the wake of easy money. I stand with my friend in the smoky room, where light bulbs hang from wires, swaying from the ceiling.

The longer I stay, the more nostalgic I become for my old life, the early days when chronic marijuana smoke wafted through my whole being, deep down into my subconscious, eventually establishing a profound neurological relation to the plant. I was nothing more than one strong, deep inhalation. I cleared the smoke of self-consciousness through my mind and body, purified by the tough love of the Earth.

The next day I travel upstate to have dinner with my grandmother. Extended family make themselves heard over a range of uproarious and solemn notes of communal respect in memory of our late patriarch. I sit next to my father, who is curiously interrogative as to what I am eating.

“I’m a vegetarian,” I say, flatly.

I begin to explain, “I can’t just eat whatever’s on the table, a carnivore’s delight as usual.”

“Is that difficult?” he asks, patiently interested, although with a slight grin in the corner of his mouth, growing by the second as his younger brother watches us discuss what is, to them, totally irrational.

“I am not only unable to eat most of what our family traditionally prepares. As a vegetarian I must eat more frequently than you carnivores. This puts me at a disadvantage.”

As dinner ends, my younger cousin, age nine, shows me his mouse cage in the corner of the living room in sight of the dining table. Almost everyone at the table seems to watch, some staring, others out of the corner of their eyes. I reach into the mouse cage, only to find that there is no mouse. I reach inside the cage, though as I do, the cage feels like it’s getting bigger, and that my hand is becoming smaller.

“I’m in the cage,” I say, smiling, to my young cousin.

He smiles back silently, and runs to the table to eat more flesh.

Outside the picture window, behind the head seat at the dinner table where our patriarch would sit and crack jokes, a frenetic blur sparks like lightning through the overcast night sky.

I travel through unknowable experiences, fragments of momentary time. I fly over a cacophony of rhythms, internalizing new realities as soon as they are actualized. My memories fade absolutely. I listen to music resound off the polished glass of the picture window. After the eerie music subsides, I roll out into an empty room.

As I drift to sleep, I realize that no one else has heard or seen anything except me.

Morning, before dawn, I walk under the volatile lighting of department stores carved into the landlocked urban sprawl. Through radio speakers latched against corrugated tin rooftops, I hear the unmistakable sounds of passionate sex. The early light thickens against the walls of the building as the coital whimpering subsides.

Walking indoors, I pass by the first cash register, and notice how people are blatantly unconscious to the most obvious and unusual of orgasmic sounds coming

into the entranceway from above. Through a personnel service door into the warehouse, I see a half-naked woman and her lover.

As I continue on into the depths of the store under the blinding artificial light, with the slow-rising sun brightening outside, however unseen, I quicken my pace, wandering to the back, where the commercial mall begins.

Most stores are closed. The mall is darker than usual with so many lights unlit. Listless, I amble through the empty corridors to the movie house. No one stands in the box office, and yet, the theater hallways are open. I wander, and sit inside a theatre, staring at the black, empty screen blankly. I smile and laugh, mimicking the movements of a theatergoer, placing my hand into an imagined popcorn bag, and throw a few invisible kernels into my mouth.

I imagine sitting beside my anima and fiancé. The three of us watch the latest romantic comedy together. "I've long become a fugitive from love," I echo the sappy dialogue, and reach out for an imaginary cup to wash down the salty, popped corn. Now, all that I have for love is my imagination, and the knowledge that I merely contrived all of my feelings.

"Who is that I see?" I stare at the unlit screen, amused and excited to meet an actress in real life, although the movie I'm watching is completely imagined.

She was an acquaintance I made in Cairo. I remember her well. She was a kind young woman, very tall. She used to give me rides in her dilapidated Volkswagen bug through the busy streets of Cairo, driving more confidently than the infamous cabbie.

Here she was again, we watched a scene where she is driving through downtown Cairo, during the days when Tahrir Square still held a certain romance, before street war emptied the place to desolation, as empty as closing hours at the theatre.

The reel ends. The next film is untitled, experimental. The projection screen is divided into a multiple monitor-display sequence of three variations. Then the projection splits, and illuminates different corners of the theatre. Audio frequencies pan from right to left in erratic, nonlinear patterns. Mostly, the film is silent. Two monitors screen the same video. The display is projected behind us, mirrored against the projector.

"Experimental cinema is fascinating," I say, in a round, slightly sarcastic voice.

I am alone. The Cairene comes onscreen again. Only this time, she floats off the projection to sit next to me in the theatre. She smiles, intimating a grand welcome with her big, gorgeous soul. And I think back, nostalgic for the warm nights, when she would step off of a bus looking more beautiful than any image of beauty I had ever known. Soon, my imagination overwhelms me to the point of

exhaustion, and nearly fainting, I exit the theatre into the bustling humdrum monotony of the daylight mall.

The street is cold, and the night still far away. Everyone outside seems to live in a perpetual timelessness, as if the hour before dawn was still lingering. Outside, immediate exhales are thick as cream in the freezing air. The weather is bone dry as the desert tundra. The visibility of breath evaporates, dispersing as suddenly as the disappearance of my lost loves at the theatre.

I cross the city limit, entering the low-lying brush of the coastal woodlands, frosted over. The salt of the nearby sea sticks on my skin. I feel the same sensation touching felled tree trunks. I stop at a clearing, inhale the gloriously fresh marine air and lean against a massive tree lying on the ground. Its bark is covered in silvery gray icing.

Not far into a low-standing grove, I find a ramshackle house. I had never seen it before, its walls are all rough-hewn stone, without a door, and the windows frameless and empty. Walking quietly through the entranceway, the wooden floors remind me of a few homes I lived in during my childhood in out-of-the-way countryside towns. I sit down, beside a rotted desk, and feel withdrawn, suddenly intensely anxious.

I hear the footsteps of my mother, and the voice of a young professor who taught me to respect plants like medicine. I slouch closer to the floor. I feel my nerves split with the overwhelming sensation of distress. Angered, and frustrated, in disbelief, I become like the place I have found. Raw. Austere. Bleak. There is no respite.

“The aftereffects of childhood’s vulnerabilities carry lifelong psychological traumas far into adulthood,” I think. “Most never escape the distorted retrospective fear that we suffered in our childhoods. So, we believe in memories, for a sense of belonging, trust and innocence.”

Once having left the abandoned home, without the comforting sound of a door closing behind me, I fall flat on the field of leaves and dirt, transformed by the naturalist haven surrounding me from below like an impenetrable wall of acoustic sound. Lying on the soft earth, I imagine beasts of the ancient wild, extinct saber-tooth cats, prehistoric dogs and reptiles of the dead and silent past.

I open one eye. My vision is blurred by an overcast drizzle. I see vestigial wings fly across the darkened gold of the mid-afternoon horizon. An impractical, airborne craft trails off into an unseen corner of the sky. I return to mind the present air as winged blades whirl over a cliff edge beyond sight.

Leaping in mid-air, I feel we are like prehistoric humans. We wear rough animal hides. Nude women, cinematic, beautiful, commingle curiously, inciting déjà vu of country forests in Western Massachusetts. With spiky dreadlocks, an inveterate marijuana user, she was a tough spirit at heart. I watch as she glides effortlessly down a tree trunk, just evading a branch with long twigs sharp enough to impale her. Finally reaching ground, I run with her like I would with my golden retriever in the paved neighborhoods of the suburban coast near my mother's home.

I enter the woods. I'm alone. I find my way onto the property of another identical home. I'm lost in the forests of suburbia. I flee down a nearby stream in an ocean kayak. Ocean water rushes into the Shaganappi River.

I feel safe by the mighty, flowing water. It will lead me along its course for days through the riparian banks that nourish so many groves, and brush along cliffs that lead to lakes. I see familiar freshwater island scenery. The river opens my mind with memories of the St. Lawrence, where I once kayaked for hours under a deafening thunder of sky, a spiritual witness to the pregnant emptiness of nature.

I reach beyond the sights and feelers of my past. The new terrain is a mucky, narrow zone. I'm unable to penetrate through. Someone has followed me here. "Am I at risk of being sent back to my former life in the over-paved neighborhoods of my upbringing?" I ask myself, nervously. I manage to sneak past the river's murky undergrowth, trudging through the surface, thick with vegetable muck. I continue on into the mire, unnoticed.

For days and nights, I sleep under floating watery stars. My eyes pierce the black veil of Earth's atmosphere, seeing out from the unity of my being. I am in tune with the flow of its being, asleep in my watercraft bed.

In the morning, I find a small refreshment stand, perched against the unsteady shore. Inside is an old friend from Calgary, who has since eagerly fled the obsolete untruths of suburbia for the brilliance of Brazil. She is friendly, offering me a cold drink and an ice slush, which she sells to passersby.

I look ahead and see where the river turns into a highway, a crooked bend of road, packed with cars in the middle of rush hour. I tell her that I think I will turn back and go upstream against the flow of the river, where I came from, rather than face the impassable void of humanity ahead.

She agrees, while bringing up that it would be easier for an ultramarathon runner. With a touch of humor she wishes me good luck. I wink back, confident in our strong platonic friendship, which is her soul's greatest gift to me. I begin upstream. I see no challenge, and simply row along swiftly, returning to the road

where I began my kayak adventure. I retreat once again onto the sober ground of family life.

Later that week, invited to an extended family reunion dinner, I sit around a table at the Kehila Kedosha Synagogue in Lower East Side Manhattan. The temple represents the last living remnants of Greek Jewish culture. Amongst my relatives, dining on traditional delights, there is an argument. My grandfather stands out among the crowd, mystifyingly dissatisfied. Concentrating, I understand, the argument revolves around the origins of our ancestral name. “Did our name change upon immigration?” His raspy voice disseminates like cracked ice over the antique wooden table.

To find the answer I travel outside of the synagogue, outside of the city limits to a small, ramshackle hut, in which an American hermit lives. I often visit him, though no one else knows of our friendship. When I arrive to his hut, he greets me graciously. I ask how to attain filtered water without a filter, after which he points me in the direction of a stream.

Despite being unaware of which direction I’m heading towards, I lead the way and find that his once-densely forested nature hermitage is now interspersed with half-destroyed concrete buildings and functioning industrial office rooms. I enter one of the offices to let people know we are here, and to learn how to filter water without a filter. They look at me ignorantly and distractedly brush me off. The hermit then leads me to a stream, where the water is rushing clear as a cloudless sky over an array of varicolored stones. I’ve found what I’ve been searching for, but there is more, now fading with the forgetfulness of day.

My wild ambition changes shape as I endeavor to petition a cultural request. Rising in the office’s elevator, I meet a Greek restaurant owner. He invites me to his place of business to organize an event for Greek heritage and culture, celebrating the music of Roza Eskenazi. A man at the meeting works hard for our mutual betterment, as an astute creative writing collaborator. He is kind and encouraging.

I descend once back in the elevator. Across the street from the building, I patiently await my anima outside a cinema. The movie house is packed with young kids who appear to be nearing their high school graduation. They are a beat group. One walks up to me, noticing me from a music venue, and begins talking to me about how he rides waterfalls. He uses a board or foot-gripped craft of some kind and negotiates the verticality of the world’s tallest waterfalls. It is a death-defying sport, yet he is keen to talk to me about it.

I leave the cinema with my anima mid-film. We walk along a damp dirt pathway. Close by is the largest waterfall in the region, Athabaska Falls. I feel the presence of snakes and other venomous creatures about. They say there is an especially aggressive snake that dwells there. Nearing the edge of the waterfall cliff, a man dives down into the abyss beyond. I see a snake hissing and striking at a man on the other side of the waterfall. He reacts playfully, trying to calm the snake and is bitten. No one panics. Afraid, I dart back, tracing my steps along the path, meeting many snakes along the way. I manage to avoid their wicked advances. I look out over an outcrop and see that young sportsman riding the waterfall skillfully. It is a sight to behold.

That night, my face brims with a Cheshire grin as I practice lively positions from the Kama Sutra with my anima. Hovering above, and fading in and out of my view in my space of practice is His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who appears smiling, directly into my eyes as I lay down under my *dakini*. Although he does not open his mouth, his voice says, “Enlightenment is in a smile.” He then fades from my vision.

Standing in the opaque darkness, I open a door and enter a small theatre. My anima accompanies me, wrapped around my arm. We attend spoken word performances. The first performance portrays a sterling and inventive will unlike anything we have seen from the English language outside of song. The subsequent acts are less impressive, yet we enjoy the entire show.

Walking from the theatre venue, the road reflects the night sky as floodlights guide our footsteps along the thin, snow-laden sidewalk. We continue on without a glance forward, watching our feeble footsteps on the icy pavement. Without hesitating, we enter a rundown apartment duplex in our small, industrial city borough.

As we walk in, we find a number of friends and friends of friends sitting on couches, occupying the entirety of the now tense indoor space. The silence is masked with body language, mostly through the eyes. Most are from Colombia. I ask them about life there. Two popular African-American men sit comfortably on the old upholstery, creaking in their wooden chairs. One of them begins speaking eloquently about their situation, connecting the struggles of each and every one present.

I read people like signs, undeniably. What I see foretells the coming fate of humankind. The future is a grim façade of the past’s latching on to the thinly laid dreams of a survivalist on a bed of bloody nails, a failed magic trick.

My vision clarifies with the acuity of fish-eye optics, my nerves straightening over the bluff of a wide forest hill. The forest is damaged, burnt. I feel intensely bound by a potent sensation of fear and isolation in every direction.

In the middle of another world, I drown in the traumas of my life's changes, a natural force looms, ever pervading, with another history, another worldview. I move under the low hovering gray sky when a tantalizing drip of adrenaline stirs.

A wolf is near, ferocious and starved, eating human flesh. I move through a dark grove, edging my way beyond the absolute wilderness of my strange, unquiet surroundings. I hear the echoes of human song, like prayer, chanted and primal. I begin to see smoke rise from a hut made of animal hide and forest wood. As I approach, the landscape transforms into the bald face of nature, alone.

I come to the inhabitants of a small family camp. Two other travelers appear behind me. We confront the camp's inhabitants. There is a violent tension between us, of premature aggression. I disarm them with a smile, persuading them of our innocence.

There is an inhuman air of blind unconcern for solace. The environment seethes with personal need, bared by the encumbrances of pack mentality. I saunter off. The camp accepts me while I'm away. But I'll never know, as I walk with my fellow travelers through an emptied, ghostly silent suburban neighborhood. Once affluent, the residents have long since abandoned this obsolete way of life.

Repetitious Retelling, Restitution Retold

Deep in my subconscious, I mix elements of imagination with reality, wholly overarched by the peculiar logic of my idiosyncratic thinking. I spend my days spinning yarns.

It is the end of World War II. I am a Jew, having barely survived the tight noose of Hitler's Final Solution in Europe. In the cold forests of the northeast, my sister and I are caught in our hiding place. Although they have lost, the Nazi terror is far from over.

Scrawny, with a mind filed away by a flood of unspoken atrocities, a thick-mustachioed German soldier enters. His damaged, sick outlook feeds on our vulnerable state as he begins taunting and undressing my sister. We fight back. He wants us alone in his depressed desperation after hearing that his short-lived Third Reich has ended before it began.

I just barely escape out of the basement window after he'd pulled angrily at my clothes, my sister wrapped tightly in his unforgiving arms. I tear a small, tea-stained map from the corner of a dusty book. I slip away into the cold rush of the oncoming night. I wander with the map embedded in my memory. I pass through an underground warehouse. Small newspaper vendors stand under intensely unnatural fluorescent lighting. Barefoot, I stammer unheard and unnoticed, my clothes torn in rags.

I imagine the map of northeastern Europe zooming out to show an image of northeastern Germany's terrain. I then head for a port, not minding the distance.

Days and nights pass before I arrive to the shorefront town. My muscles are stronger, while my clothes have frayed all the more. I suffered a deep cut. My tongue lolls, as I am conspicuously thirsty. People empathize as I push past townspeople, into the open markets. The sea is stormy, but the salt fills my blood with the heat of my yearning. Ever closer to the seaside, I find a ship departing for America.

I board as one would glide through the unconscious fading of dream. I am overwhelmed by the glorious unknown. A blooming of compassion empties my weighted heart with the immense figure of a creaking wooden ship and its sail. I eagerly march aboard. The massive ship embarks from the port into the wide, light gray fish broth of a cloud-covered fog horizon.

A petite elderly Chinese lady comes on deck as the ship splits the waves on the open sea. Inside the ship, warm faces reflect the surrounding gray mass of shape-shifting wet forms. Suddenly, I see my sister. Our faces glow with the gold of our mutual recognition. A new smile forms upon our lips. We've never tasted such happiness, relieved to our souls.

Once across the sea, weeks later, I spend spring in the solace of an American city park. The daily ground breathes with the comforts of life. Slow, with a confident gait, my lover enjoys the fresh air. She approaches and smiles broadly at me, looking older, more mature and at ease. This fills my heart with unending joy. Beside me, a musician friend who I've known since childhood plays his instrument flat on the ground like a slide *veena*. Their music is serene, and magically rejuvenating.

Years later, I travel to Sudan with a Sudanese friend I met in Cairo, Egypt before the war. Together, we leave for Khartoum from Egypt. When we arrive, I find myself called to visit an ecological park. The city infrastructure and the park itself are strongly reminiscent of Puebla, Mexico where I had then recently lived. The park reminded me of the midwestern plains of North America in midsummer, with its straw grass, lit beige along the side of railroad tracks before an open horizon. I look through my immediate environment to where such memories lead, into the labyrinth networks of my psyche, set in every one of my past residences.

We arrive to our destination in Khartoum. I remember my school dormitories in Cairo, especially their washrooms, where I meet a curiously forward acquaintance who accompanies us throughout the city of Khartoum. I seem to have studied with him in Canada and later we met again in Cairo. I can't quite remember his name, he's assumed another identity, another name in Sudan. Since Cairo, we'd fallen out of contact.

I'd never been to Khartoum before. After a day's activity, I return to the ecological park, while my friend from Sudan remains in the city core. I meet him at a café. Over strong black tea, he emphasizes the fundamental error of my research, which, if on the subject of refugees, should not be "why there are refugees" but, instead "how do we get these people out?" One should not make the mistake of undermining or exploiting someone in the act of exile, as exile is often the most decisively conscious of choices that anyone might make throughout their lives.

Now, I'm tasked with remembering the content and substance, or narrative structure and significance of his statement. I later tell the story of what I experienced in Sudan to close friends and family. It is especially important to tell the story in an intimate setting, to make those listening comfortable enough in a silence so deep that we can hear the pulse of our hearts.

Kasr al-Aini Street in Cairo, Egypt is primarily a street for government bureaucrats and rich bankers and other business fat cats, however there are a good many small juice stands and cafes tucked away. One is called Cafe Vienna.

I often relive Cairo, as a temporary visitor, on Kasr al-Aini Street in a quaint little house. There are random character homes sparsely interwoven in the city core. Its internal and external architecture reminds me of a ramshackle country house.

The first time I exit that home I am immediately met by a conspiring individual, a rotund young man who offers me a small sum of money in exchange for delivering a package around the corner at a gas station. Curiously, I take the package and run back inside my home. My anima tells me that I'm being foolish, so I return the package to that inexpressive young man. He takes the package back without question and rounds the bend, after which police storm.

That day, a neighbor moves in. He is a man with dark complexion not unlike the local Egyptians, however he seems very American in his mannerisms. He later tells me he is from Hawaii. He is nice. One day he helps us as we return home with two amphibious pets and a fish.

I am not sure why we have these creatures, however another smaller man, a caretaker of amphibious pets, comes to cut them out of packaging that resembles stomach lining. He says to be careful of one of the amphibians, which is an exotic species that spits poisonous mini-bullets. Quickly, I take the beautiful, exotic creatures back to the pet shop, and leave them there.

I return to home to find my anima missing. I look all over our property, even in the dim, polluted backyard for a sign of her. I stay awake in a candlelit room all night, and contemplate losing her. I don't feel that she is dead, only that I may now be in the wrong place. I am at a loss for motivation. I simply wait, despite our Hawaiian roommate's offer to help.

When we are able to manipulate our psyche, to remember more consciously, one finds that the substance of reality resonates more and more with our aspirations.

“What is it about my unusual behavior in Africa that recurs? Why do I think in metaphor, see in myth and hear poetry?” I ask myself these questions while staring into the open door of the next train in the New York City subway. The train itself seems like a passageway, a link between worlds, memories and times.

My anima and I travel to the East Village of Manhattan to see a friend who once gave us a place to stay and offered his collegial support to my anima, who is also a musician. Arriving to their home, our friend introduces us to a friend of theirs, also a fellow writer, who engages with me in quite healthy ways to encourage our common career goals. We like this man, who is extremely effeminate. He has just woken from a nap and speaks with us warmly, however bedraggled and then throws on a pink, fishnet, sleeveless shirt and walks out the

door. We don't see him again, but before leaving he offers us his place to stay as well, anytime we might need it.

"He must be a roommate?" My anima asks, contented and unworried.

Later, I realize I am late to pick my parents up at the airport. They arrive to visit with us during our time in Manhattan. At 10 p.m., I am very late. We missed dinner. They are relieved to see me. I greet them and go with them to their hotel so that they can rest.

Before returning to the East Village, I first take a walk in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, where men stand in small groups on street corners. I pass by an alleyway. I realize I've gone in the wrong direction. Turning back, a black car with tinted windows rolls past. Cautiously glancing down an alleyway, I see it is now littered with shattered glass. I feel out of place to say the least. A band of young Latinx kids face me, jeering as I walk away.

Finally, I meet my anima at a nearby subway station. We board a train.

"Is this, Venezuela?" I ask, with an exclamation.

The silent air is unsettling. At our stop, a Spanish-language choral group busks, singing beside the metro benches. I flip a coin into their empty basket. My anima does not look at them. We walk out of the underground train platform, into the pitch-black night. It's too dark. We head back down into the subway. The choral group is gone and no one is on the platform.

I look down into the subway tunnel, and think I see concrete square homes built by the Maya people of Campeche, Mexico, which they construct merely as a symbol of prestige beside their grass huts. They are mostly uninhabitable. They still hang hammocks from wall to wall.

When I was there, a local girl once came to me as I slept. As my body swung under a blanket of stars the petite young lady with unmistakably Maya features came to with me her sweet smiles, laughing and beckoning me to join her in the night. I wanted to marry her.

I brought her a jade ring, which consummated the innocence of our shared emotions. But soon after I left the village and moved into a furnished bedroom in a Mexican city. In its comforting aura, I awaited my other love, a Spanish woman, a few years older than I, with a gorgeous wit. It seemed we had married as well. Our life, however, became overly domestic, and too quickly. One night, I waited for her, only to find her absent from our apartment.

My anima looks into my eyes. I come to. "Where are you?" she asks intuitively. I am entranced by her radiance, yet consumed by nostalgia.

When we exit the train at the next stop, still in unfamiliar territory. There is a field of sparkling light before us. I think of the house of my father and stepmother, emptied. In their yard, a highly religious ceremony is taking place. They enact the end of the Christian world, the last Christian rite.

As high-rising organs reverberate with incandescent, crystalline harmonies, as would imaginably occur while the heavens open, all present form a mass around a glowing, ceremonial hearth. My anima and I enter the house, to escape such highfalutin religious activity. We rummage through their fridge, cleaning their expired foods. The television has been left on. There is a program showing the center of the Roman Catholic world crumbling away, as the central image is of the Jesus statue in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil falling down its mountain like Saddam Hussein's in Baghdad.

After the ceremonial mass, Christian imagery fades. The archaic celebration finishes over a block of precious stone, gleaned from a nearby mountain. I am called out, to stand with them in the midst of a forest clearing. Underground, we are led to a palace. Its interior stifles with an air of royal intrigue, as there is a changing of the guard.

A lady turns to me and begins chanting and singing lightly to calm us. It alleviates my anxiety. She gives me her hand, which freezes in the grasp of my palm. She then turns, leaving her hand in mine while singing to everyone present, pacifying the palace mood. She says that we are at the end of days. She has a strong voice. She comes back to me, and places her other hand in mine. Her palm is mangled, fingerless and bloody, though she has a serene facial expression.

The backdrop is starkly lit behind closed curtains. We come to a concert hall. I sit at a piano bench. Next to the instrument, there is a classical percussionist standing over two tympani, holding a metal triangle. I remember the fingerless woman as I delicately press a note.

The percussionist offers to play for my anima and I. My anima tells me she can't make it. So, we leave. That night, I think of my childhood room, when I had dreamt of Allen Ginsberg visiting me. I was excited, seeing him in my presence. He told me that he was in a rush, though we spoke about my writing. He seemed to be like a spiritual vagabond, among wandering ghosts. He sat at my computer, and told me to fish out some of my writings. I gave him my writings and proceeded to tell him that William Burroughs also appeared to me in a dream not too long ago.

Ginsberg emits a refreshing glow as he announces quietly that he must leave. With a flighty sense of humor, he asks me for twenty dollars. I am distracted by the fact that he is reading my work. I can't seem to get his joke. He referred to an Egyptian bureaucrat who I dealt with in New York while immigrating to Canada. Without another word, he saunters off into the edgeless yonder.

The day after that I attended a high school reunion. I was glad to see my old friends from the days of superficial cliques and institutionalized learning. I tell everyone there I married twice in Mexico. They aren't surprised and go on talking in their closed circles of indiscernible chatter. I later returned home to my mother's house. She was watching television, as usual, with my stepfather. They stared blankly at ghastly scenes of war. Tanks mercilessly run over children in jungles and deserts, their bodies scarred with burns and ash. I react, abhorred by the atrocities that they were witnessing so mindlessly, distant. Then, my mother cries and drops her face into her hands. My stepfather continues watching, without the slightest show of emotion. I leave.

Murder of the Female Thoth

I fly west with a yearning to walk the highway connected to missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. I dream of justice for the victims. I am outraged, yet powerless without having had direct contact with the victims or their communities. I am not local.

I find a federal office which oversees one of the most afflicted highways. I walk in, immediately distracted by the environment of mundane administrative, bureaucratic work. I wait beside a few chairs, incensed by their seeming apathy. There is no information or any signage about the murders committed under their watch. I am called up.

The two office workers appear as under a guise of extreme passivity and banal normalcy. They react to my presence as monotonously. We review maps of the highway layout, and yet their imbecility is striking. It leaves me breathless. I become introverted, silent and leave disappointed with myself.

“What is the overlapping effect of passionate, searching intent to experience and remember one’s dream with regularity?” I reflect coldly, walking on the side of the highway. Bitter, I feel a need to experience the perspective of the murdered, to imagine what they suffered, taking their last breaths.

“What happens when a dreamer replaces sleep with consciousness?” I self-interrogate, maddened with remorse before the all-pervading white guilt of colonization’s undead legacy. “How does life experience change based on the spiritual momentum of transitioning dream to a practice in waking?” I look out over the highway. Not a single car passes. I stand on the road, solitary, placated only by the croaking screech of the wild avian sky.

A voice echoes, as from a falcon above. “See dreamers in the crowd, those who are aware of the fickle nature of reality, who are fearless and dream in their daily lives, who create worlds out of creative mediums emanating from their own minds like the veins of a pulsing heart, emboldened with the glory of Love’s unmistakable vibration, they are clear among crowds of people isolated from the dream connecting us all, because the rest are too afraid to realize that their clothes, hair, attainments, are the mere substance of their dreaming and nothing more, and nothing less.”

Peering into the hazy fold on the dank horizon, I see the shape of a woman. With this experience of consciousness, my dreams help me alleviate my suicidal instincts. Only moments before had I intended to discard all evidence of my current activity. “Communicable sketches of my dreams and memories are far-fetched, removed from my daily, waking reality,” I imagine. But when I see the form of the woman, I think, “This is a sign. I should remember my dreams.”

Thumbing in from the West Coast across the United States, I pass through the Southwest. I've recently ended a part of my life. I was embroiled in institutionalized study. As I traverse beyond the coastal horizon into the desert landscape, I consider my last lesson. I stop in an area of absolute desolation somewhere deep in the empty space of sand and sky. The nearest city is far beyond the horizon.

We are rock and cacti. I see a familiar face among the succulents, animate human shapes. Suddenly, though unsurprisingly, there is a presence above, a direct, mysterious light, leading us to raise our arms in recognition. I feel we are being taught something. My entire body begins to radiate with visible electricity. A pulse courses through my limbs with a vibrant white glow.

I feel that I have returned to my childhood. I perceive myself as a small, minute entity, like a small version of myself. My surroundings are more massive than I've ever experienced. I'm in the middle of the desert, with only a couple companions, equally disoriented.

We stumble through the dry brush, thoughtless, with a stubborn, introspective gaze, strong enough to leave us careless, at once convinced by our optimism. As we continue our walk, we come to a cliff, which leads into a canyon of vegetation and water. The source of life is our destination. We can feel it.

Like children, we fall headlong down the cliff, without heed to caution or the ability to properly maneuver the descent, and find ourselves plunging into the cool stream below. This is refreshing, and disconcerting. We feel we have lost things of importance. There are beings on a hill in sight. We slowly regain our composure and find our way to the top.

We are welcomed by a towering figure, an alien body, whose shape and features remind us of an insect, although this being commands great respect. They resemble Thoth, Egyptian god of Knowledge and Writing. We feel protected by their presence. They see to it that we are taken care of. We spend our days splashing playfully in cool, cavernous ponds, and climbing the forested canyon highlands.

Reflecting at home again after returning to the city, I am convinced that I did meet an incarnation of the mythological Thoth in the flesh. Their earthly avatar held an unassuming, humble air, as they embraced me and allowed my inner child to explore their presence, with all of my personal neuroses intact.

My anima lays down to rest in our new apartment. It is in the same building where she had first arrived from Vietnam to Canada. In her early childhood, she was a babysitter for many immigrant children on our Chinatown block. The city

was much different, she likes to remember. It was more spacious, green and communal, she would say.

One day, she enters one of the apartments where she used to babysit many years ago. Before she knocks on the door, it opens, with a neighborly welcome, like old times in the Chinatown of her childhood. Stepping onto the linoleum floor, small children levitate above her. They take her hand. She flies with them, transcending the bounds of their brick home. She then soars out over the pine forests beyond the city limits.

Returning to Asia by air, she attends a Sikh dance ceremony. Ladies in elaborate jewelry and glorious headdresses dance to an electro-pop bhangra. Three ladies are wear distinctive, varied clothing. One is fully covered, from head to toe in black, another appears only through the slits that expose her eyes, and yet another wears a colorful headscarf. They become mechanical, and move like machines.

I am in a field, waiting for her return. At once, the low grass at my feet is supplanted by a realized illusion, a warehouse meant for music rehearsals. Standing across from a local musician, a classical percussionist and kit drummer, he asks me to play. “Every American kid must have banged on a set, eh?” he asks. I respond, “My brother used to play all day long. I’d only listen.”

“How is he?” again, he interrogates softly.

My mother’s voice calls from within my head, “He was kind of depressed, so he didn’t do as well as he wished.”

My shape-shifting surroundings transform from a warehouse back to a field. I sit at a small drum set with a snare, high-hat and ride. The two cymbals are spread far apart. All I have for sticks are pieces of light balsa wood. I attempt to play, weakly.

The old musician walks away. He looks back at me, trying to help me navigate the drums. From afar, he cackles as he tells me a story of his decadent years in New York, about a soiree that he once hosted at his house after a celebrity gig. He walks off downhill, out of sight. I can hear his laughter fading away.

My anima returns from her flight and lounges restlessly on the grass beside me. She begins to tell me an unusual story.

“It was a very ordinary day, during the winter at my mother’s. Around the afternoon to early evening, there was this constant presence, an animal. It was an albino rabbit. I named him Salt. I put his head in my hands, and he skipped free.”

“Outside was heavy snow. Salt was pure white, only visible by his beady, red eyes. I saw a child running through the snow. The child came into our house

and lay their head onto my lap. The child nudged its head into my hand, wanting to be pet. He was a mute boy. He looked at me with colorless eyes.”

“Salt came back to you as a young boy?” I asked with a smile.

“Salt became a boy. That boy then hopped out into the snow and through the trees, just like a rabbit. He hopped out of my sights, but I felt that he had changed back into a rabbit.”

“Then, out of the snow, a very silvery, glowing white cat appeared. It was striped. Recognizing its face, I realized that it was my deceased cat. His charm radiated. My hands were warm as I pet him. I cradled him in my arms, and looking behind my shoulder, I saw you smiling and laughing.”

“I spoke to Max, my dead cat. He was an infant with the same eyes as a cat, but with the face of a child, staring back at me with such love and affirmation.”

“I spoke in English, saying, ‘I want you to learn Chinese. I am your mother.’ You kept laughing in the background. In synchronicity, you and my son spoke to me in English. Both of you said: “We already know Chinese.”

“The child then spoke. To my surprise I noticed my cat-child had aged. On a brick ledge, we all gazed at a beautiful golden sunrise. His dirty blonde hair glistened. His eyes expressed inquisitive curiosity and loving recognition. They were deep emerald green and earthy brown. Sitting on that ledge, I taught him to say, ‘*gnan* (eyes)’ in Cantonese. He stuttered, but was able to repeat the word. “*Gnan*” he said. You smiled as if to say, ‘Why are you trying to teach him what he already knows.’”

“The child chuckled and said, ‘*gnan, yee, hoaw, bae* (eyes, ears, mouth and nose).’ I was shocked with such gladness and immense, pure unconditional love for this being. ‘Ma’ he would exclaim. ‘I already know.’ He became a toddler. His head rested on my thigh. I stroked his hair, which glistened in the light.”

“I became used to living with him as my son. Then, one day, he shifted back into a happy, white-furred cat.”

Arm in arm, my anima and I returned to our apartment in Chinatown. Our home was a refuge of solace for our individual spirits. We were the beatific artists of our making. My father calls to suggest that I meet with another writer. When I do, I realize they are a spoken word artist, and a fiery and impassioned one at that. Her name is long. I can’t remember it. It seems to be of Polish origin. I send her a poem that I saw in a vision, entitled “Through Palestine”. It begins:

I am
a me.
an am

alm
@me

The vision-poem describes a scene I witnessed in Nablus, in the West Bank. The poem is a cry for social justice. In a few days time, I receive a reply from this writer. The entire message is a series of colors. It seems to have been made with a basic computer program. The letters and images sprawl out chaotically. She wrote long messages, including script-like poetics and communal dialectics only shared by the more avant-garde poets of our kind that she, with all heart and intention wishes to affirm through our mail-art collaboration. She says, with my skills as a writer, and hers as a vocal performer, we could be a fine duo.

I wonder if I should embark on a shared creative path together. I had invoked as much deep in my subconscious yearnings, to actively combine elements of our peculiar poetic logic.

When I meet her at a cafe, I first notice the ghastly scars on her face and neck. She walks through the doorway, staring at me. No one notices her. I'm stunned, and my eyesight flickers. Her face beams with a smile just like my anima's. She stands like a ghost, not sitting. She is the undead voice of her murderer.

Ancestral Fear

Nightmare.

I sport a military Eskimo jacket in the middle of a WWI battlefield. Barbed wire and deep trenches mask the deep snow. I sprint effortlessly across the tundra, murderous, armed with broken pieces of wood.

My arms are lacerated with dirty wounds. I stick a wooden shaft beneath the snow into the hard-packed, frozen dirt. I draw a broad, serrated knife from its sheath at my hip and plunge it into the earth, removing it slowly so that it retains soil, infecting wounds. I face a formidable foe. I swing my weapon through their torso. They lift theirs, another splintered wooden shaft. I am impaled through the stomach.

Flash. Memory ignites my unconscious, making my thoughts visible. I climb onto twisted monkey bars. They are rusty, old, high.

Bleeding, helpless in the open tundra, I am delirious. My attacker lies dead beside me. We are both insignificant specks of flesh on an ocean of ice. I face the horizon, and get up.

I find my way to a hut, like a sleepwalker. There is a black coffin on the porch, glimmering in the sunlight.

I've walked into an elderly woman's house. The subdued beige carpet fades against the similarly hued walls. The old woman barely notices me as I walk in. She is tired, anxious, and slumped over a baby grand piano. She is alone. She has suffered so much pain. My presence, like anyone's, is lost to her.

I find my way through a corridor into an enclosed, outdoor courtyard. A small altar stands with a light-colored metal bowl at its apex. I labor to move. Every breath could be my last. I step toward the bowl. I want to look inside. I then feel the presence of a man in uniform entering a side door.

A silent videographer sits in the corner. I'm afraid to cross the court, which seems like an abandoned playground. I cross shadows with the others. As I continue on, crawling on my hands and knees, the floor is humid, covered in a layer of fog. I see an opening on the other end of the yard. My mind goes blank. It's impossible to cross. But I have no choice, and shiver violently.

I reach the opening. On the other side is an abandoned children's shelter. I remember my childhood girlfriend. She was Egyptian. She went missing. Her parents spoke with local police, but they were hysterical, and shouted in Arabic.

I grasped the monkey bars. The man videotaping me began burning their personal collection of my poetry books. They could have been used as evidence to find the missing girl. They were immaculately printed, well-edited and included full color photos of the girl. The room is emptied. The silent man recedes into the

waning dusk, out over the tundra. I walk to a cemetery. I hear a mass of people reciting my poetry at a funeral.

*Why do we wake?
Notions of the word
A dream, a synonym*

*Is there something?
What do we attain?*

*Are we subconscious?
Are we dreaming?
Is this the word?*

Months pass. I survive, but fail in my attempts to scale a sheer cliff. The convex shaft of rock rises with crumbling shale and patches of vegetation. About twelve stories high, a small plateau can be seen from its face. There, a sparse array of pines and a wild horse appears in the glinting corner of my eye. I stare, earnestly, against the immense verticality of it all.

I camp for a season at the bottom of the cliff, contemplating my journey up to the top of the rocky plateau. Night falls.

On my return home, I stand on a street corner. The city is like an old Western town mixed with Cairo's inner island district. Beside me, there is an old-fashioned, abandoned colonial bar.

The dirt roads are still damp. I see a cat on top of a small, ramshackle home. I shoo away stray dogs. I pick up a percussion instrument made of canine, cat and horse vertebrae and begin to play it. I knock against the dangling bones with fragments of a dog's skull. The hollow, knocking sound mixes with small, cymbal-like metallic objects hanging off of it, which I strike to produce different tones. The sounds are enlightening. A dog races past, chasing a cat. I yearn to rise with the break of day, to scale the rocky outcrops afar.

I begin to walk up an ascending road. I am near a house in the middle of nowhere. Thick, northeastern forests surround. The wilderness bears heavily on my mind. I end up near a home that looks much like my father's. A woman stands outside, dramatically waving her arm, motioning me inside. When I get in it feels like Christmas morning. There are books everywhere on spirituality. I look through these books, disinterested.

I imagine I'm living in the middle of a desert wilderness. There is a shack fortified with wood and concrete. I am still concerned with the time, confused and distracted. I ask myself, "Why do I pay attention to the time when I am here!"

I look over my shoulder. The sun dips down like a bag of tea dipped into boiling water. The desert horizon is endless. Then, my surroundings darken. I realize where I am. I can see the likeness of the Great Sphinx, its eyes aglow. Beside the statue there are other ruins which go unseen in the light of day.

There are faces of pharaonic majesty, indescribable monuments.

"How did we get here?" I wonder, in sheer disbelief.

I become nervous, seeing a local Egyptian in Bedouin clothes, on the back of a camel, trotting down a nearby path.

"Do you know where we are?" I ask him.

"This place is forbidden territory."

I question him, disobedient. I wish to stay permanently, enamored with the mystery, convinced that I am where I should be.

I set off. On the road, I board a handcar and wind through the desert mountain landscape. As I near insurmountable cliffs, the car hovers over cliffs, propelling me up steep inclines with automatic ease. On a deserted hill, where a Zen dojo and Buddhist shrine is situated, I enter, leaving all thought of my past lives behind.

Inside the dojo, a group of hermits pay their respects to the memory of Allen Ginsberg. They practice methods of lucid dreaming to overcome their fears. Psychedelic video art is projected on the walls, affirming Ginsberg's mantras to wisdom energy. There is an unspoken air of poetic thought in the room, accented by a collective attitude of spiritual practice. When it is finally my chance to engage in an exercise, I am keen to try. I wander into the deepest quarters of the dojo. Its paper walls open as I approach. I survey its empty corners. A lightly carpeted staircase leads upstairs to a dark room.

Inside, there is a table. I feel my adrenaline rush through my blood and brain. My scalp tingles uncontrollably. I look up and see an alien figure, hairless and gray-skinned, shriveled and wrinkled, with an inflated head. It is relatively docile, holding a rope in its hand. On its left shoulder there is a smaller version of the same being.

I look into the alien's eyes. A piercing evil sound reverberates throughout my body with driving intensity. The only light in the room emanates like diamonds from the pupils of the emaciated skull that droops, its gaze, deathly, is directed at me. I am overcome with fear and immediately exit. I return to the room. The mood is one of polite compassion. I leave, and standing outside, reflect on the old poet.

“What was Ginsberg trying to show us? He expressed something old, withered with age or neglect, something so superhuman, yet resembling us, something hidden deep within, a thing I’m merely afraid to confront?”

I aspire to master myself, to become immortal.

Mechanical Domesticities

A vast interwoven web of imagery flows through my imagination. I am invigorated by the pulse of my intellect, burning up in a mental spark. My insides course, fluid. I am excited by new insights, actively seeing into the contents of my mind; my perceptions, memories and the urge toward all that is necessary. To be, shape-shifting, as my life unfolds to meet her: Love.

In the yard, there is a private party of well-groomed high-society types. They sit on the mantles of elegant windows, behind which are botanical gardens. The autumnal light recedes. Ferns grow against the glass. The damp ground thrives with mycelia. I walk into its humid ecology, feeling the soil under my bare feet. Haunted by the lore of spiritual flight into the wilds of nature, an enamored romantic bleeds with obscurity in the darkening passageway.

Drumming drowns the sky in the clamor of festive happiness. The air fills with the deathless heartbeats of its broken rhythms, careless, heartening, chaotic, as belly laughter resounds hotly in the night. Her smoke lingers. I amble about, through such free sounds into a verdant labyrinth. I'm at the edge of the estate, still surrounded by glorious architectural feats, Victorian hideaways, and find my way to a swinging sofa, suspended in the shade of a bower, lightless under a thick canopy in the late evening. The soft red cushions are welcoming beside mahogany furniture and plush carpets. She lounges there, smoking, resigned to the world.

She uttered her last words, spoken resolutely, as from beyond the grave.

“I entered the elevator on the first floor of my apartment building in Chinatown. I fled upstairs to meet you on the second floor, where we lived. Anxiously, I hopped in the elevator, keen to chase you, playing our childish cat-and-mouse games. A big smile formed on my lips as the door shut, and I readied for it to open so I could then hold out my arms to embrace you.”

“My thoughts fluttered with your kisses on the crown of my head, the way you delicately regard my thick black hair. The way I bury myself in your arms as we open the troublesome lock to our home. But that was not to be. The elevator never opened, and it rose, and it rose, and it did not stop rising. Stricken with unearthly fear, I watched the numbers escalate beyond counting. The elevator continued to rise. Suddenly, the elevator stopped to the sound of crushing metal. The roof of the building, the last level that might buffer the elevator's rise into the sky above, stood unmoving. I pressed the alarm button, the ringer rung out. The walls of the elevator began to compress. We were crushed.”

I remembered our mortal fear while seated across from my father. He is grayer and older. His face is sunken and lost in age. I reach out to him. He is distracted by the television as usual. We are on cushy, white sofas. I drink beer from a glass bottle. As night falls, the ceiling windows are lit with the moonlight as it is cast on the wooden floorboards. He is asleep.

I toss the bottle of beer across the kitchen in the direction of the basement door. I am remorseful, and get up to retrieve it. I head down the basement steps, only to find it empty. I have never seen that way, not since we moved when I was still a kid, almost twenty years ago. It has ever been my father's refuge. It's usually full to the brim with musical equipment, records, books, boxes and a weightlifting set. It is now bare, except for a corner, heaped with beer bottles covered in cobwebs.

Flight from the Priest

The church is a stark, bleak and humorless abode, a grayscale neurosis. The masculine dread is potent with failure, lifeless. My blood feels like it's evaporating slowly out of my veins. Between the cold, stone walls, a claustal pressure moves into my chest, closer and closer. I turn a bend and go outside.

With a video camera in my hand, I happen to come across a friend's father succumbing to his heroin addiction in an alleyway by the church. I watch him shoot up and turn pale. He bares his incisor fangs, which are tipped with blood.

I walk to his home, and enter the door by the kitchenette. I sit with my friend and what remains of his family around the table. Their small home is a blur of silence. Their hearts are stifled and drowned, turned to meat. They quietly drain their soup bowls.

I remember a small kibbutz where a family stayed together in a lonely room, also missing their father. I sat with them, not uncomfortable. He was nearby, huddling low in the dark corners of their collective poverty.

That night, a cloaked figure came into my room wearing a black robe. It was praying, but its invocations turned to nightmarish cursing. A knife glinted above my head. I could not move, petrified, and suffered a gash across my stomach. I howled and caught two more incisions along my side and below my left shoulder. Blood streamed out of my body.

It raised a gun to my shoulder. A bullet went through my right shoulder. Inert, my mind turned to shade. My adrenaline picked me up, blowing my lungs full. I thought of my anima, and worried about her. I became merely animal, waiting to be slaughtered by the weakness of an insane mind frothing at the brim of its lost asylum.

The wasted house enslaved me in its inconceivable pain. I felt my life struggling to stand in my chest, to the rhythm of my heartbeat. The beat has never been so important. I faltered. I might have missed a step and fall into the void of the shale rock floor.

I close my eyes and see my anima. She is covered in ash. I would scream out, swearing vengeance, but my throat is saturated with blood. I sense some kind of wonder.

"How am I still alive?" I ask myself, gently.

I am forced, embedded in a hospital, where, lying for ages, I confront the image of the murderous wraith, while engrossed in the balancing act of my death. I can see my wounds. I am in critical condition. My flesh has been flayed visibly. I

can touch my vital organs. A sensation of heat beckons me to survive so that I might go after the culprit.

I rise to my feet, and move to the blackest corner of the lightless room. I walk through a heavy wooden doorway and flash an upraised knife, buckling down over my loosened sinew, butchering myself. My blood falls. I paint the stone floor with my pain. Locked in deathless love, I fulfill my need to escape.

Childhood Imagination

Defeated by the steep incline of a country hill, I walked my bike along the side of an empty highway. At the summit of its crest, the city came into view. A ragged man was walking behind me toward its polluted horizon. I got back on my bike and continued on my way. I could not get the vagrant man out of my mind. His presence conjured something that I could not shake from my thoughts.

When I reached the city, it was night. I tied my bike to a post on a lightless side street. There were bushes nearby. Someone seemed to be hiding in them. A muscular horse flew past. Its rider wore medieval knight's armor. Their long, splintered lance pressed upward into the windless eve as they raced towards me. I ran away as fast as I could, and turned a bend. I ended up in a backyard, which appeared to double as a castle's outer court.

I remembered a children's story, an escape plot. I did not move, but thought of the tale until the early hours of the morning. The swing of my emotions became vivid after transitioning home once again. A few nights passed without incident.

Desert engulfed me, drab and steaming. I am immersed in the genocidal pioneering of the Australian outback. There is a furor in the air. The atmosphere instills dreamlike imagery, seizing my mind and heart like a clenched fist. Up into the mountain, I climb, compelled toward the sky in a delirium of ruthless passion.

It is high noon. I wander haphazardly. It's the season of heat stroke. Everything is unprotected from the ferocious sun, an immortal predator of bare flesh. I hallucinate serpents mutating into swords. I tunnel underground in the middle of Maghreb wastelands.

A host of armed thieves rush over the sands. I become one with the naked, burning earth. A snake slithers. I am gashed, impaled to the sound of thin swords hissing in the air. There are heroic duels in my midst.

After I regain consciousness, my mental fog is lifted. I clamber, hopeless, in the dunes, evading death. I drink in the cool, clean winds. The sight of another man clears my bleary vision. Full-figured and bald, with rimless circular lenses, he stills one eye, and holds another ocular instrument with his right hand. He tells me to travel to Olympus.

Time is immaterial. I gaze into the atmosphere, far into space, beyond the solar system. Olympus is a lunar satellite. I look out of a window and see the night sky blanketed with stars over a pale horizon of hills and forests.

Struggle Is, So We Are

From the nest, inexperienced, I fly, unlikely to return to my origins. I am a demonstrator, with stereotypical shaggy hair, a wiry beard enough to age me past my twenties. Impressionable, fire-born, I am a Sagittarius, without regrets. I have a taste for denial. Ferocity grows within me.

I hear a slogan repeat: “Bleed with the public truth of mass suffering.”

I defy the plastic mantras and feed off the morning dew. Our militant society exhales its smog of consumptive dread over the undreamed folds of quotidian, earthly stress. With a sudden and instantaneous manifestation, my surroundings are a congruent, geometric mold. A shapeless mass of grey and beige frosts the walls of my interior perception. I am bored, enraged, and shed tears of yearning for a new paradigm. The corruptions of unequal, social dominance do not stray from my lines of sight. I contemplate, inwardly, the bedrooms of the rich. I volley curses at them with my ringed middle finger.

We were angry, living under a totalitarian presidency. Our rage was drained. There has been a slump in public protests. Our efforts changed to more clandestine operations. We are buoyed by an underground swell of renewed purpose. An optimistic resurrection chimes beneath the sidewalk cafes.

I am welcomed at subterranean meeting places. A contingent of passersby and onlookers wades in, wondering about the movement’s ends. Our thoughts are palpable to each other.

I joined them desperately, asking for a place to sleep. I needed to rest on softer surfaces, at least concrete smoothed by age. The muffled sound of the streets once quelled my hate. I am stirred to action by our gripes with untrustworthy leaders. I have an autonomous modus operandi. Ours is Darwinian survival.

Sleepless, I cowered behind the guarded walls of our rootless embassy. The streets outside were empty with our failures. The notches of murder grew more numerous on the batons of the police who knocked on our doors.

I asked myself: “Have I come here to die for America?”

I waited restlessly, silent in the twilight hours. And every dawn inflamed my vital organs. I needed to flea from American savagery. I wanted to fight for the freedom to move far from its influence and borders, for my anima and our sanity. We asked only to be awake, yet not deprived of friends. I have known the collective suffering of our kind. I’ve shared our common pain, and expressed it publicly, in so many words. I have been lightened by our community. We have acted as one being, whole.

But we fought for the no greater dignity than to rest our heads on a feather of earthly respect in a factory of anthropocentric holes.

Groundless Mystery

I was an unidentifiable fugitive, constantly surveyed.

“What have I done?” I brood, with unceasing self-pity.

My mind is buried deep inside the fog of the Amazon rainforest. I remember myself on the glowing banks of the Marañón River.

“Is this my home?” I stride effortlessly over wooden planks bedecked as suspended sidewalks in between stilted houses in the neighborhood of Belén in the city of Iquitos.

I once followed a young a brazil-nut seller from the center square in Iquitos. She led me to her sick mother's home. Along the delicate creaking of thin wooden walkways, the dark river below us was a constant threat. But the poverty was worse.

“Do I live there?” I ask.

At the end of the riparian quarter, a shrouding layer of mist appears before the opaque darkness ahead. The battered plaster of church walls surrounded us like an invisible fire. I live on the cusp between Earth and Hell.

One day, a criminal investigator visits our home. He is sympathetic, and leaves me be, condemned to the punishment of life in Belén, a Spanish appellation for Bethlehem.

I sometimes return to that little girl's home. Poverty is incarcerating, a place overcrowded with the starkly opposing reality of its bitter environment, hidden. In her innocent presence, nature is demoralized. She lives damaged in a desperate human community.

I think, “We hold onto the ideals of life while experiencing our pervading social malaise.”

Months pass. My brother comes to see me. We travel to a chasm. Stories of the nearby cave haunt us. We confront myths after traveling about a half day upriver. While exploring the secluded entrance, we plunge recklessly into a body of water. Although our fall felt interminable, it lasted only for a few seconds. The water expands with the vastness of our fear.

Years pass. My paternal cousins arrive. They are eager to follow my brother's example. We all decide to make headway upriver to a cave. As our small raft edges out into the water the river's depths bottom out under us, and we become anxious. We are alone together.

One of my cousins holds a light out, standing on the front edge of the vessel. I fall into the treacherous dark of a cave pool. Everyone is petrified. Someone

reaches out to grab me before I go overboard. His palm is overstretched, and his fingers flex with all of his strength, but he is unable to pull me back up.

Absolutely still, submerged, and fearful, I feel an intense sense of abandonment. I think back to the infamous Amazonian waters, and break into a cold sweat. I dissolve into the memory of my small, hometown bay where I grew up. I was left alone, buoyant, far from the coast. I am completely left to the water and its unforgiving depths. My subconscious life stirs me awake, and I face my fears directly, as I wade toward the shallows.

“Is that a shark's fin?” I wonder.

My eyes freeze, as if my blood were shocked. I call out. No one is near. The shark fin passes by me and I feel a brief moment of relief.

“Is it a dolphin?” I wonder.

The fin then turns around and heads straight for me. I am paralyzed with dread. My body shakes in the vibrating water. I let go of every notion of my human mortality.

I grasp hold of a submerged rock ledge. My muscles seize. I remember climbing up from the *cenotes* in the Yucatan. The rock feels like shelves of resin. Crystalline stalagmites and stalactites form innumerable shapes under the translucent water. I climb atop the cavernous rock that emerges by the shore. Slowly, I become aware of my surroundings. The rock face is as tall as the side of a mountain. I grapple the porous underlying textures and ascend into the air.

I reach a pile-on of found stones, similar to the formation of an Inukshuk. The humble landmark is constructed with urban street trash. I find solitude, and think of the sands of Jordan, where I collected small trinkets.

I am somewhere familiar, though it is all foreign to me. It is a place that has been visited by many others just prior to my arrival. Confident, I feel my existence as the sensation of safety. I have rarely experienced this in the past few years. Yet, I continue to forge on into the absolute, everlasting night. Alone, I again descend into the groundless mystery, and float away over the sunken land.

A Wake from Me

Late morning, I drift back onto the dry sand. I sight an island, treeless, bare. I can make out lines of soil etched into its short grass. Thin trails of dirt seem to have formed, designed as from above, connecting low stone monuments. I peer with a more intensive focus. I think of Stonehenge and Easter Island. The atmosphere is prehistoric, a mystic, grassland environment.

I keep staring into the fold of the sea's horizon. I lean in, and lose my balance. I then turn around and walk into the forest groves. A natural, verdant sanctuary, almost supernatural, encloses my visceral periphery. I am in a space where the earth once lived as an archaic presence. I realize the significance of such havens, where creatures exude an ethereal energy. Light pokes in through the overhanging canopy. My nerves sense another being, silently and invisibly behind the curtains of rainforest. I know where I am, a realm as clear as the nature of my own mind.

I feel a bodily urge to run through the jungle. I spur on my light muscles, toned and fair. The forest is thick, bright and full of movement. Shadows appear. The green thickness bends with obscurations and clearings. The structure of the environment becomes concave. I sense that life is threatening with a tinge of bitterness. I lose self-perception. My every movement ceases. Shafts of metallic light break through the canopy, replacing sun rays with lifeless industry.

The jungle is burning to ash. I falter, shivering. With each step, I fade, overwhelmed by a violent fever. I come to a paved ground. The autumnal clouds above are natural to the temperate, coastal, northern woodland ecology. A convertible car stalls on the concrete lot. I get in and look in the rearview mirror, nervously gasping at my reflection.

There is a Quaker church on the road. Across the highway, a seedy motel, half-burned from a recent fire, blinks with vacancy. I enter the silvery gray light inside the antique house of worship. A wood sculpture of the wounded Jesus lies on a table. I splinter it with a sharp stone, stabbing directly into the painted wounds.

I run away as police sirens sound in the distance. A man steps out of the front door of the church embracing another sculpture, and says: "May he see the volatility of his presence."

Escaping the Primitive

As a child, the forest was a source of joy. It is overrun. Unpredictable wisps of arrow trails cut through the air. There must have been at least fifteen of them. Cracked wood splinters shoot toward me with the impact of an arrow. I evade an onrush of slings. I hide behind thin trees as the arrows increase in volume and speed, hitting the trees around me with splitting thuds.

In the tumult, an arrow grazes my shoulder. I move in the opposite direction. An arrow splits bark, as I lay petrified beside a thinning stand.

With a rush of adrenaline, I bolt out of the forest. My friend and I scatter leaves, sprinting with a speed mustered by our animal instinct to survive.

Soon, I reach the ocean and board a migrant ship. I begin the voyage across the sea. I lay back in comfort on the ship's deck. Sedated by cinematic stretches of the oceanic void, I feel pride at having come out of the forest, a survivor. Though, I am still enraged by its violent chaos. I internalize my emotions. My buried feelings soon give way to empty pleasure.

“Am I no different than prey to a predator, hunted in the thick forests of desire?” I ask, watching the infinite waves crest and crash over the wide, empty sea.

I disembark in a dusty town in Mexico, and board a small, local bus. The place is a blur. Passing a Zapatista demonstration, I let a young mother and her child climb out before me. She is perfectly fashionable, dressed to the trends of socio-cultural resistance against the corruptions of power in Latin America, a tradition long held since their first revolution.

The atmosphere is young, vibrant and inclusive. I file past a scattered group of policemen, barred from entering the demonstration grounds. The area attracts a united front of Mexican youth and social activists, international community, young travelers resonating with the ground of truth-seeking and decolonization.

There are photo exhibits, circus acts, a music stage and a round of booths and presentations by social activists, Indigenous Peoples and the Zapatista themselves, encircling in a cathartic flood of dramatic restitution. I rest on a high-perched bleacher, gathering perspective.

The landscape is cluttered with life in the Federal District. Over 35 million inhabitants die and die here, many times more than the entire population of my lost countries. The houses barely top two stories, creating a vast urban landscape, rolling down hillsides in myriad colors.

The city has a peculiar eccentricity. Two Mexican teenagers sit a few feet away from me. They laugh and start lighting a pipe. Marijuana smoke hits my

nervous system like a cool breeze. I smile at them. They offer the pipe to me, and I smoke. Self-conscious, I realize that I am staring, estranged, foreign. The differences between us are striking. The only similarity is the camaraderie of our age against the fleeting instant. A mixed, flowing cacophony of sound travels into our minds. It is the slogan of the demonstration: *Digna Rabia!*

I hear the Mexican language. I am enthralled by the speed of its intonation. High, I look out towards the mountains. There is an immense statue. I wonder how I could not have ever seen it before. I gasp, wondering. It is a human head. I point to it.

“Benito Juarez!” says one of the young men, in his thick accent. Ignorant and bewildered, he knows I don't understand,

“Benito Juarez!” he says again.

Their sculpted, living faces are apparitions of Aztecan myth, distant to me, mixed against my disoriented nerves. They are locals, though transient, and step down, leaving me to contemplate my surroundings. I look up, overlooking the bodiless head of Juarez and the Zapatista demonstrators, high above my own mind.

The landscape around the head of Juarez shifts mysteriously. I see the ruins of Teotihuacán. My mind cries, whimpering with innocent exasperation, intensified by the psychoactive heat. The grandiose pyramids reside in my imagination. From my vista, I see nearly half of one pyramid summit. Squinting, I notice the steps, gorgeously erected, though worn with many cracks. A massive field is draped alongside it. I continued to gaze in amazement, lifted off the ground activity by the drama of the sight.

In the desert field, walking in an easterly direction towards the greater pyramids, I sense the radiance of a woman, her figure wrapped in a scarlet shawl. Lone, she walks slowly into the unforgiving wind, out of sight.

I reconvene with an old friend. Our emotions rise to the visible empyrean, which overshadows us. We are a smidgeon of existence beside it. We trek through a backyard beyond the demonstration's limits, descending a sloping hill covered in sludge. The liquid tar sand breathes with an addictive, alcoholic energy, strong and putrid. The endless grime gathers and quickens under our feet. My friend slips clumsily, knocking bones with a misanthropic man covered in sludge, holding a pessimistic, authoritarian air.

“This is an environmental catastrophe,” I think.

I look into the man's embittered eyes. He stares back, spiteful. He curses me, invoking my personal ruin. He communicates with loud body language, overcoming our language barrier. Nerves shocked, and weary of his unforgiving stance, I simply slide past, down the aching earth, bleeding with tar. I'm worried about my future as an immigrant.

At the bottom of the hill, I meet the ocean again. I walk along the beach, scratching my bare toenails into the sandy sidewalks of a seaside neighborhood. Broken shells lay scattered on the road. A group of local residents approach on their way inside a house. A deer shoots past.

The animal springs forward. Silent, motionless before me, it bears an impressive mane, with the qualities of alpaca, mountain goats, deer and gazelle. The animal rejoins its herd, trekking nimbly into coastal cliffs, disappearing into the groves.

I follow the herd of animals beyond the horizon, where the land opens to another beach. Electronic billboards litter the oceanfront. Mesmerized, I follow the animals into the forest, immersed in their habitat.

The Lake Between Egypt and Iran

I peruse the overstuffed labyrinth of a Chinese grocery store. For two days, I rummage through every item on its shelves, without purpose. One of the ceramic tiles on the floor is slightly dislodged. I try to fix it. The shopkeeper takes my orders and starts throwing them out, telling me they've gone bad. I plead for more as each piece of food is thrown into the trash. Finally, she kicks me out.

I retreat inside my house. I peak out of the window at the neighborhood. Beyond my view of the homes there is a seaside forest. I go down into the basement. As a child, I had not noticed anything unusual about it, except that the stairway was crooked.

The ground is flooded. A slow trickle of quicksilver drips down from the ceiling. It swells into a chemical cesspool. I float upward, toward the ceiling. I see light outside. I am immersed in the subterranean emptiness. The unlit corners are dusty, and dank with neglect. Much of the space is stacked with heaps of some indiscernible substance. I swim to the light, trying to escape the basement, its memories. I ask myself to listen.

Emerging from the house, I come to the edge of a great lake. The water foams. A plethora of life tingles within. A wave erupts from the center of the lake. A protrusion of flesh is revealed. I imagine it is a mythical beast. The fog clears. The other side of the lake is visible. I am swept ashore by an undertow.

Disfigured, fatigued, my bowels spin with nausea. Whirlpools of fascination brew with the lake's secrets, submerged. At the foot of a mountainous cliff, stones shoot up skyward from the back of a gothic fortress.

I glare ahead, delirious. The waters on the way to my incarceration remind me of the natural landscapes of Persia, and a French film artist who fell to his death over a lake similar to the one outside my prison.

Incarcerated with Iranians, I realize we're to be tortured. The basement windows resemble my childhood home. One difference, there are bars. The empty darkness is filled with mirrored rooms. Its reflections multiplying infinitely, corridors are occupied by other prisoners. Everyone's eyes are worn with pain.

I imagine the pavement of the driveway where I grew up, the feel of the neighborhood, the smell of the flowers in the summer air, the large stones, the humming of insects over the freshly cut grass.

Years later, after my release from the Iranian jail, I accompany my anima on a tour to Egypt. In her dressing room on a Nile yacht, I realize that she has gained a

certain prestige while I was away, and is unencumbered by our past. The gold-framed mirrors are lit with gaudy bulbs. The rest of the room is adorned in the fashions of the French colonial era, as the European ghosts of the early 20th century demand to be seen in Cairo's downtown core.

We step off the yacht, led by a masked host. He shows us to a street. We walk. We are in the midst of Cairo's Abbasia neighborhood, which encompasses the lost glory of Tahrir Square and the broad Muhamad Mahmoud Street.

I know this street. I saw a concert by El Tanbura there. The mud of its unpaved road is worse than when I last saw it, filled with oversized bumps and deep divots. Simply walking through Cairo's alleyways is a precarious adventure. Children walk the narrow lane barefoot, smiling with mystified amusement. Our foreignness is clear, and we hold the center of their attention. They are as fascinated with us as we are of the road ahead.

We move out into the street. I edge into a crowd of demonstrators. We are in the thick of a mob. Protestors rally against Cairo's police brutality. I am gripped with fear. My anima is still with me.

A zing of tear gas separates us. Wafting smoke and the sonic punch of a rubber bullet passes through us. Between demonstrators and police, I crouch low to the ground. I desperately reach out to my anima. More rubber bullets and tear gas rain down on us. We lose our balance on the quaking ground zero of the protest. It is human sandstorm theatre.

Skimming past abandoned riot police shields, I grab my anima's hand. We run into a dimly lit government building. I am reminded of Leon Trotsky's room in Mexico City. There is murder in the air. A chipped skull and stray bullets pierce the ambiance with the suffocating air of death.

We wander the halls and rooms, only to find burned and tortured bodies, their flesh partly covered in torn uniforms. Enemies and comrades are all maimed beyond recognition. It is a breeding ground of hate. There is no escape.

Seizure of the Western Family

The rocky coastal bays of Massachusetts welcome fall. Sharp grass, half-submerged in the salt water intersperses with crabs scuttling over periwinkle stones. The hard Atlantic breeze passes through with a constant shudder. From the concrete of a makeshift pier, I see my relatives from New York. We observe strange electric eels in the water.

An immense storm washes over our feet and stings our eyes with fresh, misty salt in the rapid wind. The sky darkens with heavy cloud cover. My father stands there, entranced. As a boy, he had once saved his family from a similar squall many years ago.

A plane dips through the sky. The craft self-obliterates with an implosion, careening in smoke as black and thick as the clouds above. The sea begins to swirl and swarm with gargantuan waves. It is nothing like the hurricanes or spouts we're used to. The whirlwind madness escalates. We retreat farther inland, away from shore. The sky lowers, spelling doom.

Escaping from the disappearing shoreline, we sprint to my father's cabin. There is great tension between us, as the house is stormed, not only by the forces of nature, but by the police. I hide somewhere near a mobile home in a neglected part of the property's backyard. I exit unseen. Then, I am caught.

A standoff ensues. Allegations are read to me over a loudspeaker. I freeze, and receive a blast of rubber bullets. The pain is as bitter as burning acid rain. I am taken into custody.

At least a few of my relatives have been killed, and I wonder whether my father was hiding drugs, or weapons. My mind floods with the sensation of fear. In the back of a police car, I exclaim, "I am someone", exhausted and humiliated. One of the officers turns his head, and tells me, coldly, without looking into my eyes, that I will get a life sentence, that I am responsible for his friend's death.

Held overnight in prison, I endure solitary confinement, and become possessed, mad. I work deliberately and steadfastly to fold a piece of paper into a flower. A day passes in darkness. I act as if I were giving the flower to my anima. I become paranoid, and convince myself that she has fallen in love with someone else. I see her dancing with an androgynous Italian man. I hear the opera music that they play as they make love.

Years later, I receive parole. I am released after a brief acquittal. I board a bus, and look out of the window at a highway dense with department stores. Advertisements glare at me in full color on both sides of the road. The saturation of

digital colors overwhelms my eyes like a strong intoxicant. The degree of commercial urbanization is alarming.

In a few weeks time, unemployed and lost. I volunteer for active military service, and depart to a combat zone. As an armed soldier in uniform, I hunch down behind a rock pile on a hill and await the enemy. Trucks roll in, accompanied by tanks. I throw out a grenade. It is thrown back and explodes nearby. I'm unhurt. I search for the right weapon, and bear a knife.

In a brave act, the enemy comes to greets me, non-threateningly. They speak Spanish and have children with them. "Como te llamas?" I ask the children. Their name is long and incomprehensible to my Anglophone ears.

I am overwhelmed by a gush of emotions, seeing humanness in my enemy. I rummage through my gear bag, and realize I've lost a pistol. They have emptied my pack behind my back. When I look up, I am alone.

I sit under a tree in the middle of the open field, I look out over the landscape. It reminds me of the high plains of Southern Alberta. There are hints of prehistoric life. I can sense the presence of dinosaurs, extinct lions, bison, and other herds that once rumbled in the distance, their bodies still lingering in the soil.

I hunger for cooked flesh and taste the rot of vomit in my mouth. I pick myself up and wander, eventually coming to a country tavern, dim on the horizon. I sneak in, breathless, suffering fearful confusion.

I see a whole slew of different social groups, among them Arabs and Jews. I see a man with a yarmulke smiling at me. I look at the bartender, who also wears a yarmulke. I have a drink and feel more like myself, before I ever endured nights in prison.

I see a friendly sort cross the tavern, a Senegalese musician. He is on the phone. We start a conversation and continue drinking at a nearby table. There are people around us, drinking a lot of alcohol. One very rotund man at the end of the table tells me he also plays percussion and enjoys rambutan, a rare fruit from Vietnam. He winks and I scowl in return.

"Has he met my anima?" I wonder, disdainful.

A few people erupt in laughter, and I feel it is directed toward me. I attempt to converse with my new friend at the other end of the table. We agree that there will never be any change in the world, not ever."

I walk out of the tavern. I feel all the more that I am in a prehistoric landscape. I imagine early humans walking amid the predators and herds of endless mammals, fearless, barefoot and without purpose beyond their immediate

surroundings. I see a familiar tree, but I do not walk over to it. I just stand, and sit, and lay down under the bare, blue sky, watching as it blackens.

The Margins of Reserve Land

The full moon lights a pathway over the crumbled rocky ground. My footing is unstable, and my nerves are on edge. My stability goes slack and I fall. A dog comes to me. His master is an older man. He kneels by my head.

The winding, hill-crested path lies on the margins of a First Nations reservation. I walk over broken stones. Other dogs, ravenous, bark and growl at me. The man and his dog are calm, and I follow them farther on down the path.

We come out of the forest to a clearing. The moon is bright. I see men in traditional dress. They are half-naked, adorned with feathers and hide. The bushes shake, as if there were people hiding in them, dancing, convulsing. A man walks towards us. I turn my head uneasily. He is warmly welcoming. The elderly man grabs his shoulder, and they bow their heads out of respect.

Lights flicker softly from the forest. We make our way inside a moveable home. It is full of people from the reservation. All are in a festive mood. They are young, vibrant. The elder man begins recounting our path. His dog is alert, as if he were also listening. A young man wearing glasses and a light collared t-shirt tells me that I should dance for the dog.

I ask him, smiling, how to dance for a dog. He assures me that there are customs for dancing with dogs. He gets up, and starts to hop on his feet. The lights dim. He shines, embodying the spirit of the dog. The dog becomes docile. Its limbs and face relax. People laugh, and they continue to listen to the elder man. I am in awe of their beauty.

The Mother of the World

In the thick of a humid evening, low lighting reflects off-white paint lathered on concrete. I exit a building complex in a neglected suburb in Cairo, Egypt. It is a community center, called, “The Fulfillment, “*el-Wafaa*” in Arabic. I teach English to refugees there, and live one floor above its entrance.

The rooms of the school are crowned with a single, fragile light bulb. The dangling light wavers between chalkboards. Blue paint peels from rough globs of plaster on the walls. I wash my hands in the hall sink, and start to feel a suctioning at my fingertips. Something emerges from the drain. It’s a jellyfish, glowing underwater. It strikes.

I am in shock as the being grapples onto my skin. I become hypochondriacal and fear that I’ll contract HIV. I try and clean the blood off my hands and face. Black ink splurges, flowing down the chipped and stained stone wash basin.

With no particular destination, I walk the streets all night. The violent smog haze of Cairo’s infamously polluted dawn blends with the disarray of the fading urban lights. Down an obscure alleyway, I am enshrouded in a dense oasis grove.

An Egyptian *tabla* hangs from a thin branch on a palm tree. The drum seems to suspend in place of its natural fruit of dates. The ceramic percussion instrument falls at my feet.

I retreat to a shallow stream in an empty forest. The sound of the drum crashes with wallops under scraggly fig trees. To the Pharaohs, this was *Nehet*, “tree of life.” The tree is a paradisiacal delight, demanding reverence by the girth of its roots. At the water’s edge, I pick up the drum. A square-shaped piece has cracked off of its base.

I place the drum at my hip, feeling its fish skin head. I touch it, first delicately. With time, my rapid rhythmic techniques produce trills of beats. I move with the sound waves that I create, rapping the unbroken skin.

I face *al-Qahira*, the irresistible. Cairo muffles the Earth’s irregular heartbeat. She is the Mother of the World, *Umm al-Dunya*, renewed by her sound tradition through the spatial fullness of her creative continuity. A purr from the tightened skin of the drum synchronizes my breath to its life-renewing rests, in and out, back and forth, like the flooding of the Nile.

The Internal Divide

Sitting contemplatively, I light a pipe. I quietly exhale thick tobacco smoke into the deep, green heart of the forest. I rock in a wooden chair. After some hours pass, I sit on a pile of leaves beside a wooden house. Around the edge of the property are various individuals. I join them in a bout of uninhibited group sex.

Within the virile, untamed crowd an individual stares cruelly through, at me. Burning in the wilderness of human flesh, his double-barrel shotgun bears down like a cold shiftless weight between my eyes.

I stray, cautiously, away from the double-bind of his potent sex and my imminent death. Wandering off at a deliberate pace, I find a ramshackle deck. It is spacious. A live band plays in full swing, led by an acoustic bass.

A few people set off in small groups into the woods. They charge into the wild obscurity with fierce cries, as to war, death or a fight for their freedom.

Inside the rustic wooden house, a map hangs on a wall. The map is covered in the antique impressions of old rubber stamps, like envelope seals. Blood red splotches of dyed wax mark various geographical points.

Looking closer, my eyes are drawn to an archipelago, a peninsula. There are notes over the continents, islands, subcontinents. I read the scrawl, and realize these imprints represent shockwaves, tracing their destruction. Earthquakes and tsunamis are scaled by the measure of their fatalities, like imprints of blood. I inspect the geography where I reside. I see traces of red.

In the following weeks, I speak about this to family and friends. Together, a cousin and I walk through densely forested roads to a wooden building. On the way, we find sheer a cliff face.

She is about my age, and decides to take a risk. I walk along the cliff's edge. I slink down the side of the cliff face, and hang from a protruding root.

I become fearful when I realize the implausibility of survival from such a height, if I were to fall. My cousin comes down to a rocky outcrop beneath our feet. I am frightened for her. I can feel their vertigo. Then, they fall. It is as if I fall with them.

On my way back, I am depressed, convinced that they must be dead. Time passes, I nap. My imagination runs wild. I am in her presence. She can not see me. She is standing at the foot of the cliff. A man in a loin cloth and spear comes to her aid. He is like a witch-doctor sprite as he fends off a gang of rowdy bandits, protecting her. She rests, and wakes alone. Her mind is clouded with the loss of her memories. She is unable to find me.

Marooned on the Imagination

Where the high plateau of the open prairie meets a vast expanse of towering buttes the Painted Desert bleeds under a golden crimson horizon. I am rock marooned. I mumble to myself how I might get down, fatigued. I look out into the distance and see three children. Two are darker in complexion, the other paler. The paler figure looks like a child, but then, it must be something else, because it has horns. It runs toward a butte, sticking its horns out, kicking up a bustling steam of desert dust.

The air is thin. My lungs seize up as I struggle to find a place to get down. It is almost impossible to balance on the rough edge of the butte. I peer out, and see a herd of bison. I am mystified by my surroundings. I have the sensation of vertigo.

The midwestern range of desert expands out from the butte landscape, stretching as with upraised palms toward the Earth's atmosphere. Luckily, I find a long metal pole, bent slightly, under the butte's edge, connecting to the ground. I have some leftover rope. I step off the butte and slide downwards. My stomach is in my chest. The sand breathes. There are remnants of an ancient culture embedded in the petroglyphs.

I come to a gathering. Caucasian men and women circle, representing various metaphysical traditions. They discuss peace and harmony, and are celebratory. They encircle stone structures. I hear the word, "*kachina*" many times. I notice my future spouse right away, naked, lying on a reed mat.

Eight people surround her naked body. They make an altar around her. She is their living, human being. She slips into a subconscious stupor. Her involuntary movements blur the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate. She is covered in varicolored flowers, beads and leaves. I stare at her navel, amused and bewildered. Everyone starts to laugh. One woman rests on her body's lower torso. I feel warm. Bells ring.

The Religion of Memory

The stone cathedral reverberates with the acoustics of an amphitheater. The stands are full of spectators. I am perched on a balcony, looking out. The attendants are adorned in robes and suits. They represent their rich, upper class European ancestry.

“The entire congregation is from Brazil,” whispers a woman in heavy makeup beside me, sharing the balcony.

“Is this a service for the Santo Daime?” I ask her.

She does not respond, but stares, vacantly down toward the stage. A Torah emerges from the crowd, tall as a man. The ceiling seems to bow in reverence. Sun rays pour over the masses of blind eyes.

As the crowd exits from the cathedral, a man stares at me. His complexion is darker than most of the other people around us. I wonder if I have seen him before. My mind wavers.

I begin work at a train station. One night, I suffer an extreme case of shivers. I think of endless tunnels. I search for my anima inside them and call out to her. I return to consciousness crying, alone, delirious.

I traverse the subterranean corridors. The silhouette of Hitler appears on the murky walls. He follows me. I run through the broken tunnels. It is an airless womb. He nears. And there are others with him. Someone catches up to me.

I see my anima. She is an apparition, I feel a thud against the back of my head, and then a thunderous strike to my shoulder. Deadened, I fall to my knees, and stretch out in the narrow, concave tunnel. Someone else approaches.

My shoulder is bruised. I am fearful, sensing a malign presence. I hear my anima’s music. Regaining strength of mind, rising out of the brackish water, I race through the tunnel system looking for the quickest escape.

I come to a bend in a tunnel, and witness a woman being executed before my eyes. I see the shadow of a figure, a semblance of Hitler’s ghost lowering his weapon over her neck. Then, the specter disappears. I find a way out.

The tunnel spills out into a snowy field. It is nighttime. A vacuum of steam, pungent and metallic disperses in the dry air. I feel that armed assailants are still close. It is wartime. I stand knee-deep in snow, stunned by the thought of the encroaching enemy. I am resigned to my fate in the total silence. The dusk falls.

I see the Hitlerian wraith. I imagine breaking through the atmosphere above, transcending my human form, dying beyond the reach of all that is earthly. He is a Goliath, and he grasps out towards me, a bird lands in front of me. It is violent

green with a bright red tuft around its neck. Its smear of color in the bleak landscape is lightening. The bird flies away.

The earth has a pulse. I can feel it in the ground. Vapors issue from its depths, like that of a hot air balloon, warming the cool ground. I walk to an abandoned parking lot, the icy pavement is dim with street lamps. Its lifelessness is sickening.

There is a bowling alley and bar somewhere in the distance. The kind my stepfather used to play at with his rock band of fifty-somethings. Covers from the seventies drag on mercilessly. I stay outside. As the night ends, I peering across the breadth of my field of vision and notice large animals moving by the car, motionless under the street lamps. They look like overgrown fisher cats. They growl, scavenging with voracious appetites, like erasure marks in the cold, white New England winter.

I think: “Here, we are corrupted by the spoils of war, domesticated, yet freed into the all-vanishing flesh of our petrified humanity, stilled by a stifled society. We earn only the categorical satiation of a thankless search for nothing to entertain nothing.”

I can almost feel the years passing. My lover strides toward me. Her character is adaptable to the moment. She opens her car door against an iron railing. A cat pounces inside, and starts swatting. She emerges, bloodied with deep gashes, numbly stepping back into the car.

A rope dangles in front of the car window. The cats try to catch the rope, and scratching at her car window dazedly. Their claws cut into its plastic exterior, as she heaves, breathlessly, fearing for her life. The rope swings towards me, and I grab it.

I am pulled upwards, speedily, above the clouds, into the glowing dawn sky. I climb up the rope and fall into its basket. Its hot air balloon lifts me to the edge of the horizon. At the top of my mortal existence, I stand. Then, I let go.

My chest fills with cool air. I inhale deeply. Emerging from the ocean’s depths, I surface into a bubble, gliding upwards beneath the water. Within it, I remain submerged.

“To what air of mystery?” I question, without a memory.

The Fugitive Gamble

In a massive commercial grocery store, my presence fades, unconsciously. I turn astray from my anima, who accompanies me. Under the subtle burn of the industrial lighting overhead, I walk beside a girl in another aisle. I recognize her from my early school days. She once pursued me passionately. I was indifferent then. I am different now.

Soon, I have an affair with her. After a few weeks pass, I begin introducing her to close friends of mine. We walk arm in arm.

In another grocery store, my anima finds me shopping, alone. Together we exit into the parking lot, silent. She takes the driver's seat, even though she lost her license years ago. She hits the gas pedal full throttle into open traffic. We fly past a school of oncoming cars as they nearly crash into us sidelong. We buzz through a red-light intersection unscathed.

She slams on the gas pedal. She turns toward the forest, crashing into a trunk with a bang. I crawl out from under the steaming, totaled car. Her skeleton is bent as she is asphyxiated in the upturned canopy of metal. The forest breathes, damaged, but alive. I faint.

I wake from a coma, relieved. I am told that she died without much pain. A dream lingers from my days in comatose. I remember the stirring of its narrative, symbolic undercurrents, and its heightened emotions. Yet, I can not recall essential details or frames of reference.

"How does a fugitive run?" I ask myself in the dark of the hospital room.

"As a mind, fleeing traumatic memory," I answer myself.

Lying awake, my intuition peaks.

"Am I under the thumb of some unknown authority?" I wonder.

Paranoid by a conspiracy theory, I imagine who might have gone after me.

Was it the police, the FBI, or a foreign power?"

I want to escape.

Months earlier, I had busked with a guitar beside a fire hydrant in a small coastal town in New England. I was aware that it was eccentric.

"How strange to expect attention in a car-dependent, non-metropolitan town," I thought. I could sense the government's oversight.

My change bowl clinks with a few silver dollars and some pennies. I enjoy playing guitar. I know I'll leave town.

"On the run again?" I ask myself, concerned.

The town's firefighters glare at me as they walk past. They are tall. I feel low to the ground and belittled by their suspicions. The ambiance is less than welcoming. Everyone seems to bend over backwards to spurn me.

That week, my father is desperate to knock sense into me. He begs me to follow up with my higher education. He's always wished that for me. I comply passive-aggressively, reflecting his stubborn insistence. On the way to the university, I think one thing and do another. I sign up for classes. He surprises me with the gift of a cheap guitar.

Later that day, he meets a strange partner. He is happy, and so, I am content, though exhausted by his uncompromising relationship with me.

All to myself the rest of the day, I visit a neighboring friend. He's now living in the bedroom of a trailer. I show him and his friends the guitar. It's practically unplayable, a cheap piece of trash. We all sit awkwardly around the television, wasting time. They pass out and I exit the trailer unnoticed. I walk down an alleyway beside the trailer park.

I think: "The air reminds me of downtown Cairo, in Egypt."

I see people playing music. Their genuine enjoyment is infectious. Around us, the dull and dreary atmosphere of biological decay breeds a kind of mental stagnancy. But these performers are elegant and mindful. I cheerfully greet them, and sit to enjoy.

I feel a bit lighter with each step as I walk away. The ground is beautified by the music behind me. I wander inside a warehouse. The abandoned structure teems with street musicians.

"I've seen this person before," I think, peering into the crowd.

There is a fellow straight across from me. He is tall, stout, blonde-haired and bearded with mottled complexion. I begin to realize that the place is depraved, a haunt for the unhoused as they mingle and interchange among the mad and poor. I walk through unaffected, witnessing.

I continue on past the crowd to the edge of the building, detached by my own perspective. Though, with the burden of my nostalgia, I know I have returned to our world, that of our nation, born of mass inequality. We are buried under, drowned by sensations of closure, to affirm ways of life that transform people into fugitives of their own minds.

The Renewal of Seasons

Winter's night sets in. I look out of my screen window, peering at the ground from the balcony of my apartment. I think I see a cat in the shadows of dusk's last light. For a moment, my balcony reminds me of my first apartment. I remember how cats would come visit me there, and how I'd be comforted, listening to their subtle purring, watching as their fur brushed up against the crumbly edges of the concrete.

I open the window. The landscape is cast in a sheath of snow. In my yard, the shadow of a cat bounces playfully against the wooden fencing. I open the door to get a closer look at the disappearing shadow. A cat then slides gracefully between my legs. Huddled next to the heater, the cat turns its back to me, nonchalant. I then recognize the cat. His name is Max. I kneel down to pet him. He hops away silently, without leaving a whisper of a purr in his wake.

Spring clears the open prairies with its renewal. Windy, tall grass foretells the hush of life waking from its seasonal slumber. Tall fields of wheat blow in the wind against the faint horizon. The wind is warm.

In the vicinity of my home, there are no rolling hills. The land is flat. In a nearby rickety, wood bungalow, my mother cooks her morning eggs. Across from the yard, I holler in Cantonese. I can hear her warming presence beckoning me for food,

"Sik Fan!"

She returns without skipping a beat.

At the table on our lawn, I feel something furry brush by at my ankle. I recognize the cat. My smile turns my face bright as a citrus fruit. I look down.

"Max!"

His forehead markings are distinctive. He's with me again. There are tufts of delicate, black fur on his chest. He lets me pet him. Leaning into my leg, he lays on his back. His white stomach is exposed. He is all friendship. He was usually temperamental. Now, he is the opposite. I can't hear his meowing.

"Are you opening your mouth?" I ask him, enjoying the quiet moment.

Minutes pass without a single meow. I feel his warmth and the way he feels in my arms, his size and weight. I hold his face in my arms. He hops over to the door of my mother's home, happy. "My cat has come back to life!" I tell her in Cantonese.

I look at Max. I tell him I am going to call his father. I kiss him between the nose and forehead. His eyes are pressed tightly shut. His fur makes me sneeze.

Cooled by a breeze, I open my eyes to the empty horizon. It is a very warm, windy day.

Under the hazy sky, I wake from a nap, surrounded by prairie grasslands. The clouds above begin to blur. The summer sun makes us glow. For the last few weeks, I've been contemplating my dead cat twice now. I dreamt of Max every night. But I fall asleep, dreamlessly, all through the night.

I see him in the grass. He is silvery and angelic, radiant. He is gently animated. He was often aggressive. I squat on the ground, sitting atop of a pile of straw, and stretch my arms out to pet him. He rests on my elbows, comfortably.

He crawls and stretches, relaxingly leaning into my right thigh. I shift, patient under the stop-motion crepuscular dusk. I kneel close to his side. Admiring him, I think, "He is wise."

I reach out to him. Docile, he places his right paw on my left hand. I pick him up.

"You are a seer," I whisper.

My breath is hot and soft in his ear.

The final snow of winter falls. It is a very ordinary day.

"Is it afternoon or early evening? Oh! What's the difference?" I think.

I'm in an irritable mood. My mind turns in my head. I sense the presence of an animal. My albino rabbit, Salt, visits me. I am lonesome, miserable. I stroke the fur on his head.

I let him out in the yard. The snowfall was heavy. I am calm. Salt is white as the snow, only visible by his beady, red eyes.

I then notice a child running through the snow, not far ahead. The child runs over to me. He rests his head on my lap. I realize the boy is mute. He looks at me with colorless eyes. I see my rabbit in him, and watch as Salt hops above the snow, sinking into it occasionally.

I can only make out stripes, an outline, bright, an animal form over the snowdrifts reflecting the light of the sun. I can make out a face. Its spirit is persistent, gracing me with its merciless rain of compassion. My hands are warm.

Turning my head, I see my partner smile and laugh. We have a child. He is an infant with the same eyes as our cat, only with the face of a child. He stares back at me lovingly.

"I want you to learn Chinese, because I'm your mother. You will preserve our lineage by learning Chinese," I say to him in clear English.

My partner continues to laugh in the background.

In synchronicity, my partner and son speak to me in English. My partner is wide-eyed and says, "He already knows how to speak Chinese."

The child says, "Mother, I already know how to speak Chinese."

Beyond the brick ledge of our balcony, dawn approaches with a beautiful golden sunrise. My son's dirty blonde hair glistens. His eyes express his inquisitive curiosity. They are a mixture of emerald green and chestnut brown. Sitting on our balcony together, I teach him how to say eyes in Cantonese.

"*Gnan*"

I move my lips, exaggeratedly, to show him. Stuttering, he has difficulty repeating the Cantonese word.

"*Gnan*" he says again.

My partner greets us in the morning with caring eyes. He asks a question, playfully stern. "Why are you trying to teach him what he already intrinsically knows from his mother?"

The child chuckles and says eyes, ears, mouth and nose all in perfect Cantonese.

"*Gnan, yee, hoaw, bae*"

I listen, shocked with gladness. An immense wave of pure unconditional love washes over me for him.

"Ma," he would exclaim, "I know."

He is able-bodied. He hops off the sandstone ledge back inside. That night, he rests his head on my thigh. Our bodies fit perfectly. I stroke his immaculate hair, its ruddy gold matching that of the sunset.

The Blues of Extinction

I am in someone's else's cramped home. I barely have clothes on, just some torn underwear and a sock.

We met in the city, new friends. He is a calm, collected man from Morocco. He is a lover of music and delights in extended conversation, though much of the time it is one-sided, leaning to his side. He appeared at the door to my favorite cafe, and sat beside me, unannounced. He then got up without a word, and motioned toward me, expecting me to follow him. We went for a night on the town.

"How did I come to this house?" I ask myself, exasperated.

I act natural.

He says to me, "Well, what about the blues?"

Forward, as if pleading, he is unceasing, saying that I need to witness live blues music. He acts like it's an emergency, like a drug addict after a fix.

Other people enter the small apartment from upstairs. I get dressed. Three guys pull out guitars and drums. I also take up a neglected electric bass and play along.

There are harmonies, mostly chaos. I feel extremely creative and lead the jam with an experimental, percussive approach to the bass that is quite bluesy. More people start to come into the room to admire my playing. The Moroccan man is outside, smoking the night away. He says he has had his fill of our music. He leaves the property, drifting off with delicate, silent steps, as sure as the smoke's slow, deliberate wafting in the windless night.

After many hours of solid jamming, boozing and smoking all the while, I wake from an unconscious stupor of musical virility, previously unknown by my quaking hands. A buzz of soothing intensity kicks in and I stand up. I walk out the door and into the surroundings, which resemble New England suburbia.

Exploring the land, I scowl about the deadened forest of slated housing developments for evidence of upper middle class America. Thoughtless, in an instant, a huge, towering mass of fleshy gray bursts through the overgrown pine thickets. An elephant-like mammalian animal peers at me with big, friendly eyes.

"Isn't this being long-since extinct?" I wonder, submitting to my imagination.

The gentle giant has light, matted hair. Their head is unusually shaped. I attempt to mount its back, intuiting its invitation to do so.

We stride carefully along the shoulder of a paved road. Then, the animal races forward, striding mindfully, at a quickening pace. We reach the heart of the undeveloped woodlands on the northeast Atlantic coast.

After hopping off its back, the animal stamps away with a volcanic gush of energy through the crashing, spouting forest. I watch, feeling empathetic compassion for it as it charges into the wilderness, on the brink of dissolution.

A Question of Religion

I enter a conference hall at a hotel resort. Outside, the bayside quays are sunny and picturesque from inside the spectacularly high glass walls. The effect from indoors fills my eyes with a transparent mural of living water, fresh gardens and insurmountable sky.

On the beach, a monstrous, sunken hand sculpture stretches out of the artificial sand. Frosted mirrors and scarlet carpeting bedeck the thoroughfare leading into a main reception hall. With its own gardens, waterfalls and even streetlight-studded sidewalks, the lavish architecture welcomes anything, anyone but the stoic.

In one of the main halls an exotic show demonstrates a musical fusion between Bollywood and Gamelan. Passing by, we hear that a community culture center from the Philippines performed the act.

I walk through the buildings with my anima. We find our way to a smaller hall, which is still quite roomy. The hall bears a sign, reading that there will be free dining there that evening. In a room around the bend, we wander down a well-maintained corridor. A video presentation plays my anima's music in the background. We both nod in approval. The sound is good.

Walking farther along, we realize we have come to the pews of a synagogue. The man at the front *bema* is dressed in secular clothes. He delivers a Hebrew sermon. A man my age in front of us speaks up, dissenting in an Americanized Hebrew accent.

“What are we doing here?” I ask myself, seriously.

A Moment's Dying Wish

I sit relaxed at a seaside café on the Mediterranean. I am reminded of my time at a small restaurant in Malibu, California. I sit with a man who resembles an old friend of mine from Sudan, who I knew when I lived in Egypt. He is engrossed in his own matters.

He begins speaking with me in Arabic about his father and his homeland, recounting a story from his village in Darfur. I can only make out the gist of his story, though I very much like his animated telling. The story is interesting and informative of his birth region's local history. He expresses his identity in relation to a man who he grew up with.

It is a story about fishing. I want to make sure I am following. I ask him to confirm when he starts talking about his life in Libya. He nods in approval.

I begin to translate his story as soon as he is finished. An Algerian man at the next table turns to us begins professing their ideas about overcoming and eradicating racial barriers.

I feel a strong urge to convey the man's story, while also practicing my translation skills as I interpret their Arabic in my head and make notes. As the conversations closes, I wish to relay their stories, as they are about the meaning of home in the midst of migration and conflict.

The Effects of Ayahuasca

It was my first night in Latin America. I walked alone on a dimly lit street. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a sidewalk eatery where buses stop. I walked over to the restaurant. Its floor was dried mud. I was on the outskirts of a Peruvian city. My eyes were weary. I was a young traveler from *el Norte*, fielding the *castellano* of my gracious hosts.

Around the restaurant, a barefoot man held a freshly blown glass jar, labeled “*Ayahuasca*.” I had a quick drink and went over to speak with him. I offered him a few coins and he gave me a substantial pinch of the substance in the jar.

I sat back down in the restaurant, inspecting the bark and leaves in my hands. I washed it down with a bottle of beer. Within the span of a few hours, I felt as if I was together with all of my loved ones, my best friends, and my anima. When I realized I was alone, I became frightened.

Enduring waves of wooziness, I then imagined my family and friends sitting together with me at the restaurant table. Dizzy tingling sensations worked their way into my extremities and down to my core.

I noticed a jazz ensemble performing. Yet, they were silent. The oil pans and grills melted into a music hall. No one else seemed to notice what was taking place, as if the sticks of furniture that made up the restaurant and the music had become a single chorus of vibrations.

The band performed directly in front of me. The audibility of the music tuned in and out, like a child playing with an old radio. I only heard sounds coming from my periphery. The music intermingles with constant babble from other guests at the restaurant. All are local Peruvians.

I began to hear a mental commentary of my running experiences. It was a sensation like remembering my dreams, only while still awake. The ayahuasca began to subside. A mass of flesh stood before me. An angered cook had been yelling at me for hours.

“*¡Por favor, necesitas dejar de pronto, amigo!*”

Dusting off my pants, and denying my detached countenance, my mind turned on me. “The *Ayahuasca* had no real effect,” I think.

Dawn. I begin my first full day abroad.

The Innocent Voyeur

The landscape is discolored. An underdeveloped urban setting rises high. Urban sprawls in Cairo, Egypt, *favelas* in Brazil and the outskirts of the D.F., Mexico do not compare.

I look out from a skyscraper. Immediately outside the impoverished core are wealthier developments. The affluent, suburban residences remind me of those in Boston, Massachusetts, or the state of New York.

The first ring of suburbia illumined in the harsh sunlight. Its residential area appears much clearer than my immediate surroundings, though my vantage point is itself dim.

In the most outlying urban division, a round government building comes into focus out of a field of lush greenery. The building is surrounded, as are all outlying developments, with dense low-lying jungle.

I check into a dilapidated hotel. I'm staying with two men and two women. They are all about my age, twenty-somethings. One of the ladies is striking. She is Provencal French, proudly exclaiming that she has a Roma nose. The door closes, and there is a sexual tension in the air.

From our sixteenth-floor window, we can clearly see the divisiveness in our society. Stepping out onto our balcony, our room becomes an observation deck, a voyeuristic plane from which to shed the nonsensical social walls we've built up around our tattered cores.

Shy and distant, I observe the Frenchwoman in front of me. The group soon disperses, anxiously. I leave the building.

Music of the Adulteress

An older man sits at the piano, performing a duet with my anima. I watch them in the tight, dim café downtown. Deliberately ignored, I sit alone.

Listening to the performance, the music interpenetrates their hearts. They leave together, without sparing even a hint of a moment's glance in my general direction. I am speechless.

I let out a dry heave, cold. My body feels frail, and sickly. Through a window, I can see my anima delighting in profane, erotic humor with the pianist. They flaunt their flirtations.

I walk back into the cafe. Onstage, a singer looks at me. Blankly, I ignore her stare and turn back to walk the streets alone. My shoulders hurt.

Soon after, I learned that the pianist traveled to Vietnam with my anima. Dirt pathways opened their bicyclist's honeymoon with clear visions of the emerald jungle and the translucent, blue sky. In every waking instant, they breathed the country's exoticism in all its myriad forms, escaping from the triviality of life.

The pianist flew off his bike and into the forested underbrush. Crouching low behind a large tree, unhurt, he had a flashback.

Helicopters and bullets whipped through trails of missile smoke in the air with a horrifying menace. Colors were subdued to incandescent steam. He hid, fearing for his life.

He angled his neck ninety degrees to the right. He heard soldiers tramping behind a nearby tree, preparing a massive latrine. Taking out what looked like human waste, they uncover a mass grave.

A year later, I was back at that same downtown café, stroking the long, black hair of my loving anima again. We whispered sweet nothings to each other, kissing. Abandoning all inhibition, we rode calmly out onto the open prairie highways. Our music buzzed through the car's tested speakers.

Air Craft North

I see our pilot. His nervous face is reflected in the front window of the aircraft. He has never taken off in a snowstorm. I can feel the engine burning after takeoff. The plane splits under the pressure. We crash, and land miles apart.

I wake slowly, as fading from white. I walk from the crashed aircraft, and find an outcrop on the snowy mountainside. The highland peaks are immense, full of endless crevasses and massive plateaus. The horizon moves with me as I approach the face of a downhill drop.

I walk like a sole survivor down to the base of the mountain. I notice a house. It is occupied by a family in robes and saris. They seem busy. A man emerges from the house in a green, military uniform. I am hurt, dazed from the crash. I ask for help, but they do not answer.

A tall, thin lady on the grounds notices me for a moment, but then she turns around. I may as well be invisible. Fortunately, I find an unguarded, snowmobile that looks like it's able to push through the terrain. I steal it.

The descent from the mountain base is steep and long. When I cut the engine, time stops in the depth of the silence, which is only broken by the shriek of an eagle or a rustling pine. I feel as if I am slipping out of consciousness. The wintry mountain wilderness gives way to a subtropical coastal village.

There are children running about along a single cobblestone road surrounded by a network of muddy dirt paths. Long wooden boards are planked over swamp pools that collect in the path of seaside creeks. My stolen vehicle breaks down.

Two young women greet me. They are about my age, in their late twenties. I can see their minds stirring in their eyes. I can see the beauty of their imaginations on their faces.

It is humid in the village. One of the women wears dreadlocks. I fell attached to her as she tries to help me adapt to local life. Some days pass. I search for another vehicle. I find a small, unlocked motorcycle in an enclosed yard near the river. I hot-wire its engine, hop on and leave the village behind without looking back.

What This Was

Rusty kept telling himself, "I'll never return. I'll never return. I'll never return." He said it out loud as he lay on his back, in bed, unable to sleep.

He gave his new mantra some thought and concluded that it was literally impossible for him to return, because he could never actually be anywhere at all even once, never mind twice. All sense of time and place melded into itself indistinguishably, eluding his every definition of himself as part of a narrative linked to the settings of countries, or the characters of people, whether they be others or himself.

He no longer had an identity, he thought. If anything, he was simply a form of movement that sees like the mind sees when the rest of its body is asleep, and the personality that thinks he or she or they own it dissolves into a purely subjective objectivity.

But there was day left, and the stars were just winking through the darkening azure. So, Rusty rose to his feet and went out.

