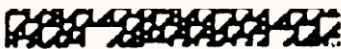


LITTLE TITAN
 IN THE EYE
 OF THE
 HURRICANE



SAINT DELETER



little titan
in the eye of the hurricane

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springs almost over. sun go up. sun come down.
and the long and winding road. you always said we'd
rule the city by now. and next year, the world. what
a terrible liar. you know the kids sing a song about
you now?

1 + 2, yellow and red.
judi put a bullet through goldy's head.
sun go up. sun come down.
say your prayers. goldy's still dead.

they got their facts wrong. and the kids these
days dont flow like we did. it is catchy though. i
really like the sun go up sun come down line. i
wonder where they got it from. better than any song
you tried to make, so smile.

if theres one thing i learned about dying, it's
that spring is the best time to do it. summer, your
body goes bad too quick and everybody has to hold
their breath carrying you over. winter, the sand's
too goddamn hard to dig up and after a few hours you
cant even hold the shovel cause your fingers are
bleeding. fall? man, i dont even gotta tell you about
fall. but spring? spring gives you the best shot at
coming back. remember dad used to say that.

i think i got some time to decide for myself
when i die. no way i graduate senior year first time
around. i have a d+ average and im keeping it that
way. i think ill repeat the year once or twice until
something good comes up. and then ill die wherever
that is.

i know you wanna hear about judi heller. i dealt
with him, but maybe not the way you wanted. wing and
cairo wouldnt talk to me for a month. ill say this.
mom's fine with it.

mom moved out by the way. she couldnt stay here
after you died. she lives with her new boyfriend now.
she went out 1 week after you died and that same

night she called me from the nigga's house. been living there ever since.

old guy's alright. doesnt like me much and i dont like him. he has a decent job working hvac, he keeps mom company, and he sends checks for rent, so maybe i actually kinda like the guy. the memo on the checks should say 'for staying the fuck away from me.'

mom still comes around every once in a while. shell just sleep in her room, or ill come home from school and shell be passed out on the couch with mash or long vacation on the tv and her mushy spaghetti in a pot on the stove.

one time she walked in on old man green sleeping on the floor. she made spaghetti for him too. yelled at me for not letting him sleep on the mattress but i never made him do that. he just likes the floor.

these past 9 months, ive had hot water for all my showers. by the time i start scrubbing my ass cheeks, im always expecting the water to turn cold, but it never happens. no one's here to use up the hot water.

and ive been wearing your jacket. it's way looser than i thought it would be. mom wants me to throw the thing away cause of all the bloodstains inside it and the bullet hole on the chest. i said i cant throw it away. theres too many prayers sewed into the inside and i dont wanna get cursed. she offered to sew the bullet hole up but i sew better than her, and ill get around to it when i feel like it.

it was a lot of times i wanted to say something to you. times and memories you should be in. like when cairo's comic got disqualified in a contest for having too much blood and rape and he got banned for life cause he slammed a chair over 1st place's head.

or when i found prince walking home trying to keep his guts inside of him cause some girl's man carved his stomach up. herm had to sew his guts back

together and now prince cant eat beef anymore. prince says beef is bad for your energy anyway.

and when wing's back got so bad cause his little wing got too big and he had to start taking pills and quit the basketball team. dad always used to say that angels blood doesnt mix too well with titans blood. im starting to know what he means.

one day there was shortage of pain pills all over the city and me and the kids and karina had to keep him steady while he diarrhea shat his brains out. it's funny how he's always complaining but when things actually get bad he goes quiet.

i dont know how he does it. my right arm hurts a lot but not nearly the way wing hurts.

ive been running. trying to beat your record for the 100m dash. i can hit clean above 11.5 these days. weve been training for the big game. i figured id get fast. trying to smoke less.

cairo's braids are down to his shoulders. wing can still fight sometimes but he cant move like he used to. some days it feels like he's fully back and he's fast and he has that uppercut that shakes the world off its axis, but most days he moves like a normal ass nigga.

im getting off track. let me talk about a few nights ago. i was trying to think of something to say to you ever since i got this typewriter and then some thing happened that i had to tell you about.

mom came around one day and told me to clean the room for gods sake, cause all the dust was apparently terrible for my lungs. she read that in a magazine. i had to choose between smoking and living in a dusty room. if i did both, my lungs would turn on me. 'i have seen what happens to boys who have their lungs turn on them.' she said.

i stayed in bed pretending to sleep until she threw a wet towel at me. she said 'if you dont start cleaning, you will never get married.' and then she

headed out, and i heard her down the hall saying 'aiyai! what a lazy son!'

i never tried to spell that before actually. ayyay! aiai! aeiai! aiyai looks the best.

believe it or not, that threat worked. you might not know this, but i think a lot about getting married. not to clarissa or bb or any of the girls ive been fucking around with these days, but to whitney houston. and andre melly from that dracula movie they show at the drive in. and diana ross in the 70s. back in 4th grade, i used to think about marrying gina v, but she was always scared of me.

so i figured id clean up the room. mom never would shut the fuck up about how she made sure dad could clean before she married him, but i never saw him clean a damn thing in my life. maybe you did.

i got to wiping my side of the room. you dont deserve to get married so i left yours alone. i wiped the nightstand and the floor around my mattress, and then i started wiping the corner of the room.

nigga, tell me why i found a shoebox full of receipts behind my mirror. you dont actually need to tell me. im getting to it. i know you think im retarded but i am getting to it.

the oldest receipt i could find was from when i was in sophomore year. and they all had kisses on them with a different color lipstick for each one. what were you doing keeping these things on my side of the room? for that long? i otta beat your ass, wise guy.

and they were all for chicken w/waffles at some diner on priya street. what was your ass doing that far out west when farooq has perfectly good waffles just down the street? and they were charging you extra for sauce? and you were tipping 30 dinar? i think youre acting above your paygrade, soldier.

i think i remember it though. i think i went with you one time and you got pissed cause you didnt want me there, and you didnt let me get anything, and

you spent all this time talking to the waitress out side.

on every receipt was a line that said WAITRESS: FORTUNE. ok. i felt like i heard that name before. you see where this is going.

so me and the kids went out to your spot on priya street. so fucking close to the hills. cairo was checking his shoulders the whole time like a mid fielder.

when the waitress came around i just said your order. chicken and waffles with extra honey sauce.

the waitress said i looked familiar.

i asked if shes seen a girl called fortune around.

she thought for a second then said 'OH MY GOD! i totally forgot about her! did you die your hair red?'

'yeah.'

'i liked the blond more.'

'ok.'

'fortune got fired. didnt you hear?'

'no. tell me about it.'

'oh my god. like, she was getting everyone's orders wrong, so the manager already wanted to fire her, and then he caught her like, stealing from the register, so she cut him and ran. when the cops went to her place it was empty.'

'you know where she went?'

'nope. i forgot the whole thing. we used to go shopping together.'

'what did she look like?'

'what do you mean? you dont remember?'

'i was too busy looking at you.' the kids started laughing but you gotta understand. this was a through and through american girl. and i like working the broads out by the hills.

she said 'oh, youre just playing with me.'

'yeah. i am. gimme a little reminder.'

'you know. the short curly hair. ummmmm.' she thought about it some more. 'she had a scratch on her

cheek. she always tried to hide it with makeup but if you looked really really close, you could tell. did you notice?'

'nope.'

'ok, well lemme put down your order hon.' HON! once you get west of reyes, people start talking like they just got off the boat.

the food was not that good. i still took some of wing's waffles. he keeps getting mad at me, but he knows he cant have more than two or he's gonna get all backed up.

the shit was too expensive. i told the kids put together everything you got. then i called the wait res over. i told her i was paying for my meal but everyone else is broke. do what you must. then i ran.

but here's the thing. listen, youre gonna love this. not even 2 days later, me and the kids pull up to mona's. it was after some shit went down with some redshirts and we wanted patch ups.

usually, when i pull up to mona's, ill ask about ursula or tonya. yeah ursula's getting up there in years, but shes still the funniest girl in all the city. i like her stories from before she came to the city more than i like her fucking and she's the one who taught me fucking.

my favorite was about the calabrian she fell in love with who took all her money and she ended up tracking him down and cutting his ears off with his shaving razor. if it was any other broad, i wouldnt believe it. these days shes always with that business man. i wish she'd cut his ears off.

i like tonya's crazy ass too. she once told me that the city puts melts in our tap water to keep us under control. i told her i like melts. she said i was a sheep. it's true. i dont like melts no more though. they make it hard to pray.

i cant ask about her anymore cause she has throat cancer. last time i saw her was last month at

her sister's apartment. she couldnt talk anymore. i cant think of a worse thing for god to do to her than take away her mouth. then i heard her family sent her out to the old country to die in good air.

im off track. we were at mona's for a patch up. everybody got their girl, but i was sitting there with one of my girls taken and the other one dying. dizzy told me ursula doesnt even take his money anymore and thats why she should get mona's instead of ursula when mona dies.

'i am still alive.' mona said. she turned to look at me. 'they talk about me like i am dead already. inshallah i will outlive them both and leave this place to your bitch mother.'

'i dont think my bitch mother wants it.'

'she will take it whether she wants it or not.'

then she told me they got a new girl last week. she wanted me to meet her. shes new so she didnt have any regulars.

diz told me she'd cover my hour. now i knew she just wanted to fuck with ursula, but i bit. i like to meet the girls before they move on.

the girl was called prudence. she was in the room roxann used to be in, all the way at the end of the upstairs hallway. i knocked on the door.

'one second.' and in a bit, she opened the door. she started to say 'hey, how are you doing' or something like that, but she only managed to get the first word out before screaming.

i was about to ask if she was all good, but she pulled me by the arm into the room and slammed the door. then she started feeling up my face. felt like a doctor trying to figure out what was wrong with me.

i asked what the deal was.

'youre not goldy.'

oh.

'youre the brother.'

i put her chin to the side and squinted at her

cheek. she smacked my hand away. i saw the scar though.
'fortune?'

'dont call me that.' her hair was curlier than i
remembered it from back in the day.

'youre prudence now.'

'yeah. fuck. i knew it was a bad idea coming back
here.'

'so you left your whore name at the diner and
took a waitress name at a whorehouse.'

she laughed at that.

'what happened with that whole thing at the
diner?'

'do we have to talk about it?'

'nah.'

'ok. thank you. just prudence please. fortune is
gone.'

'i barely remembered the name.'

'then it's working.'

i sat on the bed with her. i asked why she said
it was a bad idea to come here.

she said it was nothing.

there was a table at the end of the room with a
sheet covering it. looked like a covered up shrine
like the one herm has for his gods.

i told her about how back when i was in middle
school you took me to see this highschool girl get
fucked under 11th street bridge. there was a bunch of
guys there watching too. i asked if that was her.

she laughed and said yeah. 'i remember that. i
used to love to put on a show. i never knew he was
one of my admirers. or you.'

i told her you would tell me exactly what the
guy was doing wrong and youd whisper to me what you
would do instead.

she laughed.

i asked why you never showed her off.

'it was too dangerous back then. when i had my
old name. but still he asked me to marry him. then he

died the next day and i went back to feeling like a mistress again.' i was gonna say something but she took my hand and smelled the cuff of the jacket. 'it still smells like him.'

it stopped smelling like that for me a few months into wearing it. now it just smells like time gone by. i said i thought it would smell like blood.

'he always smelled a little bit like blood. but never in a rotten way.' she took the collar of my shirt and smelled that. 'or maybe you just smell like he did.'

'maybe.' i lit a stick and laid down. she went over to open the window. then she laid down next to me and put an ashtray between us. she started smoking too.

she already has long fingers so the silver l20s look real nice in her hands. you know all this shit, but it was all news to me. short nails. unpainted. did she paint them for you? she had a thin pearl watch on her wrist. do you remember a watch like that?

she asked what i wanted.

you know how i operate. i always like to let the girl make the first move. technically she touched my face, but she thought she was touching you. and then she touched my hand, but only to smell you. so i figured when she touched me, id touch all up on her.

she asked if i wanted my face patched up. i forgot about that.

i said 'maybe.'

'well id rather patch you up before you get blood on my pillows.'

'sure, if you wanna.'

'i do wanna.' and she put my head in her lap and got to work fixing my face. i had a cut on my eyebrow and my lip. i tried to talk but she told me not to move my mouth while she took care of it. she took her time. more time than she needed maybe. she kept feelin g up my lips. going over them, around the outside,

around the inside with her thumb.

i asked her (and it was hard to talk with her finger in my mouth) about what you and her got up to before you died.

'i dont know. i think he was seeing other girls.'

'he was.'

'thanks for the confirmation.'

im ssorry man. it just came out.

'i cant blame him. you want to relax with the person you love. but when you spend all your time with them worrying, you need to find other ways to relax. im not mad at him. i was mad at him back when i hadnt seen him for weeks. it was awful. i thought, if youre going to fuck other women, then at least see me on weekends. then the day before he died, he came to see me. he was acting really sweet. kissing me a lot. he promised he'd bring me a ring tomorrow. i dont even remember agreeing to marry him. he wouldnt let me get a word out. i was just happy. so happy i gave him my best watch. the watch made its way back to me a few weeks later. it was just a piece of garbage. amateur work. all frills and no substance. no clarity. maybe if i gave him a better watch.'

'were you gonna say yes? to marrying him?'

'i think so.'

theres your answer.

then i asked if she remembered how you used to run with your arms and legs wagging around like a jellyfish.

she laughed. she did remember. and you were still fucking fast. 11.4 still stands at 9th place.

i asked if she thought you ran away from judi heller like that.

she stopped laughing. 'i dont know.' she went to smoke out the window.

you wouldve laughed. she made me feel like shit though. i finished my stick and got up and left that

big mouth ass bitch. i waited in the lobby and pretended to sleep until i actually slept. everyone came down and woke my ass up.

ursula took my face in her hands. 'ah. my poor titan. who did this to you? terrible job. terrible. was it dizzy?'

i said it was prudence. but she was already off arguing with dizzy about some bullshit, and mona came through to yell at them to take their fight somewhere that wouldnt scare the customers away. she just made the fight louder and scarier.

then i went home. i prayed. the neighbors all moved out so no one complains about any noise i make. then i went to sleep.

and thats it. i dunno. i feel like youd have something funny to say about the whole thing. i dont know how you dealt with that broad. a mouth that big and she cant even laugh with it. fuck.

i can ask 100 niggas about you and theyll all give me the same words. 'goldy. with the blond hair and the 87 mile fastball and the 11.4 second runtime who beat this many frankos in sophomore year and blah blah blah.'

i think she has new words about you. maybe the last person in the whole city holding onto those.

yesterday i woke up to old man green eating my ramen and watching a japanese game show on the tv. one of those where niggas have to touch bugs to win a million ~~do~~ yen or some shit.

old boy comes through every week or something like that. he takes my ramen and watches some bull shit on tv id never think to find. and he always says something like 'please stop buying the pork ramen. the spicy chicken is much better.'

then i ask him what the numbers are gonna be, and he says 'ill tell you the first 3, but after that, youre on your own.' he's always right about the first 3 but i can never finish it off.

one day he told me 'you know, lad, i go to the races some times, when im feeling lucky. and i bet on the losing horse, just to see if ill finally be wrong. i never am.' theres not even that many horses left in the city anymore.

by the way, old man green gave me this typewriter a few weeks ago as a thank you for letting him stay over whenever he wants. he said it's a bootleg. a sniffaroma brand typewriter.

he said 'it holds many innovative technologies in the field of typography, and yet remarkably, it remains a piece of shit.'

he taught me how to use the thing. i like doing the big spaces for each paragraph like it's a book. it looks nice. i had some trouble trying to figure out how big to make it.

like maybe this

or like this

fuck. i cant get it back exactly like it was. close enough. i think this is the best. let me know what you think.

and typing beats writing with a pen or pencil cause my hands always hurt too much to do that. you should see the assignments i turn in these days. this is why i keep telling cairo to take care of his hands.

yesterday though, old man green was watching a japanese game show and eating my ramen. i asked him if he ever had a girl get mad at him.

he looked at the ground, then he looked at me and said 'no.'

'bullshit. guy as old as you.'

'maybe. i forget so much these days.'

i told him to fuck himself and lock the door on his way out. he never needs a key. he always finds a way in.

he said 'how's your pickpocketing?'

i said i aint scooped shit since freshman year.

'keep your guard up. you may need to SCOOP sooner than you think.'

ok.

we ended up having a run in with some hundreds this time and i split my forehead bad. really we shouldve been practicing for the big game but i wanted to see what was good out east. nothing. nothing is ever good out east.

the cut went up into my hair. maybe i should move the next time i see a lead pipe coming at me. i wouldve gone to mona's after but it was bleeding pretty bad, so i went to herm's place.

herm took care of it and he said it wasnt nearly as bad as i thought it was but it felt pretty bad. then for payment he said he needed a half liter of scoundrel's blood.

i asked where i could find that.

he pulled out a bowl of leeches.

i wore a leech shirt for about an hour in that bitchass nigga's apartment. and he wouldnt change the channel from the news either. i zoned out to the mayor on tv talking about the ECONOMY. i still dont know what that word means. i was thinking about what to say to prudence. i didnt come up with an answer. when i left, herm told me to go eat some liver.

so i walked my woozy ass over to wing's place

cause he wasnt with us at the karyas and i didnt feel like walking all the way home. i walked up the stairs and i could hear him and his dad yelling at each other from all the way down the stairs.

just as i was gonna ring the bell, wing's dad bust out the door yelling some bullshit about cleaning the kitchen. he looked at me with his nose turned up and walked down. i wouldve done something about his attitude but i just got done with the leeches and the thing with my head and everything so you can understand why i just stood there leaning on the rails.

karina ran at me and hugged me. 'you came to see me!'

'yeah. wheres wing at?'

'in his room. what happened?' she put her hand on the bandage on my head. it still stung cause i didnt take any of herm's pills.

i walked in and karina stuck to my arm. that whole family is so touchy. wouldnt be surprised if the dad started leaning on me too. i looked at the kitchen and it didnt even look that dirty so i dont know what he was screaming about.

karina asked me if i wanted to eat. i said nah i just wanted to sleep. i went over to wing's room and he was smoking out his window. his room was covered in feathers. he's been shedding a lot these days.

i dropped on his bed and told him about my grand adventure. i told it more for karina than wing cause she likes to hear about that shit and i know wing doesnt talk to her about it at all.

i was about to talk about the prudence situation but wing realized and he pointed his finger at me with his thumb up and one eye open like a sniper. 'you know what you need, baby? some liver. karina. run and get kid some liver.'

'what? why?'

'cause he needs to get his blood back. now run.'

'why dont you get it?'

'cause we got business. dont make me tell you again.' and he put his hand up real quick like he was gonna hit her but she didnt flinch, she stomped away.

i felt bad. ~~if she was my sister~~ if she was our sister what would you do? would you try to keep her away too? she cried for you when you died. thought you should know in case her tears didnt reach you.

'she digs you.'

'im not retarded.'

'so take it easy on her.'

'i forgot.'

'maybe i shouldve kept her here so she can get over it. it's gone on too long.'

i asked him what he does when a girl gets mad at him.

'who's mad at you?'

'you dont know her.'

'bullshit. what girl do you know that i dont?'

'new girl at mona's.'

'nigga, she just got there.'

'yeah, i made a bad joke. listen. you had a lot of girls be mad at you. what did you do?'

'i ran from their brothers. man you already got ursula. what you need her for?'

'ill tell you later.'

he took a big drag off his stick and blew it out the window. you ever notice how when wing blows smoke he clenches his jaw a little and presses his lips so the smoke comes out like a sheet of paper? you could write books on the smoke he blows out. then he turned to me and said 'you gotta get your shit straight, baby. it's graduation soon.'

ill tell you one thing. i did not go there to hear that shit.

'we gotta think about some moves.'

'you think about moves. ill sleep. youre better at thinking than me.'

'shit, man. everybody's looking at you. you think anybody gives a fuck what wing got to say? nobody does.'

'im doing the year over.'

'and then what?'

'what about we all apply to a grocery store.'

'you wanna move boxes all day until you die?'

'i dunno.'

'you dont, nigga. you gotta boss up. get real.' he talked to me about all the moves he was trying to make with these guys and those guys. start his own office close to the intersection. i was falling asleep.

he noticed and flicked his stick at me. 'man whats your deal?'

'i dont wanna have a deal. i just wanna sleep.'

'you want me to carry you on my back like your mama's boyfriend?'

'i wouldnt trust your back to carry a pack of cigarettes nigga.'

'yeah. dont come crying to me when you get evicted.'

'ill try not to.'

'idiot. what do you even wanna do?'

'nothing. sleep.'

'you shouldve become a boxer.'

'not with this shoulder.' and i dont even wanna be a boxer.

'check, baby. when i get right, ill let you stay over if you clean and cook for me.'

'deal. ill be your wife and suck your dick too, nigga. now shut up and let me sleep.'

and then he laughed and said that prayer he always says that starts with 'holy mother mary'. thats all i can ever hear before he starts whispering it. i always mean to ask him what it is but i always forget. maybe becoming catholic is the move. i went to sleep.

when i woke up we had some liver. i forgot i hate liver so i filled up mostly on bread. when karina was

washing the dishes i asked wing if he wanted to come to mona's. he said he was saving money.

i said bullshit.

he said karina didnt have any friends to stay over at that night.

i said ok. and i went to tie up the trashbags so i could at least take down the trash on the way out. then wing said 'why dont you try flowers?'

'i dont know what flowers she likes.'

'ok nigga get her a can of beans then. fuck you.'

'i dont know what kind of beans she likes.'

'get the fuck out my house.'

so i took down the trash and then headed to the intersection. i went to the corner store before mona's so i could get some peach tea and chocolate. and guess who i see there? fucking prudence. reaching for what else but a can of beans all the way at the top shelf.

she cant reach it of course, cause the store still aint learned that the intersection is literally all just women and women are not tall enough to reach the top shelf.

i could tell it was prudence even from behind. even though she was wearing pijamas and fluffy slippers instead of silk robes and heels, and she had her hair up with those two ribbons of hair down each side of her face. you know what im trying to say.

i was thinking damn, i guess im never gonna escape this horsemouth ass bitch. i was thinking maybe i should start going to a different house.

she let the beans go and walked off. i went up and i found out what beans she likes. i wouldve asked you but youre still not picking up my calls. i got the can and slipped it into your jacket pocket.

out on the sidewalk, i tried to sneak the can into prudence's plastic bag. same tec that jaws taught us to scoop wallets out of pockets. except it wasnt the same tec cause a can of beans aint a wallet, and a plastic bag aint a pocket, and this thing was going

back in, not coming out.

so she noticed. and she turned around and saw a nigga only 2 inches away from her holding a can of beans. she gave me eyebrows.

i said 'i saw you were reaching for the beans.'

'and you couldnt just hand them to me?'

'no.'

'why?'

'practice.'

'what?'

'with scooping. and shit.' i said it exactly like that. 'cause old man green told me.'

'how does that count as practice?'

i told her it was cause it was a can and a plastic bag and the difference with wallets and taking it out vs putting it back in and i got hit in the head and had leeches on me and all that shit.

she covered her mouth with her hand. i think she was laughing. i didnt realize i wasnt breathing until that. i guess it wasnt such hard feelings. 'i was just going to ask ursula to get them for me later.'

'well now you wont have ursula up your ass for the next 2 weeks.'

'youre telling me youre supposed to be good at this.'

'yeah.'

'well show me then. and if you actually manage to bring me a wallet, ill make you dinner.' she didnt have to do all that. but i didnt eat all day except like a little bit of liver and some bread. and i had blood to get back.

'ok. gotta pick a good target first.'

'ill wait.'

so we waited a few minutes until a guy showed up with a fat wallet sticking out his back pocket like an extra asscheek.

i said 'him.'

she saluted. 'roger that, captain.' i think she

would love cairo.

i walked up behind him. same tec jaws taught us. the guy turned and started yelling at me. i knocked his ass out and scooped his wallet. it only had like 40 dinar in it. the thickness was mostly cards. i waved it to prudence. she laughed. i took the money and let him keep his bitch mama's wallet. i took his watch too. it looked nice. shiny big and ssilver.

prudence said that it was an impressive technique. i told her i learned from the best of the best. that was a lie cause jaws is a fucking retard and thats why that nigga's still in jail. theyre probably gonna give him the rope.

i showed her the watch. she yanked it out my hands and looked at it with one eye, then said 'garbage'.

'it looks nice.'

'but it's garbage.'

ok. she still put it in her pocket though.

'well, a bet is a bet. and i owe you for buying the beans. lets go.' i didnt feel like telling her i forgot to buy the beans.

i was sitting in the kitchen at mona's and she was cooking. she said i got the wrong beans. she was reaching for pinto and i got black. 'whatever. ill make it work.'

she ended up making this thing with chicken and beans and tomatoes and rice that tasted damn good. i asked her what it was called. she said 'i dont know. i learned it from prudence.'

'you mean you?'

'no. i mean the girl who had that name before.'

ok.

we ate without talking for a bit. she was wearing a watch with a thin leather strap that day. i asked her why she didnt grow out her nails like all the other girls.

'thats for my work. it's too precise for me to grow them out.'

'work? like fingering hole?'

'no, my other work. but apparently im the only girl who gets guys who like that stuff. i think they pay attention. just like you. do you like having your butthole played with?'

'kill yourself.'

she laughed. for such a bigmouthed broad, she has a nice laugh. a gigantic smile like the whole world. just like wing's except not nearly as ashy.

i said sorry for joking about judi heller the other day.

she said 'dont apologize. coming from you, it felt like goldy was making the joke himself. he would joke about that, wouldnt he? if he came back and said that to my face, i would have killed him again.' so there you have it. even if heller didnt do you in, old girl wouldve.

i looked down at my plate.

'dont worry.' she said. 'i didnt poison it. i cant bring myself to kill you just yet. you look just like him. and i havent seen him in so long.'

i told her i dont look that much like you. im taller. it's true. i marked it with a pen. but whenever i think about you, youre always taller than me for some reason. i cant think about it any other way.

she said you talked about me alot, but she wouldnt tell me what you said about me. 'oh, this and that. you got on his nerves a lot. but you took up a big space in his mind.' aint that sweet. 'and you do act alot like each other.'

'how?'

'like keeping your spoon upside down in your mouth and sucking on it like a pacifier.'

i didnt even realize i was doing that.

'and scratching your sideburns as soon as you feel awkward.'

'everyone does that.'

'and then going for a cigarette right after.'
goddamn, bitch!

'and then giving me that look whenever im right about something.'

'what look?'

'with your eyebrows like that! just like that!'
she couldnt explain what that was.

it felt weird, just how much she knew me just by knowing you. you two mustve spent some time together. she knew you so far inside and out she even figured me out, man. probably figured mom out too.

shit, i spent my whole life with you and i didnt even notice half this shit. but when she puts it into words, i see it clear as day. the parts of you that i thought died 9 months ago. she was keeping them alive for me the whole time.

when i finished, she took my hand and looked deep at my knuckles. 'your hands look horrifying too. just like his.'

'it comes with the territory.'

'you should really take better care of your hands. otherwise your fingers will get hurt. and then you wont be able to pickpocket so well anymore.' she smiled at me. 'among other things.'

i let her hold my hand like that for a while. randomly i decided to tell her the story about the time you took out 20 frankos. for some reason everyone thinks it was me who did it, and now i have to deal with the bullshit. and no one believes me when i tell the truth. i figured i might as well set the record straight with someone. she liked the story, i think.

when i finished she looked like she was about to say something, then mona came through and said prudence had a customer and ursula was free. i took my time getting up. prudence waved at me and i waved back.

when me and ursula got done fucking, i asked her what girls like to do on dates.

'you never went out on a date?'

i said no. shit, most girls are fine just coming over to fuck. or having me over to fuck. or fucking behind the bushes.

'aha, aha. and why so different, this girl?'

i dont know.

'try dinner. a girl loves dinner. a good dinner? at a nice restaurant in the west? it turns a girl into a woman for the night.'

'that shit's too expensive.'

'too expensive? then stop talking of romance. these things need money. they are not for boys to play with.'

i asked if her businessman ever takes her out to dinner or if he just orders takeout.

she sank her elbow into my spine. 'he does both, pendejo. the massage costs extra.' sun go up. sun come down. i told her put it on my tab.

later, the kids were at our place watching the sultans game and huffing thinner, and i told everybody to start taking care of their hands, or theyd never finger a pussy ever again. especially cairo. i told him to start wrapping his hands. or get boxing gloves.

he told me not to worry about his fingers.

i yanked on his braids and made him promise to start wrapping his hands. he promised.

me and the kids were walking down blaterlane and prince was doing that thing he did where he kept pointing out all the places where he fucked these bitches.

the way kid points to some apartment window and says 'ah, trini, what a magnificent cunt she had. she rode me like she was trying to kill me. i should pay her a visit sometime.' i wanna kill this guy.

we walked past a little movie theatre and he said 'i fucked cindy in the front row of that theatre. we put on a better show than the movie. we got a standing ovation.'

the theatre said it was showing a french movie tonight. i asked if girls like french movies.

prince said 'i dont know anything about french movies other than that every girl likes them except for french girls. it might be because theyve finally had enough. if youre not french, you dont really have to try with french girls.'

that is the last nigga who should be talking about having to try with girls. matter of fact, lets skip that conversation and get to where im sitting in the lobby at mona's waiting for prudence to finish up. actually no. lets skip past that. im in her room, and i ask her if shes french.

she said 'no. but my mother taught me a little. why?'

man, fuck. i got stuck on french girls i didnt ask about girls who just knew french. i just said fuck it and asked her if she wanted to see a french movie with me.

'like on a date?'

'yeah.'

'i dont know if thats such a good idea.'

'why?'

'it's just. i dont know.'

'well come out anyways and tonight youll know if you know.'

'im tired.'

'it's a french movie. you can just sleep through the whole thing.'

she laughed her bigmouthed laugh and said 'ok.' and that was it. changed into jeans and one of those shirts girls wear with the puffy shoulders. and a rose gold watch shaped like a heart where the straps were made up of a bunch of tiny little chain links. thing looked expensive. she said it wasnt.

we went down to the theatre. it turned out to be a porno flick from the 70s. it was french though. i told her i didnt know it was a porno. she said 'sh. pay attention.'

there wasnt any subtitles, so when the girl was on the bed sucking dick, and the guy was talking his shit, prudence translated. 'he's telling her that shes such a slut for begging for it. he's asking what her husband would think.'

and when the guy had the girl's head pressed down onto the bed and i thought she was crying, prudence told me 'shes saying he owns her. his cock is her god.'

the movie ended with the husband walking in on his wife riding the guy's dick and having her titties sucked on with her arms pinned behind her back. prudence said she was screaming 'my love! my love!'. her husband broke down crying.

i told her my friend told me it was a french movie but i didnt know it was that french.

she said 'no. it's fine. the movie was alright. there just wasnt any build up to the things she was saying. they shouldve taken their time. but the director was a man and men dont have patience. the man was good looking though. thats rare.'

i said 'theres a drive in if you wanna watch a real movie.' i took her hand and looked at the watch. 'we should have time. i can get us free food.'

'a double feature?'

yeah. sure.

we headed over to the drive in, but the movie was already ending. the last shot was 2 guys walking into the fog. then THE END. A WARNER BROS PICTURE.

prudence got mad. 'youre telling me we missed casablanca?'

i got confused cause i thought she was talking about the city.

'casablanca is the best movie ever made! you dont even know it?'

'nope.' and the best movie ever made is the one where arnold shwartznegger is brothers with the short fat guy.

she pointed at me but words wouldnt come out and she shook her head. i

went over and told the hot dog boy to toss 2 dogs. kid tried to bring up my tab like he doesnt remember me from middle school. i made it very clear how good of friends we were in middle school. i went over and gave prudence a dog.

she said 'it's been so long since ive seen it.'

'they dont have it on cassette?'

'i can never seem to find it.' sun go up. sun come down.

we walked back to mona's and we didnt say that much. well actually she started holding my hand and it got sweaty and i wanted to take it out and wipe it but i didnt know how without hurting her feelings.

when i think about it, the last time a girl ever held my hand and walked with me was gina v on the last day of 4th grade.

mr markovich wanted to do a field trip for the biology class cause he didnt feel like teaching. that nigga doesnt feel like teaching any day so i dont know what was special that day, but i said lets all go catch a movie.

so i took the class to the french theater on blaterlane. the poster for the movie was this naked bitch on a desk in front of a chalkboard with her tits out and her legs spread and she had her hands covering her pussy.

calcutta bought one ticket and we all just went in. the cashier got mad so i told him calcutta's the big dog. take it up with him.

everytime they showed a guy's face on screen we threw shit. everytime they showed a girl's face we screamed. everytime a girl got cummed on we cheered. it was like watching the sultans game.

some niggas jerked off. i saw daisy chasing maxy and calcutta with cum on his hand.

some random nigga came in and asked if there was any room for him to sit. we chased him down and took his pants.

we left a bunch of bottles, sticks, pops, and stains in the theater and someone stole the poster for the movie. the next time i stopped by, there was a big sign that said

NO RIVER TITANS
ALLOWED
EVER!!!!

man. you cant take us anywhere. the bad news is i got an A for the field trip. the good news is the naked lady looks real nice next to your dylan poster.

propatie de

st. Mary ✓

RIVA
CHITAN



Dear Goldy

Your brother has informed us of your crimes and you have been Summoned to report to the Jail on Loun Street so we can take you to Jail. If you do not respond to the crimes you will be Guilty and we will take your mother and ~~girl~~ ex-girlfriend to Jail as well.

You are being questioned for the crime of being a Bitch Ass Nigga! Sike!

i got your retarded ass didnt i? you probably forgot you were dead and shit. started packing your bags getting ready. maybe i shouldnt have gave it up so quick.

all ~~we~~ i have in the house right now is a quarter block of white cheese so i gotta find some food. i wanna eat some cucumbers or pickles or something cause i got buttons last week from too much constipation. i think i ate too many noodles.

niggas wanted me to show up to a fight with some redshirts and i did. and i just stood there trying to keep my butthole in.

wing guessed i had buttons. told me to eat some pickles. sometimes he sounds so much like mom that i keep expecting him to say he 'read about it in a magazine.'

you think dad ever had buttons? i dont remember the kind of guy who would get buttons. everytime i try to remember him he always has shades on. or he's looking away from me. or he's so tall i cant even see his eyes cause the shadows are covering them.

did you feel it? when maxypad beat your 100m record? did you feel it when the wall burned and the fire spread to every part of what was left over from the old school?

the st mary's we used to take the backroad to is gone. sun go up. sun come down. and everything built with wood will been taken by fire or something worse like thermites. but you dont have to worry no more.

me? i was pulled up with a bag of sausages from sidi's shop. i fried them on a stick. names and stories feed fires better than newspapers do. mr markovich told me id get cancer from that fire. i told him it wasnt anything i didnt already get from his classes.

wing, prince, and cairo pulled up next to me and took the saussages i worked so hard to cheat sidi out of. well wing and prince did. cairo stood an inch from the fire and stared into it with his mouth open like he was watching his girl get fucked.

he kept putting his finger in it and yanking it out like he was surprised it hurt. i smacked the back of his head. how many times i gotta tell this nigga to take care of his hands?

i can tell you how the whole thing went down.

so maxypad knocked you down to 10th place and knocked me off completely. so it was a tough decision. if i beat him, and he only had 11.3 so it was easy to beat him, and also cause coach has been taking it easy on niggas these days so i could probably even hit 11.2 if i take something for my shoulder. but if i do, youre off the table. and it's not like youre gunning to beat your record anymore.

cairo's still trying to make it into the 12s. i think he has a spot on the bench. he might see 5 minutes of the big game if we really wanna lose.

prince is already 7th. and he's only the keeper. wing cant even crack 11 most days anymore, but his top 3 is still safe. and he can still curve the ball

like he's zico.

but anyways, niggas was getting on my case to beat maxy. they said it was embarrassing to have a captain slower than a junior.

so i said fuck that shit and went over to mona's. ursula and dizzy and emmy were in the lobby watching tv and fanning their tits at the ac repair guy. im wondering now if he worked with mom's boyfriend's company.

ursula called me over and took my hand. 'she steals you from me, my little titan. the watch girl steals my favorite from in front of me.' prudence did have a lot of watches. that day she was wearing one with pink straps and an antenna. looked like some shit out of kamen rider.

i put my other hand on ursula's hand. 'steals me? habibti. no one can steal me from you.'

'ai. i hate liars. you are worse than your brother. look at you. you are covered in her. already she has stolen you from me.'

'on my mom's grave im always yours. you know i wrote a poem about you?'

the girls all laughed. 'it's been a long while since a boy wrote a poem for me.'

'your businessman doesnt write poems?'

'he prefers to write checks. yalla. tell your poem.'

so i cleared my throat and put my right hand on my chest. 'ursula, ursula, you make my balls burstula.'

'STOP. stop. i have heard enough. go to your girl. i hope she likes poems about your balls, or your marriage will be terrible.'

i had to laugh.

'yes. marriage. it is good for young people to play at marriage. good for you to learn early why it is a bad idea. yalla. andale. and dont forget to pay this time.' she smacked my ass and sent me on my way to prudence.

sometimes we fuck and i hear whispering in my ears telling me to do stuff like grab her hands and put my fingers between hers and put her hands behind her head and bite her neck. and to repeat after it and call her names like princess and shit.

then she gets this look in her eye and i ask her what i did wrong. she says nothing. she says shes getting deja vu. then she curls up in a ball by herself and smokes and i have to put an ashtray for her cause she doesnt bother. and she smiles at me like shes sorry about something.

the whispering in my ears. that was your voice wasnt it? on the bridge, back when we were watching her fuck the man in the suit.

you were telling me what youd do to her, but you were giving me directions too. im sorry for getting scared. but all prophets must die some day.

so that day i asked prudence if she heard that too. she said 'heard what?'

'goldy's voice.'

she asked me what i was talking about. so i ran out of there.

and in a half hour i found myself looking at the record wall with 10 cans of ace at my feet. 100m. free kick. fastball. vert. firehold. clapping. my cuban record is still undefeated. the numbers all made me smile.

so i threw the ace at the wall and threw my lighter at it.

i stood there, letting the fire slow roast me from about 2 feet away. close to 100 names and numbers i was burning. then the fire spread to the rest of the school and i ran away.

i came back like an hour later with the sausages and the fire already cooked all of old st mary's and all that was left was central new eden industrial school for boys.

half the guys were out on the yard looking at the

smoke. a quarter of the school burned down maybe. they were saying half but it was more like a quarter really.

the statue of st mary in the yard changed too. went from bronze to stone. she let go of her cross too. her hand is open now. palm facing the sky like shes holding it all in her hand.

we finished the sausages and went on over to the arcade where i unplugged every single machine and got chased out the district by a hundred of the sweatiest kids of all time. now the arcade has a NO RIVER TITANS ALLOWED sign on the front. cairo almost killed me in my sleep with a giant rock.

then yesterday i went back to mona's. prudence had a customer but i went in anyway and threw him out. then when i started fucking her i told her to tell me what she wanted me to do.

and she whispered her instructions in my ear, and it sounded almost exactly the way you did on the bridge. almost. you got some things wrong, soldier. she doesnt like being called princess. and this time instead of curling up into a ball by herself, she curled up into a ball on me.

she used to love your kind of sex but her new job ruined it for her. so she wants something different now. this aint the same broad that was singing under the bridge for us. and probably not the same girl you proposed to either. i hope.

mona got so mad at me for tossing the customer out that she made me scrub the showers of every room on the 1st floor. but it was all ok.

how many words did you say to me in your life that i forgot? how many words did you say that no one remembers anymore? words you said that just disappeared into thin air?

they had your name in big white letters on that wall. and on the side of the smasher too. and on 2 billboards outside the karyas where they can never

manage to scrub off.

they have your name in songs talking about your fastball and your hair and the frankos and hundreds and redshirts that crossed your road and how the sun goes up and the sun comes down, but what does it matter if no one remembers the words you said the wendsday before you died? the clothes you wore on tuesday? what you had for breakfast on monday? how bad you were at guitar?

thats the important shit. and it's not that many that i remember so well i can say that you did this or you said that. but it's more like 'you would do something like this' or 'you would say something like that'. all those honest people you were got squished together into one thing, and the rest is gone.

well, now the underclassmen and upperclassmen have to share classrooms. i feel bad for the niggas actually trying to pass. getting held back before senior year is worse now than it was before.

wing asked me why i did it. 'i know you did it baby. i just wanna know why.'

i told him a blond haired devil whispered in my ear to do it cause he was tired of teaching me how to fuck his girl.

a few days ago, someone stole the right arm off the statue of st mary in the courtyard. we knew it was jackals cause they tagged the resst of her body. the paint was more pink than red. it's been a year since i saw anything jackal related outside of rahma court.

everyone was arguing about how many people we should take, what to bring, blah blah blah. i told them id go alone. it's been a while since i talked to tigger. not in the 2 years since rig died. only non river titan i ever saw at the cemetery. and all the stories you guys tell about him. it had to be me.

wing was trying to tell me if i was gonna talk to tigger to bring some guys with me. at least him and prince. i told him i didnt need help talking. were all americans now anyways.

so i biked all the way down to rahma and asked around. not that many people left down there. all the spray paint on the concrete was fading pink.

the city was building a road that went right through the center of the district, and it started far enough down south that if you stood on the edge with your 87 mile fastball, you could probably throw a rock into the desert.

they had to mow down some apartments for the road, so tug's crew was making more apartments on the side i guess. something like that.

i just followed the noise down to the sight tigger and his crew were working at. i headed in and asked around for tug. the guys told me i wasnt allowed to be there.

i told them to let me talk to tug. they kept trying to get me out, but the foreman came over when he heard the noise.

he yelled something in aramaic that got them back to work. then he looked at me, squinted and said 'ah, it's that time again?' it was tigger. he was a foreman now. he had the white hardhat on and the

clipboard and everything.

i said whats up.

'dicks and airplanes.' his guys laughed at that. took me a few seconds for it to sink in. shit. it is funny.

'cherry, yeah?'

'you remember.'

'i remember more of you guys than i wanna. i liked your brother. he had a good head on him.'

not the words id use. 'some of your guys took our old girl's arm.'

'ah. yeah. i apologize. my boys been acting out these days. they dont listen to me like they used to. youll find the arm in the pile over there.' and he pointed to a pile of trash.

'ok.'

'take it easy on them, huh? theyre scared. there aint that many of us no more.'

'where did everyone go?'

'just wandered out into the desert. thats how jackals go. we dont ruin the whole city when we leave like some people do.'

'yeah.'

'well, you can take your arm and get going.' he turned to leave, but it was one thing i just had to know. all those stories them niggas told. rig, jaws, lilo. i had to see for myself. so i grabbed his shoulder and i swung at him.

when i woke up, the sky was a nice and easy blue. it was the kind of sky that didnt weigh too heavy on your shoulders. it's been a while since i ate a blue sky that hard. a beautiful day. and there i was ruining it with the taste of my own blood. my cheek still feels like it's growing another cheek.

the construction noise was gone. i pulled out a stick, but before i could light it, a hand took care of it for me. i dont think ill forget that bigass hairyass fist for the rest of my life.

tug walked up and sat on the cinderblocks against the fence right next to me. 'what is it you river titans have against being liked?'

'it's not as fun.'

'every last one of you guys is a pain in my ass. every year, like clockwork, one of you fuckers comes through and starts some shit with me.'

'even last year?'

'yeah. your brother.'

you never told me about that one.

'and the year before, that fucker with big mouth.'

'jaws.'

'he bit me.' he pulled up his left sleeve and showed me the scar. goddamn. 'thinking back on it, rig was the only one who could land a hit on me. with him, it wasnt so easy. i could never get a read on the guy. if he smelled daisies, i was picking roses.'

i asked him how you did.

'ah, he was the hardest to fight.'

'i thought rig was the hardest to fight.'

'rig was the hardest to beat, but gold boy was hard to want to fight in the first place. it was like fighting a baby.'

you heard that?

'he told me a story about you actually. that shit made me laugh my ass off.' and then he told me this complete lie ~~where i got my ass~~ what the fuck was your bitchass telling people when i wasnt there? how many people did you tell this bullshit to?

i told him one about you. i wanted it to be funnier than yours so i maybe played some shit up, but i just told him the one about you shitting yourself at the ballgame. and if titans and jackals ever cross roads where you are, you can tell him how it really went down if you want.

when he finally stopped laughing, i asked him how he hits so hard.

'dont worry how i hit so hard.'

'ok man.'

he dragged on his stick. he was sitting on a pile of cinderblocks like it was the throne on top of the world. he said 'i pray a lot.'

'i pray too but all that did was take away my right hook.' he didnt get it but it's ok.

'i got a lot riding on these hands too.'

'that doesnt slow you down?'

'a man cant let that slow him down. he should let it push him.'

'i guess im not a man then. all that other shit just brings me down.'

'rig made everybody scared of the titans. goldy made everybody love the titans. what are you gonna do?'

'honestly, ill probably make everybody forget them.'

he pointed at the trash heap. 'look what happens when people forget.' he pointed at the rest of the neighborhood. 'no one here remembers. it's all done. is this what you want?'

'no one can remember forever.'

yeah. i wish he wasnt so disappointed but i dont know what else i can say.

we smoked for a while. i asked about his white helmet, and he said he was only standing in for the actual foreman, but he was in line to be an actual foreman soon. a 20 year old foreman. goddamn.

he said he wanted the job, but he wanted to get better first. work on his game. he sounded like wing trying to make the nba. he said he also needed to get his beard a little bigger or he'd never get some of the older guys in line.

i asked him how he knew that this was the life for him. he pulled out a picture from his wallet and handed it to me. a cute girl with american cheeks and the smoothest afro youll ever see. they were engaged.

'so it was a girl.'

'nah. i just wanted to show her off. but even if she left me and took my nuts with her, id still be living this dream.'

'ok bigdick but how did you know this was the dream?'

he scratched his beard. 'i showed up cause they said theyd pay me. few years down, and i cant tell if i show up for the pay, or if the pay shows up for me. the pay aint even that good, really. all i know is, i keep showing up? ill be set. if i stop? the sky will fall down on all of us.'

'thanks for holding up the sky then, big guy.'

he taught me some sayings, like 'im the one fucking this chicken, youre just holding the legs.' and 'im smelling what youre stepping in.'

and when someone asks how life's treating you. 'like a baby treats a diaper.'

some stuff i didnt get. like something about dangling or something. i dont know. he gave up trying to teach me that one. construction workers speak a whole different language and im not just talking about aramaic. i only did construction once with wing and prince and it was maybe the worst day of my life. no offense.

i went over to the trash heap and found a few kids huddled around a burn barrel. st mary's arm was to the sside. they stared at me. dirty as fuck. one of them wasnt even wearing pants. they took my bike so i called it a trade and took old girl's arm. and i never looked back.

so i walked home. and i let that blue sky lay it down easy on a nigga. by the time i made it back to school, it was starting to get dark out and the kids were getting ready for war.

they waved me over and i waited for one of them to say it.

prince came over. 'oh dear. what happened to your face?'

i told him i ran into a wall.

wing asked why i was smiling so hard.

i told him the same thing.

then cairo came running over. he said 'whats up?'
about time.

'dicks and airplanes.' i said. all i got was
eyebrows and head scratches. and thats the last time
i take advice from a goddamn construction worker.

day of the big game last week. i know youve been waiting for the play by play, but im gonna be honest, i completely forgot about practice. i forgot about running, drills, strategies, quitting smoking, quitting drinking, quitting huffing, quitting pills. but i didnt quit hope.

prudence was out on the bleachers, ready to watch me be god. and i didnt even ask her to come.

calcutta and maxypad are almost good enough to fill in for razer and ramon. maxy is fast but cant cross. cutta cant run for shit but he has a shot on him and he knows his way into the box and he can stay onside if the ref's pockets aint too heavy.

and the redshirts didnt have judi heller. wonder why. ill tell you this though, judi heller's little brother's only in elementary school, but he's damn good. i call him little laudrup. i check in on him every once in a while. he could be huge so im making my investment now. im like a nigga johan cruyff.

all things considered, we had the best shot in world history to assfuck the redshirts.

the thing is though, before the game started, i was in the shitter pretending to be constipated, when old man green tore the fucking door off and said we had to throw the game.

how do you argue with a guy like that? so i said deal. we can talk payment later.

he said 'your payment will be saving the lives of everyone in the center bleachers.'

i looked out and yeah, half of mona's girls were there. prudence included. and karina too. and half the grade's brothers and sisters and cousins.

'ok so we just have to lose. we do that every year. easy.'

'yes, but if that were my only concern i wouldnt have come to ask your help. you must lose in spectacular fashion.'

spectacular fashion he said. or else everyone in

the bleachers would die. he didnt know how. didnt know why. just that it would happen sometime around the 70 minute mark.

i said why dont i just pull us out of the game. he said 'if youre certain your men wont mutiney and go forward anyway, then by all means.'

'no theyll definitely mutiney.'

'by the way, thats spelled M-U-T-I'
shut up nigga.

now, the play by play. you excited?

first thing i did when i got back was swap every one around. i took maxy out and put cairo on, i switched sides with daisy cause he cant play on the right, and i put calcutta in midfield.

everyone got mad at me except cairo. wing especialy got mad. i told them they would see.

5 minutes in, we were down one guy cause calcutta thought it would be a good idea to do the blackstar salute to celebrate a tackle. you know where he got that idea from? shit. kids these days. wing found it about as funny as the ref did, and kid got a red card.

i tried to distract prince by paying 2tap's sister to flash her tits at him but he was actually centered on this shit. it took 10 whole minutes for him to give up and take her behind the bleachers.

i was gonna put cairo in goal for him but 15 minutes in, cairo lost the ball in the 18 yard box and bit the goalie.

40 minutes, were down 4 goals and 2 guys. maxy, still 5 foot 5, is in goal. youre thinking 'why arent they up 10?' and it's because this really couldve been the year we took it home.

honestly the bleachers were starting to clear out already. mona's girls were the only ones left singing and clapping for us and they were getting tired.

until wing got fouled outside the box. he was slow all game and he was already out of breath. he didnt

have a 2nd half in him.

the redshirts were grabbing on his wing all game and pulling out his feathers and the ref didnt call shit over any of that. not in the rulebook he says. it took them taking out his legs to get a yellow.

and even with his back crooked and his legs heavy he still curved that shit like zico. and then we were down 3. wing is the one, man. he was always supposed to be the one.

and everyone who i worked so hard to scare away from the bleachers came right back. and they sang and they clapped for us like we were a real team.

and then right before halftime wing got his 2nd yellow for 'shedding too many feathers.' so he dropped his shorts and pissed on the ref's shoes.

ref chased him off the field with one of those police beating sticks he had on him. he had to go the rest of the match in his bare feet.

halftime, niggas asked me what the plan was. the plan was i went over to the bleachers and told them 'everyone here who sticks around past the 2nd half is gonna die.'

they said a stinky old man already told them that a hundred times. just get out there and stop embarassing all of central. at least close the lead to 2. all a sudden everyone on the bleachers turned into a coach. put maxy up front. me in goal. daisy play deeper. and i figured i didnt mind everybody dying.

except prudence. she wasnt saying shit. she was just smoking that long silver 120 and looking at me from behind those ~~leopard-leopard~~ leopard print shades. shes not coming back to you just yet.

honestly, it wouldve been over if the redshirts could finish the fucking ball. that johan kid, speedo's cousin, he was acting all day like he was going to europe off this shit. whole time he couldnt score a single goal in the 2nd half against 8 guys. i had to

turn one of his shots into an own goal by myself.

i wasted like 5 minutes arguing with the ref that it wasnt intentional so he wouldnt send me off cause if he did we might just make a real comeback.

it took 2 more goals and daisy getting his knee cracked for the bleachers to start emptying out again. 68th minute, the only one left was prudence.

at that point i just took her and ran. she moved so slow cause she was wearing those blocky ass shoes.

and before i could ask her why she wore those shoes to a game like this, a helicopter shot right down into the bleachers. nose first like it was digging for something.

the flapper flew off and got lodged deep in the field and is still sticking out of the ground right now. prudence said it added some fung shuay.

after the match old man green came over and asked me how it felt being a hero.

'what do i get?'

'usually heroes get hung. or crucified. or exiled.'

'then i feel normal.' but the last one sounded scariest to me.

so the game got canceled, but the redshirts couldnt even celebrate out west. the score got erased, and the next day in the paper, instead of a tiny corner saying how the game turned out, or who played good and who got the hat trick and whatever, there was a big picture on the 3rd page of the field with the trashed chopper and the flapper sticking out of it. apparently some ad executive died in there. you can guess what part of the city he's from.

and a few inches under that, a picture someone took of wing pissing on the ref's shoes. back to the camera. #10. the ref in the middle of taking out his red card. and the perfect stream of piss, a shining diamond arch. curve like zico. sun go down, but sun come up sometimes too.

herm blew the photo up and framed it in the

council room. there were a few words under the photo from the paper. 'central new eden's #10 urinates on referee during a draw' and the rest is cut off. a draw. we did it. the whole school couldnt shut up about it.

i cut one of the pictures out of a paper and stuck it in our mirror, right under the picture of you and jaws at the beach.

wing tried to get mad at me about how i handled the game but he just couldnt wipe that last bit of smile off the corner of his mouth.

they were talking about the whole thing on tv. reporters came to school to ask around.

prince did an interview completely naked, but the camera only showed his shoulders up. we still catch some modeling agents waiting at the gates even today. herm taped the whole thing and it plays on repeat in every tv in the school.

me? i didnt care about winning that bullshit anyway. i asked prudence later why she didnt leave with everyone else and she said 'i thought it would be disrespectful to leave while you were obviously trying so hard to be pathetic.'

it was about that time. i didnt wanna do it, but i had to. i had to let the kids meet prudence. they were starting to get suspicious. talking about the busted ass bitch ive been hiding in my basement. which one of us has a fucking basement?

niggas are so annoying. if they think your bitch is ugly, they yell at you. if they think your bitch is real ugly, they congratulate you. but if your bitch is bad, everybody turns into a goddamn comedian. and prince is gonna try to fuck her no matter what she looks like.

i brought prudence over to herm's place for a cookout cause there was actually gonna be other girls there, and the first thing that happened was wing and cairo sat me down and tried to give me a massage. it was cool until the massage started to fucking hurt cause they were both trying to kill me.

cairo was pulling out material i never heard in a million years. the kinda shit that would actually get him pussy if he told it to literally any other girl. why does he never try to make me laugh like that?

when we were alone cairo kept telling me she was a 'real classy dame. reeeeeal classy dame.' and he said 'when you die, leave every thing to me big dog. ill take care of her.' i told kid he should start taking care of his tits cause they were poking through his shirt. they werent really but a nigga had to shut him up.

wing just told stories that made me look retarded. like the time i tried to sell a cop back his beating stick in elementary school. it's funny how he always remembers things at the perfect times.

prince kept talking to her about clothes. and they talked about fashion and shit. when herm asked if prince wanted some orange juice, this nigga said 'i dont drink orange juice, my dear. it's too john travoltaish, and his chin is too big for his face so i want to distance myself from that energy.' prudence

completely got that.

herm of course didnt hit on her, but later, she said he was 'the most charming one.'

i said 'he's gay.'

she said 'oh. that makes sense.'

'how?'

'the eyebrows.'

what?

i told her herm is the only nigga i have ever seen who can talk about sucking dick with his chest out and not care. he has hands that send niggas on vacation.

she said 'it's kind of sad isnt it?'

i asked how.

'he has to be that strong just to talk about some thing that matters to him.'

'yeah. thats how it is for everyone.'

'it shouldnt be.'

i dont know. but shes smarter than me so i buy it. anyways, it would be one thing if that day was where it all ended. but on more than one day, i caught these niggas hanging with prudence.

one day prudence told me cairo took her to the arcade and taught her how to play street fighter. another day i caught him showing her his drawings. another day i caught him alone in the council room drawing her. i told that nigga to get a job.

another day, i caught prudence and prince coming back from shopping with a bunch of bags in their hands. i watched them both in her room trying on the new clothes they ~~bought~~ stole. they still go out ~~shopping~~ stealing together every week cause prudence refuses to spend her savings and prince doesnt have any money.

and i still watch them try on new clothes all the time. i dont get why prince is so obsessed with fashion when he spends half his days naked anyway. sometimes i catch him and pru looking at magazines together. i dont really get it.

now, everytime prudence and prince see each other they kiss each other on both cheeks like theyre sisters. so now it feels like prince is my brother in law. or sister in law. dont tell prudence i said that though.

the only one i got mad at prudence about was wing. wing and her got into a heated fight over pearl jam vs the cranberries. i dont care about either one, but i still got mad at prudence for some reason.

she said 'i dont mind pearl jam, but to act like eddy vedder's voice is even comparable to dolores's, UGH!'

i said thats not what im mad about.

'what the fuck are you mad about then?'

i dont know. i just dont like it when wing argues that hard with people.

i never thought id see the day. cairo was on a roll the likes of which have not been seen in 1000 years. i dont think i couldve stopped it if i tried.

i dont even know how it happened. just one day, i walked by the band room and heard a girl screaming. i peeked in and saw kid with his head up a redhead's skirt. he took his head out, gave me a sloppy smile and a wet thumbs up. old girl grabbed his head and threw him right back in.

i walked by around afternoon, same thing. i said 'damn, nigga! you been at it since the morning!'

the girl looked at me. she was blonde now. she jumped off the table and put down her skirt. 'morning? i wasnt here this morning.'

'baby, come on now, listen to me.'

she smacked that nigga and ran off.

i said 'shit. my bad. didnt know.'

he was like 'nah. i was getting tired anyways. my hand is cramping up.'

he went over to a desk and pulled out the drawer. a pile of panties this high. 'and thats just today.' he had another drawer for the socks. apparently, he was trading portraits for the stuff. or maybe thats not the right way to put it.

what this nigga did is, instead of drawing fucking tanks and soldiers and guns all the time, he started drawing girls. like drawings of the girls who were coming through. but he wasnt just drawing them like normal. some he would draw pretty with flowers and butterflies and shit. others he would draw them like, bleeding and shit. gorey. brains exposed sometimes. holes in cheeks. it worked.

he said 'not every broad tries to fuck me. some of them just cry and go. but they take the picture home, so it's gotta mean they like it.'

every guy wanted to kill him. not a single one wanted to learn. but i didnt even get to the crazy part yet.

one day, cairo's sitting in our math class, kicking his feet up, popping peanuts, blowing o's, talking his shit. im sitting right next to him cause i know he's this close to getting nuked by every guy there.

then in walks prince with a smile on his face like shit on a tire. never seen him with that look on him before in my life. he puts one hand on cairo's shoulder, and with the other, he starts choking kid out. 'ILL KILL YOU!!!! ILL KILL YOUUUUUUUU!!!!'

the kids werent too quick to help me get prince off him. prince looked at me, face red, eyes red, lips shaking, and then he ran out.

i think the only guy who really stuck by cairo is some dickhuffing freshman called wamble or womble. cairo doesnt even like him.

one day, im walking to school with wing, and he's saying 'this is a fucking problem, man. christ. life's already hard enough when youre not getting pussy. and then this little freak starts fucking every girl you ever looked at. we gotta do something.'

i start saying 'i dont think it's that big of a deal. he's just eating pussy.' and then we walk in on cairo in the yard making the freshmen and sophomores do military drills.

afternoon, i caught prince laying in the garden smoking. i laid down next to him and we split the stick. i asked him what the whole fucking deal was.

'ive been dry, my dear. i havent fucked a woman in almost a week.'

it took me a while for that to sink in. thats like, a normal amount of time actually.

'cairo took all my girls.'

'but i saw you talking to danica just yesterday.'

'no. cairo took all my FUCKABLE girls.'

i didnt know what the fuck this nigga was talking about. danica is not bad at all. i told him ive seen him fuck bitches that look like frogs.

then he said 'the BASTARD took those ones too. the only women worth fucking are the remarkable ones. danica is a woman for another man, a man with unremarkable taste. it would be unfair of me to keep her forever. that BASTARD has left me only with such women.' and then he pulled out a knife so rusty i thought it would turn to dust on the spot. 'how long do you think this would take to kill cairo? im going for a slow kill. i want him to live in hell for at least 2 weeks. i think this should poison him suffisciantly.'

i was ready to kill both these niggas myself.

man, you shouldve been there to see it. you wouldve known how to solve the problem day one.

man, i can remember at least 10 separate days i accidentally saw 2 people fucking in some bushes or on a bench or some shit, and 8 of those days prince was one of them. and how many times have i seen this guy walk out of a room with some guy's girlfriend and instantly start dodging hands? all smiling blood and fire. the exact kind of white boy that these bitches die for. it was impossible to see him like that.

i told prince lets go to mona's.

'i dont want to. whores make for better friends than fucks.'

'i guess. but you can still fuck them though.'

'ughhhh. ill never be fucked again. i know it. ill grow old, untouched. ill regrow my virginity. my cock will turn into a cunt. no woman will ever look at me again.'

'i think thats how most guys live.'

'perhaps.' then this motherfucker rolled over on top of me. 'cherry dear? will you fuck me?'

i put out the stick on the back of his hand.

he yelled, then he said 'actually, i can work with that.'

goddamn. what a situation. 'no, nigga. we are getting you some pussy.'

'ah! even my own brother wont fuck me. im such a retch. leave me be. let me grow old alone.'

'ok.' i got up.

'NO!' he grabbed onto my legs. 'DONT LEAVE ME! I DONT WANT TO BE ALONE!'

i said 'man, cairo is doing something for these bitches. he's providing. why dont you provide something?'

'i do! i provide cock! and a wet mouth!'

fucking disgusting ass nigga, man. 'i mean something else. something emotional and shit.'

'like poetry?'

'yeah.'

so prince got to writing a poem, and i watched him hand it to a girl. she just dropped it and left him there. not even a slap. prince came over and said 'this doesnt work. i give up.'

i told him show me what he wrote.

the paper said 'you are beautiful and your bosom is so large. please fuck me. from your admirer.'

'you talk better than anyone i know, and this is the poem you write?'

'you told me to speak from the heart, i spoke from the heart!'

worst heart i ever saw in a man.

'can you write one for me?'

'i dont do that shit.'

'not even for me?' he gave me those pathetic eyes that, shit, if i was a broad? all im saying is, i see what they see. so i gave it a shot.

i imagined i was trying to write about prudence. prince's girl didnt have the same eyes, her hair was too long, her titties were bigger, and her skin wasnt as dark, but i did my best. i dont know how poems are actually supposed to go so i just told a story that rhymed. id tell you what i wrote but now that i told you my method, im actually embarassed.

to top it off, i took the teeth off the edges of

the paper and sprayed some of prince's peach perfume on it to make it special. it looks better if you just poof the colone in the air and let the note sit in it so it doesnt look wet.

well, shit. prince got in. and he let us know by advertising me like i was some kind of god. as far as i cared, i was just writing about my girl. if she was in a different body.

some guys wanted to see if they could get some off my words, so i started charging 15 dinar for 8 lines. it was really working. word got around. day 3, 35 dinar for 8 lines. and i wasnt half assing it either. i wouldnt half ass it for pru. i dont think.

cairo came for my throat one day, talking about how ive been killing his mojo. he said that word too. mojo. he didnt talk to me for days after that.

the crazy part is, i went to mona's and told prudence about the whole thing and she ended up yelling at me. she said 'i havent seen a word of poetry out of you from the day we met, and now half the girls in new eden are rubbing it to your words. congratulations.'

'im not trying to fuck them.'

'but you are. youre just using all your friends little dicks to do it for you. get the FUCK OUT! i dont wanna see you again.' she smacked the fuck out of me until i got out, and then she said 'youre just like your brother.' what do i even say to that.

in the lobby, the girls were all shaking their heads at me.

well, i stopped writing poems after that. i dont even have to tell you how that pissed everyone off. guys were offering me double. triple. calcutta offered me 200 dinar, about 2 weeks worth from his part time gig, cause he had it bad for this tunisian broad from across the street, but i had to turn him down.

niggas was yelling at me. i told them off. i said

'you dont wanna fuck those girls! you wanna just fuck them with my dick!' no one understands what pru meant by that except me.

then, some fucker i aint never seen or heard of in my entire life shows up and starts taking all the bitches from everyone. his name was moped. not cause he rode a moped. he rode a normal bike with a basket in front where he kept his pet goose. the nigga had a pet goose.

i swear to god, he looked like he was in his 30s. beard like pubes, lines in his forehead. he would let bitches pet his goose and then they would all a sudden wanna fuck him.

i gotta thank this moped motherfucker though. prince and cairo stopped fighting. cairo stopped fighting with me too. one day, im laying there on the roof, and cairo pulls up and lays down right there next to me. asks me if i saw the new kamen rider. of course i didnt see that shit. why would i when cairo always tells me what happens?

i thought prudence would stop fighting with me too so i went around to see her and she opened up my eyebrow with one of her heels.

so i hit up old man green at the smasher. i asked him if he knew where all my poems were. he asked why. i said i wanted him to get them all back for me.

'a task and a half, what you ask of me.'

'yeah. whats it gonna cost?'

'2 things. very simple. 1, your thanks.'

ok.

'and 2, your promise that you will never buy that pork flavored noodle ever again, and that you will only get the extra spicy chicken.'

'the fuck? pork is the best flavor.'

'it flays the skin off a praying man's tongue. thats F-L-A-Y-S. it means to remove the skin from.'

'i know.'

'know you did not. you would have spelled it with

an E. now promise me.'

'damn nigga ok. i promise.'

'extra spicy chicken.'

'ok! damn!'

'good lad. it would take about 2 days to gather them all.'

'where should i meet you? here?'

'yes. right here.' and he pulled out a plastic bag full of papers right there. ok.

i thanked him just like he asked and then i asked him how much trash he had to go through for all this.

'remarkably, none were in the rubbish. there was one that i was unable to retrieve, however. its recipient guards it well. no matter. this will surely be enough. i look forward to a stocked cabinet.'

i took the bag to mona's and knocked on pru's door. i had to beg for like 10 years just for her to open the door arms crossed and shit. i handed her the plastic bag.

'what is this? your trash?'

'yep. all the trash you wanted to see.'

she went in and dumped them all on her bed and started reading them one by one. then she pressed her big, wide lips together the way she does when shes trying not to laugh. then she covered her mouth and turned away like she does when she really really doesnt wanna laugh.

'so. what do you think.'

she shook her head. 'bad. bad bad bad bad bad.' she wasnt hiding her bigass smile when she turned back to me. 'this got your friends laid?'

'yes maam.'

'well it certainly wouldnt have worked on me.'

'i dont know how it worked. it shouldnt have.'

'you know what? i still think it's cute. maybe thats it. maybe it's that when a boy is really really bad at something, but he tries really really hard, it makes girls want to fuck him.'

'the way youre trying really really hard to win me back right now?'

'kind of. except im not bad at that. im not bad at anything.'

shes bad at listening and not throwing things at me.

things went alright on my end. one day, i was in the council room watching the new kamen rider before it got spoiled for me, and cairo comes through and says 'hey, big chief. you want some goose?'

apparently, the kids were cooking a nice fat goose over a fire in the yard. wing was head chef. it smelled damn good.

by coincidence, moped ended up losing his goose, and he stopped getting pussy. apparently he graduated high school out east like, 5 years ago. who called it.

so prince is back to having all the bitches himself. i dont know. it's a weird way to come right back to square 1. but actually, here's the big surprise.

cairo stopped having time to draw pictures of bitches cause he ended up getting an apprenticeship with an actual comic guy. he makes these retarded comics that sell like 500 copies a year at underground shows. cairo showed us one. it was called vic violence. lots of naked bitches and rape. and what the government would call monarchist sympathies. cairo might have a road. i wonder what that feels like.

i'm gonna make
a comic about
this nigga ~~and~~
and show
cairo
whats up



Salim the dog

yesterday me and wing were golfing at the smasher
and i asked him if it would be weird if i started
writing letters to you on a typewriter. he said 'dont
tell me youre writing letters to a dead nigga.'

i said im not.

he said it's a waste of time.

i said yeah.

he said 'but if you do get a hold of him tell him

i said dont wait up.'



Wing getting his ass beat

prudence showed me what shes been working on this whole time. she took off the sheet from that table at the end of the room and it was a watchmaking table. i said 'bitch, you make watches?'

she said 'no, i put them together. i find the parts and i put them together.' she pulled out a drawer and showed me the ones she made so far.

'sounds like making them to me.'

'no. i mean, yes, but i dont design them from scratch. i just use what i can find. maybe ill find a watch or buy a watch and take it apart and, wait, do you know what a person who makes watches is called?' she had a gigantic smile on her face and she was squinting at me.

'what?'

'a whorologist.' and she started laughing her ass off. 'a whorologist!'

your girlfriend is hilarious, man.

i asked her how she learned all this shit.

'an apprenticeship. not an official one though. i didnt get a certificate or anything. from middle school to my freshman year i would spend after school learning the ins and outs from a belgian man in our neighborhood. i wasnt in a such a hurry to go back home to my mother.'

'do you sell any of them?'

'im not selling these. i wear these. theyre amateurish, but i wear them. im planning on making some for sale though. im saving up to start a watch repair shop. and i want to buy and sell used watches. and maybe sell some of the ones i put together. and then maybe someday i can design them myself and get the manufacturing and something something something' she started losing me a little bit. it was nice though. getting lost in her dream.

i sat down next to her and watched. she explained to me about movements and mechanical vs quartz and how there was a huge deal called the quartz crisis

and a bunch of niggas lost all their money and shit.
did she tell any of that to you?

she showed me her plans to make a new movement and 'revolutionize the watch industry' with a 5th dimensional watch. her drawings are nice. her handwriting is fucking terrible. maybe next year she can do my math homework for me so i can graduate.

she said 'i hope youre paying attention. this is important stuff. your girlfriend's dreams. i showed this to goldy a long time ago and he didnt pay any attention. he would always touch things and look at them and not put them back where they were, and then i would yell at him for that and he would get sad and leave. god i hated him.' for what it's worth big guy, she didnt look like she hated you.

she was working and shit and she asked me what i was planning on doing. i said after i got done watching her make watches maybe we could fuck or get drunk.

she said 'no. i meant the future. what do you want to be?'

i said shit. i mean im already what i wanna be.

'and what is that?'

i didnt have an answer. if i could turn back the clock a few days id say real. i wanna be real and i am real.

but because i didnt say that, she said 'ok, let me make this simple. what would you like to do for a job.'

'i would like to not have a job.'

'youre fucking hopeless.'

yeah. then i said maybe i could be like mom and become a whore. or maybe i could be like dad and chase sunsets.

'hm. no. you wouldnt make for a very good whore.'

'why?'

'youre a bad liar. and something about your nose. youre better off doing whatever it is your dad does.'

you know how she wears reading glasses with this like, little microscope on the right side? i said it made her look like a kamen rider villain and she looked at me like i shat myself. and she wears these little finger condoms on her hands.

'theyre NOT finger condoms!' she said. 'theyre finger COTS. so the oils in your fingers dont damage the metal.'

she showed me the pallat fork which is really important for something. she told me 'the movement is the heart of the watch.' 5 minutes later she said 'the balance is the heart of the watch.'

'a watch has 2 hearts?'

'a watch has 6 hearts. no. 7.'

what the fuck? but i liked watching it. i leaned in and i got lost in the way her hands danced. and i got lost so deep i started drooling. she told me if i was falling asleep to go to bed already. i get it now why she doesnt grow out her finger nails.

i asked her if that watch you were wearing last year was hers. she said yeah. a pair of twins brought it back to her. razer and ramon. i guess you guys did get up to business. tell raze i said hi and ramon is real sorry.

she lost one of her screwdrivers though, and we ended up spending the rest of the night looking for the thing.

that night i ended up getting pretty bad chest pain too, so we went over to herm's place and he tested me out and gave me one of his bootleg super nintendo ass x rays. he showed it to me. prudence's screwdriver is in my chest now. just lodged right in my heart.

i asked if he could take it out cause it hurts too much.

'and i really want my screwdriver back.'

herm said 'you take it out now? i cant tell you whatll happen. if youre lucky, itll stay. but if youre

unlucky, which you are, and youre retarded, which you are, youll vomit it out soon enough. now as payment for the x ray, you can run over and get me some iberian tomatoes in the morning. and make sure theyre fresh this time or ill make you get them again.'

so now i gotta buy her a new one. she keeps putting her head on my chest to hear my heartbeat and saying 'i made that.' fucking bitch. sometimes it hurts more than my shoulder does.

yesterday i was watching her work, and she said one thing thats different between me and you is that i dont break things.

she started talking again about all the trouble you made touching things and breaking them. i think she was talking about the watches.

i watched for a little and i asked if maybe she missed how you broke things. she said yeah. i asked if maybe i should start breaking things too. she looked me in the eyes and yelled 'no!'

i had a dream i was a dead fox and a deer was eating my dead body. i told everybody about it today.

wing wouldnt even let me finish. said he wished the foxes around here would die. then he started complaining about how they were always fighting the jackals over the scraps in his trash can and he has to weigh the lid down with bricks and shit so they wont keep knocking shit over.

prince said his mom said there used to be dream readers around here, but they left with the angels when the americans came in.

cairo told me about this nightmare he's been having where he's on monday nitro and his chest wrap comes loose.

i called mom about it and she told me to stop eating right before sleeping. i hung up.

i told it to prudence while she was doing her makeup in the mirror before work, and she looked at me like i was an idiot and said 'but deer dont eat foxes.'

'damn. youre right.'

'stop falling asleep to the nature channel.'

'i was so fine with it, though.'

'what?'

'getting eaten. i didnt have no problems with it.' and i didnt. it felt cool on the outside by my skin, but warm where the deer was eating me. maybe the deer called over her kids to eat some more. i didnt sleep that long. but i liked it, kind of.

do you get any dreams over there? id hope so. i wouldnt want any of you guys to walk around without your dreams. dad used to say only idiots ignored their dreams. but also he said if you have blood, you will dream. do you keep your blood over there?

i went to mona's yesterday and ursula handed me a hot bowl of chicken noodle soup. she took my arm and said 'you are here to see the watch girl, no?'

i said 'yeah. were talking about prudence, right? why arent you using her name.'

'she is not doing good today. she is new. she does not know what to do with the harder men. you are her ustad, hah?'

'i guess.'

'prove it.' she shook me and a little bit of the soup spilled. 'should i leave you in her care?' then she held my face and stared me down. she shook her head. 'no. you will break her heart.'

'i think it might be the other way around.'

'no. i am right about these things. but it will be ok so long as you dont ask her to marry you. yalla.' and she kissed me on the cheek like she had a one way ticket to the mainland burning a hole in her pocket. i dont know why she acts like this sometimes.

i left her behind and she started talking to mona in spanish. mona was saying something about 'what will i do with that girl?' i think. i wish mom was there to translate.

so i headed up to pru's room and the door was locked so i couldnt just go in.

'vacation.'

'yeah i know. thats why im here.'

i heard fast footsteps and the door unlocked and she threw herself at me and got burning soup all over me.

she kept saying sorry and when i stopped screaming i told her it was all good.

we went inside and i asked her what was up. was she sick? whats going on. i could tell by her voice and her night stand she was medicating.

she said 'no reason. ive been checking my charts but the stars and the moon are in order.' she had a few different watches out, all going at different

speeds. i didnt ask her what those were for. 'i think it's just one of those days. i should be working. im almost there. im so close.' she dropped facedown on her bed and tapped at her side.

i took off my soup flavored shirt and went over. kept the jacket on though. i asked her what she was so close to.

'the movement. the money. the ticket. my happy place.' she put her head in my lap. from experience, what that told me was i should put my hand on her cheek and rub it with my thumb. so i did that and she put her hand on top of mine. she said 'youre close with ursula huh?'

i said yeah. i was closer with tonya but i aint seen her since her family sent her off.

'why does ursula like you so much?'

'wheres this coming from all a sudden?'

she put her face in my stomach and said 'i dont know. shes so much older than you.'

'youre older than me too.'

she pinched my nipple so fucking hard nigga. she said 'not that much older.'

ok. i told her about the time you paid that broad from rania's cafe to take my virginity when i was 14 and ursula's not that much older than she was and prudence just looked sad.

'it's the americans fault. i dont think it was very nice of them to leave you guys behind like that.'

'they left you behind too. so long as youre here, youre one of us.'

'not for long. im leaving as soon as i can. ill take the big train. and ill make it out of this hurricane and leave everyone behind too.'

'even me?'

she laughed at me and pinched my nose. 'even you.'

we sat there for a while, listening to the commercials on the tv. then she told me to tell her a story.

and cause i had ursula on my mind i told her about the time ursula's businessman made her wear a wedding dress to fuck her in and she got depressed for like a week or 2 and i had to deal with it.

it was just chance too! apparently she was normal all day, and i was just the unlucky son of a whore who had to walk in on her crying her guts out.

you and mom were laughing at me on the phone. i remember. school was almost over. i needed the attendance. the last thing i wanted was to get held back before senior year. i know what yall wouldve done to me if i got held back before senior year.

but ursula wouldnt let me the fuck go. i had to wipe old girl's eyes and cheeks and blow her nose and pet her head and hold her hair back while she vomited and take the bottle out her hands when she passed out and put it back in her hands when she woke back up. she kept talking about how 'he made a mockery of me' and 'he shitted on my dreams' and stuff. she was ripping her voice in half telling all that shit to me, so i couldnt be too mad at her.

the times when we would fuck were the worst but i didnt talk too much about that.

one thing i never told anyone was how i took care of the problem. genius solution. check it. i found the guy's adress from ursula's book. ursula knew where this nigga lived but she refused to go see him.

so while ursula was sleeping i headed on over to this insane apartment complex in the hills where every flat has like 2 floors and is big enough to hold like 15 of our place in them.

ursula was sleeping in the day which was good for me cause all i had to do was head on over and wait outside for this bitchass nigga to walk past me and id take care of the problem.

so i run through half a pack waiting. im getting angry. im getting ready to take this nigga out.

then finally he comes down from his apartment.

he's dressed up in a suit and the shiniest shoes this side of heaven. he's walking out with his family. a wife and 2 daughters. he has a car waiting on him. a nice sedan with a driver and everything.

so i walk up to him, i pull on his shoulder and i ask him if he knows ursula. he looks around like im crazy for being there. starts yelling for security.

i clench my fists, nash my teeth, and i drop to my knees and beg him to see ursula again. im screaming at this point. 'TAKE URSULA BACK. SHES RUINING MY LIFE. IM BEGGING YOU.'

old guy squats down and whispers to me 'ok. ok. ill take her back. please, be quiet.'

'SHES NOTHING WITHOUT YOU. SHES GOING TO KILL HERSELF.'

'ok! please! i understand!' he took out his wallet and handed me a 500 dinar bill. i still dont know whose face it is on it. i shouldve taken it. i smacked it out of his hand.

'I DONT WANT YOUR MONEY. YOU NEED TO GO BACK TO URSULA?'

'ok! ok! ill go back! now please, please go!'
and i stopped crying, got up, and left.

and then apparently, and i heard this from dizzy, later that day he called about her. i wouldnt know though. i got jumped by some redshirts on the way home.

prudence fell asleep halfway through my story but i told the whole thing anyway. then i tucked her in and took out her trash. i had to get another trashbag.

then i went on the phone and called up the kids but then mona cut me off and told me to pay for the phone time. 'this is what you boys do. you make my girls fall in love with you, and then they fuck you for free and fuck no one else. ah. i dont care. it's their money. and when the light turns off and they have no tv, they will see. at least you will pay for the phone.' of course i had no money so she made me

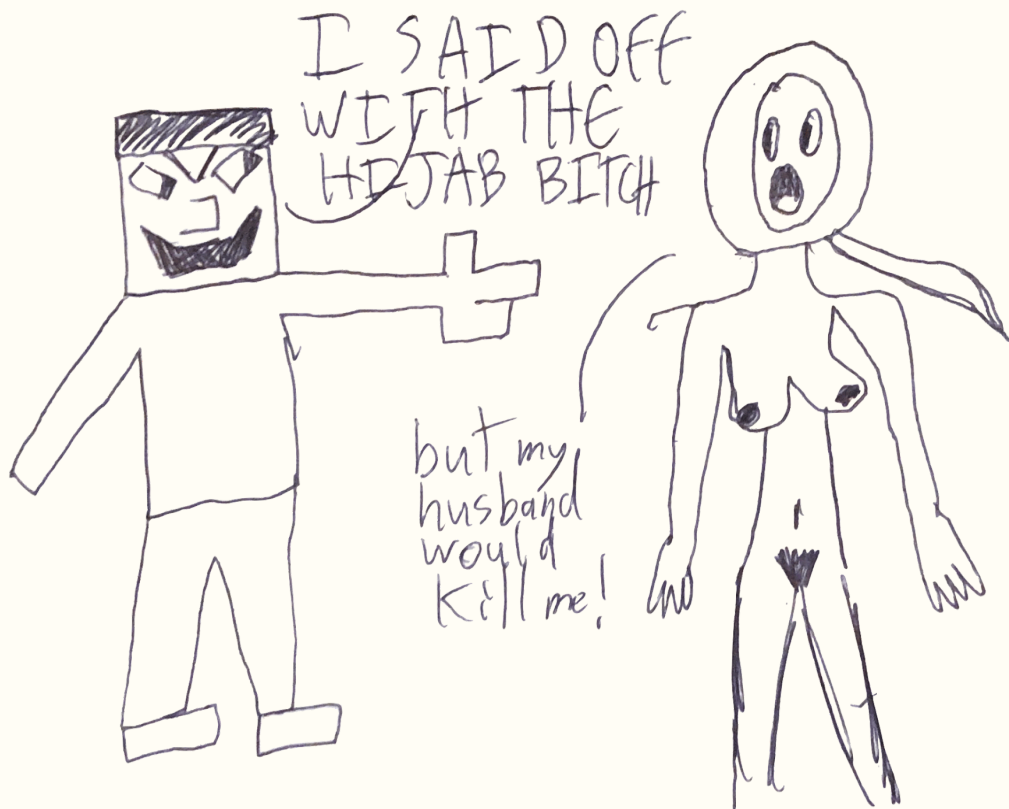
wash the dishes.

old man green came over and handed me a pair of golden scissors. 'an engagement present.' he said.

i asked him what the fuck he was talking about.

'oh. that hasnt happened yet? my apologies. still. keep it on you.'

i keep it in my boots now. it's a nice switch from the knife even if it does cut my hands.



when we learned that jaws died, we were at the pool. the kids were talking to some franko girls, putting on a show to make them laugh. usual straight man funny guy routine. they mightve even got some numbers, but then everyone's teeth all started hurting at the same time.

we all had to leave. even herm couldnt help that much cause he was busy with his own teeth. no one said a word until we hit the smasher and wing said 'fuck' with every square inch of his lips.

jaws got out of jail a few months after you died. he didnt know shit. he came through and asked about you. i didnt think he'd take it so hard. he's seen more people die than any of us. he said 'i thought that nigga would stick around. i really thought that nigga would stick around.'

we took him out for some beer and barrel chicken, and the next day he stabbed a cop up north. sun go up. sun come down. and all the things we are.

they shot him, and our teeth started hurting a little, but he didnt die, so nothing happened yet. apparently there was a trial. we never heard about it. we were just waiting on it to happen.

then, a half year later, this. and im sitting here wondering what it was that fearless soldier was so afraid of.

3 days after the toothache, when our gums were still bleeding like shit, they dropped jaws's body off at the front gate of school. he was naked and charred all over like fresh pavement. the kind you only find up north and out west.

they tried to cremate him. you cant burn a titan corpse. there were marks on his elbows and knees and neck and dick where they tried to chop him up. funny guys they have working for the state. new probably.

i took his right arm. that right arm used to be mean as a bitch. you could be looking straight at it and it would still catch you on the other side of

your head.

there was that time when he was crushing on a girl from across the road. goddamn. i forget her name. some serbian girl who was driving everybody crazy. you remember? they said she was dating a big shot albanian, that she only drank cow's blood, that she killed her dad.

i think jaws liked that last one cause it made him relate to her a bit more. he was spitting game like battery acid. i could tell by the look on her face. i bet he thought he was slick as a bitch, coming back to us smiling ear to ear. his lips were barely there on his body, so his smile was all teeth now.

that day, he walked over to us rubbing his hands together like he just figured out how to cheat the pachinkos, and all i wanted was to put that nigga down. i said some gayass shit about the girl having a flatass and i said it loud enough for her to hear, and the girl turned back just in time to see him smack the bullshit out me.

hindsight, that probably helped his chances. my top left tooth still wiggles sometimes ever since that day. im lucky thats all i got. the streets are covered in loose teeth now thanks to him.

we needed a lot of guys to carry him. wing wouldnt take no for an answer, and damn near carried the entire left leg by himself. and then 15 minutes later he complained that no one was helping him out on his side. said 'they gotta be feeding prisoners like kings these days. and the rest of us hardworking citizens go hungry.'

some of the guys carrying him didnt even know him that well. it took us about 2 and a half hours to carry him over the river. the fish bit at our ankles and we dropped him and had to fish him back out. but if jaws is where you are now, let him know he made it over here.

we needed a big fucking grave for this nigga.

about as big as rig's. almost as big as yours. every body got to digging.

i heard guys tell stories about him. bullshit about how the first time he got caught, it was for running ice out east. or icing a spider. or ice this or ice that. i had to tell them it was a prostitution charge so they got it right. was it you who changed the story? st mary's these days is full of kids who never had a whore mother or sister. niggas are ashamed.

i dont even know if theres any point to getting the story straight. the story's just gonna change and change and change forever. once you die, your story is out of your hands.

used to be you could spend the whole day telling stories about jaws and youd only make it to his 7th birthday. but what point is there in even doing that. nobody writes books about us. you cant read about a river titan in the library. they dont even let us in libraries no more.

you said it best about a month before you went down the same road. it's a raw deal. we trade our lives in for stories we never even get to hear. you looked proud when you said it. you thought you were bob dylan. well come sing it then.

i dug and dug and dug into that sand. and whenever anyone asked if it was ok now, i said no. keep going. wing kept complaining about his back and how i was a slave driver, but the minute he sat down he started complaining about how the hole wasnt big enough and how these new kids couldnt dig their way out of a piece of bread. he couldnt decide which side he wanted to be on.

when we finally got jaws in the grave and started filling it in, i told jaws everything that happened while he was gone. it was a lot. and it still wasnt half filled.

by the time the moon came up, i said fuck it and

handed my shovel to cairo. im getting old, and that little boy needs some excercise. kid's getting too spoiled sitting around drawing all day.

it's weird to think that cairo never knew jaws like we did. cairo and half the guys there. i guess they do know him in some ways.

scooping. mongo goose. where to sit on sahib bridge when you wanna look up girls skirts. the words you use to keep the rain off when youre lighting a stick. jaws taught us all that. i never asked who taught him. i figured he just found out.

theres jaws in all that. i think 100 years from now, a kid's gonna be lighting up a stick in october or catching a business woman's bright blue panties and he wont even know jaws's name. but he'll be right there with his arm around kid's shoulder.

i lit a stick and dragged on it hard. like dragging a titan's body out a river. i said 'cairo. you wanna hear a story?' it's a great question cause the answer is always the same. unless youre cairo and youre pissed at me for giving you the shovel.

so i told him anyways. i told him the one about how jaws got his name. you remember. you were there. and now cairo was too.

a few days ago, i was in pru's room. everytime i head down there i bring her something. a shawerma. some fish basteela. a cheap plastic watch. those are some of her favorites. i got her a pikachu one a few weeks ago and she went crazy.

this time she handed me a watch. 'it's pretty basic.' she said. 'no frills, nothing crazy. stainless steel case. brass dial. mechanical movement, though. obviously. just under 130 parts. shes a tough cookie.' that was a personal best for her. there were rounded edges on the case and black leather straps.

we ended up just sitting in her bed watching cagney and lacy, and i was holding onto the watch the whole time. i kept looking over at it. it looked so slick.

i didnt even realize it was a gift until an hour later when she saw me holding it and told me to wear it.

'what?'

'it's a gift.'

'why didnt you say that?'

'i thought it was obvious. do you not like it? i can take it apart and make something better. as a matter of fact'

'no.' this bitch, man.

thing is, i forgot who i was, man. next day, i was talking my shit. none of the kids could see the art. the craft. i had to explain it to them the best i could. wing called me a conman, i told him to kill himself. i let the whole block know what was on my wrist wasnt no bullshit.

i forgot how fast word can make it out of central. but it's not my fault. i wasnt even as far west as reyes and i still got jumped by redshirts. like 100 or 200 of them. maybe 300. had to be cause it takes that many to keep a nigga like this down. and all i wanted was some lebanese grill to take back to prudence. my fault.

that little freak speedo said he heard about my expensive ass watch. i told him i aint seen his ass since i fucked his sister. prince was the one who really fucked her but he didnt remember that so he kicked me in the face.

i told him he'd have to kill me if he wanted to take my watch.

he looked at it and said. 'nah. i dont want it. run his pockets.'

they ran my pockets and found 15 dinar. he called me broke and kicked me.

boy i got my ass up so fast i got dizzy. 'nigga, what do you mean you dont want the watch?'

'it's ugly and it's gay. now stay down.'

i said 'this is the most valuable watch in the whole city.'

'looks like it's made of plastic. thats a broke nigger watch for you. a broke nigger watch on a broke nigger's hand.'

'you blind, retarded, monkeydick mother fucker. youre gonna sit down and appreciate this motherfucking watch.' then i started explaining everything about the watch. that stainless steel aint nothing to play about. that the dial was made of brass which is a good, reliable metal. i was in the middle of talking about the movement but then him and his boys beat the bullshit out of me. all 700 of them.

they took my boots, my pants, my underwear, and my shirt. just left me with your jacket, the watch, and the golden scissors i was keeping in my boot. gold aint been worth shit since you died.

then they held my left hand down and started beating on the watch with a pipe trying to break it. but shit, nigga. the watch was too strong. i thought it would at least break a little, but it didnt. i said 'hey fagbag. how you like the watch now?'

thats all i remember. i walked home naked except

for your jacket and it didnt cover my balls, dick, or crack. i had a headache the whole way.

i was singing that song the kids made for you cause it kept me from getting sad. i felt so sad for prudence that no one even wanted to steal her watch. she put her heart and soul into it and niggas wouldnt even try to steal it.

i crawled over to pru's room and told her the whole thing.

she slapped me! i was bleeding and crying and she slapped me. she said 'i specifically made that watch so that no one would want to kill you over it. how did you find literally the only way to get killed over it? you boys are nothing but trouble. your family will be the death of me.'

the day after i got robbed of all my clothes, i had to borrow some pants to go out the next day. i cant spend more than a week a year walking around naked. im not prince.

but all i ever left in pru's room are socks and shirts, and the only one at mona's who's tall enough to have pants that kinda fit me is ursula.

so i headed out wearing one of her baggy yoga pants with the indian patterns on them. she called them harem pants. i went to school wearing them and everyone laughed at me.

crazy thing is, no one asked me for shit the whole day. wing and cairo wouldnt be seen with me unless we locked the door to the council room or the roof. they tried talking me out of wearing it, but i didnt wanna give it up. prince said he liked it though.

next day i took another pair of those pants from ursula and showed up again. niggas stopped laughing. they thought something was wrong with me. they called herm and he took an ice pick out the freezer and tried pinning me down to do a brain check.

the day after that niggas started wearing those same pants to school. and by the end of the week, half the school was wearing that shit. wing said i had these niggas hypnotized. cairo said i fagged up the school. prince said they didnt have the figure for it.

well, that was the end of my week of peace, cause after that, niggas started looking at me again, asking for shit. telling me we should go out here and fight this nigga and head over here to fuck on these hoes and blah blah blah.

shit, some kids were even starting to die their hair red again. i had to cut it off quick.

so i stopped wearing those fucking pants. the next nigga wearing them to ask me about some shit, i told him 'dont talk to me if youre gonna dress up like a fag.'

and now as i write this, the pants are dead. and
it pisses me off too cause they were so comfy. going
back to jeans makes me wanna kill myself.

ive been praying. even though i dont think i did anything wrong. i just wanna make sure things stay good for a little bit. my whole right arm hurts so much even just typing this out makes it hurt.

we took mona's girls to club eleventeen. well everyone except mona. she said she wanted some peace and quiet and she doesnt like this bullshit us children call music.

so we were at the club and prudence made me promise not to start shit. i got us kicked out of the last 3 or 4 clubs and now they all have signs saying NO RIVER TITANS ALLOWED.

i promised her. no hands. and it was going good. we were watching this band called the peroxide bunnies. the lead singer was kinda cute and she had a terrible voice. perfect band.

and then 7up showed up.

i aint seen this nigga since he got signed 2 years ago and then dropped off the face of the earth. and i dont remember him having all his fingers.

so 7 walks up to me, all his fingers on his hands, neck clean no scars, and a smile too expensive for him to afford. and he says to me 'hey cherbear! you still got them dustyass boots on?'

i say 'what the fuck happened to your hands?' the fingers he used to be missing were attached to his hand like they were sewed there with a black thread. they didnt all match his skin.

'these? aw man. weaver took care of these for your old boy. he takes care of shit like that.'

he looked at wing and wing was staring right back at him. he had his attention now.

he said hey to the girls and i introduced him to prudence and he cooked me and wing and cairo like he never left. not one of our shoes made it out alive. he didnt say shit to prince.

remember how he used to try to sing for mom under the window? and she made him learn spanish and arabic

and hebrew and aramaic songs to remind her of home. she turned that nigga to a diplomat. and all he ever got from it was a kiss on the cheek.

kid was the ugliest nigga i ever knew and he got the most pussy out of anybody i knew beside prince. you wish your songs could get you the pussy he did.

and when he had the whole neighborhood dancing at the smasher you said it was all cause he played with soul but i dont think soul had anything to do with it. chato was a better guitar player than him and he was a rapist.

then he asked us if we wanted to see something. he led a train of like 20 niggas and whores up the stairs to the vip room.

he got us past security which turned out to be handled by spiders. big surprise. and then the room behind the vip room, also handled by more spiders.

it was a studio. full of those boards with the sliders and the buttons and a glass wall with a band room behind it. he said shit was sound proof but i could still kinda hear the peroxide bunnies downstairs.

we crowded the joint, and 7up said 'check it. im cutting another album. new label this time. on the weaver's dime.'

ok.

'and i wanted to use goldy's song.'

i asked him which song. you made a whole lot of bullshit and i couldnt imagine anything anyone would wanna put on a tape. i asked if maybe he wanted to use your 'god take me away fire' song. like as a joke.

he said 'no. i meant the one the kids made.'

'oh.'

'yeah. i actually recorded it here. i wanted your thoughts.'

ok.

i look over at wing and he's feeling the situation about as much as i am. i look over at pru and she doesnt even look back at me. she left the glass

behind a long time ago and was onto the bottle now.

so 7 puts on the cd and we listen. and it has guitar that kinda sounds like his. it has some key board and shit. drums. backup singers. and it's so fucking bad. the guitar and the singing and everything is good but for some reason it's so bad it makes me laugh.

and 7 says 'you digging it? imagine, all of new eden singing this song.' and i thought of every kid outside central having a singing dancing toy titan all to himself. and i thought of them saying our words so much that they started to melt off the walls we tagged them on. and all a nigga can do to that is just laugh.

and then he gets to the part that says sun go up sun come down. and i promised prudence. i promised her i wouldnt start no shit. we were running out of clubs to go to.

i promised this bitch who got up, walked over to the board, and poured out the whole bottle of montague over it. and she took the cd out and threw it on the floor. and then took the bottle and smacked it over 7up's head. it didnt even break. just bounced right off and flew at the window.

then the security came in. and then the girls got involved. and so we had to get involved.

and then we got tossed the fuck out. and they put up a printed NO RIVER TITANS ALLOWED sign like they had that shit ready. and then they came back with another sign and written on it with marker was NO WHORES ALLOWED.

so we took the girls back to mona's, and when mona saw how beat up her girls were, she got so mad.

first she got mad at the girls. she said 'it's your money, not mine. you want to play fighting? go. play fighting. see who will pay for you now. you should be thanking allah i am your manager and you are not working for my sister at touch. she would

have you on the streets. she knows better, yekhrebbet ha. and YOU!' and she pointed at me specifically. 'you should know better than to hurt my girls!'

'we didnt hurt them. it was the girls at the club and'

'i dont care!' and she put up a sign saying NO RIVER TITANS ALLOWED FOR 7 DAYS.

so the next day i called prudence at mona's. i had to pretend to be a guy 'inquiring about a watch'. and so we got to talking, and i wanted to talk to her about 7up and whats been going on, but then i heard someone else's breath on the line. i asked who that was.

'dont worry about me nigga im just bored.' it was fucking dizzy.

prudence yelled at her to get off the line.

'it's not just me! it's ursula and emmy too!'

they were all bored as shit without us. or there was just nothing on tv.

mona heard all the noises and picked up the phone and realized it was me and she added a day to the counter.

then the kids all got together and we let cairo do his voices on the phone and put mona through his rigamaroll so we could talk to the girls. sometimes he was a southern gentlemen looking for a 'dainty negress'. sometimes he would put on his favorite, the detective, and say 'ay TOOTS. ive been looking for a BUXOM BROAD.'

and when mona heard the girls laughing she'd pick up the phone and yell at us and she'd add another day.

the girls stopped taking calls. i thought it was nice that they wanted to see us so bad, but wing thinks they just stopped finding it funny.

i was at the graveyard with wing last night. we both got a feeling when our hands went numb and we couldnt hold spoons or forks right anymore. and i was

having trouble typing this out.

so we went looking for 7up's grave. it shouldve been between yours and leo's. nothing. blank spot. wing thought maybe we got his year mixed up but i asked him if he ever saw a nigga's grave missing like that. he said no.

i said i dont like this spider shit.

'me neither nigga.'

i walked wing home and when we reached his street his back started hurting and he left his pills at home. so i let him lean on me. it's more like i was holding him up. he's getting skinnier but everyday he gets heavier on my left shoulder.

karina helped me put him in bed. their dad woke up and started yelling something. i told wing take some melts maybe. drown that nigga out. he said nah. i wanted to do something. maybe pat his head. tuck him in. i dont know nigga. i just left.

i walked the streets for a few hours. i think maybe i was looking for answers, but the closest thing i ever found to an answer in my life was in a good solid wall. and i have tobit to thank for that.

from east to west and back again there is no step you can take that will save you. a million miles of questions hanging from the street lights like sinners and criminals. see for yourself. sun go up. sun come down. and the devil will have your soul.

on monday, old man green took me out. i woke up to him staring down at me.

'up up now.' he said. 'weve got places to be.' he was holding a basket and 2 of those buckets you use to water plants.

'nigga it's too early. im going back to sleep.'

'it's the afternoon, and we really ~~ott~~ ought to get going before the moon closes the path. thats O-U-G-H-T not O-T-T.'

'i got shit to do, man. im hanging with my girl.'

'today is cleaning day at mona's house. she wont have time for you until night.'

he was right.

'and getting drunk with your friends can wait until they wake up.'

well shit. i went with him. he handed me one of the garden buckets and we went on down, through the smasher to some backside dirt road that i never actually saw before. it's way at the back, where the fences dont even reach, and you have to push through a ton of branches to get through it. man i been in this city my whole life. it scares me sometimes, how little i know about this place.

it wasnt wide, so i had to walk behind old boy. the bushes kept scraping at my legs. i turned the jacket inside out so the leather wouldnt get scratched. i dont know why. it's already beat to shit.

we came up to a small river that i dont think shouldve been there. green said 'be careful the water doesnt get in your eyes. once we cross over, were on the king's land. american law doesnt reach so far.'

i took off my boots, rolled up my pants, put my hand on my eyes, and walked across the river. it barely touched my knees. across the river, i put my hand down. nothing looked that different.

'in here.' and the old man went into the forest. there wasnt any dirt road over here.

every few steps, i'd feel some kind of wind blow by my ear, like a whisper or a breath. one of them said the name mom gave me. another one said yours. another one said wing's. i ain't heard those names in so long.

he said 'don't mind those. just the whisperflies.'
'why do they keep saying names?'

'forgive them. they know not what they do.'

on the way, i saw a fox dead on its back, with its guts splayed out on the dirt. a deer was eating the guts. must've been the last deer in new eden. it had blood all over its nose and mouth. chunks of meat stuck in its teeth. it looked into my eyes and ran. the fox's eyes were closed.

a little bit later, and the trees stopped. it was this massive spot, a circle surrounded by trees all over. in the middle was a bunch of massive rectangle blocks made out of stone, each one with a bunch of words on it. they weren't even though. they were crooked and out of place like some giant hand smacked them all around.

all the stones were covered in words. later on, he told me he was the one who put the words there. they're not prayers. they're proclamations, he said. of who the people were.

'this, lad, is the graveyard of angels. where the king and his family will rest unbothered until time ends.'

so the big blocks were tombstones. they were almost as tall as the trees. and the graves were bigger than anything i ever saw a titan buried in. 3 of the graves were empty, and the holes were huge. i asked him about that.

'those 3 haven't died yet. it will be up to them, however, if they wish to be buried here. come. take the can. water the graves with me.'

'seriously? these things are so small. i don't think it's gonna be enough.'

'it's not enough. but it will do.'

so i went around and did what he did. poured some water on the stone and on the dirt. old man green would sometimes put his hand on a stone and close his eyes and whisper.

i dont remember any prayers except the few words of the quran i remember from cairo, and the beginning of that prayer wing says all the time. holy mother mary, give me your hand, something something something.

i came up to the biggest stone, and it was the most crooked, leaning so close to the ground. i watered it, and green said 'thats king daved's grave.'

i dont remember much about him. he had some guys killed or poisoned or whatever. we mightve had a test about all that shit in middle school, but i always skipped history. i asked 'was he a bad guy?'

'yes. but not for the reasons your textbooks will tell you. not that you read the bloody textbooks. he was a broken man. but i loved him nonetheless. thats one word, by the way. none-the-less.'

ok.

'i tried to advise the man, but he would not listen.'

he patted down one of the stones. it was resting on a massive tree root in the middle. 'this here was prince hanyael the 7th. H-A-N-Y-A-E-L. grandson of the king. the tomato prince. the best man i ever knew.'

'tomato prince? thats what they called him?'

'he was exceptionally fond of tomatos, of course. his garden was all he cared about, and in there, he had every variety of tomato you could think of. and many you would never think of. his obsession made some doubt whether he could ever be a good king.'

'what do you think?'

'i know for a fact that the throne would have made a terrible seat for him. he was not meant to rule.'

good men always make for bad kings. the boy was meant only to love tomatos. that should have been enough.' he looked over at me. 'tell me, boy. why is it not enough that a man live to love tomatos and nothing else?'

'i couldnt tell you. i fucking hate tomatos.'

'prince hanya would have convinced you otherwise.'

'i dont think so.'

'he would have found a specimen that suited your taste. this, i am certain of.'

'so you were a big shot back then?'

'i was merely a servant, as i always am. some times, i think i was a friend.'

'you think.'

'some things, god does not let me know. he did not let me see the way the family would die.'

'they got executed, right?'

he nodded.

'damn.' i told him about jaws. only guy i ever knew and probably ever will know to get the rope by the state.

'there was no way for you to foresee that.'

'i shouldve seen it. the way he was so scared. i shouldve known he was gonna be up to some bullshit.'

'i saw with my own eyes that they would be executed. and for some reason, i could not avoid it. what i did not see however, was who would be executing them. the americans, they have a funny way of handling things.' he reached under his turban and pulled out a picture.

it was 3 people in a black and white photo. old man green was in the middle, looking the same as he always does. cleaner though. and it was weird to see his clothes in grey.

to his right was a girl. maybe our age. maybe younger. long black hair. she had a smile like the first fall wind after summer. she kinda looked like wing. a lot like wing actually, with her strong jaw

and pretty eyes. way less ashy though.

'princess anya was the only one who managed to escape. and through her brother's tomato garden no less. and the plants all moved and shifted so as to obstruct her pursuers. none were ever able to find her. i gave her one of my mint leaves, so that even i would not be able to find her.'

on green's left was a guy a little older. his hair wasnt an afro like the girl's. it went down to his shoulders. lopsided smile. a little crosseyed too. he was holding up a long vine of tomatos like it was the heavyweight title.

'when i finished with them, i brought all the bodies here. i sewed the heads back on, and i laid them to rest. even the stubborn prince samael, killed in combat. they made me behead his corpse just to send a message. and i swore i would not serve god ever again. i cursed his name. i cursed and cursed until my lips and tongue and throat ran raw. i was determined never to use my mouth again. but my curses were, unfortunately, no different to my prayers.'

'i get it. sometimes i do the same thing. i hurt myself when i pray. but i dont do it for god.'

'then why?'

'i dunno. i just do it when i feel dirty in the kind of way a shower doesnt fix. i dont worship god. i believe in him, but i cant worship him.' and i aint prayed in a long minute either so my arm is feeling better.

'well you worship something. otherwise you wouldnt be praying so religiously.'

'what do i worship? the walls? the hands? the blood?'

'i cant say. but i know that you pray. you, like me, have the smell of an ascetic. thats A-S-C-E-T-I-C.'

'i dont smell like you.'

'ok. you dont. now take a seat and have some food.' he opened up the basket and inside it were a

bunch of walnuts and little ~~the~~ baby tomatos. he took out a pot and said he'd make some tea, and got to work making a fire. i asked if he needed a light. he said no.

i laid back against tomato prince's tombstone. it had a nice angle to it. the baby tomatos didnt taste good at all.

~~i thought about prince and tomato prince in a video game like street fi nevermind.~~ it was funnier in my head.

'where did the tombstones come from?'

'that is for the forest to know, my boy.'

'what does that mean?'

'it means im not going to tell you. not yet.'

i took out the gold scissors and opened up some of the walnuts and ate them. i lit a stick and laid there for a minute. then i told him how i aint visited your grave in about a year. and i aint watered it neither. i told him how everytime i bury another titan, i walk right past your grave like it's anyone else's. i couldnt fit in that massive grave if i tried.

'you want a large grave?'

'i just wanna fit in mine.'

'a normal sized grave is good enough for the rest of the world.'

'but not for a river titan.'

'and you want this fate?'

'i got a big wooden stick with my name on it across the river, and it aint going nowhere. so i better like it.' but they can go somewhere, it turns out. i dont wanna know where.

'your brother, the gold boy certainly was magnificent.' he kept calling you gold boy. ~~it made me laugh.~~ it makes me laugh. 'he had a prophetic quality about him. i was frightened, in fact, that god had chosen yet another. unlike you, he was beloved by all, and he knew exactly what to do and say at every moment.'

yeah.

'there is nothing prophetic about you in the slightest.'

shit nigga. ok.

'though if i can be honest, there is nothing to envy in a prophet. they never listen. well, neither do the masses, of course. but all this is to say, of the pair of you, i always preferred you. you have a much worse head on your shoulders, but youre solid in spite of that.' you hear that? the homeless nigga likes me more. it makes me feel good.

he made the tea and poured it out into these 2 little clay cups. green tea. no sugar. it was bitter. cairo and prince wouldve hated it. i asked him why he showed me this place anyway.

'i apologize, my boy. i desperately wanted someone to share this with. perhaps i have overburdened you. thats one word, by the way.'

'i know.'

'what is a world that forces a place like this to be hidden in the shadows, restricted by streams no one can find nor cross. i wanted someone to witness this. to witness them. and perhaps, if ever i have to leave new eden, i would appreciate it if you could come to water these gravestones. at least once in a while.'

'i might leave new eden too, you know.'

'you might.' but he didnt sound convinced.

'theres a kid i know who would probably be better for this.'

'he's not ready for all of this.'

'and i am?'

he just drank his tea.

i asked him 'you think youre gonna leave?'

'i know better than to put my trust in the future.'

'how much of the future you think god has planned out? you think were all just strapped into a roller coaster?'

'no. i dont think we move. it's rather that we are
in the middle of a great storm. and sometimes if we
are lucky, the storm abates. A-B-A-T-E.'

'i know.'

'drink your tea.'



Jackal reaches for the moon,
but he lost his wings on the way.

we were having chicken at farooq's when this nigga b load decides to walk in. i never had a good time with this kid in my life. that day was no different.

so he comes over and holds out his hand like he wants me to shake it. i eat with my fingers. i was sauced up. dripping. so i nod at him, but he keeps his hand out. just looking at me and smiling.

so i shake his hand finally, and then he sits down and injects himself in the conversation without even wiping his hands. prince was talking about some broad he liked in deepeast who was a photographer or something. it was a fun story. i was looking forward to hearing more of it.

then b load jumps in says 'yeah, those bitches out east are ugly as fuck.' and he laughs. and prince stares at him and now i feel like shit.

and b load went on and on about how ugly the bitches out east are and how bad the bitches he fucks are and how he doesnt need to pay whores like we do and blah blah blah. and the whole time he has my sauce on his hands.

and he orders his own chicken with different sauce and he's eating it with my sauce still on his hands and it's combining. and none of us say a word and he just keeps on talking.

and then he says 'so. you boys wanna make some money?'

i was gonna say no but we were all dry so i let kid talk. he said the spiders were looking to help out the local kids. said the weaver was a titan back in his day.

i asked him what year, where was his grave, he didnt answer. he said to meet him at the lot on morgan tomorrow night before the sultans game starts. then he left without paying. and he didnt even wipe his hands before he put them in his pockets.

well, we showed up to the lot and 4 guys were waiting for us, 3 of them in suits and shades, 1 of

them b load, all standing outside a black import town car. never seen a spider drive anything else.

b load was jumping around talking about some shit no one was listening to. we showed up and the guy with the ponytail told b load to shut up. b load actually listened to him, so i liked him already.

he said 'i was told you guys are interested in making some money.'

i asked him why the weaver needed highschoolers to put in work for him.

'dont be mistaken. youre not in. not yet at least. the weaver just likes to help the kids out. give back. and weve heard a lot of stories about a river titan with red hair who took out 20 frankos.'

i told him it was an exaggeration.

'the weaver will like that even more.'

'i didnt think we had such a good reputation with you guys. we got banned from some of your clubs.'

he smiled. 'grudges never won any wars. in any case, your job will be easy. all you need to do is accompany our man' he pointed at b load 'to the location and make sure he stays safe the entire time. there shouldnt be any heat. you handled 20 frankos, give or take. this will be easy. secure the delivery. only 1 and a half kilos. and youre on your way home to get 2000 dinar each.'

you read that right. 2000 each. for 1 and a half kilos. i was thinking how strong does shit have to be for 1 and a half kilos to net us 8k total? i decided i wouldnt take any pills for a month and id keep a close eye on rosale.

then ponytail pulled out a card with a number on it. 'in case of emergency. you can only call this number once.'

so we were meant to show up to hangar 8-7 in the russian quarter tomorrow at 1pm. but you know how we sleep brotherman. so we wiped the crust out our eyes around 12 and biked on over around 1:30.

b load didnt wait for us so we figured he was already in the warehouse. i said 'lets go. cairo, youre lookout.'

'nigga im always lookout! put me in there! im trying to fuck shit up!'

'thats exactly why we dont want you in there. we need muscle not retard.'

'nigga who got more muscle than me?'

'wing, answer his question. prince, lets go.'

'nigga, first off, youre not leaving me with this kid. you think im a bitch all a sudden? i cant handle this?'

'yes. prince, lets go in.' prince was honestly the only one we needed in there if were talking muscle.

prince said 'of course, darling.'

tell me why this nigga started taking off his clothes.

'apologies. force of habit. lets go.' he was about to slide up the door but he looked through the little window in it and said 'holy fucking shit. is that imani shunt?'

i looked and i saw b load standing there with a plastic bag in his hands, and standing across from him was 2 niggas in suits and a bald nigga in a leather jacket. the bald nigga had a tattoo of a cross on the side of his head.

'ok. change of plans. im lookout. you guys, show them that central new eden muscle.'

and now all a sudden everybody wants to be lookout. and while were fighting over who gets to be lookout

BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG

we look inside and everybody's on the ground. we head in and see b load dead with a piece in his hand. no idea where he got it. no heat my ass.

on the other side the 2 guys in suits are dead. imani's stumbling away carrying b load's plastic bag and a briefcase in one hand and trying to keep his

guts inside his stomach with the other.

up close, from behind, and with 3 bullets inside him, imani shunt is actually not that scary. i kicked his foot and he fell on his ass and dropped the bags and the knife. cairo stuck his fingers in imani's bulletholes and i told him to cut it out cause his screaming was too loud.

imani kept saying to let him go and he'd give us 10 thousand dinar. no. 20 thousand if we let him go.

prince had the briefcase open. he said 'cher? you otta come look at this.'

i went over and looked. it was, and i shit you the fuck not, 8 boxess of golden weekend strawberry milk. i dont know how long it's been since i had that shit.

we checked the expiration dates and they were all about a month away. and the briefcase kept them all cold. i took a box and went over to b load. he had more stabs in him than i had the math lessons to count.

i squatted down and looked at his gun. it couldve held 11 bullets but it had zero in it. the 5 he shot was all he had.

cause i felt bad for him, i thought id hold his hand and say a prayer for him, but his hand was sticky. i looked at it and it had chicken sauce all over it. 2 days nigga. 2 days. i wiped my hand on his pants and kicked his sorry dead ass. fucking dirty ass nigga. then i put his hands on his chest and asked holy mother mary to wash his hands if she saw him.

then i went out to the phonebooth to call the number on the card and tell them what went down.

a guy picked up and said 'fooler street office speaking. who is this?'

'cherry. from the job at warehouse 8-7.'

'yes?'

'there was heat. now everyone's dead. except for us. the river titans.'

'noted. a cleaning crew is on its way. did you

secure the package?'

'nah, but we found some boxes of golden weekend. you think your boy the weaver wants one?'

'that is the package.'

'huh?'

'1 point 5 kilos or 8 boxes of golden weekend's strawberry milk. that was the package. is it secured?'

i spat my milk right back down through the straw. 'yes. secured.'

'good. we expect the delivery by tonight at 9 pm at the latest.'

'got you big chief.' i was starting to talk like fucking cairo.

he hung up and then a bunch of spiders came out the holes in the phone and took it over and i jumped out.

on my way back to the warehouse i was trying to figure out how id close the straw hole on my milk box and put the straw back. i was thinking maybe id fill it up with some normal strawberry milk, or any milk, or even water, and then i got back and saw the idiots finished every last box.

prince pointed at wing. 'he drank it all! he drank 4 cartons all by himself!'

'i had to! he was gonna drink all of it! or you were when you got back!' nigga, if theres 2 things in this world that give wing diarrhea, it's missing out on his pills and drinking milk.

i told them the milk was the fucking delivery, and the sweepers were on the way. then i went over to imani shunt, who was trying to die peacefully but cairo was drawing on his head with a marker. he copied the cross on one side of his head to the other to make it even, then he got started on the designs.

i told imani he was getting the premium treatment. new eden's finest laying down a piece on his head.

'you niggers are dead. you have no idea how dead. forget my people. you think the spiders will let this

go?'

i put my fingers in his bulletholes and asked him where he got the milk from. he screamed '345 watermain! 345 watermain! go there and die you faggots!'

i asked him where 345 watermain was and he screamed it was south. in the desert. i squeezed deeper in but his answer didnt change. so i wiped my hand on his pants, took b load's bag of money, and we ran.

back at school we tried to find a map of the city in one of the textbooks but they were all 30 years old and still had most of the southside mapped out, with the gardens and othrys court and all those places mom said she used to hang as a kid. problem was every book was so covered in drawings you couldnt even see the maps.

so we headed to mr velasquez's room and asked him if he knew a place called 345 watermain.

'you kids think i know every street in the city?'

'yeah.'

'alright.' he took a book and looked at the map.

wing said the shit was outdated. we needed new textbooks.

mr velasquez said 'nobody is wasting that much money on coloring books for the mentally disabled. here.' then he circled a part of the southside with his marker. 'between niha and the hairy nutsack.'

wing said 'no way it's all the way down there.'

'it is. you idiot kids think there was never anything that far south, but there was. no one ever told you about the sundown?'

i asked if it was part of the curriculum.

mr v picked some gunk out of his ears and flicked it. 'ah, maybe. i cant remember.'

'well tell us what happened then.'

'ah. just some idiots burned down the factory they were working in. they all died in the fire. the town died a little bit afterwards because the factory was

all that was keeping it alive. really goes and shows you how smart those southerners were. why do you want to know anyway? i dont believe you idiots all a sudden wanna learn about history.'

'the milk is being shipped from there.'

'milk?'

'the golden weekend you old fuck.'

'impossible. the place doesnt exist anymore.'

'we gotta check it out.'

'go. youre free to kill yourself whenever you want. hey, why dont you make it an extended vacation?' he laughed at that one. thats why i always piss in his desk.

now, you know it's a damn long ride from school to the desert. what you dont know is how long it is with wing on your back.

wing is always bitching in your ears about your riding, but usually you only have to take it for like 10 minutes.

he says 'i feel like youre looking for every hole you can find just to hit it. just to fuck with me.'

how is it my fault the city doesnt wanna pave the roads? man, if you wanna ride to the southside and not hit any holes in the road, you should find a way to fly.

then this nigga says 'herm probably wouldve loved it back here.'

that wouldve made me laugh if he wasnt screaming in my ear every time i hit a goddamn pebble.

at one point he says 'if youre gonna torture me, at least let me take my pills.' he pulls out his baggy, and by sheer godfucking coincidence, i pass over the smallest hole in the entire world, and he drops like 2 or 3 pills. 'you made me drop my pills!'

'be careful next time. theyre expensive.'

then he smacks me. 'dont act like youre the one buying them!' but sometimes i do buy them.

and every 5 minutes we have to stop so he can shit

his brains out on the side of the road and then spend half a day looking for something to wipe his ass with.

by this point i have fucking had it. a little bit after that, he starts praying because he thinks he's gonna die. 'holy mother mary, if i die on this ride, forgive my sins, and tell god to send this murderer to hell.'

man, that whole ride, i was looking at prince and cairo. cairo looked so light. so quiet. for once, kid wasnt screaming.

i asked prince if he wanted to swap. he smiled at me and said 'no.' like he was riding on air. cunt. and thats not to mention wing weighed the bike heavy to the right and left a trail of feathers the whole way.

we rode right on through rahma, and at some point wing stopped crying cause the road was more sand than gravel. then when the sand got too thick, we had to drop the bikes.

we reached the mosque that used to be at niha and looked at the map that i tore out the book. a mile was like a finger wide on the map. 345 watermain was about a finger and a half to the west. sun go up east. sun come down west. and all we had to do was walk to the sun for a few minutes.

a few hours later and the sun was just about gone over the edge of the world. we for sure missed the delivery time. it was moonlight and stars for us. and let me tell you, it gets way colder out there than it does out here. we ran out of water a while back cause wing drank most of it cause the diarrhea. we didnt think that far ahead.

at some point, wing fell back on the sand. 'i cant take it anymore.' he tried to light a stick but his fingers were shaking. for the life of him, he could not make the fire come out. i covered the lighter with my hands. there wasnt any wind. his hands were

just cold.

we all just laid down in the sand next to this cactus with 6 arms. we had to huddle up cause it was getting real cold. your jacket was big and it was warm for once. we pulled it back and forth between the 4 of us.

wing still found shit to whine about. talking about some 'yall need to shower more.' but for all his angels blood he did not smell like no angel i ever met.

cai had to take off his chest wrap cause it was getting hard for him to breathe. he kept snuggling up on wing's wing.

'get off me, man.'

'shut up. it's too cold.'

prince jacked off on the cactus. we kept telling him to take that shit away from us but he said he couldnt sleep until he came. 'and unless one of you will volunteer, i would like some quiet. or actually, make a little bit of noise. like youre cheering me on.'

we shut the fuck up. then he tried to sleep next to us but i saw he had cum on his hand and i ran. and he chased us until he caught me by the arm of your jacket. i smacked the dogshit out him.

i checked the jacket sleeve but i didnt find any cum on it. to make sure we made prince wash his hands with the sand 100 times.

then we went back to sleep. we just laid there and looked at the stars for a while.

prince said. 'id sell my holes for some water.'

yeah. me too.

me three.

me four.

cairo and prince fell asleep quick. wing was still awake. he had some sand on his face that i wiped off. i thought one day wing's wife would be doing this. it would be cool to live long enough to have a wife.

maybe i could wife prudence someday, and wing could wife a good woman too, and we could all have wives who wipe ashes and dust from our faces.

but even if wing did have a wife, i dont know if she would be able to take all his bitching. riding him around. taking away his food. im the only one who knows how to do it.

wing asked me 'what are we doing, man?'

'just out to get some milk.' my lips were dry as hell. i didnt wanna think too much about it.

'no. i mean, when we get back. what do we do?'

'we deliver the milk.'

'and then?'

'we deliver the money too. and pray we dont get killed.'

'and then?'

'i dont know and then.'

'me neither.' then he wriggled around and said 'oof. my back.'

'you want a massage nigga?'

'a massage? from you? no thanks baby. i wanna keep walking at least for a few more weeks.' then he said his prayer. holy mother mary something something something, and he went to sleep. i didnt have the heart to wake him and ask him to tell me the prayer.

i turned and wrote all our names in the sand. it felt good knowing the wind would take it away by the morning. and we will all be off someday like a bullet from god's silver gun.

we woke up to the sound of a guy yelling something. it was barely morning. there was a light a few feet away. it was a shack. no idea how we missed that. the door was open and some old geezer was sitting inside chefin' something up on the fire. my nose was clogged with sand but i could still tell it smelled bad. i picked my nose and once all the sand was out, the taste in my mouth was terrible.

i asked the geezer if he had some water.

'where are you lads off too?'

he was an old white guy but he for some reason had a british indian accent. 'water.' i said. 'we need water.'

'well get inside, then. bloody hell. and wipe your feet on the mat, please. have some manners.'

the mat he was talking about was grey sheepskin that probably just made our shoes dirtier. it was cramped as hell in there with just the geezer and me. when the rest of the kids came in, it felt like we were gonna make the place explode. the shack was made out of sticks of wood and bundles of straw tied together with old rope. there was a hole in the ceiling maybe the size of my fist.

the geezer passed a big clay pot full of water that tasted like dust. i spat it out. would have rather drunk the sand.

'very very unwise, wasting water in the desert.'

cairo said 'hey geezer, what you cooking?'

'camel ears.'

'you finish the rest of the camel?'

'no. all ive eaten for the last 50 or so years has been camel ears. every week since i started living here, the postman has dropped me off a sack of the delectable stuff. i assume he has the wrong address, but ive been afraid to correct him this whole time. i would have nothing to eat if it werent for these. praise be to god. hay rabi.'

wing said 'what are you, parsi?'

'no. it's mandaism for today. i make sure to have a religion for every day of the week so i dont miss out on thanking any one of them. today is a monday, so i am a mandaian.' it was not monday. all i know about mandaism is maybe calcutta might be mandaian. i never asked him.

'so then, where are you lads off to?'

i told him 345 watermain.

'i was afraid so. well, youll have to turn back.'

345 watermain no longer exists, though i wonder why you believed it would exist. this place has been desert for almost 3 decades.'

'thats bullshit.' i passed him the delivery sheet. 'from this morning.'

'i regret to inform you that this is not real.' he threw it into the fire. i yanked it out and cairo jumped on the old man like he was trying to bring the whole place down. we had to pull kid off before he murdered the guy.

geezer was rubbing his neck, talking about some 'look! see how that milk of the devil makes you all act! every year! like rabid dogs, you lot are! strawberry milk does not deserve to exist! if god meant for strawberries to be in milk, he would have put strawberries in milk!'

wing laughed at him. 'you retard. then half the things in the world dont deserve to exist. yogurt. cheese. butter.' i dont know why he was only thinking of cow stuff. 'shit, if youre right, then this entire shack doesnt deserve to exist. if god wanted it to exist, he wouldve put the whole thing together himself.'

'but he did!'

i dont know how to tell you the way we all looked at him right there. i dont think i have to. i know you got that same face on you right now.

'over 4 decades ago, upon this very ground!' and he pointed at his dirty ass feet. 'i was shot by the dastard goldeye slim. some indigene bandit, perhaps also of berberoid origin, from the liners. regardless, he was of foul blood. he massed a large following around these parts, back when life still thrived. well, life is gone now, and parasites such as goldeye and his ilk are gone with it.'

the kids were looking at me begging me to let them go, but i had to ask. 'why'd this goldeye kid shoot you?'

'he shot all his witnesses! upon this very ground!' and he pointed at his stinky ass feet again 'i saw goldeye slim himself, over yonder, by that piece of green desert shrubbery!' and he pointed out to the weird cactus. 'the dastard murdered an innocent man!' sun go up. sun come down. '6 bullets! and you'll notice the plant has 6 branches! 1 for every bullet! the city may have gone, but the sands remember always! 6 bullets into the poor man's skull. and for what, you ask? a sack of devil's own milk! once the factory went, and the milk with it, men turned to blood for answers. i tell you, there are 3 things that will spell the end of this world. women, guns, and straw berry milk.'

i remember dad said women, war, and whiskey, but ill ask him about strawberry milk next time i see him.

'and oh, how lucky i am that the victim took 6 of the goldeye's bullets, for when the dastard turned upon me, he let me have the 7th! only the most dastardly of dastards would carry an extra bullet within their chamber!'

i wanted to say 7 shots aint even that rare, even dad kept a 7 shot revolver. but he kept going.

'he pierced my hip, the knave! and here, upon this very ground!' he pointed at his stinky ass feet again 'i lay, soaking the land with my juices. i thought i would die! bloody goldeye, may god curse his line, walked up to me and told me to lay there and speak of his crime to passers by, such that they may never forget his name! why, as i retreated into the black, i prayed to god for his glorius bounty, and when i awoke, low and behold, the house was built around me! and god's hand, so deft, left that hole in the ceiling right above my mouth, such that his rains would quench my thirst! of course, as the city has gone, so too have god's rains, but i am lucky this pot no longer runs out of water.'

'alright.' i slapped my thighs. 'lets get going.'

matter of fact, it looked unfinished. concrete raw. no windows, just square holes. the door had sand all up in its hinges.

inside, it was all empty and black, and it smelled heavy like the milk. i was drooling. we had to pull out our lighters, and that didnt do much.

the noise changed indoors. it was more like SLEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK-flup-flup-flup-flup-flup-flup-flup-flup.

the noise came from downstairs so we headed down, but cause we couldnt see the stairs, we all ended up falling down. i landed in some goo. the noise was so loud down there. i thought it might be some kind of broken fan or air conditioner. everytime the SLEEEEEK noise happened, something sucked at my hair and clothes. and everytime it went flup-flup-flup, a wind hit me like whips from a chopper. the milk smell was getting kinda gross and spoiled.

i said 'you smell that fellas? were close.'

'turn on the light.'

'how?'

'the string right by your head.'

there was in fact a string right by my head. i tugged at it and the light turned on. 'howd you know?' then i turned around.

it was the devil. or something close enough to make me pray because i knew whatever god that existed was against it.

'you have come to partake of me.' it said. it was huge and pink and meaty and wet, like some kind of giant cancer tongue. so much skin. skin all over the room. skin stuck to the walls and ceiling. skin creeping up and down the wires of the lightbulb. so many veins in the skin wriggling like hairy, wrinkly worms.

and the skin moved. it pulled together everytime it went SLEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK, and it melted down when it went flup-flup-flup-flup. i think that was the sound

of its breathing.

it had a bunch of holes and flaps across its body? i dont know if body is the right word. a lot of holes and flaps that shrunk like a butthole when it breathed in and flapped against its skin when it breathed out.

in the middle of a massive pile of skin that folded over itself constantly was a shriveled face. its eyes were yellowing and it had so much gunk in its eyelids that fell in chunks everytime it blinked. like boogers falling down in strings of snot.

'come.' it said. it talked in whispers like its lungs were giving out. its mouth was big and its teeth were tiny. 'come and partake of me. that is what you have made your pilgramage for.'

cairo vomited. wing and prince pulled out their knives.

'we have got to get out of here.'

'no! i shall not let you leave!' behind us, the skin grew and covered up the stairway. 'my sacks will soon overflow! this is my final batch! you must partake of my bounty! here, apply pressure upon my teet!' then it rattled a giant, bloated nipple at us.

i vomited too. it was mostly just stomach juices at that point cause i was starving but i couldnt even keep that down.

prince stabbed at the skin in front of the stairway. nothing. the skin was tough and slippery. cairo tried burning the skin with his lighter, but it just dripped milk on the hole and it stopped working. prince pointed his knife at the thing. 'what in the fuck are you?'

it flapped out some noise that maybe wouldve been laughter a million years ago. 'i am the producer. i produce that nectar which is the source of childrens joy. now, partake of my lifemilk.'

the word lifemilk made me vomit again. prince went over to sshank the thing. he stabbed it in the eyes and a bunch of its skin. the thing let out a

strawberry milk flavored breath. prince pulled the knife out.

'you think this is pain? once you have carried the milksacks for over a hundred years, then you will learn of pain. will you carry the milksacks?'

there were a bunch of eggs on prince's hand and knife, bubbling and pulsing. he threw his knife at the ground and wiped his hand on his shirt and then threw his shirt on the ground and threw his expensive ass lighter on it.

'if your thirst is too quenched to partake, then relieve my teet into the pouches, and spread my bounty across the lands. the leathern pouch should keep its temperature cool under the desert sun.'

wing took a pouch, walked up to the rattling tit, and squeezed. like, 5 different streams of milk flew out. it hit me in the face. i vomited again.

cairo said 'no way, nigga. no way thats what weve been drinking this whole time.' and he vomited.

wing told us to quit crying, then he asked the thing 'if we take your milk, youll let us go?'

it moaned. 'yes. please. this is my final batch. the last gift.'

wing got to milking it. the pouch kept falling though, so he yelled at someone to come steady it. me and cairo went in. prince refused to touch anything. he held onto his arms and hopped from one foot to the other looking around himself so he could dodge the meat chunks that fell from the ceiling.

'damn.' wing said. 'it's so oily.'

'those are my secretions. they lubricate the milkhole.'

finally, prince vomited.

wing asked it how it got like this. i asked him why he was talking to the thing.

he shrugged. 'i dunno. i feel bad for him. like you felt bad for that old man.'

'i didnt feel bad for that old man.'

'maybe.'

'youre not grossed the fuck out?'

wing asked the thing again how it got like this.

the thing said it's what happens when a congregation comes together in prayer.

i asked it to repeat that one for me so i could remember it.

when we thought we were done cause we filled the bag, the thing told us it wasnt done yet. it was still rattling. it took us 12 pouches to finish. by the end, the thing was shriveled up and grey, and its breathing wasnt so loud. the skin on the stairway dried up and fell.

we made prince carry all the pouches slung over his shoulder. wing said bye but the thing said nothing back. sun go up. sun come down. and the way back home was paved with feathers on that day. the wind couldnt move them. wing was the road home. he always is.

cairo was holding onto his chest tight while we were going up. i asked him what was up and he shook his head. i asked him if it was trouble breathing but he just shook his head and squeezed tighter. kids these days smoke too much i think. they should build up to it like we did.

'we should throw it away.' prince said when we got out. 'just pour it all out here.'

'no.' wing said. 'were all hungry and thirsty arent we?' he took a pouch from prince and downed half of it. 'fuck. it's cold.' and then he downed the other half.

i asked him what the fuck the matter with him was. he said it was the best golden weekend he ever had. so shit nigga, i had some too. in the cold desert evening, sweating like shit? it hit. and they tell you to not drink milk in the desert.

we had to twist cairo's arm to make him try it but he ended up liking it. prince wouldnt try the milk no

matter what so we sprayed him with it and chased him all the way back out the desert. by that point, there was only half a sack of milk left.

on the way back, we passed the shack, and old geezer shook his head at us from inside. by the time we got back to the road, the bikes were gone, so we had to walk some more. wing had to hang onto me and cairo.

then i let cai and prince go on ahead and i took wing home alone. wing kept the half sack of milk for karina.

he leaned on my left shoulder the way he always did, but everyday he gets heavier and heavier. and the trail of feathers behind us isnt getting any lighter.

'christ. i left karina alone for too long.'

'damn. youre right.'

'pray she had someone to stay over with.'

'yeah.'

'im telling you pray, nigga.'

so i prayed. and again i forgot to ask him about that prayer he always whispers. holy mother mary hold karina's hand.

karina wasnt home. wing's dad was sleeping. i carried kid over to his bed.

he told me peace.

i said peace. and i watched him for a little.

'whats good with you?'

'just making sure.' i said.

i was about to leave when wing said 'i think he was just trying to do his best.'

i said 'huh?'

'he was just trying to do his best and no one wanted him. and now he's dead. mother save his soul.' and he signed the cross.

'yeah.' i signed it too.

next day, the spiders showed up to school and i gave them their plastic bag full of money. i asked

ponytail what i owed them for not getting the milk.

he said 'you killed imani shunt. you couldve kept this money for all we care. but thanks. the weaver will hear about this.'

and for some reason he had to say that in earshot of half the school, and now everybody thinks im the fucking one who killed shunt. and now im getting niggas from across the whole fucking world coming over to fight me. and of fucking course the cops visited to 'investigate' and smack me around a little.

then the next day i was in pru's room after she had a long day's work and she was working on her watches.

i told her the story and she told me not to get involved with spiders. theyre dangerous.

i said sorry i couldnt bring back any milk. the kids drank it all. 'i can get them to puke it back up for you though. if you want.'

'as much as i love to watch boys puke, i think i can live for today.'

that day we smoked and watched the city on her balcony. sun come down. sun go up.

i got a bunch of new ribbons from the computer parts store on leuin. i bought some but i wanted more so i took cairo along and we played a game of mongo goose with the cashier. cairo made too much noise though so we had to run.

he asked what all that bullshit was for and i told him it wasnt bullshit it was typewriter ribbons.

'ok big chief. what you need all them typewriter ribbons for? you writing a book?'

'no.'

'writing letters?'

'yeah.'

'to who nigga? you got a side piece we aint seen yet? i like prudence. ill tell you that. swell girl.'

'to the family nigga. out in the old country. what you got so many questions for?'

'just looking out for old girl.'

'when did you get so close?'

'shes cultured. it was gonna happen kid. dont be surprised you find me moved in with her.'

we walked for a little and then i asked him if he could talk to you right now what would he say.

he said he'd tell you to give back his bad religion tapes. shit. you took them. you give them back.

i thought he was gonna go to work but he just kept following me around. i said 'aint you got work?'

he said 'nah. i trashed that nigga's apartment.'

'why?'

'he was a bitchass nigga. wasnt even tryna do no comics. he was on some other shit. he was a better actor than a comic writer.'

'got it.'

then he wrote ~~my~~ our number down as a sex hotline on the side of a payphone box and i had to disconnect the phone at home just so i could sleep.



i asked prudence about the scar on her cheek. she told me the story. she told me

before i came to new eden, i used to know a beautiful boy named jericho who pushed nails through his cheeks. he would find a nail, sometimes a screw, and no matter how rusty, he would put it in his mouth and stick it out of his cheeks. and he would smile and bleed.

jericho never talked. he only smiled and made noises. he got decent grades in school. he understood us. but he never spoke. only noises and smiles with him. even when the teachers beat him. i dont think his parents were ever around. i never saw his house. i only ever saw him at school or outdoors somewhere.

everyone would get scared when he pushed nails and they would run away from him, whether it was in the street or at the playground. and i ran away with them, but i always looked back at him. sometimes i wanted to just stay. and one day, i did.

on that day, jericho took a particularly long nail and stuck it through his right cheek, near the top, and it came close to his eye. he decided to stick it through his eyelids. he started laughing when he finished. he had a laugh like a baby's. he kept that long nail after he took it out.

one night, i found jericho out in the field, laying there on his back. smiling and bleeding at the moon. i walked up to him, and he had his hands full of nails and screws. he held a hand out to me, but i told him 'i cant.' then he took a nail and motioned it through his cheek, and held it out to me.

i took it and put it in his mouth. i felt around his mouth. it was such a beautiful mouth. his lips were so full and red, and the inside of his mouth was like jewelry. i made him laugh when i put the nail through his cheek. i laughed too.

my mother always hated it when i played with jericho. she hated everything i did. even when i

started making watches, she hated it. i made her a watch one time, and she threw it away. months of my life wasted.

i tried to laugh like jericho when my mother hit me, but it was hard to do. i think i loved that boy. maybe he was my first love.

one day, he got me to push a nail through the palm of his hand. he laughed the way you do at those japanese comedy troops. he doubled over, tearing up. his cheeks were so red.

we started pushing nails into his hands and wrists and arms, and then his feet and legs. we pushed 2 through each of his nipples. we only managed to push one underneath his collarbone. we pushed 3 in his penis and 3 in his testicles. he was so gorgeous. i dont know how he stayed so gorgeous full of screws and nails. his smile was god to me.

my grades started slipping and my mother beat me even more, but she never locked me in my room or anything, and she worked the night shift so she passed out early in the day, so i could always leave and be with jericho.

i would kiss the nails on his hands and feet. i dont think it made a difference to him when i did that, but it made a difference to me. maybe it was to spite my mother. no, thats too cheap. it wasnt cheap, what we did. it couldnt be. it was worship.

i lost a lot of friends for him. when i stopped running away from him, everyone started running away from me as well. i didnt care.

then, one day, i asked him to push a nail through my cheek. he did. and it fucking hurt. i didnt laugh. i didnt smile. i only bled. i pushed him away and ran back home to my mother and cried my eyes out and apologized.

after that, all i saw was a drooling fucking idiot. i feel bad now for thinking that, but i was angry. and i didnt want a scar shaped the way he made

it on my face, so i took a box cutter and drew a nice even line from my earlobe to the dot. that made my mother furious. she said 'now you wont even be able to whore yourself! what will you do for money?' isnt that funny?

yeah. i guess it is. i laughed a little. maybe she told you all that before, but i think it's a good story to hear again. the prudence who wouldve told you this story back then cant be the same prudence who told it to me now.

i told her the story reminded me of prince. doesnt it remind you of him? maybe it's different. i dont get prince the way pru didnt get jericho but i love him the same. the way he takes more hits than he has to in a fight. the way he hurts his face but somehow he always turns out prettier when he's bleeding. sometimes i think he's trying to get rid of his prettiness but it doesnt work.

prudence said 'i think i just like to watch boys bleed.'

prudence was hanging with me and the kids in the council room and she asked us how we got our names. what a horrible night. not completely her fault.

she didnt believe wing had his name before he started growing that thing out his back. he kept trying to convince her he had airtime like jordan since he was a kid. she wasnt buying it but she pretended to.

one thing i found out is prince and cairo are both retards.

cairo said he used to think my name was cherry cause i apparently i always have 'ass cherries.' he meant buttons. i smacked his mama's ass.

then wing started talking about when we were in 2nd grade in the sandpit and a scorpion clipped my balls and i was running around town with a scorpion stuck to my balls. he said my balls were so red and thats how i got my name. i beat the dogshit out of him.

the worst was prince. he said he thought my name was chairy cause apparently i like to beat people with chairs? what? and he didnt used to think this. no. he thought that was my name until today.

like, this nigga was spelling my name as CHAIRY the whole time in his head. how many years ive known kid? and i only ever beat him with a chair like 3 times. and he still doesnt know why im so upset.

around 2nd periodish today i was at prince's place looking at some of his old school porno tapes and huffing some of his new school nail paint remover.

prince has trouble getting out of bed some days ever since a few months ago. if he doesnt show up by 2nd period one of us goes over to his house and drags him out of bed and throws him in the bath and helps him with his hair and kills the roaches for him and takes all his moldy plates to the sink and sometimes throws them out if theyre too far gone. that day it was me.

whatever you remember his house smelling like before it's like a thousand times worse now. i never got how such a clean looking guy could have a house that smelled like dog shit. i cant remember if it smelled like that even back when his mama was with us. i mostly cant remember smells that far back.

he was just out of the bath playing with the hair we just spent a fucking hour brushing and not paying no attention to the white girl i put on tv getting her feet licked and sucked on.

all day he aint said shit about shit so out of nowhere i asked him if he could say something to you right now what would he say?

he looked down at his toes and played with them for a bit. then he said 'first id ask him if the weather's nice where he is. if i should i pack lotion when i go and visit and what kind. i like the heat but i want to dress up too. and i like the cold but i dont want to wear clothes every day.' then he put his fingers to his mouth and looked at me like he was actually scared. 'i hope they let you wear silk. if it's hot, then i have some fantastic silk shirts that would be much more season appropriate.' he got up and walked over to his poster and slapped it. 'is viktor tsoi over there? oh, i know he isnt. but can i at least call him on the phone?' he slapped his other poster. 'and christian rosenkrantz too. can i talk to

him too? id send goldy a list of questions to ask both of them. and what do the girls look like over there?' he put up his hand. 'no. dont tell me. theyre all blonds, arent they?' nigga i dont know. 'i think thats the way it is. hell is filled to the brim with blonds. and thats why he's there and not in heaven. nevermind. im not going until i absolutely have to. you know, youre lucky youre not blond. if only you werent such a marvelous piece of shit, you might have had a chance at heaven. remind me to die my hair black before i die. anywho,' what? 'he should come here. or otherwise meet us halfway. and then and then' and then and then and then.

kid spent an hour walking around the house just talking to himself. when he was done i told him he should invest in a typewriter.

by chance, i brought up ms abbas with prudence. she was working on her watches and talking about how she thinks this guy called fitzgerald is a hack cause he doesnt write his own books. i think i remember dad saying he was a hack cause of vietnam or cuba or some shit. i guess the guy got around.

prudence was tearing into the guy, but apparently she still liked the book. stolen or not, the words worked. and something about the way she talked about the book brought out a memory in me.

5th grade, 1st year out of the original st mary's. ms abbas was trying to get us all to write stories, and i kept drawing pictures of rats bleeding and shitting and yelling FUCK ME, all kinds of shit like that.

one day, after school, she sat my ass down, and i stuck out my hands. i thought she was gonna give a nigga the ruler. maybe the belt. i was getting ready to piss her off by laughing instead of crying. i had to focus though to make that work.

i remember she had the accent of someone you could tell worked real hard to get rid of their accent. it barely showed on her. mom could learn something. then she took out my paper about ratshit and vomit and said 'whats this story about?'

i said 'the rat saw your face and vomited and shit himself.' and i laughed my ass off.

she said 'what does the rat not like about my face?' and she asked it not like i was in trouble, but like she really wanted to know. like she really cared what the vomiting shitting rat thought about her.

then i dont know what happened, but i started crying. i said i dont know. he's weird.

'is that why you like him so much?'

'i dont like him.'

'why dont you try writing about something you like?'

'i can try.'

ms abbas never needed a ruler to make me cry. all those other teachers back then, i can thank them for toughening me up. ms abbas didnt do that. she was doing something else. maybe i loved her more than mom. it makes me scared to think about that.

i wrote a story for her called BIG BEETLE COMES TO TOWN about a beetle who ran away from the beetle city in the winter but got stuck in the ice and couldnt get out and died. she said she liked it, but my spelling and my grammar sucked balls.

she hammered commas into me until i pissed myself. i still dont really know, where commas go, but i throw them in, sometimes, where they feel right.

apostrophies can fuck themselves though. i only use them if i really really have to, like the bullets in a gun when the zombies finally get you. i think ms abbas gave up on me with capitalizing.

her class was the only class i didnt feel like a retard. the only class besides pe that i passed without having to force calcutta to do my homework. it was the only time i didnt feel like shit for holding you back from that boarding school mom wanted to send you to.

i told it all to prudence, and she was surprised to hear there was a teacher i liked. she asked what happened to her and i said i didnt know. i remember last day of 5th grade, she wanted us all to get up to the front of class to read our stories for the first time. i asked her if i could write mine for wing. she said 'absofruitley!' i liked that. wish i started saying it. i was real proud of my story. it was called BIG BIRD COMES TO TOWN.

she said 'im sure he'll love it.'

well, last day of class, im the last one to go. i dont know why she did that. maybe it was for the best. all the girls got up and read their stories that got good grades. all the guys got up and read their stories that they fucked up on purpose to get

laughs. wing got up and flicked a booger into ramon's mouth. he didnt write anything.

then it was my turn. i had the whole class banging their desks yelling 'CHERRY! CHERRY! CHERRY!' man, you know i couldnt read no bullshit. i balled the papers up into my pocket, pulled down my pants, and started pissing on calcutta's desk.

then ms abbas looked at me in a way that sent me so far away from everything else.

back home, mom asked me how the fuck i found a way to get suspended on my last day of school. i threw the paper under my bed and forgot about it. maybe i picked a fight with you knowing you would beat my ass.

prudence asked what big bird comes to town was about.

i told her i forgot.

she said she wanted to read it. that you told her about it. what the fuck do you know about big bird comes to town?

i told her it's probably gone somewhere.

she said either i needed to rewrite it or find it, because she wanted to read it.

well, shit. ok. she came over, and we went to our room. pru said 'this is my first time in this room.' she sniffed. 'it stinks.' then she laid down on your bed. 'never had a bed frame?'

'a what?'

'what about sheets?'

'we sometimes have those, but it's not cold.'

'so thats why you let me have all the sheets to myself.'

'no you just take them from me. i need the sheets over there cause you and mona always keeps the ac so fucking cold.'

we checked everything and put everything back where it came from. like we were never here. i made sure she didnt see the type writer.

she told me i had to start cleaning the room out for dust or id get too many bugs. i said maybe.

she said 'should i check under goldy's bed?'

i said 'go ahead.'

'he did tell me he kept some of your things under his bed.'

nigga.

she checked and actually found a big ziplock under there. inside it were a bloody tooth, a stick butt, a switchknife handle, and some notebook papers.

no fucking way. how long were you keeping all of those? we shared that room for more than 10 years. how many secrets did you hide in that room? how many did you hide in the city? how many could you even hide? i dont even have that many secrets so if i even wanted to hide them i wouldnt know where the best place is. am i doing something wrong?

pru shook the bag. 'goldy always said he liked to keep track of the things you didnt care about.'

'why would he care about that shit?'

'i always thought it was so cute. i cant believe im actually seeing it right now. look.' she pointed to the tooth. 'the first tooth that got knocked out of your mouth. look at it! it's so little!'

'not that little.'

she pointed at the stick butt. 'your first ever cigarette!'

'who keeps something like that?'

'a good brother.'

'a dirty freak.'

'your first knife.'

'7 inches. everyone else had at least a 9 inch back then.'

'and of course.' she took a bunch of papers out. 'all your stories.'

'thats stupid.'

she looked through them. big bear comes to town. big bronco comes to town. big billiam comes to town.

and big bird comes to town. you kept a library down there. all classics.

'he told me he kept other stuff too. like the first little sock you grew out of. and your first pair of shades.'

were you a fucking stalker? i reached out my hand so she could give me the paper but she went into the corner and started reading it. i didnt want her reading it without me reading it first but she shoved her hand in my face and then sat down on me until she finished.

'your handwriting is so bad.'

was. 'you done with that?'

'i want to read it again.'

oh my fucking god.

'this was meant for wing?'

'yeah.'

'not fair.'

'huh?'

she put both hands on my throat and started killing me. 'NOT FAIR THAT ONE OF YOUR BUTTBUDDIES GETS A STORY AND I DONT!'

i tapped out. 'it was like 7 or 8 years ago. and he didnt even look at it. it doesnt matter.'

'he would love it.'

'you know thats bullshit.'

'read it yourself.'

'no point. you already read it. now it's going in the trash.'

'no it's not. what grade did you get for it?'

'i dont know. i ran out of the class before i handed it in.'

'maybe we should find her and give it to her. see what the grade would be.'

'yeah, okay, sure.' i reached for the papers but she folded them up and put them in her bra. 'im keeping this until we find her. or until you write me a story.'

man. this woman will drive me off the goddamn planet.

well, that night i headed out to reyes and peach to remember what a punch felt like.

next day, i went back to mona's to see pru. she says she can tell it's me by the way i knock, so i keep changing up the knock but she keeps guessing right.

i went into the room and there she was, beautiful as ever, but wearing the dumbest hat i ever saw in my life. it was like 2 hats on top of each other. she had one brim to the front and one brim to the back. she put up her hands like she was showing it off. i asked if this was some kinky shit she read in a book somewhere.

'you idiot. this is the sherlock homes hat.'

'thats one hat?' it was one hat! man, i couldnt stop laughing.

'it's my detective hat. were going detecting today.'

'detecting what?'

'your teacher, ms. abbas.'

now, you gotta understand, i thought this was over and done with. im a retard, of course. i shouldve known old girl better by now.

she said we should go to the old school and see the 'directory'. no idea what the fuck that is, but we went.

the school was shut down. there was a fence around it, and some signs said DEMOLITION SOON. i dont know how soon, but there wasnt much left anyway. the fence was useless too cause there were like 10 different mansized holes in it.

the walls inside were all flat grey. the color left with everyone else. even the posters were all grey. grey cats telling you how to tie your grey shoes. grey numbers added and subtracted from other grey numbers.

i remembered exactly where ms abbas's class was. there werent any tables or chairs left, but there was the stand that miss put her papers on, and an empty desk that she used to sit at.

we didnt stay there too long. prudence was a little sad. 'sherlock homes would be able to find a clue here.' she said. but thats just what happens when you stop going down a road. everything along it turns to dust.

on the way out we asked the guy working the liquor store across the street what happened. first he asked about pru's hat. i kept trying to take it off of her but she wouldnt let me.

then he said the school moved. pru lit up. the guy said last he heard, the school was closer to the meds, maybe on polos street.

it was on polos street. and it was a bit smaller too. there was a receptionist. you ever see a school with a receptionist in your entire life? we asked her if she knew ms abbas.

'dear, what is that on your head.'

'a sherlock homes hat. now, about ms abbas.'

'oh, well i havent heard from her ever since she up and left with that convict 6 years ago. ferone, was his name. ferone something. a criminal if there ever was one. yes, yes, racketeering in the levantines! protection, with the spiders or the albanians or what ever god forsaken group of bandits it was! in my humble opinion, they shouldnt have let him out of prison at all. how that woman could fall for him after all that, and how she could leave her students! can you believe that? leaving her students for a criminal! just goes to show, even the most clean and proper women can still be whores. heavens. what IS this world coming to? oh, by the way, who are you again?'

prudence looked at her funny. 'werent you supposed to ask that before?'

i said i was an old student, and i asked if she

knew the address.

old bitch said no. prudence asked if she could look at the directory, and the old bitch said they lost theirs, and they cant afford to replace it.

'i told you that wasnt a real thing.'

'shut up.' she reached in my pocket, pulled out my wallet and slapped all 15 dinar on the desk.

'oh, would you look at that! ive found it!' she pulled out a big book and flipped through it and said the adress out loud. pru wrote it down.

i said we cant even go there. the building was taken down. old bitch said she couldnt help us. wouldnt even give back the 15 dinar until she saw a knife in her face. pru got mad at me for that but i cant just give up 15 in this economy. it's not the 80s anymore. niggas cant just find metal and get paid. i didnt even tell you about what happened with the manholes. thats for later.

prudence took me to the police office in the levantines. i really did not wanna be anywhere near there but i guess i follow her wherever now. she took off her hat this time before going in.

she said she was looking for a guy by the first name of ferone who was arrested for running a protection racket with either the spiders or the albanians. the cops laughed at her.

they said spiders dont run protection. yet at least.

'what about albanians?'

'whats your business?'

'were looking for an old teacher.'

'your teacher got arrested for racketeering?'

'something like that.'

'where are you from?'

'not your business. by law, arrest records are meant for the public.'

i guess she knows how to deal with cops. if i talked to them the way she did youd catch me telling

you this story in person.

she got the file of 4 different ferones who all got arrested for racketeering with the albanians in the last 10 years. never heard that name before in my life and now every single one i know is a non-albanian who ran protection with albanians.

3 of them didnt have addresses in central. 1 of them did, and his parole officer, who was there, gave us the address he moved to with his wife. he laughed when he said he was invited to the wedding.

so we went over to the building, newer than our place, but it's one of those buildings theyre trying to cram the whole city into. we knocked on door 312. not a damn soul. prudence said i should write a note and slip it under the door. now i dont walk around with pen and paper, but prudence does. i didnt wanna do that shit. i just wanted to go home.

then, a short, chubby woman walked up the stairs, out of breath, with 2 massive plastic bags in each hand and 2 jumpy kids on each side of her. i was still squinting at her like she was fine print on the devil's contract when she said 'cherry?'

i damn near fainted. 'howd you know?'

even with that heavyass plastic bag in her hand, she still found a way to wag that finger at me. 'a teacher never forgets her students.' she had on the widest smile on her face. she got fatter since the last time i saw her but all it did was make her smile like the sun. 'do you know someone here?'

'actually, were here to see you.'

'then what are you doing at 312?'

huh?

'i live at 313.'

in that moment i wanted every cop in the world to burn in front of his family. i say in that moment but that aint changed yet. 'you wouldnt believe it, miss. the RIGAMAROLL we went through to find your place.'

she laughed and said 'it shouldnt have been that

much trouble. your mom knows my address.'

'what.'

'she does my taxes for me every january.'

'oh yeah.' of course she does. that kooky bitch does taxes for the whole city. and never tells me about any of it.

'oh, you HAVE to come in for dinner. im making wara enaaaaab!' her kids danced.

i looked at prudence. 'ok.' prudence pinched my ass and told me to take her bags. ms abbas gave me the 'no no no, it's okay' but she still handed them to me like she was trying to get rid of them. the 2 kids stared at me like they never saw a guy before. maybe a guy with died red hair.

inside, it was about as small as youd expect from a building like that. i thought our place was cramped, but she was living there with her kids. i guess i forgot how cramped it gets in a home. she told me to put the plastic bags down on the floor.

she had quran verses and old looking paintings hanging from the walls. on the wall next to the tv was a bookshelf with more books than anyone could read in their whole life. her kids were already at the tv booting up their sega. she said they were sharif and mahdi. sharif was a year older. he was louder and had light brown hair. mahdi was quiet and had his mama's black hair.

'now are you going to introduce me to the pretty young lady in the sherlock homes hat?'

prudence held out her hand. 'im prudence. cherry's moral compass. can you believe he doesnt know who sherlock homes is?'

ms abbas bent over to look at me like i was still shorter than her and said 'you havent been keeping up with your summer reading!'

i asked miss if she read all the books on the shelf. she said 'of course. twice for some of them. thrice for others.' thrice. what a woman.

about 15 minutes later, her husband came home. he had a suit on. looked a lot smarter than in his mugshot. big fucker. had maybe a foot over me. made ms abbas look like a teddy bear. he shook my hand like he thought i was made of concrete. but i saw him shake prudence's hand. he knew how to shake hands like a normal person. whyd he fucking do that to me? apparently he did 3 job interviews that day. he was hopeful.

he did the muslim washing thing that cairo does sometimes, prayed, then started helping miss make the wara enab and the yogurt and the lamb. pru asked if they needed help and they told us to just sit there and have fun.

prudence checked out the bookshelf and i watched the kids play gunstar heroes. i took a turn at the game but the kids were a million times better than you or me. maybe if i had more practice, but you need a working sega for that. so people shouldnt break the segas that other people tried so hard to steal.

i told sharif not to die, and i told mahdi not to let sharif die. they started arguing over who was better and who died more.

ms abbas let us choose our favorite plate. they all looked different. i chose the red one of course. prudence chose pink. the wara enab was insane. and the yogurt and the lamb too. me and pru didnt eat all day and miss made a mountain of the stuff so we each of us ate 2 plates. we barely had time to say anything, so dinner was kinda silent. ms abbas smiled at that. she has such deep dimples now. kind of smile that can make plants grow.

ms abbas talked about meeting her husband at the school, where he wanted to enroll at a 6th grade level to pick up where he left off. he didnt know that wasnt a thing you could do. miss said she didnt know why it was so difficult. curriculums are terrible. but she could never turn a student away.

she taught him after afterschool. so she was teaching the kids and then she'd spend hours teaching him at her place. she said 'i knew i had to marry him my 2nd week teaching him. it wasnt anything specific. or maybe it's just i liked the way he pronounced the word thursday.'

he said it like chughsdays. it made ms abbas and prudence and the kids laugh.

only a few months later, they were married and pregnant. miss asked about wing. razer and ramon. she said she was sorry about you. i guess mom told her when she was doing her taxes. you did die in the last fiscal year.

miss is a private tutor for some rich families up north now. she misses teaching classes though. she asked about my grades. i told her i was probably gonna have to repeat the year. she told me i better try harder next time. i said i would. i dont know why i would. not really anywhere a degree can get me. but i didnt say that.

prudence and miss started talking their asses off about shake spear and alexander duma and william falcon and a bunch of other guys i know the names of but dont fucking know. book writers. authors. i remembered from their talk that charles dickins is ms abbas's favorite. but the only book i like to read is the hobbit. they smiled at that like they were giving me charity.

so they were talking about their favorite characters and lines, and pru told her about hers. ferone tapped me on the shoulder and said 'i like the books, but i prefer the cartoons.' he pronounced it caghtuns. but i was with him on that one. when they invent a book thats as good as daffy duck, maybe ill pay attention.

i told miss that prudence made the watch i was wearing with her own 2 god given hands, and that made the conversation last like an hour longer. miss

managed to find a way to get pru to talk her ear off about watches.

when dinner was done and we put the plates all in the sink, ms abbas asked 'so what made you come over all a sudden?'

it took me maybe 10 minutes to explain, but i told her the deal, and i made sure to blame prudence for this as much as possible. pru pulled out the papers and handed them to miss.

'so yeah.' i said. 'i just wanted to know if you would grade that. tell me what i wouldve got if i didnt mess it up that day.'

'so you come to give me more work?'

i pointed at prudence. 'it was her idea. i wanted nothing to do with this.'

miss laughed and touched my cheek. 'i kid. i kid.' she reached into her purse and pulled out her glasses. 'very well. lets see.'

'and dont just give me an A cause you feel bad for me or cause it's been a long time. like, i wanna know for real.'

'cherry, do you think me incapable of doing my job properly?'

i shook my head.

'then leave me be.'

i sat there quiet. prudence half argued with ferone over who should do the dishes. ferone won. the kids were doing their homework.

miss read through the whole thing, then put it on her notebook, took out her green pen and started marking it. she laughed a little. 'i forgot you wrote your m's like that.' i feel like it doesnt hurt to make sure.

then she read over the whole thing again and marked it some more. 'i thought i told you i wanted you to think over your titles. not everything can be big something comes to town.'

i cant think of any other titles. and whats better

than a big guy coming to town? it really gets the audience excited. you wanna see the big guy. he's probably a riot. but then i give you the twist. now thats a story.

she handed it back to me. in green pen, a B+. good god almighty and halay luya. holy mother mary. sun go up. sun go up.

i passed the class.

'you have to learn to capitalize properly or youll never get anywhere. and you need to be more focused.'

'was it boring?'

'no. i liked it. but you always get too easily distracted.'

too distracting. got it.

'you wrote this for wing, didnt you?'

'yeah.'

'read it to him. he'll love it.'

'i dont think so. were all grown up now. and he never liked stuff like this.'

'you know him best. but theres a lot of heart in this. it would be a shame if it was kept a secret forever.'

when i looked at the paper, it was all green pen. question marks and stuff. she stopped fixing my capital letters about a quarter of the way through. apparently i still dont know how the fuck to use a comma.

we hung around for a while, ate some good baklawa, but eventually prudence bruised my elbow with how much she was pinching it and so we had to go. before we left, when prudence was outside and ferone and the kids were in the living room and it was just me and ms abbas in the hallway, i said i was sorry.

'what for?'

'for being a bad person. i cant count how many times i let you down. just the year after graduation, i made a kid kill himself. last year, i let goldy die. then i let judi heller get away. even now. i

made you take care of a bad person for dinner.' and my right arm doesnt hurt as much these days.

'i heard about all of it. i dont know what happened. even if you told me, that wouldnt be every thing. my job was to teach you english. i think i did a very good job. and a teacher cannot help but love her best students no matter what they do. especially when they come back to visit her when theyre older.'

i had to turn away cause i didnt want her to see how desperate i was to not be a bad person anymore.

she told us to come again, but i dont know if i will. her house is so warm, and all id do if i kept coming around is bring my problems and take those dimples off her face.

she kissed me on the cheek goodbye.

outside, it was dark. purple sky. prudence called it violet. and all the stars that used to be in the sky were spilled across the city. we leaned on the rail and looked out. it was so big and open. and empty. and it was getting cold. inside that apartment was so warm. golden light all over. it's hard to imagine it ever getting bad in there, even if they were fighting. it didnt look like mahdi ruined their lives yet.

i looked over at pru. her eyes were wide. she was crying. i dont know for how long. i asked her 'what happened. why are you crying?' maybe she stepped on a nail and was too afraid to say anything. happened to me before.

she said 'why are YOU crying?'

i didnt even realize. 'i thought i was sweating.'

'it was so warm in there.'

'yeah.'

'and it smelled like book pages.'

'and baklava.'

'and she was so fat. and so happy. oh my god.'

'thats what it looks like when you eat good every day.'

'i wish i could get that fat on good food.'

'ill get fat with you.'

'no way. id lose my job.'

'you wanna work at mona's your whole life?'

'no. you know the answer is no.'

'then get fat with me.'

she laughed.

'im serious. ill find a way so we can both get fat. and you can marry me and we'll be fat forever and eat good everyday.'

then she said 'no. no no no no.' she started walking away from me. 'no no no no no.'

i went after her. she was crying harder now. i asked what happened. what was it i said.

and she said 'you cant do this. you cant tell me to spend forever with you when you dont even plan on living out the rest of the year.'

'im not planning on dying or anything.'

'but youre banking on it. and i cant do that.'

'im not banking on dying.'

'i dont believe you.'

'what do i have to do to get you to marry me?'

'oh my god. i dont know. i dont know. ive never been. i dont know.'

'you could just say no.'

'fuck no.'

'what?'

'i dont want to not marry you.'

'then what do you want?'

'I DONT KNOW!'

'ok.'

'you cant make the same promises goldy made and then break them the exact same way too.'

damn. i thought the wind took your footprints away but i look down and there they are again.

she put her face in my shoulder and said 'i cant see that far ahead either. i dont know how much longer i have before i get kicked out of mona's or get lung

cancer or get killed by a customer or throw myself into the river. ive been saving. it might be enough to leave. and if i leave, how do i know if youll follow? if i cant even see tomorrow, then how can i promise you a forever?'

'you could promise me a now. and then if you promise me a now every day, then i think eventually we can make it to forever.'

'ok. i promise. i promise you right now today that ill marry you.'

'can i get an advance on tomorrow's promise?'

'slow down there my darling. one day at a time.'

'ok.'

'and you need to get me a ring.'

i asked mom on the phone if she still had her wedding ring.

'yes. why?'

'i want it.'

'are you going to propose?'

'maybe. maybe ill sell it.'

'i can sell it myself, ya tooty.'

'maybe i can get a better price.'

'ok. if you do, you bring me with you. and we split the price in half. aiyai. a good son would be giving his mother jewelry. not taking it away.'

'you shouldve had a good son then.'

'you have to come and get it. im not going there.'

i went over to get it, and it took her about 15 minutes to find it. 'here it is.'

it was just a silver band with a tiny rock on it.

'i forgot how boring it was.'

'yeah.' she looked at it for a while, like it had something written on it. she rolled it around and tried it back on and looked at her hand.

i mustve had my hand out for like a million years. 'mom. the ring.'

'yes. yeah.' she gave it to me.

i looked at the inside. nothing was written on it.

'listen. only sell it for 1050. no less. ok?'

'no promises on the price.'

she grabbed my hand hard and looked me in the eye like she was trying to laser me. 'listen. no less than 1050. am i clear?'

'yeah.'

'good.'

'and what if i dont wanna sell it? like what if i do wanna propose with it?'

'then when she rejects you for giving her a piece of shit ring, come and bring it back to me.' she was about to shut the door but i held it open for just a second.

i asked her how she would spell that thing she

says. aiyai!

she looked at me funny like 'why do you want to spell that?'

'i dunno. i was just wondering.'

'if you spell it, you spell it in arabic.'

'i dont know arabic that good.'

'and you dont know spanish and you dont know aramaic. and you talk english like an american. your ummeema is crying in her grave right now.'

'dad talks like an american too. i got it from him.'

'ai. like a lizard, that man. he can become invisible. if you let me teach you like i taught ursula, you would now be a man of character maybe. but instead you were learning the names of every whore in the intersection. i told you and your brother stay away from there until your 17th birthday. and now like your father and your mother, you get married in highschool. aiyai. allah will judge us all.'

i bumbled around with my words a bit cause i aint talked to her about you since the week it happened, but i asked her if she could say something to you right now, what would she say.

'there is nothing to say.'

'yeah.'

then she shut the door. i was walking to the elevator when she opened the door again and said 'if he wants his teeth to be as yellow as his hair, he can keep not brushing his teeth.' and then she shut the door hard this time.

well, prudence liked the ring. i wanted to make it like the movies so i dropped to my knees but i did it too fast and bruised them.

she said 'one knee! one knee!' then i took her right hand and she said 'no, other hand!'

she still liked it. she also got a ring for me. she said 'this is a placeholder. ill get you a better ring later. i get if you dont want to wear it. it's

going to turn your skin green.'

i still wore that shit. prudence bragged about her ring to the girls even though it was just a 750 dinar piece of shit. ursula was faking it real bad so i had to pinch her ear and tell her to act better.

prudence also made me promise to stop getting into fights. she said if we were gonna leave this city and set up shop, i couldnt bring new eden with me. she said 'to test you, if you get in 1 fight from now until we leave, this is over. im not making the same mistake i made with your brother.' so ill try.

later on, i was at wing's place, and when karina asked where i got my ring, i told her i was engaged. she laughed until she saw i wasnt joking, then she passed out.

wing said 'you gotta take it easier on her.'
im sorry. i keep forgetting.

when word got around judi heller was still alive, niggas got mad at me. i told them mom was fine with it. they said they werent. they couldnt tell me a single word you said on your last day in central but they had the nerve to get mad.

nigga, judi heller begged me to get rid of him. tell me why the fuck i should hand out gifts to the guy who killed my brother. but nobody else needs to know that.

no it wasnt cause i met judi's kid brother. it was just cause i never liked beggers even when i was the one with my hands out. i dont hand out charity. ill take it up with god some other time.

some niggas tried fighting me about it. i was happy to let them beat me but i couldnt even fake it. it's not fair that hands hit softer than when theyre fighting for a cause. but say la vee.

so for about a month niggas stopped looking at me. niggas stopped giving me their bullshit to deal with. i just sat back and smoked and went to the arcade alone and hit up mona's alone.

prince hung with me a bit but cairo and wing were still mad at me. cairo wouldnt even let me help him ink in his comics.

and my footsteps had no echo that month.

every week they got into some bullshit. got their asses beat on reyes. got their asses fucked in kaze. got in trouble with octobers. pissed off a bunch of saints. that one was mostly wing.

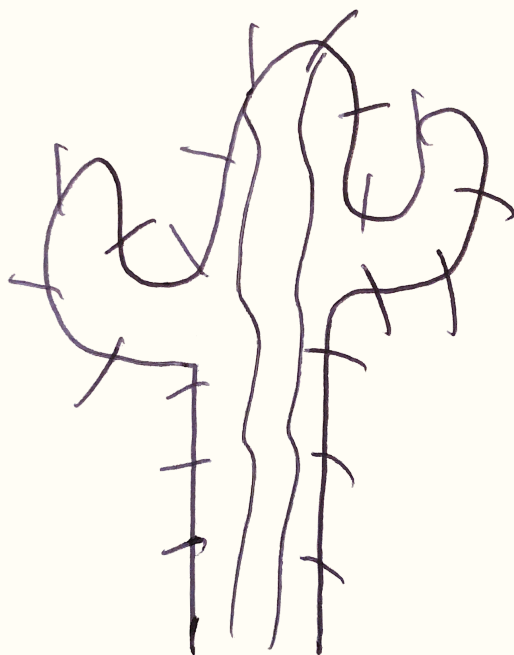
and day by day more and more eyes fell back on me. and every step i took i heard 100 more following. wing was the last one to turn around. i wished he wouldnt. i wish he could take over. he would be so much better than me. even cairo would be an improvement on me.

then one day wing pissed off a bunch of saints. again. something to do with karina. again. he showed up on the roof wobbly and bleeding wherever his body would let him bleed. he tossed me one of those

blackstar berets the saints love to wear. said 'we got trouble on the way captain.'

he passed it off to me like it was as simple as lighting a stick. and so my 1 month vacation was over. being captain is like being a sweeper. except i wouldnt mind being an actual sweeper cause niggas dont look at them or toss them saint berets and expect them to bleed for them.

if it was anyone else i wouldve thrown him off the roof. but ill bleed a little bit for wing.



man, what the fuck are these kids naming each other these days. some freshman kid died. his name was diarrhea shits.

i remember telling his friends when i first met him 'call him something different NOW.' they laughed. i showed them something to laugh about. they said yessir and saluted. then guess what they call him? guess. i dare you. they started calling him runs. nigga thats the same name!

well, kid died. sun go up. sun come down. and you can buy him an orange soda on me. i hear thats his favorite. or dont. mom read in a magazine that soda gives niggas the runs.

the kid hung himself in the garden. his friends wanted his grave big as hell but we could only make it so big. he was such a small guy, and we all had the fucking runs. we were all pale as hell and woozy, taking turns between shoveling and shitting downriver.

the toilets became useless because 'the central new eden sewage system cannot handle this much diarrhea.' thats what they said on tv. the sewage backflowed out onto the streets and flooded them with shit and it's still now barely back to normal.

you cant ride bikes right now cause it's still too thick so cairo walks around with plastic bags on his shoes. id do the same if i still had my boots but all i got are your old ass chucks and i wash them off at school.

some people got constipated instead. and some people died from the constipation. some cops. some priests. some pimps. mr fikar, who was apparently diddling diarrhea shits. sun go up.

kid's friends cried to me. asked me why their friend had to die for that nigga to get what he deserved. i cant remember when i stopped asking why. maybe when i saw tobit ask that question and not get an answer.

some of the kids shat down mr fikar's dead throat

and cut him up and left him in the street like that. herm cut up his stomach and his guts were tied up like shoelaces.

weird thing was some kids had perfectly good 'bowel movements.' thats how herm calls it. i called mom and she said nothing was wrong, but her boyfriend is shitting his brains out everyday. 'and thank god too. he was just talking to me about having children. aiyai!'

mona'ss had good business cause every other house on the inter section was either backed up or running, and they were the only girls shitting nice.

you know who else was shitting pretty? wing. he said 'baby, i feel like i could eat the whole WORLD!' for the first time in my life, wing took the food off my plate. i couldnt even finish half a drum. thats just great for him.

i hope he had his fun cause once i stop shitting im coming for every plate he ever eats for the rest of his life.

a few days ago, prudence had a day off and i told her we should get her a wedding dress. mom always said she got married to dad wearing his jacket cause it was freezing cold and the temple wasnt built for 'the weather those fucking americans brought over.'

i aint told pru that story yet. i dont wanna give her this jacket. it would be weird, wouldnt it? and i always imagined a girl wearing a white dress like in the movies.

prudence said it was a bad idea.

'why?'

'i dont know. also, grooms arent supposed to see their brides in their wedding dress before the wedding day.'

'who made that up?'

'i dont know! it's bad luck apparently.'

'i bet an american came up with that one.'

'maybe they did. but im not taking my chances.'

she didnt get it. it's ok.

'you dont want a wedding dress?'

'i want to finish this watch. and we have to save money for the move.'

'ok.'

i was ready to leave it at that, but then she said 'ok. if youre going to force my hand, then i suppose i have to. come on. lets go.'

man.

it's not that many seamstress shops left in central so we ended up going over to the hills. actually, i should say she dragged my ass over to the hills cause apparently theres a strip about a quarter mile long thats all just dress shops. they call it the ile. spelled A-I-S-L-E. you cant make any of this shit up.

we mustve gone to like, a million different stores. this is about how it went in each fucking one.

we'd walk in, and the place would smell like fancy perfume. prudence would call out every single dress out loud. too many frills. more yellow than white.

garbage silhouette. i had to ask her how to spell that. theres an h in there but i forget where it goes. if you can figure it out then stick it in there for me.

then she'd find one dress and hold it up in front of the mirror like she was trying it on. id tell her she looked great. she'd ask what the price was, and we'd hightail it out of there.

we went in each shop ready to split one for 800 dinar. then we tried going for a more realistic 1500, and i wouldve took some of calcutta's money to cover, but even that wasnt enough. the cheapest one we found was still worth enough to buy out all of central.

then it was dark out. we took the scenic road home, like we usually do. down rokeya where the sunset shines on the piles of broken traincars and nothing gets in the way of the sky.

did you ever walk down any of those roads with her? how many of your footsteps did i already step over without knowing? sun go up. sun come down. and the sand will forget the pattern of your shoes.

prudence said something like 'it would all just be a waste of money anyway. i dont even look good in white. id rather wear pink to our wedding. or green. maybe blue. it's all stupid, isnt it? and white doesnt even look good on me anyway. a good watch is more important than a good dress when youre at your wedding. and of course, the shoes. but noooooobody talks about the wedding shoes! and white is cliché for a wedding anyway. and' blah blah blah.

man i couldnt let her go home like that. i remember one of moms friends from her days at mona's was a dressmaker over on atia street. orient seamstress. with the big black and white picture of the dancer on the front door.

you remember she'd take us with her sometimes whenever she wanted a new dress? her daughter was like 5 or 6 years older than us and we'd put maggots or blood on a stick and chase her around while mom

was getting fitted for some new clothes. a lot of those shops been dropping like flies, but i had to check.

i told prudence to come with me for a detour before we went home. she whined a bit. she just wanted to sleep it off. she kept asking me where we were going. i didnt wanna get her hopes up even more just in case the place closed down. i was banking on it being closed actually.

took me a while to find it. the streets aint as familiar as they used to be. more twists and turns these days. when they were crowded, i could make my way through them blind just by the sounds the people made when they were on each street. now, when it's all empty and silent, i feel like i never know where i am.

atia street used to have so many barbershops and cafes. makes me regret all the stealing we did when we were kids. and the stealing i do now.

but then i see that atia street still has that candy store we always stole from when we were waiting for mom. and it still had the newspaper stand on the corner where we stole those bootleg comics. and i figure somehow, all the stealing we do is keeping them in business.

the lights were still on at orient seamstress. i figured maybe mom was stealing from her too. it had that same picture of the dancer in black and white glued to the front door. more grey and white now. i pushed it open and the chimes clinkled. it smelled like fabric and old.

a lady's voice in the back said 'im sorry. were closing.'

'but we need a wedding dress.'

'at this time of year?' and she walked out. she looked a little bigger than she did back then. greyer hair. but she still wore the red lipstick and the hair tied up and the dress that made her look like a

doll.

i asked if she remembered fatima.

'ya allah! her son! i knew you from the hair! i remember when you were this tall! you and your brother chasing my daughter in the streets! shes married now, ill have you know. to a doctor!'

'good to know i chased her into the right hands.'

that made her laugh. she asked how mom is doing. i said all good. she asked about my brother with the gold hair. i wanted to just lie about it, but i figured maybe making her feel bad for me would get us a discount, so i said 'remember the gold rain?' and she understood. she said a prayer for you. hope you got it.

i told her me and my fiance (such a weird thing to say. my fiance. like, thats prudence) were walking around the iberian hills all day looking for a wedding dress, and we didnt find shit.

'of course you didnt.' the old lady said. 'theres nothing good on the ile. nothing truly bridal.'

pru lit up. 'exactly! nothing BRIDAL! it's intricate. it's expensive. but not BRIDAL!' and they started talking about how bad the silouettes were and all the frills and ribbons and shit. then she said 'i dont even want to wear white to my wedding. i dont even look good in it, so really just show me your best dresses of any color.'

the old lady made a face like prudence just shat herself. 'young woman, you take that nonsense out of my shop. a bride wears white on her wedding day. and ill be damned if you wear a dress of mine at your wedding that isnt white. what will they say of me? that i cant make a wedding dress? never!' then she started pulling out all her best white dresses.

so pru held up some of the dresses in front of the mirror. the lady kept telling her to try them on but she wouldnt listen.

in the meantime, the old lady told me about how

most of her customers these days are old customers. old rich ladies who used to be young rich ladies who wanted to look good for their husbands and fathers, and who now want to look good for themselves.

they came to her one cause she was cheap and two cause she could keep her mouth shut about what they told her. theyve been telling her secrets for the last several decades.

apparently she knows stuff about the mayor and his family that would blow my mind, and she only knows that cause a girl who works at his office stops by her place once every month or two to talk.

i asked 'did he have a bastard son with his maid?'

she put her hand on her mouth. 'how did you know? word shouldnt be getting around about that. you MUST keep your mouth shut tight about that, boy.'

yeah yeah. if she knew the bastard like i did, i dont think she'd care that much. maybe she'd have a heart attack. i thought maybe id introduce them some day.

i asked the old lady if mom ever stole something from her.

she said 'not possible. fatima always paid the most. more even than the rich women. why?'

'cause youre still in business.'

'what?'

she didnt get it. it's ok.

then prudence went 'ughhhhhhhh' from the far end of the shop.

i asked her whats the matter.

prudence kept holding dresses up in the mirror and talking about how good they were, but none of them felt right. she wouldnt try on a single one. 'maybe i just wasnt meant to wear white.'

'every woman was meant to wear white to her wedding.' the old lady said. 'what else will you wear? pink? green? or allah forbid, blue?'

i told pru she was gonna look great no matter

what.

'yes. of course ill look great. you fool. but will i look bridal? or will i look like every other woman there?' she squatted down and put her face in her hands. 'my mother had the right idea.'

'whatre you talking about?'

'nothing.'

'you said something so obviously you wanna talk about it.'

'my mother burned her wedding dress.'

the old lady looked at me like she just heard someone got killed. i just put my hands up. i dont know how women operate.

i asked pru why. and i know for a fact you never heard this one.

'it was back when i was 13, when i first started turning tricks. i came home one day and she was burning it on the grill. it looked like she was cooking it, and it smelled fucking awful. she said it was better that way. she said id probably make it yellow just in the time it takes to walk down the ile. better that it burn black. when the neighbors complained about the smell, mom said oh, blame my daughter. shes decided to become a whore. but i didnt! i didnt decide! and you know something? i became a damn good whore. and now i have more money than she ever did, and i dont need a fucking wedding dress. i can wear whatever i want to my own fucking wedding.'

then the old lady said 'with all due respect, darling, your mother was incorrect about a few things. white clothes only turn yellow if you dont wash them properly. every bride deserves to wear white on her wedding day. it is her god given right. not even the most miserable woman in the world should wear anything else.'

pru asked 'and what if the bride doesnt want to wear white?'

'dont ask stupid questions.'

'well im sorry. i cant find anything.'

i told her she didnt try anything on.

'no. it's fine. lets go.'

old lady tapped her chin. 'there must be something. aha!' and ~~she ran over~~ she waddled over behind the counter as fast as she could. she took out a bunch of keys and tried each one until she got it right, then she took out a box and put it on the counter.

'this is perhaps the best dress ive ever made, but i havent been able to sell it. many women have tried it on, but i couldnt bring myself to sell it to any of them. an old friend, well, a stinky old man told me not to sell this under any circumstances until i got my old scissors back. he hasnt been wrong yet, but im not sure ill ever see those scissors again, so you might as well try it on.'

well shit. thats what that nigga meant. i took out the golden scissors from my shoe and asked if they were hers.

she yelled a little and then put her hands on her mouth. 'my grandmother's scissors! where did you find them!'

'on the ground.' i dont know nigga what was i supposed to say?

'my grandmother won this in a contest a long, long time ago. she took a caravan all the way to damascus just to show her work. just a few miles from the city walls, she was acosted by a moorish bandit, who was ready to steal everything from her. she said no! anything but the dress! he asked her what was so special about the dress. she told him that she was to enter it in a competition for the sultan's scissors. he said very well then. ill take all the clothes youre wearing. if you win the scissors, come back and show me, and ill pay you everything back in double. well, she walked the rest of the way naked, and she won the golden scissors. and contrary to what you

would expect from a maghrebi, he kept his promise!' i dont think she knows about dad so dont get mad at her. 'she ended up making dresses for the bandit's daughters, including a wedding dress for the eldest daughter's marriage to the sultan! oh, when i lost these scissors, i wasnt sure if i would be able to face her in janna!'

i said that was a very nice story, could we see the dress.

'oh! of course!' she took it out. it wasnt as crazy as all the rest of them. it had a nice big bow on it. and it had some lace stuff on it. hard to tell what it was supposed to look like without a prudence inside of it. but when the light hit it, you could see patterns. white patterns, same color as the dress, but like they were underneath. like extra white.

'theres a trick to wearing this one, my darling. let me show you.'

'no. it's ok, you dont have to.'

'no. i insist.' and she pushed prudence behind the curtain and they got to wrestling. the old lady was talking about how this one didnt use as much fabric, not as many frills, but it's her most expert work cause she used so little. pru said she understood completely. me? i dont get it. i like all that fancy extra shit, but what do i know.

after a few minutes, the old lady said 'oh! you knew the trick already!'

'thats the trick?'

'thats splendid!' i like the way old girl talks. i think i wanna start calling things splendid now. i hope one day i can talk to that lady again.

prudence walked out from behind the curtain. and thats what she meant by looking bridal. in a way, i took this from you. i failed you a year ago and now i am reaping the rewards. sun go up. sun come down. and may god get back at me for all of my sins.

honestly, it was prudence that made the dress look

good. i asked what the trick is and the lady winked at my fiance. my girl.

pru asked if we could tip her at least, and she said 'do i look like i take donations?'

i asked how she kept the business open, and she said 'with great gumption!' i had to ask her how to spell that. i didnt hear the p at first.

on the way home pru kept taking it out of the bag to feel it up and look at it and smell it. she sniffed that thing like it was paint thinner. and she moaned like it was paint thinner too.

she said 'you saw me in my wedding dress. now our marriage is doomed!' she didnt look like she was doomed though. she looked splendid.

the next day i called mom and told her we got a wedding dress at her old friend's place. i asked why she stopped going there.

she said 'it was that year they raised the rent by almost a third. i took her gold scissors. they were sitting on the counter. i took them and i sold them to an antique store. i never could look her in the eye ever again.'

'you should go see her again. she has her scissors back.'

'thats good. maybe i will.'

mom called me back that night. it's weird if she ever even calls at all. she said the store was closed.

'what do you mean? were talking orient seamstress right?'

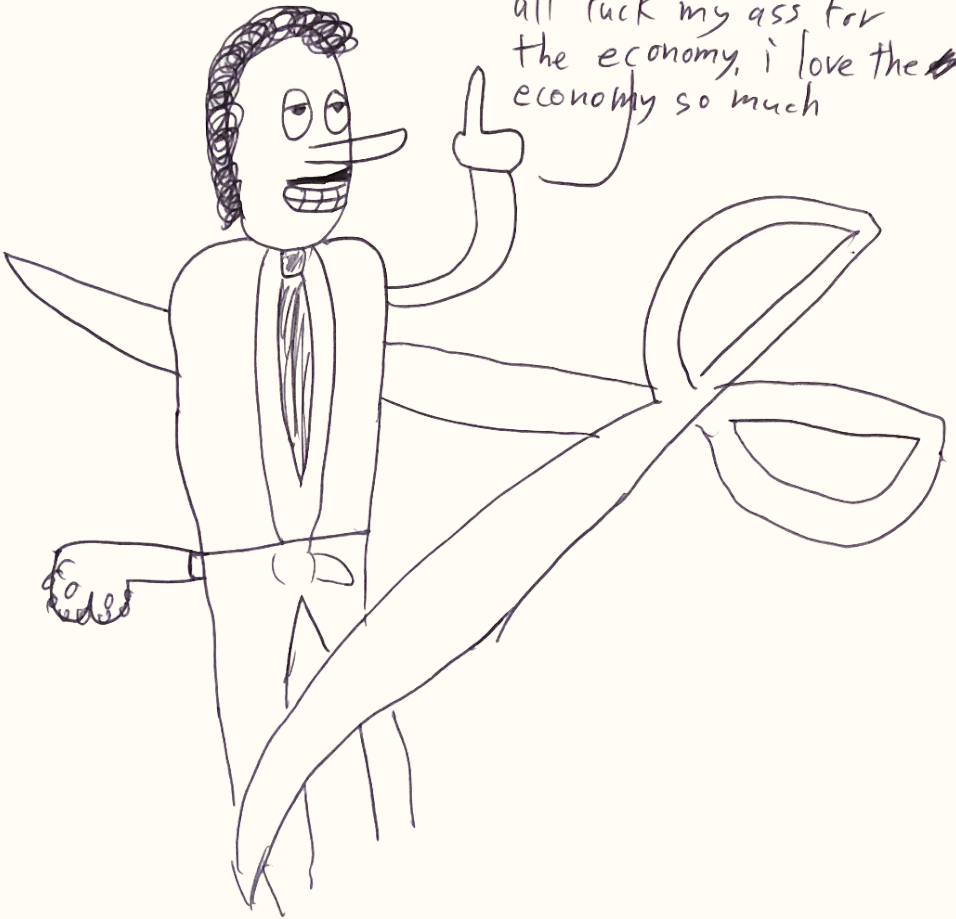
'yes. closed. out of business. khalas. theres cardboard taped to the behind of the door as well.'

'that was quick. i guess gumption isnt enough to run a business.'

'what?'

she didnt get it. it's ok. it's splendid.

i propose we should
all fuck my ass for
the economy, i love the
economy so much



i was sitting on top of the smasher this morning. looking out at our beautiful city. trying to think about a life outside of here. i couldnt get the picture in my head.

i want you to try. try thinking about me wearing a suit. prudence said i didnt actually have to wear a suit every day so if you dont wanna think of me wearing a suit, think of me wearing some other square ass shit. a button up shirt with the sleeves rolled up. pru said that was hot. my chest is hurting now.

ok. back to the excercise.

what is my fucking job gonna be? and you cant say pushing, whoring, drumming, chopping, or booking. i already asked prudence. all the criminals have side jobs outside new eden.

did you figure out a good job? let me know before the train takes off in a few months. or 'moons' how prudence says it. i saw the tickets she got and those say moons too.

so i was on top of the smasher looking down at places that you could find in any city. bar. bartender maybe? apparently youre not allowed to drink on the job though so i dont know what the point is.

it's crazy to think there's bars out there that dont have signs saying 'NO RIVER TITANS ALLOWED'. and if you fuck around too much all that happens is they put up a picture of your face.

bakery? i could be a baker maybe. but my hands are already so dry. and i dont think youre allowed to eat the product on the job. forget jobs about making things.

i asked wing and he laughed and said im not going nowhere. shit pissed me off. then he said i could be the guy in the hotel who holds the towel that people wipe their hands on. said he had a friend who did that work up north for a few months and he gave acid to retarded kids and made them take it in front of him to

see what happened. he got fired not for that but cause he played a joke on a guy by putting his dick under the towel and moaning whenever a customer grabbed it. sun go up.

apparently the first 2 guys that morning thought the joke was funny. number 3 told management. sun come down.

but back to the excercise. i dont see myself standing for 5 hours straight with my dick in a towel unless i get to do it in the girls bathroom. then wing started talking about how after a bad bitch walks out of the stall you can just head in and sniff the seat she was just on and feel how warm it is on your cheek.

~~but back to the excer~~ and wing also said that if youre up north you can meet famous people, so if you got to be the towel dick guy in the girls bathroom and madonna or julia roberts grabbed your dick? or what if she didnt flush? you could sell it. or huff it. he swears madonna's piss is like sprite. he says the drugs she takes to make her muscles big make her piss fizzy and cold like sprite. i swear he's not joking. he swears in the name of mother mary and christ.

but back to the excercise. i asked cairo and he said if im not thugging he dont wanna hear it. 'you telling me cause you got took out central new eden you gonna let them take central outta you? bum ass nigga.' man when i tell you these niggas was pissing me off today.

he said i could be a janitor. his uncle from back in egypt or sudan or whatever, he couldnt remember, worked as a janitor in a goverment building and sold speed to public servants until he got killed. he died at his next job as a taxi driver when he picked up a guy who looked a lot like the prime minister and he got exploded by a rocket on the highway. sun go up. sun come down. and i dont wanna do either of those fucking shitty jobs.

i asked prince and he said i should be a model like him. i said 'really?' and then he got a really sad look on his face and said with a really sad voice 'no.'

but he said i should work at a laundromat. he has a friend who works at a laundromat and fucks like a monster. he said he didnt know what she does there exactly but apparently she does it real good and he wanted to see if it rubbed off on me.

i kept waiting for him to tell me how she died or got fired but he said she still works there at the laundromat next to pearls. it pays like horseshit though.

so we went on over and the laundromat was closed and so was pearls. we asked around and it turns out the laundromat was owned by the guy who owned pearls and pearls went out of business cause they kept giving guys pox. turns out the girl at the laundromat was also a girl at pearls. apparently the pox went around and they werent able to get rid of it even after they all took the penicillin. the rumor was stronger than the shot. i looked at prince and he wasnt worried. he said 'i think i was the one that gave it to her.' i sit naked in a bath tub with this nigga sometimes.

i asked ursula about what i could do and she said out there, if it's not a suit and briefcase job, it's not a real job. but i never know what these suit and briefcase niggas do. i guess the bigger your job name is the better. executive vice president of operations. chief operating associate. i like to put the word operate in there.

i tried to ask mom about it but everytime i brought it up she'd change the subject. finally i cornered her and she said if i was more like my brother or my father i could get away with being a con artist but the way i am now, im just too damn slow.

'titans, when they leave new eden, become like ants.' she said. 'aiyai. this is why i wanted to...'

i never was able to get out of her what she wanted to.

i asked old man green and he said i could be a gravedigger. nontitans are a lot easier to dig graves for he said. 'if you can stomach being paid for it. but i dont take you for that kind of man.'

i never thought about it. getting paid for digging graves. that doesnt sound right.

prudence told me not to worry about all that till i get there.

last time you saw razer was when he was still in the hospital. he woke up a few months after you bounced. all he could move was his eyelids. their mom wanted to pull the plug and put him out. ramon got pissed and she stopped paying the bills, so ramon brought razer to school and put him up in the art room.

we had to help him move a dusty old couch up there for razer to sleep on. he was hooked up to an iv drip that ramon would handle all the time, always injecting shit into it to keep him alive. he spent all his boxing money on shit to take care of kid. razer couldnt even breathe without a machine working the air through his nose. it sounded like a baseball bat being dragged across concrete.

and so razer sat there like the statue of some old god that people forgot and stopped giving donations to, laying there on life support and cracking away.

the worst part was the smell. the art room always stank like shit and piss, and it went out into the hallway sometimes, all cause razer had to wear a diaper and ramon had to change him constantly.

some niggas made fun of them. they never knew ramon made it to semis. they learned though. with time. ramon was never the strongest guy. all those trophies and medals and belts and months with no booze or pills. all so he could still get tossed around everytime he tried to fuck with me or prince or wing.

but i will always give him this and never take it away, he had the weirdest hands of all time. his fists always felt like they were hungry, like they were eating your skin. i could never get over that.

one time cairo asked if razer knew we were there. mon said 'how the fuck should i know? you wanna ask him? hey, you see us? you see us right now, khoya?'

nothing.

of course, raze couldnt move, so he couldnt choose what position he wanted to sleep in. the whole time i saw him, he was sleeping with his head a little to the left. i say this cause after a while, spit started building up in his mouth. his left cheek was like a pocket holding a pool of spit that smelled almost worse than the shit and the piss. the spit always had bits of gunk in it that made me wanna vomit.

raze's left cheek started to get red spots on it. mon started to have to drain his mouth to keep him from drowning on his own spit. he'd turn his brother's head and let it all fall into a bucket that he was planning on dumping when it got full.

then one day, old women started showing up to the school gate begging to have some of razer's spit. just the oldest bitches you ever could find for miles, coming through asking for the 'spitell of the weary king.' thats what they called it.

ramon didnt wanna give any to them, and none of them answered why they wanted it. then one broad offered 20 dinar for a few spoons of the stuff. ramon looked at me. i talked them up to 40 for a spoon, and we had a business going. if you were there you couldve talked them up to a smooth 60 i think.

and so ramon started keeping razer's spit in a bucket, and he kept a spoon that was flattened a little bit with a hammer so it wouldnt hold as much. some women paid extra for a spoon of the stuff straight from the mouth of the king himself. and im still trying to figure out what exactly he was king of.

some guys said it was a gypsy thing, but i dont think so. you had every kind of old bitch there ever was or ever will be lining up outside the school. gypsies, krauts, nicks, japs, wops, flips, jicks, quints, chinks, and whatever other brand of old bitch i missed. and across the street the girls thought we

all turned into a cougar hunting house or something.

every once in a while, mon would ask a bitch what she was using it for. usually she'd lie and say it was medicine for her eyes or bones. other times, a woman would pretend like she was fresh and didnt know english.

there was a day i saw mon talking to a bunch of suits in an old black import town car. later, i asked him who they were. he said it was nobody. thats never not a lie. that was back in those few months where all i did everyday was try to knock myself out, so i didnt push him on it. shouldve known they were spiders cause sure as a good joke will land, raze and mon were gone the next day.

art room smelled like nothing. couch gone. not a trace. i asked around if anybody saw them, but nobody did. i asked if they saw anyone in black suits and shades. nope. i was sat there wondering how the guy moved a vegetable and a couch all by himself with no one seeing him.

this was all like half a year ago. then last week, wing tells me he saw ramon shooting up in the back rooms at club broog off the corner of 48th.

apparently, he was shooting up there every night for a month. they had to throw him out every night. some days, he'd just be laying there in front of the door when they came back. apparently they would have to sometimes buy ramon food cause all he would spend his money on was their skag and they didnt want anyone dying in their club.

me and wing went over to get him. he was in one of the backrooms they kept for tweekers who were too geeked for the floor and stringers who brought the mood down. ramon was stringing alright. middleweight boxing champion? i didnt see him. feather weight wannabe, maybe.

i grabbed him by his hair. it was falling out. i dragged him out the club and threw him onto the curb.

i told him talk to me. nothing.

i asked him where he got the money for all the skag he's been shooting. i knew he didnt have a job. nothing.

i asked him wheres razer.

he started crying.

wing said 'he aint dead is he?'

'cant be. we'd know if he did.' thats what i thought.

'he's dead.' ramon said.

'when? how?'

'oh. i dont know. while back. i killed him.'

i couldnt judge him. in a way i killed my brother too, and i didnt even have as good a reason as him.

'i had to. he was miserable. wouldnt you be too? i had to. and they gave me such a good deal.'

'the guys in the suits? the spiders?'

'let me go. i wanna be alone.'

'wheres his body?'

'no body.'

'huh?'

'they took his body.'

'where?'

'the spiders took his body and they gave me the leftovers. all the shit they didnt need. in a plastic fucking bag. his heart. his feet. his stomach. tripe. guts. oh. his eyes.'

'you still got the bag?'

'oh. get me out of here.'

'wheres the bag? we gotta bury him.'

'you cant.'

i took his head in my hand and reminded him he doesnt make the decisions.

'you cant bury us.'

'not you. raze.'

'you cant. were not titans anymore.'

i looked at wing. he put up his hands.

'wheres the body?'

'no body.'

'THE BAG! wheres the fucking bag?'

'smasher. the trailer at the smasher.'

i got up and left him there.

me and wing went to the smasher. there was a trailer there. tucked all the way at the back next to the cliff. it smelled savage from 100 feet away. none of old man green's friends would get close to it. they said they were waiting on us to take care of it.

inside the trailer it was a mess, but we found the bag. it was a thick black plastic bag. inside all i could see was two feet in the middle of a heap of gunk. it was all black. the feet looked swelled and gummy. wing vomited. ~~no more footw~~ nevermind.

i got a stick from outside and poked a toe and it came away so easy. it barely stuck to the knuckle of the foot by a few strings of meat and slime. when it sank in my chest that this was raze, i wanted to vomit too. sun go up and sun fucking christ and god in heaven.

we wanted to dig razer's grave but we couldnt find his marker anymore. we went over it back and forth 20 times in a row. it shouldve been between ramon's and daisy's. mon's wasnt there either. so they were both gone. i never even noticed.

we ended up digging razer's grave out by the smasher that night. it was cold as a bitch. type of wind that opens up the scars on your knuckles and makes the dirt harder than it has any right to be. it was just me and wing that night. we didnt even make the hole that deep.

we dumped the plastic bag out into the hole. just a heap of meat. not so weird when youre looking at it from that far away. didnt even feel like a funeral. no words, no songs, no stories. i shouldve liked that.

and the man with no name

will find his
home at last



on sunday, cairo started coughing up flower pedals. they were bright pink and thick. he yelled at us to stop touching them. they smelled nice. he kept kicking at them so theyd go away.

on monday, he coughed up even more, and a flower started growing on his shoulder. he picked it out and ran.

tuesday, we didnt see him at all.

now, on wendsday (and keep in mind most of this is just shit i heard from maxypad) he showed up to school wearing one of those blue surgery masks doctors wear. he was coughing like a bitch the whole class. the guys couldnt even play cards in peace.

then all a sudden, cairo screams loud enough to break the entire world in half. that i can tell you really happened, cause i heard it and i thought for a second it did happen.

he kept screaming 'GET OUT! GET THE FUCK OUT!' he started throwing around chairs hard enough to take someone's head off, which i guess convinced everyone. i ran down to the sophomore hall as fast as i could, and when i opened the door i almost had my eye taken out by a chair leg.

cairo screamed at me. 'GET OUT!'

'you almost took my eye out with that thing.'

'if you come in here ill FUCKING KILL YOU!'

i started opening the door again. i was like 'come on, kid. quit it with the bullshit.' and honest to every god real and fake in this world, a table came flying at my head. shit got me in the forehead, man. i looked over to wing and prince like 'what is kid's fucking deal?'

prince made everyone clear the hallway. then he opened the door and had a chair thrown at him. got him square in the face. he didnt flinch. just kept walking.

whatever windows werent broken before were broken now. most of the plastic sheets we taped to the

broken windows were ripped. cairo was sitting in a corner with his head in his hands and his hands in his knees. he was sitting in a pool of blood.

prince asked what the hell happened.

cairo shook his head. 'please. it's not my fault.'
he was crying.

'whats not your fault?'

he started to say 'i didnt want any-' and then started coughing up more pedals. when he stopped, he just sank his head deeper into his thighs.

i said 'i believe you. it's not your fault. but whats not your fault?'

he pulled his head out from his legs. he had that pouty, shaking face on him every kid makes when he's pretending he's not crying.

he pulled up his sleeve, and there was a flower on his wrist. he pulled it up a little more. another flower on his arm. he pulled it up some more. a third. i was about to ask why he didnt just pluck them out, but when i looked closer, they had stems, and they ran under his skin like highways. wing and prince signed the cross.

i told prince to run and call herm. cairo grabbed my collar, but couldnt talk. i told him only herm would know what to do. prince went to call him, and me and wing had to make up some bullshit so the guys wouldnt start talking.

wing said 'kid got stabbed.'

'ok. with a laced knife.'

'out west. by some frankos.'

'out east. by some hundreds.'

'what was he doing out east?'

'comic show.'

wing said to cairo 'hey, baby. gonna need some of this. holy mother, forgive my hands.' he touched the blood on the floor and turned his hands dark red. then he went outside and started bullshitting everyone.

while we were waiting for herm, cairo kept shaking his head and crying. saying 'it's over. it's all over.'

he wouldnt tell me what he meant.

herm came through, and before he could come in, cairo made him swear on his mother's life he wouldnt tell anyone what he saw. herm swore and came in. he took a look and said 'i got no clue.'

'what do you mean?'

'this aint my field, strictly speaking. this is moon shit. we should call mona's. i think mona knows a lot about this shit.'

so i called, emmy picked up, and i asked if they could help cairo out. she said yeah but we'd have to bring him over.

so i wrapped your jacket around cai's waist cause of all the blood on his ass. then me and prince put one of his arms on each of our shoulders and walked him out the school.

it was like everyone wanted to have a staring contest with kid. we made sure to rub some blood on the belly of his shirt so it would really look like he got stabbed.

thinking about it, i wish we didnt have to go through all that shit. i remember back in 8th grade when cairo first showed up wearing his dad's oversize army helmet and some hand me down oversize clothes. i was giving him so much shit everyday. all he wanted to do was roll with us. then one day, i cant remember what i said, but he got me with a punch that sent me all the way to graduation week.

anyone that knocked me out was worth having around. it was a sucker punch. but it was a good one. lucky we got niggas to start calling him cairo instead of helmet. if he was still wearing that thing he'd be impossible to hang around.

me and prince almost got in a real fight over who should bike cairo to the intersection. we were arguing

who was faster and who had the better route when cairo yelled at us that he could ride just fine. 'i aint no bitch.' he said.

mona yelled at us for coming through the front door with this bleeding guy. she hurried us to the backrooms and told tarik to mop up the floor if there was any blood. he said there wasnt. she said mop it anyway.

it was an empty office. kinda cramped for every one. she told us to lay cairo down on the table and give her some space. prudence came by with mona's bag. she asked me what was up. i said i didnt know.

mona started taking off cairo's shirt and cairo yelled at all of us to get the fuck out of there.

mona said 'im going to need help holding the stems. the girls need to go back to work.' and she looked at the girls and they left. cairo put the surgery mask back on.

the kids stayed. herm had to leave cause he always does, but he made mona promise to share her notes with him. she said she didnt take notes but he made her promise to take them.

wing closed the door and mona got to explaining. 'these are venus roses. you can get them from eating too much mercury. but im thinking it's different for you.'

all i remember about mercury is back when we were kids when mom stopped getting thermometers cause you kept breaking them to drink the red stuff inside. she kept saying 'if i did not stop you, you would have died!' shit. i wanted to taste it too.

mona took off cairo's shirt and started unwrapping the bandages around his chest. there were even more roses. and a ton of bruises.

'youre wrapping this too tight. too too tight. how are you breathing?' she tapped his rib and he flinched.

'thats from a fight.'

'you think i dont know what a fight looks like? this is from pressure. it's broken. ahyani.' she took some bandages and alcohol. then she took out some powders and oils and mixed them in a cup and told prince to grind it all up until it looked slick and green. he got to work. she told us to take foam and tape and seal up the cracks in the doorway. for the screaming, she said.

she gave cairo a shot of whiskey. for the pain, she said.

cairo said 'i aint gonna scream.'

she pushed the glass to him. 'drink.'

he took it down one shot. barely made a face. he was looking cold at the bottom corner of the room like none of it meant anything to him anymore. she made him drink a few more.

when prince was done grinding the paste, mona told cai to lay down, and told prince and me to hold him down. prince got his legs, i got his arms.

cairo said 'i dont need all this. i already took one out before.' i didnt like it either. holding him down like a sheep on eid.

'did this one you pulled have stems?'

cai shook his head.

'then lay still. and try not to make too much noise. even with the door sealed, i dont want to take the chance of my customers getting scared.' she took her finger, dipped it in the green glaze, and painted something on cai's stomach. she told him to breathe easy.

then she told wing 'slowly, now. pinch the flower by the stem. not the pedals. if it comes off, your life will be 100 times harder. pinch and pull. slowly. like this. boys, hold him down tight now.'

she pulled, and cai screamed so hard that i was actually a little happy i couldnt hear as good out my right ear. the highways under his skin started moving. the stems had thorns, and they mustve got caught on

his muscles or something, cause they had strings of meat hooked on them when they came out. clogged with deep red blood. sometimes white clumps.

i had to stop thinking what the white clump might be cause i didnt wanna feed cairo my vomit. it smelled like perfume and iron and alcohol in there, and i couldnt stop gagging. mona yelled at me. i dunno. i seen niggas die. i seen niggas have their arms and legs rot away. i seen what happened to razer.

cairo was squirming around like he was having his life taken out of him. when wing finally got the last of a stem out, blood would leak like an open faucet, and mona had to cover it up with alcohol cotton and bandage it up quick as hell.

'this is bad.' she said. 'very bad.'

when wing was pulling out the ones in cai's right arm, i saw the stems moving all the way on his left shoulder. they were longer than i realized. that one hurt so much that he started banging the back of his head against the table so loud and hard i thought he was gonna break through it. i had to put my arm under his head so he wouldnt kill himself.

sometimes a stem would be coiled around in a bunch so when wing would pull it would go around and around in the same spot and cairo's eyes would go white.

the worst were the tangles, where mona would have to go into the skin with tweasers and scissors and cut away at it.

cairo passed out.

then mona said 'we will have to do your legs now.'

he didnt hear her. she told us to hold on tight for when he woke back up again.

she took off his pants and there was a bunch of flowers on his legs, and a big clump of bloody flowers on his crotch. cairo woke up and then passed out again while wing took those out. wing was about to pass out too it looked like.

when it was all done, mona turned cai into a mummy with all the bandages. he was so dizzy from all the blood he lost.

then she asked him 'are you sure you want to keep living like this?'

cairo looked at her like he was gonna kill her. i put my hand on his shoulder on instinct like i always do but he shook me off. 'what else is there to do bitch?'

'boy. dont speak to me in that way. i did this out of good will for your mother, and for my girls, who care a lot for you. but this is my home. and i dont care for ill mannered people in my home.'

'well there aint shit else i can do. if you want me to start dressing up like a fucking panzy then take it up with my mom. shes just as dumb as you.'

'in that case, you will have to get ready to pull the roses out of your body every week. perhaps every day. if you do not, they will kill you.'

'theres no fix?'

'there are procedures, of course. but those are for people of means. and good blood. not for a river titan. maybe back in the ancient days, there was a dance. or a song. but time has forgotten. allahu alam. the only fix i can think for you right now is to start wearing makeup and dresses and high heels.'

cai spat on the floor.

mona wiped at it with her shoe, mad as hell. 'but if not, then eat a lot of beef. preferably liver. to get your iron. your alchemist friend should have iron that you can eat. it wont save you completely. but it will help with the bleeding. and from now on, dont wrap your chest so tightly. you do no one any favors if you cannot breathe.'

then she pointed between his legs. 'for the bleeding here, the only solution is this.' and she pulled out a pack of tampons.

cairo smacked it out of her hand. 'fuck that!'

'boy, dont ever do that again! if you want to bleed freely every month and leave a mark of your ass everywhere you sit, fine with me! but if you want to keep living like this, you will have to use this! now get out! i have had enough. and take your flowers and throw them in the trash. and tell tarik to come here to CLEAN ALL THIS FUCKING BLOOD!'

i took all the flowers and threw them away. the thorns cut at my hands even though they were so dull. prudence was waiting for me. she asked if everything was ok. cairo nodded.

he was all wobbly and shit. he said 'hey. your jacket. i got blood all over it.' he held it up. his blood was all over the middle part of the inside of the jacket. all over some prayer written in old greek.

i told him it wasnt the first time someone's bled on that jacket. i looked at the stain around the word GOD on the heartside of the jacket, where the bullet went straight through the letter O. judi heller was one hell of a shot. 'ill just wash it. say la vee.' pru taught me that one.

he wore the jacket around his waist on the way home. he told me he was gonna stay the night with me. he said his mom was making salmon again. prince stayed over too. said he wanted some of my ramen. wing couldnt stay over cause karina didnt have anywhere to go that night.

cairo kept his surgery mask on the whole time. we got some shawerma and he ate it by himself on the balcony. then he cut himself on the stomach with my knife. i grabbed his hand hard as fuck.

he said 'cause i got stabbed with a laced knife by some frankos, remember?'

'it was out east.' i said. 'by some hundreds.' i never thought how it must look to other people when you hurt yourself. watching cairo do it, even though i got it, and even though it wasnt even that deep, ~~it was the same as if he tried to~~ i wanted to smack

him.

i woke up at like 5am and he was gone with one of my pants. that shit was definitely too big for him.

thursday, cairo started coming to school with the blue surgery mask and some bigass shield shades that wouldve made anyone else look like a clown. but with his tight bomber and his hands in his pockets, i cant even lie, he looked smooth as a motherfucker.

there was no way cairo was just gonna become a girl. i dont wanna see a cairoless world. and a girl cairo would not be cairo, it would be someone elsse. honestly, id give him my dick if prudence wouldnt kill me about it. it only ever gave me trouble.

everybody dapped him up for getting stabbed with a laced knife and coming back. they asked to see the scar. he still had that shit taped with gauze. and he had bandages all over his hands and arms, and his neck too.

by the next week, damn near half the school was attacked by some hundred out east with a laced knife. and apparently getting stabbed with a laced knife makes you wear surgery masks and shades and bandages all over. crazy how that happens.

but no one could rock it like cai. he started coming through with green and yellow and black surgery masks. and drawing and writing shit on them. a middle finger. a pair of titties. FUCK OFF. KILL YOURSELF. im not gonna lie i wanted to rock that shit too. my favorite was BAD FOR HEALTH. like what they say on the cigarette packs.

just yesterday, i saw on tv a hundred out east get arrested for cutting an old bitch with a laced knife and putting her in an insane asylum. he got 50. i tried asking herm about that and he started talking about this nigga carl young. i didnt give one or two fucks about that shit so i left him talking to him self.

cairo's spending less time following us around and

more time having his whole class follow him around. he'll hang outside girls schools and coed schools and pick shorties up without saying a word. sometimes i catch him in the council room drawing when no one's there.

cairo owns the sophomores. actually, thats selling him short. he owns some of the juniors too. when we graduate, he's gonna be on top. and he looks like he doesnt want anything to do with it all, which tells me he'll be great.

wing says he shouldnt need a lie to do all that, but everyone on top had their lies. even you. lies so deep that no one believes you when you tell the truth.

i think if everyone really knew the truth about what happened with the frankos 2 years ago, it would be too hard to pick up the pieces. so it's easier to just walk ahead and not pay attention to the view along the way.

we got a collect call from lisbon the other day. principal bayazid got it first, then he passed it to mr trezeget, who passed it to daisy, who passed it to 2tap, who passed it to calcutta, who ran it all the way to the council room where i beat his ass cause we already have a phone in there.

so i put the thing on loud speaker cause by that point the whole school was waiting out the door and i didnt want them all breathing down my neck.

it was this lady on the other side. apparently gumruck died and this was the number he put down as his emergency contact. kid was out for 4 whole years. this was probably the only number he ever knew. all i remember about him was he was good at wrestling but was always underweight for every one of his matches.

i told her thats impossible. we wouldve known. how? were central new eden's only titans. we always know. she said theyre shipping his body here cause the only thing in his will was to be buried across the river. estimated time of arrival, 1 week.

that was 2 weeks ago. on the news there was chopper footage of a boat sinking only a few miles out from the harbor. the cargo was this giant sack of veiny meat growing so fast it was breaking the ship apart. gumruck didnt even make it to customs. maybe he went a little too hard trying to make weight this time.

a few hours ago, prudence was talking to me about the shop shes gonna set up and she told me she already got the tickets to the train out of here. it leaves once every 13 moons and theres only a few moons left.

well, now gumruck's body is floating, bloated out in the atlantic, with how many little animals nibbling at him, trying to make their own weight. the portuguese goverment is trying to claim his body, but the mayor is fighting to get it back.

i thought maybe old guy finally came around on us, but it turns out he just wants to get a hold of

gumruck's fat. 'it's a tremendous source of energy.'
he says. 'this is battle against the portuguese and
the seagulls.' aint that some splendid ass shit.

a few days ago i met the devil at one of the
mayor's rallies. i asked him what he was doing. he
said 'im just taking notes.'



believe it or not, i was walking behind cairo for the last week. for a little bit, i could follow something other than a ghost. but i fucked up. you know how lazy i get.

cairo was living in the council room for the last few weeks and he kept the door locked, so we had to almost die climbing in through the window just to get in. everyday his mom would call me to ask me some shit like 'where is mariam? i know you know where she is.' and id be like no. i dont. i swear.

now usually what cairo was doing in the council room was pulling out his flowers and leaving his blood everywhere and leaving the stems in the trash for us to take out. he was getting good at taking them out without making any noise.

and when he wasnt doing that he was laying around watching tv or drawing these sketches of people getting killed. a white kid getting branded and pulled apart by big hands. a side view of you getting shot in the head. an old muslim lady with her face flattened and her brains spilling out.

but that day, we crawled in and herm was there with cairo and they were putting flowers in ~~bouk bouquet~~ bouquets and herm was writing price tags on them.

cairo said 'you cats wanna buy some? or you want in on the business? ill let yall niggas run this shit for 5 percent.'

i said 'nigga was the door unlocked this whole time?'

'come on big chief. you gotta open the door when you wanna do business. look!' he held out his arms. he was wearing a tank top. he had so many more flowers. the pink ones were gone. he had some sparkling green ones, some polka dot spotted ones, some made of glass, some made of spider webs, some glowing blue ones. herm said those ones were radioactive.

so that day we ended up selling nothing. but we

handed out flowers and bouquets to the girls across the street and at mona's.

on the 2nd day, cairo stopped wrapping his chest. people started talking but he didnt listen to them. i asked him why and he said he felt like breathing today.

a bunch of scientists came over and tried to make it past the gates. they begged us to tell them where the roses came from. cairo went down and showed them.

they offered 10 thousand dollars to study him. not dinar. american dollars. they had the stack right there in their hands. he was about to take it but something changed in him.

he pointed at them and said 'i refuse.'

those were the strongest 2 words i ever heard in my life.

he said 'we dont need words over here.' and he pulled down his pants, showed them his ass, and gave them the finger.

a lot of guys, especially the freshmen, forgot about cairo. they were gonna start talking. so i pulled down my pants and started pissing too. and i chased those scientists off st mary's holy ground with my red piss.

cairo gave some of his weirder roses to prudence so she could figure out how to use them in her watches. she started off thinking about the pedals as decorations and trying to laminate them, but the glowing nuclear one she thought she might be able to use as a power source. so she hit the books and shut her door for a while.

on the 3rd day, bees started following cairo around. he just lets them hang out on his flowers. the kids were all complaining about getting bit and cairo just said 'quit being so stingable nigga. youre killing all my bees.'

we were on the roof and i think it was after the maghreb prayer call finished up that a flower grew out of cairo's left tit. he took his shirt off. prince

said 'good fucking god. what astounding redness.'
astounding is the right word. it hurt my eyes to look
at. i still remember it. every pedal arranged perfect
ly like it was made with human or better than human
hands.

then in the yard it sounded like an earthquake and
niggas were screaming 'the rose crutians are back!
the rose crutians are back!'

we looked over and a bunch of knights on horses
were lined up outside the gates 'seeking an audience.'
millionth niggas this month to 'seek an audience.' i
dont know when people started talking like this.

we let them in the yard.

the leader of the knights said something in german
and cairo got it. he said something back in german
and then he pulled the rose off his chest and dropped
it into the leader's hands. old guy bowed and went
off.

cairo looked at me and said 'oh it's nothing. they
just lost their graves.' but he couldnt hold his
smile back. he dapped me the fuck up. started jumping
up and down and yelling 'i know german! i know
german!'

shit nigga i was jumping too. i asked him how.
he said 'i dont know nigga! im changing!'

on tv we saw the knights take over the church on
3rd and cellar. they skewered the priests on their
lances and left them out for the birds. the cops
surrounded the church but they couldnt bring them
out.

on the 4th day, cairo stopped wearing clothes.
you'd think prince would take it as an invitation to
walk around naked too but no. he said 'it would feel
like i was competing. right now, i just want to
admire.'

on a level, it was like being naked was cairo's
clothes. like his version of me putting on your jacket.
i say that cause all a sudden everybody started

following him. looking at him. asking him for shit.

one kid asked him to take care of an arcade full of redshirts cause he cant go there anymore, so instead cairo went into the abandoned pool on ruiya ave and filled the pool with water from his mouth. it was such clear water that light didnt even warble under it. water like glass.

and so the pool was opened again and we got girls over and then kids came over and complained to cairo that there wasnt no booze. to cairo! not me!

and so kid took all his braids in one hand, squeezed on them and twisted them, and made a river of rum. and it was sweet dark rum that didnt burn your throat like montague does.

then he looked at me and said 'i woulda used your hair but i know you dont like wine, big chief.'

old man green stopped by and gave cairo a gift. a key on a rope. he said 'for when you arrive at the door to tomorrow.' then he kissed cairo's hand. cairo tied the key around his neck.

then green looked at me and asked if i was enjoying the shade. said 'you would do well to learn when to step out from the shadows.'

on the 5th day, a girl came to cairo from across the road. she was pregnant. she said she didnt wanna be pregnant anymore, but she was afraid of the abortions at the ganger. she asked old man green and he told her to come here.

so cairo ripped off her clothes and started fucking her. and not the dry humping shit he usually does. he pulled out this thing from inside his pussy that looked like a dick, and he started fucking her with it and when he was done, poof. no belly.

she asked him what he was. he said 'thats up to you. but whatever you come up with, dont tell me.'

he was still drawing too. he was drawing shapes that made no sense on paper. triangular squares. double-sided decacubes. z spheres that moved inside

of each other. he'd hand them off to mr trezeget who would take one look at them and try his hardest not to kill himself. he'd scream 'HOW! HOWWWW!'

cairo blew down wing's neck and for the rest of the day, he had his airtime back. he hooped the rest of the day and not a soul in new eden could keep up with the 5 foot 9 menace.

2 men tried to kill cairo with springfield rifles but their bullets went right through him and hit each other. they fell over by the roadside. he kept walking on.

i thought maybe he was made of light or something so i reached out for him but he reached out for me first and held my hand.

i think maybe he wanted to walk with me but i let go and let him walk on ahead of me. the shadow he made was too cool to step out of.

on the 6th day, he found a city underneath the city, a staircase to the sun, and a broken bridge that if you jump over, you fall right out the sky and land on calcutta's roof. he had to beg niggas to stop using it cause they were breaking his house and his parents were getting mad.

the cops tried to arrest cairo but even though he was walking naked through the city and had the eyes of the world on him, they could not find him to save their lives.

cairo lifted his left tit so i could look under it. there was a whole world there. me and you and wing and jaws and rig were all girls. prince was the same. and cairo was cairo. and we all lived to 30 years old. he let his tit down before i could see the rest of the story.

journalists tried to interview him but whenever they tried to write down the quotes their pencils would always write it down in phonetian and there aint a soul in new eden that can read that shit. every newspaper article they tried to put out about him came

out blank.

cairo said 'it's cause them niggas is trying to use words. if they could see, they wouldnt need the words.'

i said 'you finally did it. youre beyond it all.'

'you heard me, big dog.'

'shit, youre probably not even a titan anymore.'

'huh?'

'youre beyond that shit nigga. keep walking. leave us behind.'

he held out his hands to me but i turned him around and set him on his road. kid just wanted some one to walk with him.

on the 7th day, cairo was 1 step away from the door to tomorrow. then he made a right turn and walked right over to his mom's house.

maybe if i was standing side by side with cairo, we wouldve gone through the door. but i was following him instead. we all were. i told everybody to head out and meet back here at night time.

it was only me and cairo at his moms house. his mom started yelling at him. in arabic and english. she was yelling at him for walking around naked, worse than a whore, bringing shame on his father's name. as if it wasnt enough for cairo to keep playing dress up and acting like a deviant. and the 2 men she sent to kill him? they were his cousins from the old country trying to keep him from shaming the family. and now the family is mourning the 2 sons.

then she told cairo to come home and stop the foolishness or she'd have to start mourning a daughter as well.

daughter. i think that was the word. cairo walked up to her. so slow. the way cairo was, violence wasnt a part of him. but this was an ancient walk. from before him.

and he fell down on her with enough weight to flatten the world. fist after fist after fist to the

face. and every hit shook all of new eden. up until his hands started bleeding, then the noises stopped, and the weight was just the weight of a scrawny kid's arms.

old girl had her arms up but they did nothing, and eventually they fell flaccid to her sides. and all the roses on cairo's body dried up and fell to the ground.

it took me too long to drag cairo off. i shouldve been faster but he was so much heavier than he used to be.

i was late. his hands were gone. his fingers had way too many angles to them. like a map of the city you could trace the veins struggling to stay on the right side of his skin and the bones not making it easy on them.

and his mom's face was completely mashed in. a little bit of brain juice was leaking out of her forehead where her skull poked through the skin. just like that drawing from weeks before. she didnt even look like a person anymore.

maybe the material for a face was still there but it was arranged all wrong. she was making noises from the hole that was supposed to be her mouth. maybe she was trying to say something. cairo wasnt hearing it. dusty crying furniture.

i had to shake the number for cairo's cousins out of him. i called them, told them to get over quick, and then i ran kid over to herm's place.

i was leading him for the 1st time in a week but it felt like the 1st time in my life.

the whole way he kept saying shit like 'behold me nigga. behold what has become of my hands.' and hitting me with those broken hands. i bet it hurt him more than it hurt me and it still hurt me a lot. i had to keep him on my left side cause he kept hitting my shoulder and even though it healed over the last week cause i aint been praying, it's still raw.

whatever kid is carrying in those hands of his can kill now. and not just whoever he's hitting.

herm damn near fainted when he saw cairo's hands. and he damn near fainted again when cairo told him how it happened.

he got to work. cai didnt flinch once when herm was poking his hands.

herm asked kid about the flowers.

'theyre gone. fell off. wshhh. khalas.' and the door was gone too. and the staircase and the bridge and the way to the underground city. and the rose crutians found their graves again.

'i was worried about that.'

'im cool nigga. they have out lived their usefulness.'

'what about your hands? have they outlived their usefulness?'

'i dont know.'

'well you wont be able to use them for a while.'

cairo asked for how long.

'for about as long as your mom wont be able to talk.'

when he finished bandaging cairo's hands, they were in a fist shape. herm said he tried to stretch the hands out but the bones and nerves are so fucked theyll have to stay as fists for a while. it's possible itll stay that way forever. if it doesnt heal, he wont have a precision grip. without that, he's gonna have to say goodbye to writing and drawing.

herm said he'd have to figure out what cairo could do to pay cause everything on his list needed hands. i said i could do it but cairo said no.

we went back to school to the council room and kicked everybody out. he told me to jam the pencil through the bandage. i told him that was fucking insane. he told me sharpen both sides of the pencil to make it easier and push it in through the bottom of his fist.

so i did it. then he tried drawing. and he kept trying. making squiggly lines and shit. he wasnt pressing the pencil that hard on the paper but veins were still popping on his face and neck and he was sweating.

i asked him what he was trying to draw.

'a circle, nigga.' he said. 'cant you see?'

'no.'

'how about now?'

'no.'

'alright nigga. how about now?'

'yeah i see it.'

'for real?'

'no.'

he laughed. and shit, i had to laugh too.

he said 'ay man why did you ride for me?'

what?

'i said why did you ride for me? 4 years ago. you couldve just ignored me like everyone else.'

'you knocked me out.'

'no i didnt, nigga.'

'you did. i cant forget.'

'i know what it takes to knock you out. i didnt hit you hard enough.'

'you did. you got hands. always did.'

'and if i didnt have hands, i wouldnt be here right now.'

'i guess not.'

'so thats all i need.'

'it's sad though. prudence thinks it's sad.'

'she wouldnt get it.'

'i dont get it.'

'yeah. maybe youre a broad too.'

'what was so bad about it though?'

'i dunno, nigga. back when i was in middle school, i saw yall niggas from far away, and i wanted that. the way guys are friends with guys is different from when girls are friends with them. the shit yall got

up to. and then when i started changing again, i was getting far away from it again. and i aint gonna give up like that. i earned my grave.'

'the graves aint even that nice. and nobody visits them.'

'you visit them.'

'im nobody nigga.'

cairo went out the door on his own and i figured i wouldnt follow him. his shadow was too tired from the last week, and it wasnt as big anymore. it could barely hold a grain of sand.

it shouldve been my hands that broke instead. these hands dont hold the key to tomorrow. cairo still has that key around his neck and i could never touch it.

all i do with these hands is write these letters and i dont even know if youre getting them. you could go a while without these couldnt you? or maybe id ask prudence to write them for me.

and if you close your eyes and listen close some nights, you can hear a gurgling, drowning titan some million miles away scream 'maaaaamaaaaa!' into the sky.

and now im back to walking your path. in your footsteps. if you were here, would you follow cairo? would you walk beside him? i imagine you watching him from the side. laughing. waiting for him to fuck up so you could joke about it. but i dont know you like i used to.

i talked to prudence about it and she was depressed too. the watch she tried to make didnt work, so the movement that revolutionizes the world is gonna have to wait.

cai pissed a lot of guys off when he did what he did. some of them say moms are off limits. i dont know what makes moms so special.

i think about the shit ive done and i cant say i have a right to give that much of a shit. only mom id

ride for is prince's mom, may she rest in heaven. and ms abbas of course. our mom is a maybe.

either way, nobody could test cai about it. some guys tried to talk some sense into him. he sent them right on over to herm. maybe it's better cairo's hands are all fists now. he cant hold anything in his hands to weigh him down anymore. but i will miss his drawings.

cops came by. finally they found cairo, but he was wearing clothes and had no roses on him. they smacked him around a bit. smashed his nose in. but they didnt take him in. when they took out the sticks my ear started to hurt again. remember that day? i still get ringing in my ear. and still i dont see too good out my right eye. prudence says i should get glasses.

the cops took notes in their notebooks. fucked with some of the freshmen. took the cigarettes off them. pissed on st mary's feet. left. the freshmen had to clean her feet off.

im back to praying again.

cairo's mom is still alive but might as well not be. and cairo's still living in the council room. i was there today and i found the drawing he did of you getting shot in the head under the creaky chair. i told him it was a good drawing but it wasnt historically accurate.

he had an even more fucked up voice from breathing through his mouth for the last few days. he asked me what i meant.

i told him you got shot in the chest. 'or is this the way you think it shouldve gone down?'

he said 'thats not goldy. thats you. i just didnt feel like coloring it in.'



i finally had enough of niggas. everybody in the whole school down my throat about some 'they were talking about us over here, lets go see about it' or 'they tagged this building no one lived in for the last 3 years, lets check on them' or 'these niggas been real quiet, lets see whats up.'

so i told them what i was gonna do. i told them get me a fishing rod. then i told them get me one thats not broken. then i took that fishing rod, went right up to the bank of the river, and started fishing. and any nigga that tried to talk to me about bullshit got no words out of me. and one by one they all left me alone. wing especially got pissed at me.

and the river aint got any cleaner since you last saw it. all i was hoping to catch was maybe a worm. maybe a snake full of maggots. maybe a dog.

i caught a little gay kid. yanked him right out. he was covered in that oil water and coughing it up and everything. kid damn near broke my line. splendid.

i said 'nigga what the fuck are you doing?'

he started crying. his face was beat to shit. one of his eyes was swelled shut and he had bruises busting open on his cheekbones that made him look like a puppet.

i got back to fishing. when he finally stopped crying, he asked me why i saved him.

i said 'nigga i didnt save you. im trying to fish. what the fuck were you doing in there? trying to kill yourself?'

'yeah.'

'i cant blame you, with your face looking like that.'

then he screamed and ran right back into the river. i threw my line and it caught him on the back of his jacket and i reeled him back in. i said 'nigga what is the matter with you?'

'why do you keep saving me?' his voice sounded so broken, man. shit. then i noticed he had rocks in his

shoes and in his pockets. he thought they would weigh him down, but he was light as air.

'im not trying to. im trying to fish. you wanna kill yourself? do it over there. downstream. far downstream.'

but he just sat there with his head hanging between his knees. and he wrapped his arms around his knees so he could be a little bundle.

i felt bad for kid. i asked him if he wanted to fish for a bit. he said no. i asked him if he was gonna run back into the river. he didnt say anything. i asked him if he was gonna say anything.

'no.' and then after about a minute 'because if i do, youll just beat me up.'

'why?'

'because thats what happens to titans when they end up like me.'

'youre a titan?'

he nodded.

'whats your name?'

'rain.'

'rain? shit. we could use some of that.'

'grain.'

'grain? i dont get that.'

'my grain.'

'say that again?'

'migraine.'

i looked at him straight. 'you were about to kill yourself. a name like that and you were about to kill yourself.'

'it's not my fault! i didnt choose it!' he sounded actually sad about it. he had a bit of a lisp that i could tell he wasnt used to. his tongue probably got busted when he got beat.

i asked how he got the name and he said 'my voice. i think it annoys everyone.'

i said his voice sounded like he was whispering. he hugged his knees tighter. 'because i screamed

it all away.'

'what were you screaming about?'

he turned his whole body away from me.

'ok nigga. see if i care. and if you wanna kill yourself, downstream. downstream!'

then he said 'have you ever been hated by someone you love?'

'right now wing hates me.'

'but thats not your lover.'

'what do you mean?'

'i know wing and i know you. you 2 arent in love with each other.'

'maybe we are.'

'so youve made love?'

'shit nigga. no. if thats what youre talking about then yeah. plenty girls hated me. even prudence hated me for a bit the first time i met her. and sometimes she still gets pissed off at me.'

'my lover hates me.'

'did she do that to your face?'

'yeah.'

'fight back then, nigga. how can you let a bitch do that to you?'

'my love is stronger than me.'

'what is it with this love shit? whats her name?'

'karim.'

'karima? what is she? levantine? andalusian?'

'karim. he's syrian.'

you gotta understand. im still not hearing too good out my right ear ever since we met those 4th district cops a few years ago. the migraine kid was sitting on my left but still.

'shit nigga. you gotta know how to swing if youre gonna be out there fagging it up. you heard of herm right? he chows dick every single day but nobody tells him shit. cause he has hands.'

'yeah. i dont have hands unfortunately.'

'you gotta have hands. if you wanna live on this

side of the earth you need hands. maybe you can get other people to fight for you but that wont be me. im not fighting that karim nigga for you.'

'i wouldnt forgive you if you did.'

'why did he do that to you?'

'his friends found out about us. he didnt want to. i could tell he didnt want to. but i went back to him afterwards and he beat me again. badly this time. he wants nothing to do with me anymore.'

'i dont know any syrian karims out here. wheres he from?'

he didnt say anything.

'i swear nigga im not gonna beat him up.'

'ok.'

'ok? wheres he from?'

'west of here.'

'shahamad?'

'west.'

'reyes?'

'west.'

'you cant be serious.'

he wiped his eyes. he shouldve wiped his drool too.

'you were fucking men out in redshirt and franko country?'

'he was a redshirt. yeah.'

'wow. what a fucking idiot.'

'you can think what you want to think. i never asked you for your opinion.'

'well ill give it anyway. damn. a muslim redshirt. never thought id see the day.'

'he wasnt muslim.'

'whatever. 1st thing's 1st. learn how to hit.'

'i was never any good at fighting.'

'probably you were fighting for a reason. thats the biggest mistake rookies make. you cant fight for any reason. they just weigh your hands down. a guy fighting for no reason at all will always beat the

bullshit out you.'

'thats very easy for you to say. you never had to fight for a reason. you dont know what it feels like to be weak. im fighting hard enough without using my fists.'

'nigga shut the fuck up. you dont know me.' i remember you and jaws used to make me eat sand whenever i tried to hang with yall. i know what it's like to be a bitch. but i came up. i tried to give kid the wisdom.

i told him about this kid i know who could have held every reason in the world and he still chose to fight with empty hands. and now he can barely hold anything in them. pencil. marker. screwdriver. reason. now he's unbeatable. i cant imagine a thing under god's golden sun that could take him down. shit. he might be able to beat me now.

'but isnt that sad? what he had to give up just to be invincible. his hands. his fire. the way you describe him. he sounds cold.'

'thats how river titans gotta be. were not red shirts. were not frankos. we dont do good with fire. we always end up burning ourselves alive. we get buried right over there. all you gotta think about is how can you fill in your grave.'

'i dont give a fuck about my grave.'

'thats ok.'

'i just want that light back. that fire. i dont care if i burn myself alive. ill take that over this.'

'if you could beat the shit out his friends, youd be able to keep him probably. i think herm had to do that for his last guy.'

'wouldnt that be a reason then?'

'yeah. at that point you just gotta be strong. or stop caring.'

'why cant we just have heroes? who defend us?'

'nigga, now you sound like cairo' used to sound.

'you could be a hero. if i was you. if i had your

body. i would be a hero.'

'i dont make for a good hero. and how many times i gotta keep telling you?'

'yes. yeah. i know.'

'if i leave, are you gonna kill yourself again?'

he wouldnt look me in the eye.

'please dont. i already have enough headaches as it is.'

he was drawing something in the sand with his foot.

so i put the line out and sat there waiting. then i remembered that time when i was in 8th grade and our new neighbor was making too much noise cause he was beating the shit out his wife. and you told me not to do anything cause i would only make things worse but i didnt listen and i got my ass beat. and the next day i offered the lady a stick and she spat at me. and then mom got mad at you and smacked you for not telling me to not get involved even though you did. i was the one who didnt listen.

i told kid migraine the story.

'was that supposed to make me feel better?'

'i dunno. i just thought i should tell it. i think that was the day i decided to start doing what he told me. it's working out.'

'really.'

'yeah.'

then i asked him to tell me about this guy he loves so much.

'why do you keep trying to talk to me?'

'youre sitting next to me. were fishing.'

'youre fishing.'

'and youre sitting 3 feet away from me tops. that means youre fishing with me. whatever i catch, you catch too. shit nigga, if you dont wanna talk thats fine. just hold the line and let me take a nap.' and i handed him the rod. he looked confused as shit but i just laid down and ate up the sky. it was grey but

it wasn't raining.

after a while he said 'karim has brown hair. such a light brown though, you would think it was burning red in the summer.'

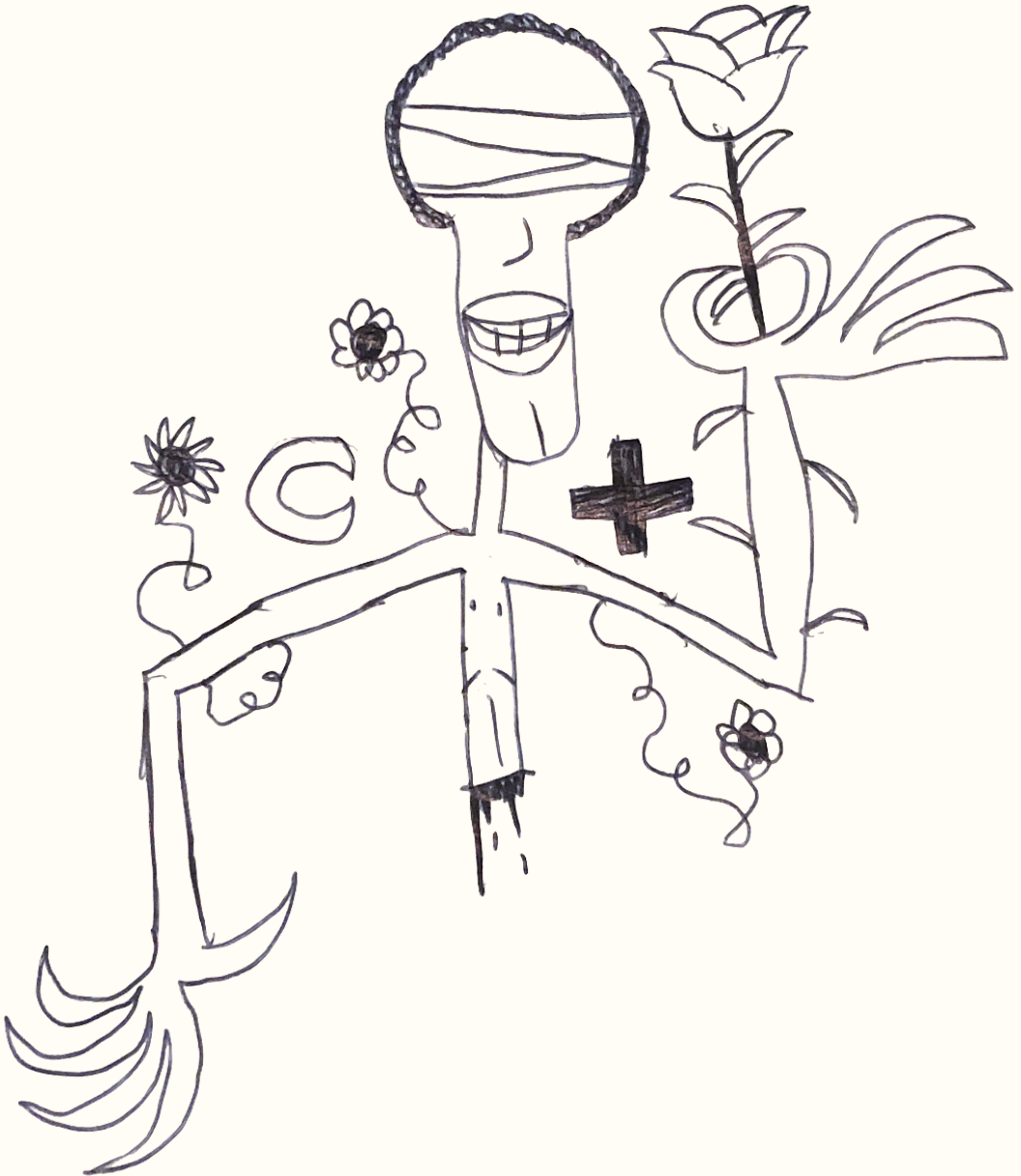
i was falling asleep but i remember some stuff. this karim kid gets freckles when he stays out in the sun too long. apparently his eyes were hazelnut colored but he could've just said brown. kid likes his poetry though.

prudence tried showing me poetry but i couldn't get into it. she gave me this emily dickinson book and i just couldn't get into the words. i really only remember one that goes like 'you will forget the warmth he gave and i will forget the light.' i like that line. what i didn't know was that you were the one who put her on. you never put me onto no poetry. except the bullshit you were writing. fucking off brand bob dylan. thank god i never have to hear that bullshit again.

i woke up and it was nighttime and kid was still talking about karim. he got to his feet, talking about the arches of his feet and how red his soles were and how the hair on his legs stopped exactly at his ankles and made his skin look like socks. and there were times he would massage his feet after he finished playing football and he would pick at the loose white skin on his big toe and smell between the toes and it smelled like all the hard work it would take to keep them together through the years. nutmeg, cinnamon, and cardamom. by the time he was done describing this karim guy's feet i felt like i could smell and taste them myself.

i got up and told kid to keep the fishing rod. i said 'you probably won't catch anything good. a real fish ain't come out of those waters since 1985. but if you keep at it, you might catch something. if you want to kill yourself, do it after you catch a real fish. got it?'

i think he got it. i think theres a few things
keeping me from killing myself. i gotta wait for judi
heller. he will come back and i have to be ready. and
then theres wing. and of course i gotta marry prudence.
cant forget that.



i remember on the day you died, you were bragging about that new gold watch you got. i remember you had to adjust it every hour cause it went way too fast.

that day, it rained gold down here in central. old eden minted dinars fell slow and easy and everyone had a chance to get some. and meanwhile, all the gold outside central rusted so bad it became worthless.

for one afternoon, central was the richest place in the world. not for me though. i spent that entire day running around like an idiot.

then the niggas up north shut down all the exchange offices. all a sudden, they issued a statement and declared that gold is worthless.

all the girls in the city tried selling their jewelry to the traders but they only paid for the stones on them. theyd charge you for making them hold onto gold or theyd carve the gems out and leave your chain looking mangled like a dumped corpse.

ursula was stubborn about it though. she still owns half the gold in new eden. 'you can throw yours in the trash, but my man bought these earrings for me because they were made for my ears.' worthless as it is it all still looks good on her.

yeah, there were protests, but no one died. then they issued a statement that anyone caught trying to pay with old eden money was to be reported for treason and monarchist sympathies. then you had all kinds of debates on tv between a bunch of guys in suits talking about the effects of US anexation and getting rid of paper dinars as well. didnt recognize a single face on those channels. and so no one ever said your name or judi heller's name on tv.

i still keep your chains. i dont wear them though. silver always looked better on me. and it looks better with your jacket.

prudence keeps a gold watch in her drawer thats rusted so bad if you breathe on it wrong itll turn to dust. it still counts the time though, even if it's a

bit fast. shes proud of that. if only you picked a better street to die on.

when i had judi heller at gunpoint, i asked him what the last thing you said was.

'he was showing off his watch. he said it was 18 karot gold. he asked if i knew how rare it was. he was gonna marry the bitch that made it.'

and when i asked him why he left the gun on you, he said 'it was his. and i wanted you to find me and get it all over with.'

he begged me to kill him. if he didnt then i probably wouldve done it and mom wouldve been very mad at me. mom was the one who had the idea for the ticket. the day before i found him she said 'labor.' and that is all.

now it's just time to wait. blood takes a long time to turn blue.

it's recruitment day. we had albanians, maghrebis, calabrians, spics, gypsies, jicks and spags lined up trying to grow their blood.

shit. we even had octobers and saints trying to find niggas dumb enough to strap bombs to their chests for a cause. in the name of communism or the old king or whatever. the saints were 'seeking an audience' with that bitchass nigga wing. he chased them out with a sword.

prince said he didnt wanna fuck up his face doing all that work so he was gonna go into modeling or whoring maybe. only nigga at st mary's who could actually maybe cut it.

cairo wasnt thinking about all that right now. sometimes i catch him walking through the halls by himself, talking to himself. hands in his pockets.

that day, 3 spiders showed up at school, with their black suits and shades. they came over to the council room. they werent 'seeking an audience' with me. they just wanted to talk.

the one with the ponytail, he gave us the milk job a while back, he said 'good. youre all here. lets talk business.'

i said were not interested.

wing put his dirtyass hand on my shoulder and whispered in my ear to hear them out.

i shook his hand off and told them to fuck out of here.

he left a business card with wing. 'for if you ever change your minds.' and he left.

wing got so mad at me. i tried to remind him about razer and 7up. but he wasnt having it. i think he was desperate.

night time, i was walking around, and i didnt know where to or where i even came from. i tried to think where i was last, what even happened. i still dont know. i looked around, but everything was dark. the buildings had no lights on, the streetlights werent

working, and there was no moon. the only lights anywhere were 2 headlights way down the road. and that was all i could use to tell where the sky stopped and the ground began.

the lights pulled up. it was an old black 70s import town car. maybe late 60s. all american steel and leather.

the driver's window rolled down, and the guy told me to get in the back. i saw a guy in the passenger and an automatic pistol on the dash. i got in.

there was another guy in the back. he had his shades on and he was smiling a big smile with more teeth than any one man should have. his cheeks were sewed together with black thread from his ears to the corner of his mouth.

'weaver.'

'correct.'

'what do you want?'

'just driving a lost boy home. doing my part to help the city.' his voice was like smoke in my lungs. i tried to hold my breath but i couldnt keep it out. it made me sick.

'and thats all?'

i looked at his forehead cause i didnt wanna look at my reflection in his shades and i wanted to avoid looking at his mouth cause it made my stomach roll.

'let me cut to the chase. your friend, wing, is in the preliminarary interview process to join my ranks. he's a smart kid. he complains alot, but he's tremendously smart. he has certain health problems, as im sure you know. blood related. blood is our specialty. he can use us, and we can use him. but more than that, we can use you.'

'not interested. i told your guys before.' i guessed it was a few hours. couldve been days. or weeks. or months. or years. i tried to stop thinking about that cause it was making me sweat.

'i know. they told me about your warm welcome. but

i think i can be a bit more persuasive.'

ok.

'you have a rare quality. men follow you, and they follow you without thinking.'

they follow my back cause i wear your jacket and it tricks niggas into thinking im you. that ssimple.

'in that way, you remind me of a good friend of mine. he too was aimless. he too ran from everything that scared him. he too had a beautiful girl that he was on the verge of losing. what do you think will happen once you graduate?'

'im repeating the year.'

'ill make sure you dont. but even if you did, what about at the end of the next year? and after that, when theyre forced to throw you out? what then?'

'ill work in construction.'

'i dont think a man like you is good at taking orders.'

'i never checked. ill have to see.'

'new eden is dying, cherry.' i didnt like him saying my name. 'its lungs are weak. its heart is fluttering. its liver is serotic. its spine is stiff and brittle. and most importantly, its hands are numb and cold.' he put up his hands. the fingers were long. each knuckle was a different color, and they were sewed together at every joint. 'what im looking for is some control.' he moved a finger and the driver yanked the steering wheel and made a quick right. 'and to get it, im weaving a web.' he lifted another finger and the streetlights all came on. 'i would like you to be part of that web.'

'why?'

'as i said, men follow you willingly.'

'boys follow me.'

'and men are just boys in suits. they will follow you just the same. thats whats important. you can only get so far with your fists.'

'i have a knife.'

'and a sense of humor, too.'

'we can see how far all that takes me.'

'and your friend wing. what about him?'

'what about him?'

'we can fix his problem.'

'only if i join?'

'precisely.'

'if he wants to run with you niggas, thats his problem.'

his smile relaxed. 'so you wont even give us a chance?'

'where are spiders buried?'

his smile went away completely. 'spiders dont get buried.'

'alright. im good then.'

'very well. im not one for wasting time on losing battles. we'll drop you off here. but ill let you know one thing. new eden will leave you behind. there is no job you can get that will hold you over until the next wind. this is all you have until it's over. even your grave will be washed away. you asked for this.'

the car pulled up. i got out and i wouldve closed the door but it closed by itself. the car went off. i looked around. they dropped me off at baroque park. took me like 5 hours to walk back home.

i passed out in the shower and hit my head on the wall. if you were around to take some of that hot water maybe i wouldnt have had to pass out. i bandaged it up myself though. i was dizzy as fuck. i slept before i could get some water.

i woke up to a call from wing. he said to come on down to farooq's. i headed over to his place and picked him up and biked him on down. how fucking generous i am. i was peddling pretty fast, so we couldnt talk on the way.

i shouldve been more hungry than i was. i didnt eat in i dont know how long. my stomach hurt, but i

couldnt eat a thing.

wing said 'baby, if thats just an excuse to take my food.'

'maybe.'

'always. you keep doing this.'

'so they interviewed you?'

'yeah. shit. it was an easy job. they paid too. give it a few months, ill have my own place.'

'a lot of jobs can pay for a place.'

'yeah, after what, 2 years? and i cant do construction with my back like this. shit, i cant even bag groceries for more than an hour, nigga. but even if i could, then what? keep taking shit? and they have stuff for my back too.' he wiggled his wing. 'this is long term, nigga.'

'man, spiders cant even get buried.'

he lit a stick and blew a sheet of smoke at the ceiling. 'shit. they can get paid though.'

'why dont we just save up for a new place together?'

'what would we fucking do? i gotta get karina out that fucking house. shit, i gotta get out that fucking house. and the spiders, they can do something about this.' and he shook his wing. 'why wont you come up with me?'

'i wanna get buried someday.'

he slammed his hand onto the table. 'fuck getting buried.'

the waitress came over and asked if everything was ok. the retard said yeah it's all good. he accidentally bit his tongue.

wing said 'fuck all that shit, nigga. so what if i dont get buried? at least i die on my own terms. thats what goldy said, right? he was gonna choose his own road? well im choosing. they want me and i choose in. i didnt get to choose a damn thing in my life. i didnt get to choose how i lost my airtime. i didnt get to choose how i lost my virginity. i didnt get to choose

how i lost my god. im gonna choose how i die. so what if it means we dont get buried together like a fucking married couple of faggots.'

we sat there for a bit. they brought wing's food but he ate it and paid for it and got up all without my help.

i wanted to see him struggle to get up. i wanted to stand over him so he could see where i was and where he was so he could know who was right. so he could lean on me again and i could take him back home. but he got up.

so i went with him and this idiot said nah.

'nigga i rode you here.'

'it's all good, baby.' and he smiled at me a way he never smiled at me or anyone else before. a liar's smile. and then he left. and i watched him across the street and down the shadows of an alley way.

so i got up and went to the bathroom and i ran the faucet over my face with cold water. i drank some of it. my tongue was so dry. i leaned on the sink and looked at myself in that rusty ass mirror.

and grinding my teeth.

and swallowing my saliva.

i took the jacket off and took my shirt off and looked at my right shoulder. the bruises were opening. i took out my knife and gave a little cut to the bruise. it opened like a camel's stomach. so much dark blood and gunk. i sank the knife deeper in and i had to bite my cheeks half off to hold back the screaming. like slow god's breath in from the east.

i fumbled and so a bigass gash opened up on my shoulder down to my arm. it was running hard. i put my thumb into it and pushed down on the meat. i took my thumb and my finger and pushed the skin apart.

the meat was so stringy and purple behind the skin. it smelled like violent metal sickness. i moved my arm and saw a rod deep behind the muscles move like the mechanics inside a typewriter pounding at a

paper. how much of my life can i measure with letters and words? can you see it? what do you see when i talk to you?

see me vomiting on the floor of a bathroom. vomit thats not too chunky cause i didnt eat that much. vomit thats mostly stomach juices. yellow mixing orange with the blood. it looks like the snot part of an egg when you crack it into a pan. something that was supposed to be warm was now cold and then burning soon after.

see me grabbing a bunch of toilet paper and wiping at the cut. my skin is loose around it. the paper stings like violent cunt. see little bits of paper sticking to the meat and me wiping it away with my finger.

see a guy in a brown suit opening the bathroom door and me turning to him and showing him my shoulder and asking him 'you see anything here?'

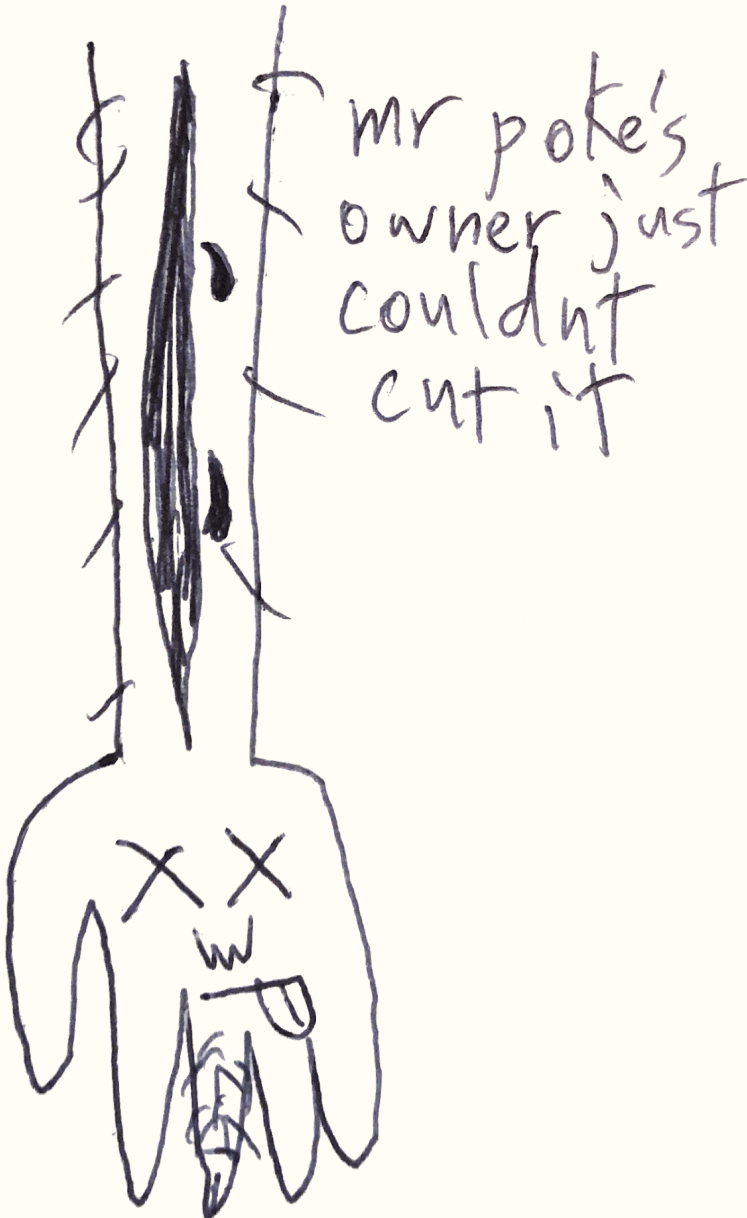
see him screaming and falling on his ass and the blood goes dark purple on his suit to match his tie. if you want, you can see him pissing himself. and then i kick the door closed and take some toilet paper and wrap my arm with it over and over again. then i put the shirt over it and the jacket and am thinking that it should be fine.

and then i wash my mouth in the faucet and i walk out. people looking at me with wide eyes. look at me the same way. im waving at them. 'sorry about the paint job. they shouldve hired a professional.' you were always the clown out of us two. if youre laughing with them i cant hear you over the sound of the typewriter in my shoulder banging out violence in my right ear and it's not even my good ear but it burns.

i dont wanna bother them at mona's with all the blood so i get my shoulder looked at at herm's place. he says the toilet paper was a bad idea and it could give me an infection. it takes him all day to clean

it out and sew it. i tell him not to use black string. he says it's blue.

the jobs he has for me to pay him off are way worse than before. on the list of things i can choose to get are 5mg of ultraket, a fire from an agiari, and the blood of a monarch. see me turn to the black painted sky on the ceiling of herm's place, and the student discount is over.



the whole city got a bout of headaches this morning. migraine finally went. ssun go up. sun come down. and the farther you go, the happier this city will be to forget your name. some people have the right idea.

when i got over to the fishing spot, i saw the rod with an acefish dangling from the line. maybe 7 inches tops. crawling with maggots.

herm said migraine's body was probably so far south by now it's not even in new eden anymore. everyone was talking about sending out a team by boat to get his body back but i told them to leave it. he's one of those kids too good to be a titan. we shouldnt even be feeling these headaches. let the ocean take him.

the headaches werent migraines but they were still bad. herm ran out of aspirin to give everyone. i didnt take any. i couldve got some booze or some melts but i wanted to pray today. and i wanted to feel it. not for migraine. my prayers wouldnt reach him wherever he's going. i prayed for me and my sins alone.

sorry i aint said shit in a while. had a fever. i graduated. you proud? didnt think id be saying that this summer. i got called into bayazid's office and he handed me a piece of paper.

'congratulation.'

it was a degree. 'and what did i do to deserve this?'

'nothing. you are still a idiot and you will be a idiot forever. this is the new education board. they want to increase graduation rates, so they lower the requirements. now you are free to maybe become not a piece of shit in society.'

'and im the only one who got this?'

'your stupid ass is never here. half the seniors already got their degree. you have to be a retarded piece of shit to not be graduating. like the wing boy. allah yellano.'

so i got up, walked to the door, walked back, threw the chair at bayazid's head, and left.

i ended up at the river, laying down on the bank looking up at the sky.

you know, it feels kinda wrong to be handed some thing rig worked 3 hard years for. i still remember the smile on his face, holding up that dirty piece of paper. or maybe i just remember that picture still on the desk in the council room. kid actually tried for it too. is he jealous i got my diploma first try? tell him not to be. mine isnt as heavy as his.

i was maybe sinking into the ground at the river. cant remember. all i remember was old man green's face looking down at me, and him walking me back home. it might have been the hardest walk of my life if i could remember it. but i remember how it felt to sink into the carpet.

when i woke up, i was in your bed. i couldnt move or talk. moving my eyeballs hurt. my face was wet and sticky and there was a gross sweet taste in my mouth. all i could do was make noises.

prince wing and cairo were there and they were arguing over what remedy to try next. they already tried pouring coke on my head and making me wear socks full of diced carrots. they were debating if they should ice my nipples. prince was the only one who wanted to do that. i wanted to kill them. and the whole time wing wouldnt even look at me.

then herm came over. he felt my wrist and forehead. it was like my skin wasnt even there. every touch hurt. he put something cold and nice and wet on my forehead. i think it was a towel. probably it was.

i didnt have my jacket or shirt on. prince touched the cut on my shoulder and arm. i was too tired to scream.

he smiled. 'who gave you all this trouble my dear?'

i was too tired to say it was me. i wish he asked about the massive scar on my ribs so i could remind herm i got it running chickens for him.

wing asked 'whats the situation, doctor?'

herm said 'if he holds out through the day, were good. if he doesnt, were fucked. he's gonna start turning into glass soon. it's up to you guys to make sure he doesnt go all the way.' then he took out some powders and a jar of lizard eyes and another jar of frog tongues. he poured them out into ripped pieces of newspaper and tied them up and wrote down the recipe for some medicine for the kids to make. then he looked at me and said 'youre racking up quite the tab for me, cherbear. my favorite customer.'

herm left, and they got to cooking the grossest smelling medicine that ever existed over in the kitchen. cairo walked in with his hands in his pockets. he looked so much older and taller from down where i was.

he said 'hanging in there, big chief?' then he squatted down and his braids swung an inch above my face. 'it's time to convert you. i think your mama

wants you to be muslim. you can call it a hunch or a gut feeling or whatever you want, big guy, but i think she always liked me most. that medicine aint gonna work. ill get an imam over. he'll take care of you.'

then he petted my head with his bandaged fist like i was some fucking dog, and i wanted so bad to ice his ass. i passed out, though.

i became a fox in the middle of a forest. on my back. my stomach was ripped open. i looked over and a pigeon and a deer were eating my guts. it didnt feel so bad.

the deer said 'he should watch what he eats. he doesnt taste as good when he eats that garbage.' the deer had prudence's voice.

the pigeon said 'i dont know. i kinda like it. it has a funky taste. like dry age.' the pigeon had wing's voice.

it was so easy to breathe there, with my lungs outside my body. i asked 'how long you guys been eating me?'

'shhh. food aint supposed to talk, baby.'

it was easier not to talk. easier to just be food.

i blinked back to your bed, with 6 niggas in the room yelling at each other. the kids, an imam, and 2 priests all arguing about how to do an exorcism. i wish they brought a rabbi or a parsi or a buddhist or something to really get the party going.

the east orthodox priest grabbed my arm and pulled it from under the covers. 'look! his fingers are already gone!'

he was right. you could see right through my fingers. they were so hard and numb and heavy. no point in even trying to move them.

the imam turned on cairo and said they should do an exorcism on him. the priests agreed. the catholic said cairo's demon was worse than mine.

the kids unloaded on them. kicked them out the house. and then there was only one religion in that

room and it didnt have any churches.

i blinked, and then we were on that backroad we used to take to go to school. just me and you.

remember the og st mary's road? before it became a goverment school? i miss it some days. i dont know if this is exactly how it went but this is how i dreamed it. let me know if you remember it different.

it was a bright day that day, and the white on everything ached to take over the color of the world. the only thing keeping it was this guy coming over stumbling on his own feet, smearing the wall red with his hands for the last half kilometer damn near. a straight red streak that divided the white like a border drawn by moses's staff.

then the guy fell on his ass and sat against the wall. he was bleeding from his stomach and he was holding a revolver in his left hand.

'4 shots.' he said. 'i miss 4 shots and he hits 1. now im the one has to die.' he had a voice like a truck on gravel. he looked over at us with his blood running from his mouth. 'how's that fair?'

you took the first step to him. i just followed. i was scared back then. of death.

then you asked 'what happened?'

'oh i just wanted his jacket.'

'was it a nice jacket?'

'shit. yeah. it was a nice aviator. brown italian leather. high cut waist. and it had a bunch of prayers sewed into the inside. christian prayers. buddhist. muslim. they protected him. i shouldve made him take it off first.' then he started coughing.

some of the blood got on my shoe. i tugged on your shirt so we could leave but you shoved me off. i dont know how you werent shitting yourself.

'my wallets in my left pocket. take the cash. leave the papers. i want them to id me. just so my mama knows.'

you took his wallet and took the cash. wasnt more

than 60 dinar in there.

'whats your names?'

'im goldy. he's cherry.'

'i dont think i seen your names in the field. how old are you?'

'7. he's 6.'

'yeah i aint been that far down. well, if youre meant to, youll be there.'

'how old are you?'

'shit. i was about to hit 19 next week.' he coughed some more. 'you ever think about being a titan, boy?'

you shook your head, and i shook mine right with you.

'well dont. but if you do, be a river titan. they get the best funerals.' then he held out the gun in his left hand. 'take this too. hide it. dont let the americans take all our guns. this one's only got 2 bullets left. worth damn shit. all it does is miss.'

then he coughed some more. he pulled out a pack of sticks, but it was empty. 'shit. why dont one of you run and get me a pack of luckies. golds.'

i took the money.

'luckies.' he said. 'golds. dont get it wrong. this is my last dinner here.'

i ran. luckies. golds. luckies. golds.

the german guy at the corner store asked who i was buying it for. he said he knew my dad didnt smoke luckies. i peed myself and cried. then he sold them to me. and took an extra 15 dinar tax.

i ran back as fast as i could. you gotta believe me. piss running down my legs. i could barely see. 6 year old legs cant run fast enough to reach a dying man.

mom never found the gun where you hid it. i think dad knew somehow, and thats why he took us out the next week and taught us all about how to shoot and how not to kill yourself. he shouldve told you the

worst thing to do with a gun is to hand it to the nigga trying to kill you.

i woke up. the kids actually did get a rabbi and a parsi. and a presomatic too. and they were all arguing still.

prince was sitting next to me, criss cross applesauce, eating my ramen. i swear, all these niggas need is an excuse to take all your shit. he said 'oh youre awake!'

my right arm was all glass and i had a shirt tied around my wrist. 'i really am sorry about that. it was an accident. it shouldnt be a problem though. we just need to be careful not to move it or itll fall off again. anyways, ive got great news!'

i wanted to ask if it had anything to do with me turning into glass, but i knew better.

'im joining a modeling agency. im going to be a model! first in the east. but then they might take me to america.'

i wanted to tell him that theyre probably gonna sell his holes and his liver, but cairo had me. 'theyre gonna sell your parts, kiddo. honest. it happened to my 2nd cousin.'

'everything happened to your 2nd fucking cousin. if he's still alive this time next year ill give you 200 dinar.'

cairo stuck his tongue out at him.

'and anyway, theyre taking my house. there are too many bills and taxes that my mother wasnt in the mood to pay. so i have to move anyway.' he did a mouth fart.

wing said 'shit. it's money.' he was helping cairo rebandage his hands. 'holy mother of god, someone get these fucking freaks out of here. theyre gonna make me into an atheist.'

the holy men were arguing on the couch the whole time so the kids kicked them out. they sat me up and tried spoonfeeding me that bullshit but i wasnt

having it. prince had to hold my jaw open and cairo poured it in sloppy as fuck. got all over me. stank like shit.

then prince got a towel to wipe me down and wing moved the tv into the bedroom and sat down next to me. i tried to reach for wing's hand with my left hand but i ended up grabbing onto a tent flap instead and walking into a military barracks.

my skin was so much darker, and i was in uniform with a helmet and a green shirt and boots and every thing. it was a big room with niggas handling all kinds of rifles and explosives and shit. i walked over to the table at the far end of the room where the big shot was standing looking at a bunch of maps.

this old tall guy, white hair with a blackstar beret, a real one, looked down at me. gave me the brief about the mission. i had to go down into the grouts and scout the position of the advancing american platoon so we could ambush them. and then he said 'i know how much sam meant to you. he meant a lot to us all. but i know how much he meant to you and yours.'

i said 'yes sir.'

'we'll get that bastard back for this, believe me, right after we take care of this mission.'

'yes sir.'

'that means no chasing after him, you hear me?'

'yes sir.'

'without your scouting, this whole operation's a bust. we need you for this, or this war will be over before it even started.'

'yes sir.'

'youre dismissed soldier.'

'sir yes sir.'

then i walked out. the whole camp was down from the betrayal. prince sam was their light. i headed over to the infermary tent. some scouts were watching it. scouts that were worse than me. they wanted to

make sure i didnt head out after the traitor. they thought i didnt notice them.

i went up to this egyptian man i met on the job. he lost his leg and the stump was bandaged and raised. he was woozy off the painkillers and he had a cough from all that toxic sand that got in his lungs. i dapped him up. his hand was tired.

i told him 'you should get one of those fake legs before you go home. freak your kids out. itll be a nice joke.'

'allah yekhreibbet your jokes.'

we laughed. then he cried. he was tight with prince sam. me, him, and the traitor.

when the tears stopped he said 'i wont be going back for a week. they delayed me again.'

'why?'

'not a single clue in my mind yakhooya.'

'dont worry. ill take care of it.'

'ah ah, it's fine. i can wait. i dont know if i can face my wife like this. i rather they put the gun in my hand and wheel me into the american camp. better than face my wife as a coward.' and he started coughing so hard he started crying. 'and my wife wants kids! what it is about war time that makes a woman wanna have children? and she wants a daughter! uffaaa. between you and me? i would rather have a son.'

'well you go on back and make yourself a son. ill get your papers taken care of.'

'habibi. you dont have to, but if you do, i will name my son after you.'

'give your kid a better name than mine, friend.'

'like what, hah?'

i looked at his helmet sitting on the pile of clothes to his side. 'name him after a city. cities have the best names. and fruits have good names too, i guess. but name the kid after a city.'

i took his discharge papers off his headboard and went over to another infirmary tent. i looked around

for a guy whose discharge papers were stamped and ready to go. i found one and i yanked it off and swapped it with my friend's. then i went back and i pinned the stamped papers to my friend's headboard.

i read the name on the stamped papers. 'ill see you back home, raikart of 371 feyrus.'

'allaybarek feek.' he took my hand and squeezed it. 'allaybarek feek.' he started crying. 'listen. listen to me yakhooya. make sure you win, hah? i dont want my children to grow up in a american city. hah?'

i got really sad and disappointed when he said that. 'i think it's too late for that.'

'what do you mean?'

'dont worry about it. i got you.'

'be ithnellah.'

'be ithnellah. and if you see them wheeling me out, keep your mouth shut.'

then i went and picked out the busiest medic and told him that the guy in bed 17 was dead and they should wheel him out to the morgue.

then i got into bed 17, laid down in it, and died. there was no way to tell when to come back to life. it was like holding my breath in a black ocean, and all i knew was that at the far end of the black was an eye, and i had to wake up before it saw me. if i took a breath without coming back to life, it would for sure see me.

so i held my breath longer than i thought i had to, then i breathed myself back into life. i woke up surrounded by dead bodies on a truck taking us to the dumping hole. i had like 20 on top of me.

it smelled like fucking shit. dead soldiers dont smell anything like dead titans.

i took a bit too long dead. my muscles and bones were all stiff and shit. i pushed my way out the pile of bodies. i stretched out my neck and arms and then hung over by the side of the truck and broke the passenger side window.

usually there would be a guy in the passenger seat but we were low on men so this guy was driving alone. i got into the truck and swerved. he was scared. i made him stop the truck before he got us both killed. then i made him give me his clothes and his knife. i let him keep his gun and told him to keep going to take care of the bodies.

then i set out walking away from sundown. i could tell by the arc of the sun that the traitor was maybe 400 thousand steps away. so i walked.

the first thing i did was look for water on the way. it was easy cause the sands talked to me. they showed me where there was water, and i would dig down and soak my shirt in the pool at the bottom of the dune and squeeze it into my mouth.

and when i heard the eagles coming, the sands hid me. they hid me the way they refused to hide the traitor. and the eagles would fly over head and beat at the sands and find nothing, and i would walk on. sometimes i would slither through the sand. cold blooded like a snake in plain sight. and the eagles would see nothing.

and id say a prayer everytime, but the sands always wanted more. they would ask me for things. breath. blood. but more than anything they wanted color. the color was what they valued the most and the last thing i wanted was to be in so much debt to the sand that i had to give them the color off me. it scared me, what the sands wanted with it. but deep down in me, where my blood ran darkest, i could tell i was gonna have to make a deal soon.

the traitor didnt know the desert like i did. he lived his whole life in the king's district. all he knew was roads and concrete. for every eight steps he took, i only needed one.

i found him in a halfcave that gave its presence up to me from 15 thousand steps away because it knew my intent. i stood there looking at the traitor.

laying down, his head in his hands. already prepared to die.

when the sun fell behind my head, he noticed me. he took out his knife and came out. we circled each other. 'you made a mistake.' he said. 'you couldve saved the war. you already knew where the americans were. why did you come after me? why?'

i didnt answer him.

'sam wouldve wanted you to fight the war, not chase after me.'

'i know.' i took his arms and legs and made them useless. he went to the ground screaming. and then laughed at me while screaming. 'the war is over now! the americans won thanks to you!'

i went through his bag, found a stick, and sat down. the sun was setting and it was getting cold. i told him 'the americans won half a century ago, when sam's granddaddy let their movies and their music in. the war was over when we went out to fight americans using their weapons, their words in their accents, making plans using feet and yards and miles. better to let this war end before it really begins.'

'i never understood you. i knew you would come to get me, but why are you siding with the americans now?'

'little boys cant hold big swords. a boy needs to grow up before he kills his father. such is the way of things. i cant be too mad at you. i was planning on killing sam's daddy once we got back. had a whole plan and every thing. but the americans will take care of it quicker. and once everyone forgets new eden, their time will come. me? i still wanna finish highschool. and my girl is waiting for me.'

'so you care not one lick about new eden?'

'i care a lot of licks about new eden. my blood will stay in new eden until theres none of it left. it's causes i dont care for. i think my whole family's allergic to them.'

and where the sun just set not 2 seconds ago, the pillar of fire rose. and it looked like sunrise was coming from the wrong side of the sky that night.

by now, my egyptian friend would already be on the truck home. and he would know i betrayed him and his prince too. but he would see the birth of his next kid. and maybe spend a few years with him until the sand in his lungs got the better of him.

and then with my knife, i took the traitor's fingers and his eyes. and he didnt make as much noise as i thought he would. he sat through it like it was a bad haircut.

and then the sands carried a song to me from the city. i heard it in my spine and then my ears. i said 'do you hear that, weaver? do you hear the sound of crying kids? my sons are crying. i have to go to them now.'

'you idiot. you really put children into this world?'

'i will soon. thats what the sands say. someone will have to inherit this world.'

'ill find them. ill get them.'

'you wont have a chance to do anything to them, my friend. ill make sure of that. now if youll excuse me, people are waiting for me.'

'ill find you.'

'do that. and maybe we can have coffee.'

and then i followed the sands to the door in the desert. i opened it, winked back at myself, and fell back into the bed.

everyone was crowding me on the bed trying to fit on it. snoring like they owned the place. wing was holding my hand. it was sweaty. i held it just a little bit tighter.

it was so warm. it was still daytime. the light through the windows was warm blue and yellow. it wasnt too heavy. no, it actually wasnt heavy at all.

i looked over to cairo on my right. i told him his

dad wanted a son.

he mumbled something about something about some thing.

prudence was peeking in through the doorway. 'i got here as soon as i could. is everyone ok?'

'yeah.' i said. 'keep it down. dont wake these babies up. they need their nap time.'

'i see theres no room for me.'

'there is. unless you wanna get between wing and me.'

'ill make chicken soup instead.'

'i dont have chicken.'

'ill get some.'

'i graduated.'

she was about to leave, but she swung her head back. 'really?'

'keep it down.'

'thats exciting!'

'not really.'

'well, im excited for you. you got out early.'

'yeah.'

'ill make the soup. itll be a celebration.'

'sounds nice.'

'i cant wait to marry you.' she blew me a kiss and left. i blew her a kiss back. as good as any man can without free hands.

i told wing that i loved him. and i was sorry.

he snored.

then all that was left was to wait for everyone to wake up.

eid and graduation are on the same day this year. usually, that would mean waking up early or staying up until 7 to go to eid prayer with cairo, but cairo's not as religious anymore, so i could just sleep in. i dont think cairo gave up on god completely though. i see him put his hands up for dua sometimes.

it's wild to think weve done eid prayer for 4 years straight ever since cai's dad died, and now it's all over. i kinda liked it, even if my arabic isnt so good, and im not a real muslim. wing has trouble bending over these days, so the movements wouldve been hard for him anyway. maybe he couldve prayed in a chair or something. but knowing him, he wouldnt have taken that.

since so many of us were graduating, damn near the entire girl's school was on campus to witness the historic event. for maybe the first time in the history of st mary's, there was more girls than guys in the school.

shit, it was a lot of niggas there. old man green was there. some albanians, maybe still looking to recruit. some spiders too, waiting outside in an old black town car. waiting for wing probably.

bayazid was tossing the diplomas out of a big black trash bag. he'd yell out your goverment name and flick the paper into the air. your luck if you caught it in time. i got mine early if you remember, but it already has a coaster stain on it.

prudence wanted to get a picture of us with all our diplomas. it's a nice picture. she has a great eye. only an artist could make a bunch of ugly ass dudes dressed in hand me downs with no future look like champions. of course my award winning smile was what brought the whole thing together.

then everyone was waiting out there on that hotass courtyard for someone to say some final words before they could lift their beers in the air and yell like animals. i dipped before i could feel any eyes on me.

took prudence to the roof and watched the whole thing from there.

i think the problems started when calcutta tried to say something. he got up on st mary's pedestal, but what he was saying was way too long and mushy. he started crying even before niggas started yelling at him. seeing cutta cry with all the muscles he has now is a sight to see.

aleel stepped up and tried saying something, but kid never learned how to talk. i still dont know if english is his first language. get him out of there.

2tap had the opposite problem. that nigga wouldnt shut the fuck up. i dont even know what he was saying. started off talking about the ball game and then went into formula 1, and then for some reason he ended up talking about the day his mama gave birth to him. they started throwing things at him.

prudence asked me 'why dont you say something?'

i said fuck no.

she shrugged. 'i think it would be fun.'

ok.

old man green showed up and said 'yes, it would certainly be fun if we could get out of here already.'

i said 'nigga where did you come from?'

'you really should say something. as the prophecy goes, if the great shadow does not canvas the feet of the whore, then may the sun never set on the western shore.'

'what the fuck prophecy is that?'

'i made it just now, because if somebody doesnt say something of meaning soon, this whole day will never end.'

'fine by me.'

'they are all titans, but none of them are giants. none of them cast a great shadow. only one person in this whole godblasted school casts a shadow worth sitting under. and if that fucking animal doesnt speak at the feet of that whore' he pointed at st mary 'then

we will never be able to lift our drinks. youll notice not a single person here can lift their beers. not even you. now matter how hard you try.'

the beers i brought for me and pru wouldnt go past chest level. they just stayed there. couldnt do a damn thing. 'im not thirsty anyways.'

'your clothes, no matter how much you pull them away from your skin, will always return to stick to you uncomfortably. the boys, for once, are rejecting the advances of the girls. and in a short minute, mosquitos will begin to evade your slaps at the last second. and they will always fly right by your ears as soon as you begin to forget about them. ah, it seems that has already begun.'

and right there, a mosquito flew by my ear. 'im not fucking doing it. matter of fact, it's kinda nice out here.' now if that wasnt a goddamn lie. i took off the jacket and tied it around my waist. and i washed the inside extra hard just for the occasion too. 'theres gotta be at least one guy who can cut it.'

jinks went up and tried doing what we all saw rig and jaws and you do a million times. raise the beers. raise them, kid. but no. kid couldnt get a single beer up. complete silence. he had to walk down.

iso, rayo, prayer, and maybe 100 other niggas stepped up and couldnt get the job done. there was beard on my cheeks. i shaved that morning.

i looked over at prince, and he swatted away a girl's hand. told her to fuck off. wouldnt even let her slap him.

prudence said 'thats bad. prince isnt supposed to do that.' she grabbed my face and said 'ok. here's the plan. youre going to go up there and tell them what they want to fucking hear.'

'no.'

'I WANT TO GET OUT OF HERE!'

'i think we could make a good life out here. you

could open up your watch shop in the council room. and i can help you out with the small things. prince and wing too. the way we helped cairo ink his comics.'

'if i may interject,' old man green said 'watches arent worth a damn right now.'

prudence looked at her watch. the hands were moving in opposite directions. 'ugh! and i just finished this one.'

'listen, boy. you dont have to tell them what they want to hear. you could just say something from your heart.'

'i dont wanna.'

'just one word.'

'im good.'

'coward.'

'ok.'

'bitch.'

i jumped up fast as hell and pushed that old fart against the broken part of the fence. i couldve thrown him over.

'i called you a bitch. worse than even the worst coward i ever knew. your belly is so yellow, it puts a sapsucker to shame!'

i didnt even know what that meant, but i had to smack him. first time i ever did that in my life. felt maybe like what ssmacking an ocean would feel like. he didnt even flinch. kept his eyes on me the whole time.

'talk.'

'fuck you.'

'talk.'

'fuck off.'

'TALK, BOY! WITH THE TONGUE THAT GOD GAVE YOU! SET THE SUN UPON THIS DAY!' it was the angriest i ever saw him.

'i cant. every year, these guys want someone to go up there and tell them we'll be titans forever. that

titans never die. that we all live forever. give them a reason to lift up those beers. but it has to be someone else. cause some people do stop being titans, and you cant bury them across the river anymore. some titans do die. most of them actually. and they dont come back. spring 74 was a fluke. matter of fact, i dont even believe it really happened. mom and dad swear, but they were kids.'

'then tell them something else. tell them about whatever the bloody hell is in HERE.' and he shook my head so hard i felt my brain rattle in there.

'i cant do that either.'

'and why the hell not?'

i just wanted to hear rig and jaws and you say all those words again. i wanna believe it's all true again.

it never shouldve got to the point where i had to say them. it shouldve been wing instead of me. if you were in my shoes and my pants and my shirt and your jacket, what would you say? would you say what everyone wanted to hear? would you say what was on your mind? what was on your mind? what the fuck were you thinking when you let judi heller have your gun? why couldnt you just wait for me?

i headed down. dogshorts was trying to say something. i pushed him off and stepped up. i hugged st mary and got up on my tippy toes to kiss her cheek. i told her shes always been good to us, and i was sorry everybody was in such a hurry to leave her. bad kids never come back home to visit unless they want money or theyre riding a coffin. but that is the way.

i turned to the rest of the kids. i found cairo. he nodded. i found prince, he waved. i found wing. after a few seconds, he took off his new shades. i looked at him the whole time.

i said nobody's as good to us as old girl. and i smacked her shoulder. i said thats why none of us

wanna leave her. shes made of stone, but shes the warmest thing in this whole city. and even shes kicking us out. it's time fellas. it's time to leave. out there is something thats gonna send us to our graves. we dont get to decide where we eat the shawerma. but if youre lucky, you get to decide if you want chicken or meat. and sometimes even if you want the mexican sauce on it or not. and some of us are gonna have to eat the shawerma at redina's where the bread is really thin and their mexican sauce isnt very spicy. most of us will. some of us are gonna get to eat the shawerma at lebanese rose and we'll get the nice sweet bread and the juicy chicken and they give you the tomiya for free in a cup for free. actually i dont think they give the tomiya for free anymore. i know yasin's sister and she told me they have to tighten the ship. but if youre eating there tell them you know cherry and they might give you the tomiya for free and then youll have enough money for fries with just 30 or 35 dinar. but for the rest of us eating at redina's, we'll just have to make do. and we can either cry, or we can get their meat shawerma cause it's better than the chicken over there. and instead of mexican sauce we can just ask for a bowl of fries. or maybe save that money and get like a bag of chips or a popsicle after.

when they realized i had nothing more to say, they all lifted their beers. and then they threw them at me. no party. just a concussion for me and a pain in the ass for the freshmen to clean up. not the worst i ever saw though.

courtyard started to clear out. most of the girls were asking themselves what they were doing there in the first place. prince winked at me then followed their asses out. i couldnt find cairo anywhere. oh well. he still has 2 more years left.

i was looking at wing the whole time. he smiled, maybe. it was a little too far to tell and you know

how bad my eyesight has been since that time with the cops in 4th district. so i could only imagine what wing's face looked like from all the way in st mary's arms. well, he left. whether he smiled or not, he left. and i was left wishing i had enough money to buy glasses.

i looked up at st mary, all wet with beer that was meant to hit me. 'you dont deserve all this. but now you can see why youre right to kick us all out. ill see you the next time one of us dies. meantime, put some meat on your bones. life's too short to be on a diet the whole time.'

i went with prudence to get some lebanese grill. it's weird. i always expected to be eating all that with wing, cairo, prince, and you and jaws and maybe rig too, and 7up if his label thing worked out. and lilo passing on by. and dad and mom. why did i think of it that way?

i just ordered a plate for me and a plate for wing and ate both, and i imagined what wing would say about me eating all his food.

desperado, why dont you come to your senses. how does the rest of the song go? i dont listen to the fucking eagles, but all i can remember is prince's version.

desperado, why dont you come to your senses. every body just keeps passing you right on by.

i was helping prince pack. wing was gone. aint seen him in more than two weeks. cairo couldnt come through. i dont know what he's up to these days but even if he could come through he wouldnt be any help.

i was helping prince throw away shit he didnt need. it felt weird knowing he wouldnt be around and i was helping him to not be around. and i need someone to help me move out in a few weeks. whether i stay around or not.

that modeling job is taking him far out east. i told him he'll have to hide that he's a river titan so he doesnt end up with knife handles for eyes. i hope they cover up that tattoo on his back when he does shirtless shoots.

so anyways. i was just helping kid out. and he was singing his bullshit version of desperado that i knew was wrong but i couldnt correct him cause i couldnt remember anything but his version anymore.

and im throwing away bullshit. clothes that he didnt like anymore and that i didnt want. most of the excercise video cassettes his mom used to watch. some tapes that dont work anymore. and a fuckload of papers. old bills. homework from back when they used to give us homework. and some random notebook papers.

i found this one notebook paper folded up nice and neat under his pillow. i didnt think a lot about it. i shouldve but i didnt. i rolled it up and threw it at the trash can. i missed. then prince picked it up.

then he smacks me so fucking hard on the back of my head i feel like my teeth are gonna shoot out of my mouth and into the wall. desperado, what a goddamn right hook.

'why did you throw this away?'

'it's a fucking paper, nigga!'

'DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS IS?'

'fuck no.'

he punched me, and then i tackled him. i had him on the ground and i asked him what his fucking deal was, and all he would do was hit me in the kidneys. even in that position, he hit like a fucking truck. im still pissing blood.

then he said 'we never settled this.' and then he took off his shirt, held it at one end, and left the other end for me. i aint played cuban in a cold minute. and i didnt wanna play it against fucking prince. not when we had so much shit to pack.

so i ask him 'whats this about, kid?'

'dont KID me, boy. take the fucking shirt.'

now this nigga pissed me off, so i took that shit with my right hand.

he was supposed to leave the house in good condition. so of course he slammed into me and we broke down the front door and fell onto the sidewalk.

i kept laying into his gut with my left cause i didnt wanna hurt his face right before this modelling gig. i got a lot of faith in my left. i swear to god it's a good left. put how many niggas to sleep with that hand.

but there wasnt any change in his face. he just kept laying into me with his left. and keeping my grip on the shirt was like trying to hold the weight of the world in my busted ass right hand. it's always been hard to keep my eyes open around prince. he shines so bright. but i aint fought him in so long i forgot how blinding he could be. how is a camera supposed to catch that.

he yelled at me to stop holding back. 'my face is clean.' he said.

'you gotta keep it clean or theyll send you right back.'

'you think you can win like that?'

'i dont know.

'my dear, if you dont hit me in the face, youre going to fucking die.' and he let me in on the craziest secret of all time. a left uppercut that turned the world inside out like paper bag. i was backwards holding onto the shirt through my legs. desperado, where were you keeping that this whole time. the hands and the people youve been hiding from me.

4 or 5 years ive known this nigga and he had this shit under his belt the whole time.

i asked him what he was doing this for.

'if you beat me, ill leave.' then he grabbed the collar of my shirt and knocked my head with his. 'but if i beat you, i have to stay here in central with you.'

'goddamn nigga. that doesnt make sense. dont you want the job?'

he pushed me away and landed a kick on my right shoulder that took my soul out of my body. he mustve taken out some of herm's stitches.

but i couldnt hit him in the face. what if the agency sent him back? he has a ticket. how many niggas around us kept throwing away their tickets? even the white boy wants to throw away his ticket? he kept begging me with his burning hands to take it away. i didnt wanna. how does it make sense i give judi heller a ticket and take it away from prince? man i hate prince.

but i wasnt gonna let go of the shirt. i aint never lost a game of cuban in my life. not even you could beat me. prince came the closest when he first came through in 8th grade. but i beat him then, and i was gonna beat him again. desperado, i will answer your prayer.

i swung far and wide, caught him on the side of his head.

'bullshit.' and he bounced my head off my neck like he was playing paddleball.

i swung again.

'wrong.' and the spaces between his fingers became sanctuary. the places prophets go when they want to hear god.

then i sent one straight to his nose. and so made a fountain. then finally he smiled.

we danced like that for a while. we made afternoon come in early. the sun had to move so it wouldnt end up in the splatter zone.

we ended up laying there on the ground, staring up at the sky we made. breathing heavy. cant tell you how many times it was just me and prince like this, staring up at the sky. in the garden. on the roof. at the smasher. in an alley. so much of the time ive spent with this nigga has been laying next to him like his husband or his wife.

we were both still holding onto the shirt. i looked over at him. i almost cried laughing at how much i ruined him.

he smiled. one of his top left teeth was chipped. ~~it was like i went into a church and cut the~~ and the fact i was the one who did it. i wish i knew a prayer for forgiveness. desperado im sorry. holy mother mary dont be mad.

'theyll never take me now.' he said.

'your fault.'

'you just got too strong, my dear. once upon a time, we were nearly the same.'

ive seen this kid take away a man's legs. ive seen him make outlines of niggas faces in lockers like a cartoon. i said 'i still think youre stronger than me.'

'no. youve been holding back.'

'can you stand right now?'

'i think so. i hope so.'

'i cant.'

'bullshit.'

'you stand then.'

he sat up and got on his knees and fell over the other way. he laughed through a mouth full of grass.

i rolled around and made my way up to my feet. my head felt like it was made of lead. most of the work was just getting it up above my shoulders.

'now you.' i said.

i pulled on the shirt to help him. give him some leverage. head up. neck up. back up. ass up. almost there.

and then he let go. fell back down so hard it shook the wind. made the alarms go off of cars. made the birds fly away. and he laughed desperado. if only you were weaker, my darling. then i couldve stayed around a little bit longer.

'i dont wanna keep your ugly ass around. the tv is calling you, if they even want you anymore.'

he laughed harder. 'i dont want to leave.'

'but i dont want you to die.'

'id rather stay here and die.'

'well im not planning on dying nigga. so you gotta live with me.'

'they wont take me.'

'they will. the bruiser look is in. youre gonna look sadder like this. for lorn. thats what prudence calls it. youre gonna look for lorn. theyll eat you up.'

me? prudence didnt say anything about me looking for lorn. i tried to explain it to her later that day but she was still mad. but she came around and she made me promise again not to get in any fights. and she said i didnt look for lorn i looked homeless.

i sat there with prince for some time longer. by that point, he already missed his ride. he was gonna have to catch a later train.

i asked if he needed anything from the house. he said nah. he packed everything.

i biked him up to the station. i was still dizzy, and he had 2 bags he was taking, but he was so fucked up that if i let him go any other way he wouldve died. probably falling into a hole. this is our karma for selling all the manhole covers.

so we strapped the bags to the bike and prince rode behind me with his arms wrapped under my armpits and across my chest and over my shoulders.

and he hummed his song because we both already knew the words. desperado, why dont you come to your senses.

at the station he got his ticket. and we waited. i asked him what was in the paper that was so important he had to beat my ass over it.

'a poem. from someone special to me. one of the only ones in the world written by him. and for me.'

'youll get more of those for sure.'

'none as important. im surprised you didnt notice.'

'my bad. i shouldve. it was under your pillow. so who wrote the poem?'

he said something but the train came through so loud i didnt hear. he put his bags on.

'who was it?'

he came back, took my hands, and kissed me goodbye on the lips. 'goodbye, leader.'

'i told you not to call me that.'

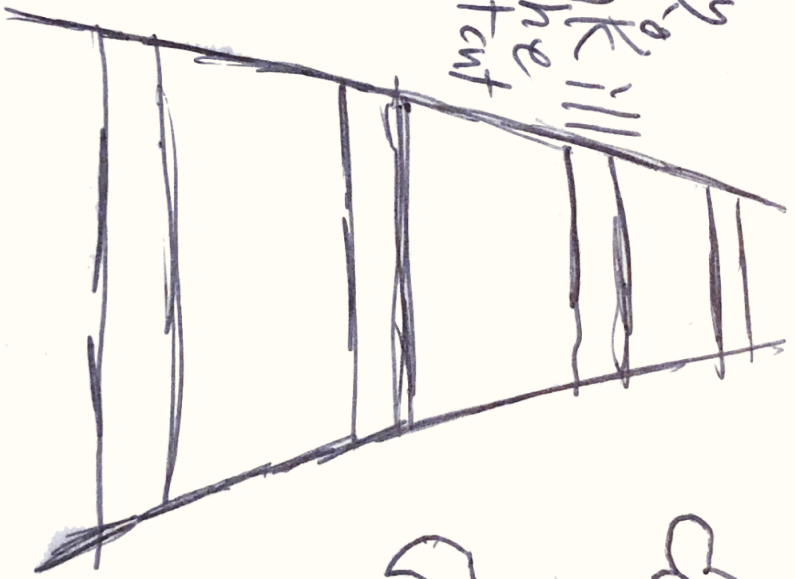
then he kissed my hands, and he was off. and every body just keeps passing you right on by.

when i looked behind me, finally, there was no one following. maybe one day theyll invent a guy people can follow forever.

the streets and the sidewalks grew 2 times wider that night. you could find 2 cars to a lane on the roads that had cars. and if there was ever a group of 4 friends walking in the city that night, the 4th friend could walk right along with everybody else.



Sorry
daddy
I think I'll
take the
short cut



mom's boyfriend's deal with me was that once i graduate, he stops paying rent. he never ran that deal by me until a month or 2 ago. i aint got much to complain about. it's his money. i tried to get him to keep me on for a few more months. i cornered his fat ass outside his work and he started crying and i felt bad. the old me wouldve found a way but i just walked it off.

dont tell anyone about this, but i actually tried to get a job, and now all i wanna do is set myself on fire.

so get this. i apply to be a security guard at some casino out east. i figured id apply to the one before 23rd street so wouldnt be in too much trouble, but the manager still turned out to be a jap.

now im pretty tall. definitely taller than you by now. and you know how strong i can be. perfect fit for a security guard. maybe im a bit too handsome but thats about where my faults end. he asks if i have training. i say i got the best. just dont ask me to take out any jackals and we'll be good.

the manager tells me he likes me. he likes black security guards more.

i tell him he isnt gonna find darker than me this far east.

he agrees. he asks me to come through tomorrow with my papers.

i say 'what fucking papers?'

he says 'your nationals.'

i tell him i dont got no nationals.

he says 'oh. we cant help you then.'

help me? nigga im trying to help you! youre the one who's short a security guard. shit. i even told him i graduated. got a degree and everything. he told me a diploma without papers aint worth a shit in the world. like a bike without wheels. tell me how that makes sense.

i head on over to sidi's shop and i ask him if

maybe he can make me a butcher.

'fuck no' he says. 'i aint getting run down like a dog for hiring a street scum like you.'

i tell him i graduated. no longer a street scum. a river scum sure. a street scum no.

then he says 'you have your papers with you?'

'my diploma?'

'the fucking national papers.'

'national papers? what for? it's chopping meat!'

he says 'get the fuck out from this side of the counter.'

so i head on down to the roadworkers. i thought maybe maxypad's cousin could get me in to help out with the road theyre making to connect the karyas. first thing i do i ask where maxy's cousin is. im looking to make some roads. they ask me for my nation als. i walk away.

at this point i was so desperate i headed down to rahma, man. i was ready to get down on my knees and beg tug for a construction job. but rahma's gone. all of rahma court is gone. what was supposed to be there was a highway with no cars heading deep into the desert, and on the sides were just a bunch of empty grey buildings with no windows and rebar sticking out.

on my way back i stopped a guy on a bike and asked him what happened there. he said the jackals that were left packed up and moved. every last one of them. no idea where to.

back home, i ended up calling mom maybe one million times before she finally picked up. 'yeah?'

'wheres my papers?'

'papers?' her mouth was full, probably with those chocolate cigars.

'my nationals.'

'what do you need nationals for?'

'im trying to get a job.'

'what fucking job asks for your nationals?'

'all of them.'

'well, find one that doesnt need them.'

'cant. there arent any.'

'you cannot just jump in with some group? i know rachid's boy has an operation in tacoba.'

'i want a legit job.'

'this one is not that bad i think. a white busines
ss, he told me.'

'when did he tell you?'

'it's been since maybeeeeeeeee 5 years.'

'no.'

she laughed and said 'what?' man, sometimes mom is worse on the phone than cairo.

i told her i didnt wanna jump in with anybody. i just wanted to know where my goddamn papers were.

'i dont think you have any.'

what the fuck did she say?

'hmm, no. we never made you any.'

'and goldy?'

'not for your brother either.' i didnt say a damn word, then mom said 'i can hear you grinding your teeth. you should stop that. i read in a magazine it's not good for your jaws.'

'what did the magazine say about making sure your kids have their papers?'

she breathed deep. 'aiiiiyAI. i did not think they would be NECESSARY. me and your father did good without them.'

'you have your papers. ive seen them.'

'yes, but no one ever asked me for them.'

i thought for a second, then i asked 'can i still make some?'

'maybe. you go check. i have to go. millo is calling. bye bye. mwa.' click. i didnt hear that fat ass's voice. i was gonna tell her to get him to get me a job if he was gonna cut me off but i dont think he would hire me even if i did have my nationals.

i think that day was the first time i really

really got mad at mom in a long time. whatever.

i called up prudence and asked her how she faked her papers.

she said 'i just had a good lookalike.'

'i cant just pretend to be my own lookalike?'

'thats not how the spell works, unfortunately. do you know anyone else who could be a lookalike?'

'i used to.'

'im sorry cherbear. i really am. but you should get that taken care of. the train leaves in just under 3 moons.'

i called up cairo.

he picked up.

i stayed silent.

'yo?'

i was scared, but i said 'ay, man.'

'wassup big dog.'

when i tell you how happy i was that he didnt put me through that goddamn phone rigamaroll he does. i told him the situation, and he said i had to hit up the ibs. the information bureau at surya. he said his dad had to take his mom one time to get her egyptian nationals cause she forgot to get them when she first came over.

'do you have your nationals?'

'uh, kinda.'

'what do you mean kinda?'

'it's useless. they got my name wrong and shit.'

'oh yeah.' i asked him what country he has on it. he said egyptian, cause both his parents were egyptian. he didnt even wanna know what i was gonna have to go through.

so i looked it up in the phone book and called up the information bureau at surya. it took about one billion hours but someone picked up and i couldnt tell if the voice was a man's or a woman's. i asked what to do to get my nationals and the voice told me if i misplaced my papers, to come through with legal

documents 'proving my proclaimed existence' and at least 1000 dinar to pay.

i asked what if i didnt misplace them. what if i never had them in the first place.

the voice maybe laughed or choked or something. then it told me i would be 'well advised to bring a legal relative to confirm proclaimed existence.'

'do i have to?'

'it would be well advised.'

click.

now, i didnt know what fucking documents i had except my new diploma. i had to call mom up again. i was getting a headache and my eyes were starting to sting. i told her the situation. she said my birth certificate should be in a tin box under her bed. i looked and it was a picture of dad and old man green pulling me out of her vagina. or i was already out of the vagina crying and they were about to cut the cord. everyone was outside on a sidewalk for some reason. so many people.

'old man green was there?'

'you mean khadrawi? yeah he was there.'

i wont lie, it's kind of insane to see me connected to mom like that. like i really did just come out of her.

i said 'this is just a picture.'

'it proves your birth.'

'you have to come!'

'aiyai! im too busy!'

'doing what? getting drunk and watching long vacation for the millionth time?'

'no.'

wait for it.

'aiyai! i dont know where you learned how to speak to your mother this way.'

'im a son of a whore. at least thats what people tell me.'

'a retired whore. ok.' she checked something on

her end. '8am tuesday. i will meet you there.'

'8am? what do you think i am?'

'this is a goverment building. they close by the time you wake up. you wanna get a job? start sleeping like it. mwa.' click.

then i called prudence and told her all about it.

so tuesday came around and i showed up to the information bureau at surya. mom was there wearing a new fur coat. first thing she did, she tugged at the coat and said 'you like it? it's mink.'

i dont know what the fuck mink is but it sounds gross, so i said yeah and headed in. she was talking about some 'i come all the way here for my son and he does not even compliment my coat. what is the point of a son if he does not even compliment your coat?'

man.

the place smelled like mold and a trillion people's sweat. there were no seats left cause of how many people were there. we took a number. 105. the lady in the window called out 23.

so me and mom sat on the floor against the wall. i had this guy next to me smelling like ketchup fixing someone's crossword answers in the newspaper. it looked like he was maybe the hundredth person to write on it. the paper was from a while back cause the mayor was still on his re-election campaign on the front page, posing with the police commissioner and promising to raise property values or whatever.

there were these 2 kids running back and forth over me and mom's legs. she smiled at them every time they went by. i stared at the white light swinging from the ceiling. every once in a while one of the kids would shoot mom with a finger gun and she would play dead. they tried to shoot me but it takes more than a finger to kill this soldier. that only made them wanna play with me more.

they kept poking my face with their dirty hands and i had to swat them away. i looked around for

their mom. i thought maybe she wasnt even there. maybe she left them there on purpose. i was thinking how long have they been there, how long could a kid live in a goverment building?

then the lady at the window called 86 and mr ketchup got up and took his kids with him.

i think it stopped being morning while we were waiting. it kept getting hotter and all the ac did was make the place stink like cock cheese. i swear it was hotter inside than outside. mom had to take off her MINK coat it was so goddamn hot.

when we finally got to sit in the chairs they were worse than the floor. i was tossing and turning in that bitchass chair the whole time trying to find a good position, and just when i finally got comfortable, they called out 105.

we went through this tightass hallway with walls that werent supposed to be yellow to an office that was already too small to have a desk in it, and the guy behind the desk was telling us to come in and sit down and shut the door.

he was this chubby brown guy with a goatee and a hawaian shirt and some hairy ass hands. he had the lights off in the office and the window open, and he was smoking a cuban stick and playing with one of those pre war radios that only put out static anymore. the bookshelf behind him had like 3 books on it. one of them was a bible you could tell was hollowed out because whatever was in it was poking through the leather like a boner.

'ok' the guy said. 'what do you need?'

i told him i needed my nationals to get a job.

'you lose your papers? happens all the time. just give me your id number and i will print one for you. 1000 dinar.'

'i dont have a number.'

he made a noise like a frog and rubbed his face. 'you forgot your number?'

'yeah.'

then mom said 'he doesnt have a number. we never got his nationals done.'

he rubbed his eyes with one of them big hairy hands. then he whacked his door with a ruler. made me and mom jump. the assistant girl came through and he told her 'no creamer. go.' and sent her running.

then he said 'do you have any proof of proclaimed existence?'

im gonna be honest i dont know what the fuck that means, but i showed him my diploma.

'oh. just graduated. congratulations.' he didnt mean that. 'wheres your student id?'

huh?

'dont tell me you dont have a student id.'

'never heard of that.'

'a diploma's useless without one.'

'since when?'

'since they passed the law 2 weeks ago.'

'but i just graduated 2 weeks ago.'

'brilliant.'

in that moment i realized i wasnt looking at or talking to a person. i dont know what that nigga was, but he was not a real person.

'i can literally take you to my school right now.' i know, it was pointless. but you cant say i didnt try. i said 'my name is all over that school. paint from 6 years ago is on those walls. im in all the pictures.'

'grafiti is not a valid form of proof for proclaimed existence.'

what do you say to that? and here i was finally hoping it would be worth something.

then i showed him the picture of green and dad holding me and im still connected to mom's vagina, and he said it was nice. i looked at mom and she didnt look back.

'im sorry,' he wasnt. ill let him continue, but he

wasnt sorry. 'but as far as the sovereign principality of new eden is concerned, you do not exist.'

'but you see me right now, nigga. im right here.'

'legally speaking, i can either be looking at an empty chair or an illegal immigrant.'

i got up and i was ready to take out my knife but mom yanked me back down in the chair. she said 'what about me? i have papers. i exist. this is my son. he cant get my papers?'

he held out his hand like 'gimme' and mom made this face like he was a shit flake on the bottom of her 1000 dinar shoes.

she reached into her MINK coat and pulled out a bigass folder of papers. they were a bit too heavy for her but she slammed them on the desk. no idea where she was keeping that. 'my papers and his fathers papers. nationals. marriage license. tax forms. apartment lease.'

the guy picked up a card from the folder pocket. 'prostitution license?'

mom smiled. 'expired.'

the guy took one of those cartoon gulps where the spit gets stuck like a ball in your throat. he flipped through the files and pulled out a tax sheet. 'it says here you have 2 children you claimed as dependents. can the other one come to confirm?'

mom tried to say the words but i had to say them for her. i told him you were dead and if he wanted proof i could dig you up and bring you over. maybe i shouldnt have added that last part. it's not even that funny when i look back at it. aiyai. what will i do with me.

old guy sank his cheeks into his hairy ass hands. 'nothing can be easy in this line of work.'

'i have iberian papers.' mom flipped through the folder for him. 'can he inherit those?'

'does his father have iberian, or balkan nationals?'

'he's descended from moroccans.' she said. she flipped through the folder some more and pulled out a yellow newspaper clip from like, back when the americans first showed up.

i read the whole thing later that day. it was about some violent moroccan thug who was brought over in a prison shipment on liner 7 cause he killed some french soldiers back in casablanca.

he broke out of the camps and set up shop at a crossroads with a bunch of indigene bandits. apparently that was grandpa.

mom pointed at the name and the mugshot and then at a brown piece of cardboard. that was dad's id. on the line for dad's dad's name, it said the bandit's name. mamdouh lazraq. she winked at me and gave me a thumbs up.

the print job on dad's id was terrible. you could see less of his face than grandpa's in his newspaper mugshot.

dad's skin was so black you could barely see his face on his own id. the whites of his eyes were smudged. the picture was from before he went off to war so he still had an afro and he didnt have the white spot on his cheek.

'these indigenous nationals. they belong to the father?'

mom put her hands back in her pockets and nodded.

'right.' he put everything back in the folder and dropped the big ass thing in mom's hands. i pinched my thighs through my pockets. 'we can get you indigenous papers provided that you pass the preliminaries.'

i asked what fucking preliminaries. i guess i did it too loud cause the assistant poked her head around the corner and mom stepped on my foot and gave me a look.

'youll need your skull measured. theres a cranio logist just around the corner. have him take the following measurements.' and he handed me this paper

with like 40 things on it that needed to be filled out. some of the words i remember are 'firmness' and 'amativness' and 'mondibulamaxillary cohesion' and shit.

i asked if we would have to wait in line again. he said only if it's the 3rd of the month. it wasnt. yay.

we went down the street to this clinic where an old white nigga with a broom mustasche sat me down in an old rickety chair. he took this massive metal thing with a bunch of fingers and claws and shit and put it on my head.

he slid rulers around and felt up my jaws. i kept smacking his hands away whenever he got too touchy. he kept filling out the numbers on the sheet. i felt like an animal the whole time. i told herm about it later and he said it's all bullshit. laughed at me for believing it. but i couldnt believe it cause i didnt even know what the fuck it all was.

we went back to the ibs and handed old guy the sheet. he got up, went to a photocopier, hit a few buttons, took my picture, took 300 dinar, stamped a paper, signed it, and got me to sign it. and boom. done.

'congratulations.' the guy said. 'now you exist.'

i looked at the thing. it was a thick kinda brown paper. like cardboard. not as yellow as dad's. it had my goverment name on it. it had a stamp. it had an american flag. it said OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZED RESIDENT OF THE SOVEREIGN PRINCIPALITY OF NEW EDEN: CLASSIFIED INDIGENOUS TYPE B. i didnt stick around to ask what the other types were. i wanted out of there. herm says it doesnt matter if your ancestors came off the liners or if theyre through and through angels, if youre a nigger you get indigenous papers.

mom wanted to go to rinha's to celebrate but i told her it was closed down. she asked where we should go, i said we could just hit up the corner store.

'youre no fun.'

we ended up splitting a blue popsicle. we didnt say much. i tried asking her about you. about what she thought. i wanted to build up to other questions. like if she thought i was like you, or if she was worried i would turn out like you, or if she wanted me to turn out like you, and why she would whoop you worse than me, and if she loved you or me more.

i couldnt get to any of that though. she finished her popsicle before me and gave me her stick to throw away even though the trash can was closer to her than me. she waved bye and left. it was getting kinda cold and her MINK coat looked so comfy.

next day, i went over to the casino, roadworkers, and sidi's shop. turns out, indigenous papers are worse than no papers. too many loopholes. nobody wanted to deal with the hassle.

so i went back to the casino and i knocked out 3 of their security guards. trashed the place. took a few of them to get me out of there. security guard hands are cold. maybe it's for the better if i never become one. their hands dont have fire. but they do fucking hurt.

i went over to the roadworkers by the karyas, took a shovel, and smacked the bullshit out maxypad's cousin. i ran before they called the cops.

i went over to sidi's shop and i pissed behind the counter. he threatened to call the cops. i told him it was easy for him to say, he had sand nigger papers. and a job.

he pulled out his butcher knife and said he'd chop off my dick.

i told him do better. chop off my head. i held my arms out. i got on my knees. i even pulled down your jacket to help him. i begged him. i told him if he didnt do it, he was a pussy and id rape his daughter.

he sank that son of a bitch into my right shoulder. then he fell onto his ass. i left him there

with his cold bloody knife and his pissed on floor. i told him i was joking about raping his daughter, but he was a pussy, and he was lucky i wasnt more of a man, or maybe id stick to my promises. i think im lucky im not more of a man too.

by the time i got home my shirt was unwearable. i liked the shirt too. it was my julio cesar chavez shirt.

in the mirror, i touched the cut on my shoulder. it was close to my neck. i spread it apart with my fingers and it stung. i poured half a bottle of montague over it. then i took a shower, finished the bottle off, and used my new paper as a coaster right there with my diploma.

i called prudence and told her it ended up alright. i ended up praying really hard and opening up herm's 2nd round of stitches. but at least i exist now. i think.

slow day with nothing to do. im still at home and i need to pack and move soon. but instead im remembering a day back in freshman year. i just got back from somewhere, i cant remember where but i remember my hands were hurting.

i went to the court where wing was putting up shots. and the sun sat easy on his skin. he went over to smoke on the bleachers and i went and sat next to him.

he was more tired than me probably. he was sweating. it took a lot to make him sweat back in those days.

but i still laid down my head in his lap. he said 'were winning this year, baby. i can feel it in the wind.'

the wind lied to him it turns out. not the first time it's done that. i looked up at him with the sun shining through his hair making him look like a king in an old painting. he turned his head to smoke so he wouldnt get the ashes on my face.

i told him yeah we better win. i got money on this shit.

'were gonna make you your money cherbear.'

and then we sat there. and the wind was easy that day. and if it lied it lied quietly. and wing put his hand on my face. he didnt have to but he did. and he rubbed my cheek with his thumb. and it moved in an arc like the sun. so smooth. and it would roll up so close to the corner of my mouth and then pass it right by. and it would come back, and he would almost almost almost touch my mouth, and then come right back down again. and i closed my eyes and the light of wing and the sun danced orange on my eyelids. and every time he would pass his thumb over i felt like this would be the time he finally touched my mouth. and i could smell the saltyness of his smooth, dry hand. and he would pass his thumb over again and i would open my mouth just a little bit to give him a

hint but he would never take the bait. just tickling
the corner of the corner of the corner of my mouth.

when i think about it i think heaven is in that
less than quarter of a centimeter space between wing's
thumb and my mouth. the smaller the space, the more
intense the heaven. and heaven is just waiting for his
thumb to cross over and finally dip in. and your mouth
is a pool waiting for that dry finger to just go
inside. and you could roll your eyes over and over and
over and god would be somewhere in the burning dances
on your eyelids waiting right with you.

but im not a good guy, so i only got heaven for
those few minutes.

i moved in with prudence. shes out right now so im writing this. i dont wanna have to explain this to her.

mona makes me clean around so im not completely useless. dizzy said she does this with every guy who moves in with one of her girls. she also said mona's girls like having a servant boy to push around. then she made me get her a soda from the vending machine. im a fucking gofer, man. im gonna kill myself.

i say i moved in with prudence, but i didnt really take much with me. didnt need to take any of the pots or pans or plates or spoons or forks. didnt need to take the couch or the beds or the rug or the shower curtain or the regular curtains or any of the soap.

i took the tv just to sell but i only managed to get about 1000 dinar off it. i dont have your way with words.

most of what i took was memories, and i couldnt just crowd pru's room with my memories, so i put them all in a bag and took them down to school that night. old man green helped me out. he's good at carrying memories.

i think the first time i ever met old man green was years after you did. i dont think i ever told you about it. you kept talking about the guy and i never met him until one night over by langways.

i watched this guy on the ground getting kicked to shit by some kids. maybe frankos. maybe redshirts. maybe albanians. i couldnt tell. i was barely a fresh man back then, so i couldnt just walk up to 4 niggas with my chest out.

when they were through and walked away, i walked up to him. he was still breathing. i didnt know he was old man green yet. all i could tell was that he was old and a man. i said 'you all good, old guy?' if im honest, ill say i was hoping he'd die so i could look through his pockets for anything the kids missed.

he said 'im not dead yet, lad. and i dont have anything of value on me. i didnt bring anything of the sort with me.' you dont hear a lot of british accents in your life so i backed up.

then the old guy meowed.

i said 'what?'

he said 'that was my friend.' he held up a cat in his hands. 'he almost got himself into a spot of trouble with those youths.'

the cat looked like a moldy stick. 'is he hungry?'

'very. as a matter of fact, he'll die in just a few minutes.'

'lets get him some food then.'

'it's too late. even if you fed him, he would still die.'

'why'd you even bother saving him then?'

the old guy pointed with his thickass finger. coming down the road was a skinny ass hungry ass jackal. old man said 'my little friend here is to be that one's dinner. but i will only release him once he has died.'

the jackal went up to old man green and started scratching and biting him, but old man held the cat up. i said give the cat over to me. i was already taller than the guy. old man passed him and i held the little guy up so high the jackal couldnt dream of getting to him. thats how i got the scar on my chin and my ear. i think maybe that day i told you a different story. i was still scared. of the old man, not the jackal.

old man told me to let him have the cat now. he was dead. so i dropped the cat onto the ground and the jackal went for him like a demon. old man said 'that dog will help a very good friend of mine someday.'

i told prudence that story while she was making a watch but she wasn't really paying attention like that. she works all day these days. she opens her door for about 7 or 8, maybe 9 hours and then she works on her watches until she goes to bed. sometimes i'm there when she sleeps sometimes i'm not. sometimes i get her cheap watches or food with the money i saved up. or i steal them. it's harder with no one to play mongo goose with.

pru's saving a lot. she's always talking about the future. about how easy life will get once ~~she opens her~~ we open our shop. i wish i could see that far into the future but i can only see three steps ahead tops, and they're your steps so i'm taking them slowly.

but then what happens when your steps are gone and all behind me? maybe i'll walk backwards so i can still see them. and then when they go out of sight? i guess i'll walk with my eyes closed.

i called mom and told her i moved out. she said 'i'm going to miss sleeping there.' i told her i'm gonna miss her sleeping there too. it was a splendid place. i think old man green's gonna miss it the most. i get the feeling it's tough for him to move on from things.

prudence is watching me write now. get it? shes watching me. write (right) now.

i told her not to look at what i was writing. she said she likes watching me type. she said it's funny how i only type with 2 fingers on each hand. i told her i used to write with only 2 of my fingers.

i had to scrap the last page i wrote on cause she came over to 'show me how it's done' and almost saw what i was writing.

shes saying now that i never told her i did this. saying i kept secrets from her.

shes been looking at places and calling international. i think she has it all figured out. she has more saved than i thought. maybe i should become a whore too. i dont know if theres still a market for gujjjjjjj ssssssssss www gshtinna eeeeeee

i cant do this im sorry she just keeps looking at me and i cant focus. she keeps asking what im writing. shes saying if im writing a letter i need to 'adress it properly' like 'dear cocksucker' and 'with love, gayass'.

i just told her im not doing all that faggot shit. and now shes telling me my margins are too small. and shes telling me it's not fair i watch her make watches and she cant watch me type. now shes saying to tell whoever im talking to hi.

ill talk to you again when this creep stops creeping on me.

i had to go with prudence to open an account or get a loan or some shit with some european bank. i had to show up cause engaged women have a higher chance than single women who have a higher chance than women with boyfriends to get approved.

bitch made me rent a suit. first time wearing one. they feel like shit. and she made me leave my knife at home and she made me promise not to 'sigh loudly, tap your feet, whistle, hum, spit, blow your nose, get angry, threaten anyone, hit anyone, put your feet up, play with things on people's desks, loosen your tie, unbutton your shirt, take off your jacket, make jokes, or do anything that could other wise ~~jepp~~ ~~jepear jepoer~~ jeopardize our chances at getting this account.'

she thought of everything. i dont know how me suffocating in a chair right next to her would boost her chances of getting a loan but i did it anyway. and everytime the guy asked me a question i answered. he would say some shit like 'where did you grow up?' and i would say 'diogo' and not 'vega street' like prudence told me to.

and he kept talking numbers and percents and growth interest principal bayazid what the fuck did you do to me.

and outside prince was on a billboard looking down at me, wearing nothing but the skin and bruises god and me gave him, laughing at me for sweating like a donkey in this suit.

they really did use his cuts and bruises well. now i think i know what prudence means by for lorn. and here i was wearing prudence and dizzy's makeup on my face to hide my cuts and bruises.

when it was all done, i was gonna say something about never doing that bullshit again, and she said something about 'youll fit in perfectly when we move.'

god my fucking chest hurts.



i knew i was going to hell a few months into 6th grade. cause of the whole southside migration, the grade doubled in size and we had two guys to a desk and kids were crammed so tight some of them had to sit out in the hallway.

back then, wing was the one actually trying to run shit. he was shoving guys heads into their desks since day one, talking his shit, running his mouth. he always barked too much. razer and ramon followed him around like flies on a donkey's ass. and i still remember the shitface smile wing would shoot me every time he made a guy cry.

then came this kid tobit. you probably remember him. he was like 6'7, 140 kilos, and that was back in 6th grade. maybe he couldve been 8 feet tall if he made it to high school. i remember the day he showed up, his mom came in holding his giant hand, damn near her whole arm disappeared in his hand. and she had to beg him to walk into the classroom. the kid had to duck under the top of the doorway to walk in. i had to rub my eyes to make sure i was seeing right.

he had the puffiest smile i ever saw. his forehead and cheeks were so big that when he smiled, you couldnt see his eyes. i dont even know if he saw anything when he smiled. top of his head was smooth grey where probably his mama gave him a buzzcut every week.

i think his mom had high hopes, but when she saw a bunch of tables pushed to the back of the class with a crowd of boys gambling over cutouts of naked bitches, man. shit. i dont know what hope she couldve had. this wasnt st mary's anymore. it was central new eden industrial.

she introduced him to the class. said 'this is my son, tobit.'

he waved. his fingers couldve touched the ceiling. i think she said 'please be kind to him.'

he was all smiling. his mama said bye and started walking out, but he ran after her just to kiss her on

the cheek. he shook the ground when he ran. sunshine soldier. he didnt stand a chance, man.

the class was already crammed to shit, and this guy took up so much space. he was too tall to sit at the front cause he would block the view of the teacher for those kids that actually cared about class. so he sat back with us. first thing anyone said to him was wing telling him 'you smell like shit.' i dont remember what he smelled like but that doesnt matter.

wing was always giving him shit, so razer and ramon would too, and then every other guy in the class. it was like a race to see who could wipe off tobit's smile first. the big guy stuck to following me around cause i wasnt shitting on him the way everyone else was, but even back then i didnt like people following me around. i just treated him the same way i treated any guy who stuck to me. i dont think i was as bad as everyone else.

tobit didnt care about the shit i said to him, he stuck to following me no matter what. he'd giggle everytime i called him a faggot or a retard. his laugh was like the backseat of a car on a rocky road. and he didnt care what i said. it pissed me off.

when he wasnt smiling so wide, his eyes were blue. i want you to remember that. remember it and tell everyone you know. tobit's eyes were blue.

i told wing and the kids to stop picking on the guy but it wasnt cause out of the goodness in my heart or anything. i just wanted him to stop following me. i said 'sometimes a nigga wants to be alone.'

wing laughed and said 'big retard thinks cherry's his mama!'

tobit got mad at that. he said 'no! my mama is my mama!'

'no. cherry's your mama and he's gonna change your diapers and rub your little asshole for you.' take it easy on wing. he doesnt know what moms do or dont do.

tobit smacked himself in the face. he said 'NO! MY MAMA IS MY MAMA!' first time i ever got so scared in my life.

after that, shit started getting to tobit. guys figured out what would make him start hitting himself. going after his mom was an easy one, but one of the guys figured out you could call him dobit, and that would get him to hit himself. it was like a secret button. he'd say 'tobit! not dobit!' the teacher always laughed when tobit did that shit.

that one makes me sad to think about now. we'll never know why he hated being called that so much. when i say it out loud, it really does just sound terrible. dobit. it sounds stupid and slow and unfixable.

then when niggas realized tobit wouldnt fight, they started poking him with pens until he bled. sometimes theyd make him throw out the trash and call him a good boy and he'd smile and then theyd call him dobit and he'd start hitting himself again. and his face was always purple and blue and red from the bruises.

calcutta was the only one who wouldnt join in. he always tried to keep niggas from fighting. he always got in between you and a guy you were trying to fight like some kind of meat shield. i remember at one point i got so annoyed with the nigga that whenever i wanted to knock someone out, id find him and knock him out first so he wouldnt get in the way. he couldnt keep me from the niggas that pissed me off. he couldnt keep anyone off tobit. and he couldnt keep tobit off tobit either. goddamn calcutta. if only he was stronger maybe the rest of us couldve gone some where other than hell.

and tobit still followed me around. when i went to take a piss. when i went to get water. when i went for a smoke. he wouldnt leave me alone. the first time i called him dobit, he started smacking himself

myself so hard in the shower i started bleeding but it didnt do anything. i asked her why i did it. what was it inside me that made me do it?

she told me to pray on it. prayer cleanses all sins. well, she never taught us how to pray. but still i prayed. at the mosque, at church with wing, at every temple i could find. then i found her later that week beating on you for turning in your homework late. why couldnt she even look at me?

and when praying with words wouldnt cut it, i started praying with the wall. i couldnt bring the force that tobit did. i still cant, so i always take a running start. a few times and either my shoulder cant take it anymore or i land a good enough hit that i get dizzy.

and then i start to cryy cause tobit had to hate himself so much to hit himself in front of everyone else. and he had to hate himself even more to do it until he died.

i think he knew hate too well. hhate that couldnt be put to words. he knew love as well, but i dont think we know that language good enough to speak it. so he just talked to us the only way we would understand.

i was beating on wing and razer and ramon and daisy and every last kid i could think of, yelling at them to pray so our sins would go away. such a selfishh reason to pray, but all i wanted was to not be a bad person anymore. i wanted to wash tobit away with prayer but all prayer does is keep him alive.

i remember beating on wing cause he used to pray for our souls in 2nd and 3rd grade and he used to go to catholic class after school to learn how to be a priest. and here i was beating him for not praying enough. i wanted him to save our souls. i put it all on his shoulders cause it was over for me.

i had the whole class praying. then one day, i realized months went byy, and i aint said a prayer in

forever.

i keep copying tobit's prayer, but it's not the kind of prayer that saves you from hell. i think it's the kind you do when youre so small and all you want is for god to hear yyou no matter what it is youre saying.

sorry i aint said nothing in so long. i guess you know why, so i dont have to explain. where do titans go when they die? are all of you waiting for me in some sunny field? or in a garbage heap? or in a class room? or at a bus stop? are there any rivers over there?

i keep asking myself what couldve been done. if maybe the big families were still around. if our grandpas and grandmas didnt fuck things up for us. but it doesnt matter. it was gonna be like this from the start. angels blood and titans blood just dont mix.

i tried not to think about wing for so many weeks, but when you have a guy's face in damn near every single one of your memories, it gets hard.

i was at home when the first feather fell. i wasnt even out to see it. just in bed looking at the ceiling. prudence was out selling some watches to a north side girl she met at the salon. i didnt feel like going. i just stayed home and watched her cagney and lacey tapes.

at one point, the tape mustve ended and the screen went black and i was just staring at the tv. couldve taken me 10 years to move. i looked out the window and it was day out, and feathers were all over the place. scattered. some dancing in the wind. i couldnt feel yet.

i put on your jacket for the first time in a while and i walked all the way over to wing's place. when i got there, karina opened the door. she hugged me so tight youd think we already lost him. i wanted to hug her back but my arms wouldnt work that way for some reason. i asked if her dad was home. she said he aint been home in days.

wing's chucks were by the wall. finally untied. i never knew how he was able to get into high tops with out untying them. i still dont. he kept some secrets from me. the ones i never got around to asking him about.

wing was in his room bundled up inside his futon. 'you're flooding the streets.' i said.

'you ain't seen nothing yet, baby.' it felt like forever since i heard him say that to me. his voice was like a cigarette cutting it close to the filter. he was maybe the size of 2 brooms put together. 'you look more sick than i do.' he said.

'it's the weather. allergies.'

'i bet you don't eat shit anymore.'

'i eat enough.' but he was right.

'i bet you don't eat jack shit cause you don't got my plate to steal from.'

'not my fault you always order the better food.'

'we order the same fucking thing.'

i told him to scooch over and gimme some space. it felt good to be in a futon again. pru's bed was too soft day in day out. hurt my back.

the tv was on. some documentary about baboons. the window was open, so it didn't smell completely like wing's farts.

cairo showed up an hour later with some cokes and homeruns and popsicles. he wasn't surprised to see me there. he had the bags around his elbows.

it was the kids and karina in that room. we sat there and watched the baboons in the african savana, and then cairo wanted to change the channel to some movies.

i helped karina out in the kitchen. we made rice and chicken that night. i asked her how she learned to make this. she said wing used to help her out. he told her she would never get married if she didn't learn.

there were so many things i didn't know about wing after this long. how much did the guy have left to show? i always thought i'd see it all before he went, or i'd die first anyway. i feel like such a faker sometimes. somewhere out there ursula's getting naked for her businessman and fucking him while he wears

his suit.

karina had a long way to go, but she was getting there. when we were all eating, she asked if it tasted like something a wife would make.

wing said it tasted real nice.

'i wasnt asking you.' she looked at me.

i said it tasted good.

she smiled.

wing said she still doesnt let the butter brown long enough.

'i dont want it to burn!'

'you gotta let it get close.' he couldnt eat that much anyway.

cairo's hands were still bandaged. he ate gripping hhis spoon like a caveman.

eventually, the feathers in the streets got so bad car accidents started happening in record numbers. outside central. apparently, automatic cars cant handle feathers on the road the way stick can, so central wasnt eating too much shit.

prudence called from dizzy's phone. she asked if she should come over. i said nah. id be home when i got there.

inside, wing was shedding so much it was making everybody sneeze. everybody but me, for some reason. wing said 'if i knew you guys were so allergic i would ve never even grown this thing.'

when i was washing his back one time i noticed the wing was stitched onto his back. i asked what happened. he said 'they wanted the titan's blood. and a nigga just couldnt let go of it i guess.' he laughed.

'what if they come after you?'

'they wont. no reason to.' he sounded almost like he wished there was a reason.

when karina left the room, he said 'one of you guys has to take her in. without me, i dont know what dad's gonna do to her when he gets back.'

cairo said 'it's probably gonna be cher. he lives

closest and can actually let her stay.'

i said it's up to mona. ill press her on it. and i did press her on it. and she gave. it's gonna be tough if karina doesnt wanna turn tricks. i know he never wanted to get into his dad's business so ill do what i can. it's not as bad for girls, but ill do what i can.

prince called just to hear wing's voice. we put him on loud and turned the volume up as high as it could go but he still sounded so far away. i called that guy on the phone how many times and he never sounded so far away.

'did you get my gift?'

'what gift.'

'i sent it in the mail a few days ago.'

'we got a bag of shit on the doorstep. i thought it was from hafsa's brother.'

'no. thats the one, darling.'

wing asked prince if he's been getting laid out east. prince said 'well, ive been fucking my managers.'

'i thought your manager was a guy.'

'some of them are.'

we looked at each other and prince could tell we did.

'you must understand, dear. it's not that i like it. i got better pussy when i was broke.'

wing hung up on him.

we got prince's gift later that day. it was a small gold chain. a bracelet with all our names on it. and a picture of prince that wing wouldnt let us look at. he teared up when he saw it. wing called prince on the phone later and talked to him. not on loud this time.

some of the kids ended up stopping by. and some girls from mona's. theyd bring gifts and it was hard to tell if they were get well soon gifts or going away presents.

wing mentioned room 203 once when he was out of it. i think he meant the room in the cloud temple

where he used to live before karina got sent over. he kept saying something about it and he didnt remember what even when he snapped out of it.

one night, when we were alone, i asked wing about that thing he says under his breath all the time. that prayer he would always make.

'the fuck are you talking about?'

'the one that goes like holy mother's hand, something something. you always say it so fast.'

'christ, you remember all that?'

'i remember the words i hear.' i wanted to tell him i remembered everything he ever said that i could hear, exactly where i was when he said it and what the weather was like when he said it. i wanted to say that i could measure my entire life with his words, and that my biggest fear would be forgetting a single one, because that would mean losing a part of my life.

'it's an old prayer someone taught me a long time ago. i cant fucking remember who it was.'

'how does it go.'

'man. i dont remember. i just jumble the words in my mouth these days. it's not even really a prayer anymore.'

'then teach me the jumbles.'

'man, lemme watch these monkeys in peace.'

'come on, just tell me.'

he shook his head. 'it wouldnt work anymore. it doesnt work for nonbelievers.'

'im a believer.'

he sat there looking at the tv but i know he wasnt paying attention to no damn monkeys.

'give it a shot, man.'

'what is it all a sudden? i aint done bible study in damn near 10 years and now you of all people wanna get on my ass? chill out.'

'just tell it to me. you dont gotta be scared.'

'im not scared. why would i be scared? why is that the thing everybody goes to when you dont wanna do

something?'

'alright. you dont wanna tell me? you dont gotta tell me. lets watch these goddamn monkeys.'

on the tv, a mama monkey was picking bugs out of the hair of her little bug eyed baby.

then wing said in a low voice 'holy mother mary, full of grace, hold out your hand and catch me before my wings falter, lest i fall beyond your reach.'

i memorized it on the spot. but im a liar, so i told him to say it again.

'man.'

'i didnt even hear it. i wanna learn it.'

'ok. repeat after me.'

'ok. repeat after me.'

he side eyed me. 'you gonna take this seriously?'

i signed the cross.

'thats not how you do that.'

'im trying for you man.'

'pay attention. it goes like this. holy mother mary.'

'holy mother mary.'

'full of grace.'

'full of grace.'

and i had him run through it with me for hours until cairo and karina came back. we went through it 37 times. the 7th time, he said it would be the last time. the 11th time, he started to say it like it was a prayer and not a chore. by the 19th time, he really wanted me to get it right. 'for your soul, baby. you cannot get this wrong. this will save you from all that bullshit you be doing to yourself.'

and every time i made him go through it again i gave myself another reason to say it to god later. or to mother mary. id rather talk to her. in my head she looks like ms abbas.

wing said he first heard the prayer in spanish, he didnt know where from. but whoever taught it to him changed it to english so he would understand it. i

asked him how many times id have to say it for all my sins to go away.

'i asked a priest that same question. until the rivers run dry and the sun goes cold. thats what he said.'

until the rivers run dry. aint that some bullshit. i dont believe it at all. i think people just wanna keep giving themselves excuses to talk to god, and i think god gets annoyed. isnt it annoying if you tell someone theyre all good only for them to keep begging for your forgiveness?

he told me when we were done and his voice was so thin it barely made it through the wind. he said 'you know the reason why i quit bible study?'

'i thought it was cause your mom left.'

'nah i was going by myself for a while.'

'then why.'

'cause i kept getting boners.'

'nigga. what?'

'from the statue of mother mary. she has her feet out from under her robes.'

'nigga.'

'and you know what she's standing on?'

'what.'

'a snake.'

he laughed so quiet, and it was so hard for me to hold back my laughter to hear his. like nigga. he kept getting boners to her feet at church.

'i felt too guilty so i said fuck it ill just go to hell then. if your gonna keep your feet out like that.' and he laughed and signed the cross and said the prayer and covered his face. there were tears in his eyes and he was smiling so wide and his cheek bones wanted to tear through his skin.

i asked him if he would mind if i told that story to you and he said nah. 'i wouldve told it to every body if i could.'

if only.

one day, i was looking at him, trying not to mourn him already. trying not to think about what a loss it would be when he was finally gone. he was laying there. the sunlight was shining through a crack in the blinds and it laid there on his lips. i kissed him.

he looked at me confused. 'why now?'

i kissed him again. a little harder. i said 'cause i love you.'

he said he loved me too.

on wing's last day, i was wide awake, staring out at the street. i did that a lot. remembering when those streets used to be full of kids and people and motorbikes and old ladies selling dumplings and old geezers selling mint leaves.

for some reason wing had it in him to stand up and lean on the window sill and look out with me. we leaned there for a while, and then out of nowhere he laughed and said 'shit. i really thought this would last a bit longer.'

then i turned my head. and he was still leaning on the window sill. his head dangled from his shoulders. like a branch too heavy to hold its own fruit. sun go up. sun come down. and sun go up. and some down. and it go up, holy mother mary, if you will just hold out your hand. and if you follow the sun long enough, you will find yourself right back where you started.

wing's body was one of the heaviest there ever was. kid carried a lot with him. but it still moved so soft. youd think his body would be hard as a stone but it moved like water. like air. i had him by his right arm, and i carried his wing in my chest.

his right hand went cold on the way there. the uppercut that once could knock the world off its axis. i wonder who the last guy was to feel it. lucky him.

it started raining heavy, and it was already tough enough pushing through damn near a foot of feathers. the water only made them heavier.

when we got to the river though, the feathers made a bridge for us. the graveyard was the only place the feathers didnt fall. the sand was cold and wet and heavy, but i wouldnt let anyone else touch the shovel. not even cairo.

the whole day went by, but the grave wouldnt get deep enough. everyone was telling me to give up the shovel but i wouldnt.

cairo tried to take the shovel and i slammed it into his head. i couldve filled another grave that day.

he got up, face red and shiny, and he took the shovel off me. it didnt take that much work from him. my hands were weak at that point.

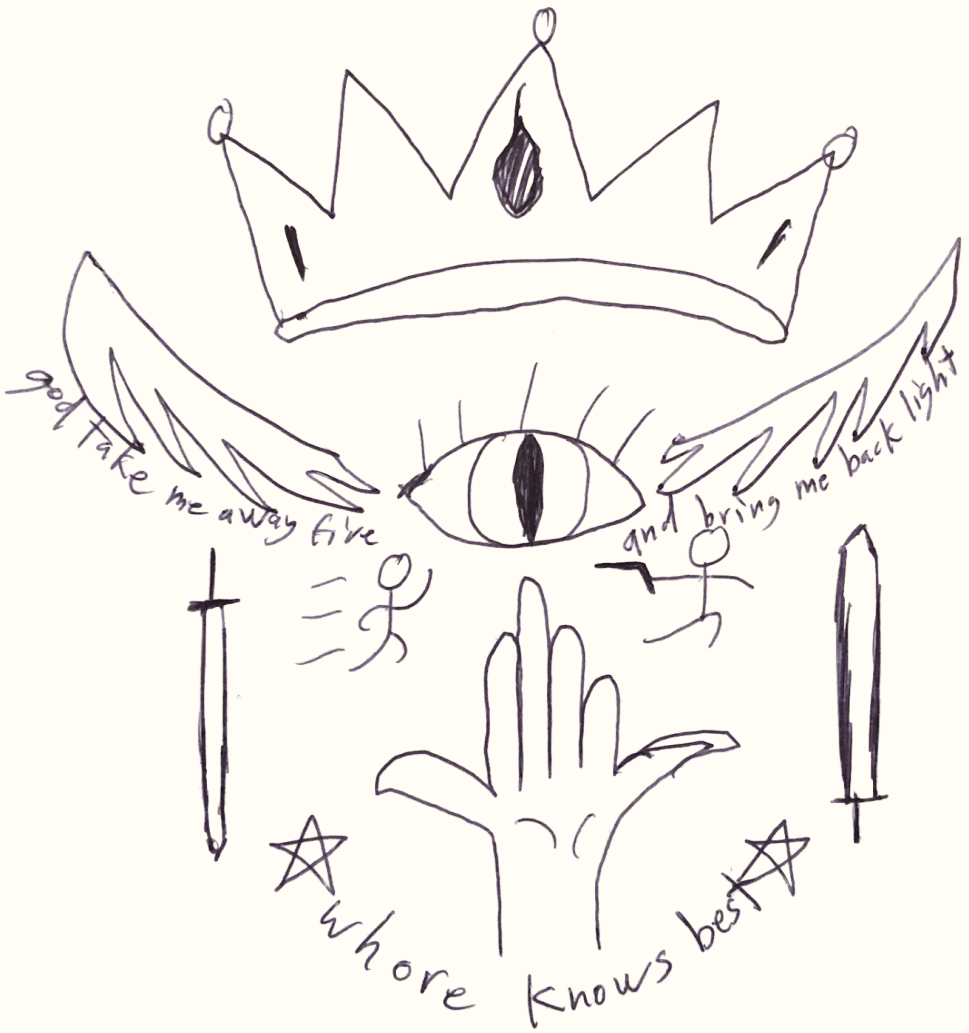
later i said sorry. he said it was all good, big dog.

you know, i dont even know if wing heard me. i heard his last words, so he shouldve heard mine. tell him for me. maybe i should tell him myself, but i get the feeling he's sick and tired of me. ill give him a break for now.

so tell him i said everything he did was enough for me. every last thing, even the things that annoyed the shit out of me, like the constant bitching, and the way he always lifted his pinky when he held a spoon. and tell him if he just stayed alive and didnt do a damn thing for the next 10 billion years, it wouldve still been enough for me.

when i got back home and told the whole thing to prudence, i found my story. big bird comes to town. i forgot to give it to him. remind me to send it over later. prudence held me long enough for me to not wanna throw myself against the wall.

these days when i feel like doing it i just say wwing's prayer instead. and still i only say it when everyone else is asleep even though it doesnt make as much noise. i really really really really really hope mother mary held out her hand in time.



you know, sleeping in these soft whorehouse mattresses really makes your back hurt after a month or two. sometimes i just sleep on the floor, how a nigga really moves these days.

i handle pretty much all the laundry at mona's now. they have so many different kinds of clothes though that i had to learn the method and i kinda ruined some of their lace and silk. all i ever knew was toss all the clothes in and put it on normal.

one time pru said the clothes were getting too dry and stiff, but that was just cause i used i used too much detergent. figuring out the right amount of detergent was tough, but now i can do it with my eyes closed. i do it better with my eyes closed. i hold the bundle of clothes and feel how heavy it is, and i feel how heavy the cup of detergent is. i get it right every time.

you always gotta remember to check the pockets. i ruined a good 50 dinar bill like that. tried to use it to get some beer and the guy laughed at me. i cant go to that store anymore.

you also gotta remember to unbutton things. ursula smacked me upside the head for ruining one of her best pieces. i said i aint seen her wear that thing since i was 15. she smacked me again.

some people say split your lights and darks, but that aint enough. anything fake silk needs a perm press. lingerie (weird fucking way to spell a word) goes in the delicate cycle. lingerie with cum in it needs a pre wash first though. some of the whites can go heavy duty too but most of them i like to put in the speed wash so i can get them on the line quicker cause i hate having to sort clothes after washing. all the clothes have to go on the line on the balcony of the girl ~~it~~ they belongs to. with the darker colors i like to go a little bit colder on the water so i dont risk anything. maybe go down on the spin cycle too.

sheets are the worst. a whorehouse goes through maybe 10 billion sheets and blankets a day. im begging these bitches to start fucking on the floor. telling them it's better for their backs too. most blankets can go normal but emmy and ursula have special princess sheets that need a delicate cycle.

one time dizzy pinched my cheek and said i was such a good boy. i had to swat her hand away. i said bitch, i do this cause i have to. this is my room and board! whats the deal with girls treating you like an animal whenever youre helping around? makes you not wanna help around ever again.

prudence said our train leaves 1 and a half moons from now. i let her hold onto the tickets. theyre heavier than paper has any right to be, and if im being 100 with you, i dont trust myself not to lose mine.

karina's been staying at mona's. maybe i shouldve said that earlier. shes not working here though. well, she is, but not as a whore. the girls asked mona to let her stay there, and she agreed so long as she works for her room and board. shes supposed to sleep in the laundry room but all the girls let her sleep in their rooms. she pays for it all by mopping the floors (which i have to do anyways cause she sucks), cleaning the rooms (which i also have to do anyways cause she sucks), and helping me with the laundry (i dont let her).

she can cook though. it's just the tuesday nights where shes allowed to experiment for dinner that i hate. ask wing where she got her splendid new take for curry and rice.

she's planning on going to sorbonne or cordoba, so you know who has to take her to school. me. thats who. i gotta bike her there and bike her back in time to take down the sheets. i dont hate it. she complains about everything just like wwing ~~do~~ did, so i cant hate it.

sometimes she complains about my riding. sometimes she complains about prudence. sometimes she complains about bullshit.

one day, she said i was riding too fast and it was making her cold and hurting her ass. so i slowed down, and then she said 'not that slow! ill be late!' so i sped up. then she said 'too fast! do you want me to vomit on you? mother of christ. you should know how to ride a bike by now.'

another day she asked me what pru's birthday is. i said february 13. she said 'a quariest and a libra dont get along. youre doomed for divorce. yyou should be a man and end it with prudence before you break her heart.'

i asked her which one she was.

she said 'im a scorpion. we go best with libras, just so you know.'

right.

another day, it rained that night and the streets were wet, and she said 'i feel like youre running into the puddles on purpose.'

i said i wasnt.

'you just want everyone to laugh at me. you want to drop me off at school and have everyone laugh at karina with the wet clothes.'

i said maybe.

'pervert.'

maybe.

one day, she said she saw prudence having sex with a customer who didnt pay. i asked her how she knew he didnt pay. she ignored me and said 'i feel bad for you. boys who cant stand up to an unfaithful woman are pathetic.'

one day, she said the road i was taking was too long, and she wanted me to look for a shorter road that instant. problem was, i was already going on the shortest road! she showed up to school late and i had to listen to her principal yell at me and i also had to not smack the bullshit out him. i miss bayazid already.

one day, she said prudence was too old for me. 'big age gaps where the woman is older never turn out well.'

'yeah?'

'yep. but when the guy is older it's fine.'

'who told you that?'

'i read it in a magazine.' that made me laugh. i told her as a joke that she'd make good friends with mom. i caught her on the phone with mom that night. the next day, 'your mom says id make a great bride.' nigga.

one day, karina said the problem with the road was that it wasnt scenic enough. she wants scenic. at 6:30 am in new eden.

one day, we saw their dad at the front gate from like a mile away. i asked if she wanted to deal with him. she said no, so i went around and we had a crossiante at some french place way farther west than i wanted to go. it was overpriced, and i had to use my savings to pay, and then get yelled at by the principal again. splendid.

one day, karina complained i dont talk enough. 'good christ, i feel like im all alone back here. im lonely. dont you know it's bad manners to let a pretty girl be lonely?'

so i told her the one about the cucumber in the potato field.

she said 'nevermind. youre better when you dont talk.'

on the days where it's really cold, i put your jacket on her back while we ride. the first time i did that, she said it was gross cause of all the bloodstains and a guy died wearing it. 'no offense' she said, but i know you didnt take any.

i said 'ill take it back then.'

she held onto it and said no. that day, when i dropped her off, there was a wet spot on my back close to my neck.

one day, she ran off and didnt give me your jacket back. pissed me the fuck off. i went to pick her up and she was an hour and a half late cause she got a detention for breaking dress code.

one day, she said 'i think im going to have sex with jacob e today.'

'ok.'

'you dont mind?'

'why would i? i didnt even know you had guys at your school.'

'we dont. it's for the track meet.'

'cool.'

'jacob e is the fastest runner in new eden.'

'outside central? sure.'

'he wants to fuck me.'

'im glad.'

when i came over to pick her up, she was an hour and a half late. she had detention again, and she was suspended for 3 days. the principal said she took this jacob e guy to the locker room and damn near took his eye out. if she really did she wouldve been expelled.

i was thinking what would wwing do. he'd probably hit her. i asked her why she did it.

'he smelled bad.' she was about to cry.
we went back home.

one day, she said 'it's not fair you know so much more than me about ~~you~~ wiving. i should know more about my brother.'

i told her the story of that day when he almost got us killed by a bunch of 4th district cops and thats why i dont see or hear as good on my right side anymore. she said she didnt like that story. and i tried as hard i could to make it funny too. every once in a while i tell her a new story about him. theyre hit or miss with this crowd.

one day, she said prudence smelled kinda bad and that all the girls agreed.

i said i like my girls stinky.

'gross.'

it took me a week to convince her to start showering again.

one day, i went over to pick her up, and she was talking to their dad at the front gate. she was up against the wall. when she saw me, she ran over. daddy started yelling. he looked me in the eye. said some thing. i had blood running through my ears so i didnt hear him.

that night, i was taking a piss in the bathroom, and karina came in while i was washing my hands and asked me to hit her. the lights were off so i could barely see her shadow, but i could see she was crying.

i knew exactly why she was asking. ive been there. i still am there. but i still asked why.

she said 'please.'

'no.'

she said 'if youre not going to love me, at least hhit me.'

'i do love you.'

'im gonna drop out tomorrow.'

'ok.'

'so you dont care?'

'i almost dropped out. look how i turned out.'

'an idiot who makes women cry.' and she cried harder. she couldnt talk anymore. i wiped my hands dry and then wiped her tears with my hands and she held my hands to her face. she wiped her face into my palms. i let her rest her head on my shoulder and rubbed her cheek with my thumb. going back and forth. but making sure never to touch the corner of her mouth no matter how wide she opened it.

the next day, she woke me up extra early cause she wanted to get breakfast at the overpriced crossiante place. she said 'we have to get there while theyre fresh!'

and weve been waking up extra early everyday now just for some goddamn overpriced bread. pru's been covering some of the costs but i dont even go to sleep earlier these days, so im just getting 1 hour of sleep. what the fuck.

i complain every day to prudence. she thinks it's all cute. she says it's just a normal high school crush. even the stuff she said about wanting me to hurt her. i asked her if all high school crushes were like this.

'mine was.'

'seriously?'

'youre a better crush for her than mine was, actually. you try not to hurt her. thats good.' then i remembered about the businessman. and all the guys in suits that hang around our girls.

'i still dont get it.'

'if i had to guess, i think she wants to get taken apart by the man she loves. she wants to belong to him in a way she can belong to no one else.'

ok.

'it's cute.'

'how did wwing live with someone like that?'

'i dont think he had to deal with the same problems you did.'

man, pru loves karina so much there are some nights she where kicks me out to sleep in the laundry room so she can sleep with her. apparently karina keeps on telling prudence she stinks and shes hairy and shes too old and wrinkly.

pru just says yes and kisses her forehead. and sometimes when karina thinks prudence is sleeping, she smells my stuff. prudence let her steal one of my underwears. and thats not even the first or last one she stole. i dont even know where she's keeping them. im down to one underwear. i have to buy new fucking underwear.

one day, on the road, karina said 'maybe i should start turning tricks.'

'i thought you didnt wanna.'

'it makes money.'

'yeah. but i dont know if you can handle it.'

'i can try.'

'youre too young.'

'ursula started at 12.'

'too young for mona's.'

'i can just work the street.'

'i wont let you.'

then she hit me so hard i fell off the bike and she scraped her leg. and then she cried and told me 'look what you did to my leg!' and she wouldnt move until i carried her all the way back over to the bike.

she doesnt have a lot of friends at school so it's hard for me to tell her no about this kind of thing.

one day, we were talking about college. sorbonne. cordoba.

'if i get in, ill have no one.'

'we can call.'

'but no one will be there with me.'

'yeah. but youll get a good job. and you can call.
and write.'

'youll be married.'

'yeah. dont worry about that.'

'maybe ill be a homewrecker.'

'dont worry about that.'

one day, she wanted me to tell her another story about wwing. i decided id tell her about this room 203 thing he was talking about while he was dying.

she said she remembered they stayed there for maybe a week when she first arrived. then they moved. she said she was scared of kid back then but she didnt remember why. he was supposed to be older than her but he was almost smaller than her.

i asked if she wanted to cut first period and go visit.

she said yeah.

we rode on over. it's been in the middle of getting demolished for the last billion years so it looks exactly like you remember. there was still 2 floors left. the plants are eating most of the building up from the inside. flowers and mushrooms and grass and shit all over the place.

the door to room 203 was damn near sealed shut with some weird gunk on the cracks. i kicked it open.

it smelled terrible in there. there was a guy in the bed. almost like a corpse. his skin was moldy. he didnt look old but just diseased. he looked familiar. karina stayed away. i wasnt expecting it to move but it turned its head to look at us and raised its skinny arm with its loose skin and pointed at the corner of the room.

a little boy. looking out the window through a tiny hole he made with his finger in the dust. the kid was naked and skinny and starving and he was covered

in dirt and grime and blood. his coughs were thin.

he had a baby wing growing ~~wwwww~~ out the right side of his back. it wasn't big enough to make any problems yet, but it was bleeding at the base. twisting wires of skin and nerves and muscle held onto the wing. his body obviously didn't want it to be there.

there were stains where tears ran over the grime on his cheeks. i felt so guilty for everytime i made myself bleed, cause here was this kid who would give anything to stop bleeding if he had anything to give but his tiny little life.

karina held out her hand and told the boy to come. he backed up. his face was so dead, he couldn't make a single expression. she started tearing up.

i kneeled down and held out my hand. 'come on, baby. it's time to go.'

the kid's eyebrows scrunched together. it took all his energy to do that. and in this sick, dusty voice, he said 'cherry?'

yep. it's me.

he crawled over. he couldn't walk. i went over to him. i asked if he recognized the girl i was with. he made a dusty noise from his throat. he hugged her and held onto her, and she carried him out. i said he was already buried one time in the titan field. maybe this time, he could be buried with the angels.

so i walked her over to the graveyard of angels. i guess i still knew the road old man green showed me somehow, across that river no one knows.

we put the kid in the giant grave and told him to sleep, and he did. and i taught karina how to fill a grave over a pile of feathers.

you wont believe what happened yesterday.

so ive been working as a bodyguard these days. just for the girls at mona's. tariq already has the floor covered and i cant take his job, but the girls told mona they wanted to start doing house calls again and they need muscle. i guess im enough muscle for anywhere up to 5 kilometers out from the intersection. and i have to ride them on my bike too.

i had to get a buzz cut cause mona wants me looking tough. she'd rather have me scare the freaks than beating their asses. i also had to die my hair black because pink hair isnt very intimidating.

the girls keep rubbing and smacking my head like it's gonna give them good luck. how abusive a broad can really get.

it's a boring job. it pays a little extra. i just sit outside an apartment while business gets taken care of. i smoke a little. no drinking or pills allowed, mona says. i play with this new knife i got. 11 inches with a honey blend handle. looks like pru's eyes when i look through it at the sun.

ill read sometimes while im waiting. whatever i find, really. sometimes pru's magazines on watches but none of that stuff ever sticks in my head. some of prince's old fashion magazines with styles from the 80s and price tags that make me angry. sometimes one of those books you find on clearance at the grocery store. about aliens or murders and shit. some of cairo's comics he lets me borrow. spiderman. spawn. i like green lantern the best but he doesnt have that many of those. he let me keep them. but my favorite to read is still the hobbit. i still have that beat ass copy from elementary school. some days i think about popping over to ms abbas's house to ask her what some of the words mean and talk to her about it.

sometimes the customer will invite me inside while he takes care of business. customers with houses

usually. i say no. they say it's getting cold. i say i have a jacket. the jacket doesnt keep the cold out as well as it used to.

sometimes i walk around. go to the grocery store. dizzy got mad at me one time for that. she said 'what if im in trouble? am i gonna have to ask the murderer to wait for your retarded ass to get back from the grocery store before he starts killing and raping me?' she was right, of course.

well, this is all to say that one day, i was taking emmy to a customer's place, and he was pretty close to vega street.

we were a bit early, so i asked her if she wanted to see where i used to live.

she said 'fatima told me they brought it all down.'

i said yeah, but i wanna see whats going on there. she said ok, and i pointed out to her all the 3 soup alleys and told her a bunch of stories that grossed her the fuck out.

the new building was almost done. it was tall. thats about all i can tell you about it. they were still working on it last i checked. i wanted to tell emmy something. something about the place, or what it was like to live here, what the old building was like, but the words wouldnt come out.

instead, out of the corner of my eye, i see a nigga staring at me. i look over and ask this guy what his fucking deal is.

this nigga's giving me eyebrows, mouth open, hands on his shades like he's gonna push them down or take them off. even with the hair white and the white spot on his cheek covering half his face now, i could tell who it was. and before i could say anything, the guy said 'cher? is that you?'

even with the died hair, he could tell. and even with white hair dad looks damn near younger than me.

'good god almighty. and who's this lovely lady right here?'

'this is emerald. she works at mona's. emmy. this is my dad.'

'fatima's husband, yeah?'

he laughed. 'the one and only. i hope.'

she slapped him across the face. 'piece of shit.'
she spat on his boots. 'may god rape you a thousand times.'

dad smiled. 'you chose a fiery one.'

'not my girl. i was just walking her over to a customer's place.'

'mona's does house calls again? goddamn. a lots changed huh.'

emmy took my arm. 'cherry, lets go. we'll be late.'

'oh, youre gonna call off that appointment. im taking my son and wife out to dinner today.'

and just like that, we found ourselves back at mona's. dad offered to cover emmy's trick but she said she wouldnt even touch one million dinar if his hands touched it first.

when we showed up to the door, mona was already burning insense and waving it around cause i guess she smelled his aftershave from across the street, yelling 'DONT BRING HIM THROUGH THAT DOOR!'

every girl who ever worked with mom, got tutored by mom, or even heard her name in a conversation, came down to slap this nigga and spit on his boots. ursula put a lot of mucus into hers. he wiped it all down with a snot rag and his boots were shining like the backside of a baltic spoon. 'whorespits could make the world shine.' he said. 'if only people would give it a chance.' his cheek was glowing red though.

i asked him what he was doing here. he said he just felt like coming out and taking mom and me out to dinner. 'i didnt know they tore the old building down. i was staring at that monstrosity they were building for maybe 10 minutes before you showed up.'

'where are you at right now?'

'ah. here and there. doing what i gotta do. wheres your mom at?'

'at her boyfriend's place.'

'shes had this boyfriend for a while?'

'about a year. more or less.'

'and whats his deal?'

'hvac.'

he let out a huge breath. 'thats good. good money. lets go get her.'

we walked over to the heights, and the whole time we talked about how different everything looked. for some reason, he knew the roads better than me. i kept getting turned around, and he'd say 'lets stick to this road.' or 'keep the runny gutter to your right.'

he kept saying they were trying to constipate the city. he had a lot of words to say about the mayor's policies and shit. he had to know i wasnt tuning into any of it.

i got it in my head that i forgot what color his eyes were so i kept trying to sneak a look behind his shades but i couldnt catch it and he looked at me like was acting weird. i was.

we finally got to the building. i rang the flat and waited for someone to buzz me in.

'i hate places like this.' dad said. 'you leave the door locked like this, and where are the stringers supposed to go when it rains? when it's cold?'

'i dont think they want stringers in their lobby.'

'stringers make the city. if the city doesnt want the stringers the least they could do is get them off the horse.'

he called it horse still. made me laugh.

the intercom opened. it was mom. 'who is it?'

dad whispered at me to answer.

'uh, it's me. i have a surprise for you. i think.'

'you THINK you have a surprise for me? well buzz me back when you decide.'

'woman, just buzz me in. it's an emergency.'

'it's an emergency now? aiyai.'

and the door opened. dad laughed. 'she still does that noise. aiyai!'

'how do you spell it?'

'what?'

'how do you spell it. the noise.'

'nigga did you get hit in the head while i was gone?'

'no.' i mean shit.

i pressed the elevator button, but dad said we should take the stairs.

'shes on the 11th floor.'

'i dont care. im not an elevator guy.'

so we ended up taking the stairs. he does not get tired easy. halfway up and i was weezing like a bad engine.

dad said i smoke too much.

'you quit?'

'hell no. i jusst know how to make the most of these lungs.'

'maybe you could teach me sometime.'

we got to mom's flat and i rang the doorbell.

mom opened the door, said something about myy hair, then saw dad. he pulled a bunch of little pink flowers out of nowhere and handed them to mom. 'for you.'

'youre too skinny. you havent been eating good.'

'nothing about the flowers? are they not your favorite anymore?'

she took them. 'you think those sunglasses hide everything but i can tell when a man is not eating rice or bread.'

'be careful. theyre poisonous.'

'i know they are poisonous, idiota. i taugt you that. and your cheeks! aiyai! why so red?'

'that would be your sisters.'

'ufffff. good for you. now what are you doing here

with my son.'

'what, a dad cant take his 2 favorite people in the world out to dinner anymore?'

then the boyfriend came walking down the hall with his big ass footsteps. 'fatima? whats happening out here?'

'baby, this is my son's father. he is going to take us out to dinner.' she handed him the flowers. 'put that in the vase by the tv. and be careful. theyre poisonous.' then she took her ~~brown~~ MINK coat and hheaded out. 'i wont bother taking my wallet or my purse. you will take care of everything. huh?'

dad saluted. 'yes maam.' then he told the guy he'd have her back by 10 at the latest. that dumbass was gawking at us the whole time. he makes it so hard to be nice to him with that retard face.

then mom said we should go pick up prudence.

'who's prudence?'

'your daughter in law.'

dad looked at me, and i could almost see his eyes get wide behind his shades. 'youre married?'

'not yet.'

'he proposed. she said yes. and when you see her, you will not believe it.'

'you make it sound like im ugly.'

'not ugly. you just dont take care of your skin and she does. and your cigarettes have no filter. and you dont pick up after yourself. and you always have no money.'

'i do the laundry.'

'aiyai! that is why she married you!' she pushed dad. 'why did you never do the laundry?'

'i only had two shirts, woman. leave me alone. but lets go pick up my new daughter. whats she like?'

i told him she was a mona's girl. i didnt wanna tell him too much else. i figured if pru wants him to know about her, she'll let him know.

we had to call her at mona's to get her to come

out cause dad didnt wanna go back in. his shoes were shiny enough he said.

so i left dad with mom and went and called by payphone and went through the whole rigamaroll of trying to convince mona i wasnt a customer and it was me cherry her longtime friend and now employee trying to talk to his girl. his fiance if you will.

when pru finally got on the phone, she asked what the deal was and why all the girls were mad. 'theyre all talking about your dad for some reason.'

'yeah. hhe's back.'

'what? for good?'

'i dont think so. come on out, were going to dinner.'

'dinner? with THE dad?'

'the dad?'

'it's just, you never talk about him. so im ~~anxe~~ anxious.'

'dont worry about it. just come over to my mom's place. it's at'

'i know where it's at. ok. ok. let meeeeeee get dressed! love you! kisses!'

'love you too.'

'no kisses?'

'im not kissing a fucking payphone.'

'just say the word kisses!'

'kisses.'

'you dont sound like you mean it. i dont feel very kissed right now. but it's alright, cherryberry. it's alright. youll see what happens when you cross prudence of the rine valley.'

shes been calling herself that these days.

i didnt feel like going back to mom and dad with out pru so i walked back and forth in this tight ass alley and chain smoked damn near half my pack until she came.

she showed up in a pink coat and a classy white gold watch that matched her necklace. instantly she

started asking me questions and i didnt say a word until i took her upstairs to mom and dad. we took the elevator cause we were not insane and she asked me questions the whole way up. i dont even think she cared if i answered or not.

shit like 'whats his voice like?' and 'should i shake his hand or should i slap him like all the other girls did?' and 'what animal would you say he most resembles?' for the last one i said snake. not for a bad reason. i just said he was good at hiding in the sand when the eagles come looking for him.

when we got there, mom and dad were sitting on the stairs arguing with each other about some bullshit that happened before i was born. something about an oven and someone called sam. i went up and said 'pru, meet dad. dad, this is pru.'

dad took prudence's hand and touched it to his forehead. 'an honour. should i call you daughter?'

'prudence is fine.'

'prudence it is.' he looked back at her hand, then looked at mom. 'is that your ring?'

'it is.'

'it fits her better than it did you.'

she pushed him. 'i know. you love buying rings for other women. youre buying me a new one, you understand? i cannot go without a ring until i die. people will think i am unmarried.'

'why dont you get your new man to get you one?'

'aiyai! that would mean marrying him!'

prudence looked over at me. 'have they always been like this?'

i told her i think so. i dont know, man. when i try to think that far back, i can barely remember anything outside of just playing outside. i think back when we lived in the shack, they acted like this. i was thinking of a time where mom and dad were arguing. mom was holding you tight. she was saying something about not wanting you to go. when i think

about mom and dad fighting, it's scary, but to see it right there, it wasn't so scary at all.

'so where are we going?' mom asked.

dad tapped his chin. 'hm. fish? fish at andalus?'

'you came all this way and you do not even know?'

i told him the place is probably closed down.

everything on gibraltar street is closed down last i checked. he said it aint, for sure it aint. and we ended up walking over.

when we hit gibraltar street, prudence randomly asked which one was taller, me or dad. now im ready to just say were about the same height, but dad goes 'oh, obviously me. sons never get taller than their dads. it's impossible.'

that was bullshit, and i had him stand with his back to mine just to prove it.

he was about a centimeter taller. he smiled like this was all some stupid kid's game, like he didnt care. then prudence said 'shoes! take off your shoes.'

we did it again, this time in our socks on the cold sidewalk, and i came out on top. prudence jumped on me and kissed me on the cheek, and i started laughing, but it didnt feel right to laugh like that in front of dad. like some dumb kid with a buzzcut that doesnt suit him. did i mention i almost cried getting that buzzcut? last time i saw myself with hair that short was those 2 weeks after prince transferred in when he got me back for shaving his head.

'you rigged it.' dad said. 'but thats good. you gotta be good at that.'

andalus ended up still being open. um kalthoum and crackling oil in the air. sakibou still in the back, hands dusted white with flour. it's a miracle he's still open. it was a while since i was last there. i hope he stays open but im not too sure.

they set up some newspapers on the table and then

they brought out the fries and the sauce. then they came with the cokes and the beers. then the fried rivercuttle. dad was interrogating prudence, asking her all kinds of things, and she was dodging that shit like sugar ray.

he asked her what kind of music she likes.

'you know, everything.' which isnt wrong cause i did put her onto outkast and she likes it.

he asked her what kind of movies she likes.

'the old ones. and the funny ones.' and the sad ones too. she made me watch this movie about these 4 kids who go on a hike and it made me cry.

he asked her if she dances.

'a little.' but she only dances to george michael. and this one single from the peroxide bunnies we found on leuin.

all a sudden he calls out to the kitchen 'hey, sakiuuuu! you forgot the dijon!'

then pru's eyes lit up and she put her hand on her chest. 'oh my goodness. goldyy used to love dijon mustard.'

mom pointed and said 'yes! yes! and when he ate it, his face used to go like this.' and she scrunched her face up until it was about the size of a 1 dinar coin. it was accurate. 'i always told him do not eat it if it hurts.'

'and he always would say it didnt hurt.'

'such a terrible liar.'

'awful.'

and then it was quiet.

i ordered too much fish. usually id just take the half of the rivercuttle that wwing didnt finish but 2 turned out to be too much for me.

dad said 'so you knew my other son?'

'a little. we dated.'

i was gripping my leg waiting for dad to make some retarded joke about it, but he didnt.

then we went quiet and ate our food. pru wasnt too

good at getting the bones out of the rivercuttle. i tried to show her how but her nails got in the way, so mama showed her how to do it with your nails, and a bunch of tricks guys wont ever learn how to do until we start getting nails too.

dad started telling stories, the way i always remembered him doing. waving his hands around, painting pictures with his fingers in the smoke, slapping the back of his right hand into his left palm. i remembered more than i thought i would. prudence actually laughed a few times.

when the check came through, dad saw me reach into my pocket and grabbed my arm hard. he smiled. 'what do you think youre doing little boy?'

'im paying the check.'

'i said i was gonna take you out to dinner. you gonna make your father a liar?'

'better than making my father broke. you know what they do to niggas with broke daddies?'

he pulled out a stack of 10s but i smacked his hand away and threw my cash on the table. we started grappling and shit, and i swear i was about to put him in a cobra, but sakibou came over himself and told us it was all paid for.

'thats nice of you.' dad said.

'not me. idiot. the girls paid. they are waiting outside. leave and dont break my restaurant.'

outside, mom said we were embarassments. dad asked if we wanted to go see a movie.

prudence took my hand and took me right back into andalus. she said 'i dropped something. i need you to help me find it.' we went underneath the table and she said 'i dont wanna go to the movies.'

'ok. wait, why?'

'i dont like your parents.'

'oh. damn.'

'no. it's not like that. actually, i do like your parents. and i dont like that im starting to like

them a lot.'

'i dont get it.'

'goldyy always used to complain about how they treated you. it would make him cry sometimes.' is that true? you used to cry over this? 'he only had bad things to say about your dad.'

i told her you were always like that. you hated dad so much, but i dont know man. mom and dad were younger than i am now when they had yyou and me. and it's not like they teach you how to be a good dad at school. cant really blame anyone.

'well just because youre ok when people mistreat you doesnt mean im going to be ok with it.'

what she said shouldve pissed me off. it wouldve if it was anyone else. but right there, under that table, all that happened was my chest started to hurt. i love her. i love her and i love her again.

i said 'at least lets see what the movie is theyre gonna show.'

'ok. ill agree to that.'

'did you find what you lost?'

'i didnt lose anything. i just wanted to talk to you alone.'

so we got back up and went over and i asked dad what movie theyre showing at the theatre. he said casablanca. i looked over at prudence.

'goodness. ok. lets go.'

we ended up walking down to the drivein, and dad was telling how the day i was born, he was still on the run from the city on racketeering and sedition charges. BOGUS racketeering charges, he says, but completely valid ssedition charges.

mom's water broke, but she held me in for a whole 2 more weeks when all a sudden, they were passing under a cherry blossom, and i just flopped out onto the dirt. dad said thats why my hair is pink.

mom said thats bullshit. 'it's pink because of the blood vessels. something happened to the blood in his

brain when he hit the ground.'

i asked if she read that in a magazine.

she put a finger on her chin. 'maybe. you should let your natural hair color. it's very pretty.'

pretty doesnt make for a good bodyguard.

by the time we got to the theatre, the sun was starting to go down, and i had pru's hands in my jacket. the movie started and instantly all i wanted to do was go for a walk, but pru was warming her hands. we were sitting on top of 2 abandoned mustangs side by side.

dad came by and dropped a sack of kettlecorn and some hot dogs into the front seats for pru and mom. 'lemme get some drinks.'

mom said he didnt need to, and pulled an entire bottle of wine out of her MINK coat.

'im gonna go for a stick.' he said. then he looked at me, and i said id go too. prudence grabbed my hand and said 'but the movie!' i told her i wouldnt be that long. i hope thats the last time i lie to her.

just outside the fence, sunset on the stacked tires and hollowed out cars. we lit up. 'luckies?' he said. 'yeah we couldve never lived in the same house.' dad still smokes noahs.

'lucky is the prophet's way.' i said.

'some bullshit.'

'so what is all this, really? trying to get back together with mom?'

'nah. nothing like that. wouldnt be any point.'

'huh.'

'what fatima and me had, it was just wartime love. no way we couldve made it work in peacetime. what we had wasnt anything special.'

'maybe if goldyy was still around.'

'what if he was?'

or not that. maybe if i wasnt here. you wouldnt be a river titan, youd be here. standing on right side of the sand. you were with prudence first. all i ever

do is steal everything you did and try to do it myself. even mom saw right through it. she didnt want you becoming a river titan. me becoming a titan? that was natural. you? that was a malfunction. i maybe said all that out loud, and maybe i looked away and scratched my head, as if someone else said all that and i was trying to see who it was.

dad took a long drag. 'you like being a titan, dont you?'

'it's all i know how to be.'

'well your brother loved it. otherwise he wouldnt have made all the gold in new eden worth less than shit when he died.'

'i couldnt even kill the fucker that killed hhim.'

'thats ok.'

'i had the gun to judi hbeller's head and i let hhim go. no, hhe begged me to kill hhim. i forced the ticket in hhis hands. i forced hhim to live.'

'ok.'

'i beat the shit out of niggas for looking at me a way i dont like. a good brother couldve killed that man.'

'maybe.'

'you couldve killed hhim.'

'yeah, i couldve. and maybe i still will. be glad you didnt inherit that from me.'

it's all shit. all of it.

'but not prudence.'

'used to be a lot more than just prudence. now it's just her.'

'is she enough?'

yeah is what i wanted to say. yeah shouldve been the word that came out my mouth. i said 'she wants to leave the city and start a watch shop. an antique shop with watches. she says she found a good place. she might buy it soon.'

'and youre gonna go with her.'

'i think so.'

'go with her. whats left for you here?'

'i gotta take care of karina until she graduates. and i gotta make sure cairo doesnt get in trouble. and i gotta be here in case prince comes back. and other things.'

'youre supposed to be different from me. you dont run away.'

'i dont wanna run away.'

'right now? for you? staying is running away. if youre the same as me, then go ahead and look for excuses. but if you know whats good for you, go after her. me and your mom? we was never making it out. we were a wartime couple. you and prudence? youre a peacetime couple. thats special. not a lot of those left.'

'what happens if wartime comes again?'

'when wartime comes again.'

'what happens when wartime comes and i cant kill anybody?'

'you stick to your girl. peacetime couples are the best thing to have during wartime next to fresh water and tobacco.'

'do you think if you killed the weaver you wouldve regretted it?'

'how do you know about that?'

'i saw it in a dream.'

he laughed. 'shit. you listened to your blood huh. i taught you that. then you know why my face is all fucked up. dont listen to me. dont listen to your blood.'

'i wish you did kill him.'

'so you met him?'

'he tried to recruit me. i hate him. i wish you killed him.'

'im working on it. thats some shit i gotta live with. forget him. you wanna kill someone? kill me.'

'huh?'

he pulled out grampa's 7 shot and loaded a bullet

into it.

i told him to put that fucking thing away.

he laughed that smoky ass laugh. then he tossed me the gun. it burned my hands so i threw it on the ground.

'come on. why not? dont you wanna get back at me?'

'for what?'

'for hightailing it out of there when you were still 7 years old.'

'you werent even 25 yet.'

'that aint an excuse.'

i squatted down and put my face in my hands. 'it is to me. and i dont care even if it's not. i dont care that much.'

'you dont care huh?'

i looked away for one second, and dad's shin came crashing into my head.

'you dont care huh?'

he kicked me again so i had to get up fast. i actually did end up getting a few good hits on him, but even when i could see where his hands were going, they still found a way to reach me. i could move, put my arms up, try to get behind, but they found me everytime. inevitable, prudence called it. i told her about it and she said thats what inevitable feels like. we're inevitable, she says. just like dad's hands. we're inevitable. we're inevitable.

everytime he landed a hit on me, i thought i was gonna die. i landed some nice body shots, but i couldnt even knock the shades off his face.

he asked me what happened to my right. that right he coached when i was a baby. i told him i didnt need it anymore. but i did. and he was too strong.

and then we were sitting against the fence and smoking, and dad just started telling me about how to be a good husband. or at least not as bad of a husband as him. thats how he put it. all the things he wishes he did, or the things he wishes he did more of. cut

her apples for her. pick the grapes and dont leave any stems. dont let people walk on your carpet with their shoes on. dust or vacuum every once in a while. she wont notice but do it anyway. it's ok to leave your clothes on a chair but it's not ok to leave the toilet seat up. let her control the heater in the winter, but you have to control the ac in the summer. dont try to get pregnant on the 5th of any month except january, and try to give birth next to cherry blossoms.

and i said i would try to do all that. she has big dreams. dreams bigger than anything that could fit in a titan's grave. i dont know what to do with all that.

dad asked me 'do you see yourself in her dreams?'

i dont know.

'where do you see yourself in 3 years?'

i dont.

'1 year?'

i cant see that far ahead. the footsteps are running out. maybe the wind blew them away. or maybe theyve been gone for so long and i just didnt notice how far i came. and i didnt even check out the sights.

dad looked sad when i told him how blind i was to time. i think he feels guilty. like he made it that way. i dont think so.

i told him maybe i could be like him and chase whatever it is he chases out there.

'nah. youre nothing like me. your brother was, allah yerhamu. youre more like your mama. you should get into honest work like her.'

'i cant do accounting.'

'i said honest work.'

'yeah yeah. i know.'

when mom and pru came out of the theatre, they yelled at us. later, pru said mom slept through half the movie and talked through the other half. about her back problems and her stupid son.

pru said 'you missed the whole movie!'

i looked over and saw two guys walking in the fog.

THE END. A WARNER BROS PICTURE.

'aiyai! that is the problem you have with this?' mom said. 'look at them. dirt all over their clothes. bruises and cuts. you cannot take men anywhere.'

'thats what cherry always looks like.' she didnt tell mom about the promise i made. i said sorry later that night and she said it was ok cause it was my first time seeing dad in a while. she gave me another chance. i really shouldnt waste it. 3rd time's a charm i think.

pru said 'and what were you fighting over?'

'cigarette brands.' i said.

mom said 'you both have bad taste. that should solve it. yeah?'

'yeah.'

'aiyai! and i wanted to take a picture of you two. ok i take a picture like this.' she took a camera from out of her coat. 'stand together and smile. come on. you are smiling all day and now when i want to take a picture, you want to not smile? every boy thinks that looks cool. aiyai-yai-yai.' she took 2 pictures and handed one to dad.

he said no. 'i already know what i look like. but let me take a picture of all three of you. i want some good luck for the road.'

i got in between mom and prudence and dad took the picture. when dad stopped wagging it in the air, it looked like a damn good picture. sky almost purple. prudence smiling so wide. mom not able to hide her drunkness. she gave me bunny ears. i half wanted to keep it. dad saw that.

'nope! all mine.' and he tucked it into his jacket.

on the way home, dad and prudence talked about their birth months and all the stuff pru likes to talk about with karina and the girls at mona's. me and mom didnt take any part of that.

mom's drunk ass kept bumping into me. she said

'your girl tells me youre moving out of the city. leaving your mother alone.'

'youre not alone.'

'a mother is always alone when her sons are away.'

'i might stay.'

'it's good to go on adventures. it's good to leave this city. it's dying. for a long time it's dying. better to leave the old people here.'

first time in my life i ever heard her talk like that. i asked her if she knew what color dad's eyes were but she wasnt listening to me anymore. she was too far out of it. she started talking about her mom and her brothers and asking rachid not to kill, and i tried to listen but she was just mumbling it at that point. me and dad had to carry her on our backs the rest of the way.

we dropped off mom, and her boyfriend looked like he had the weight of the city lifted off his shoulders. she gave him a sloppy drunk kiss and we had to close the door for them.

when we reached the front door of mona's prudence told dad 'you should come visit sometime.'

he said 'ill think about it.'

she put her hands on his shoulders and said 'come visit sometime. before we leave.'

he said 'i will.'

then she said she'd treat me good as my wife. i think she wanted dad's blessing, but all he said was 'i believe you would.' and he hugged her and sent her on inside.

then he looked at me and said 'i really want her as a daughter in law. you gonna make her a liar?'

i dont know.

'i made the mistake of listening to my blood. your brother did the same. and your friend the great grand son.'

'wing.'

'i used to tell you to listen to your blood, but

im telling you now. become deaf. you got something besides blood in your heart now.'

i said id try.

'and i wouldnt worry about the weaver if i was you. if i was anyone else, sure. but you dont worry. alright? the spiders like to make themselves out to be these big guys, but theyre just like any other family. running around praying to gods they dont know. you pray to gods you know. thatll keep you safe for some time, my boy.' then he took off his shades, hung them on his collar, and ruffled my head as if i still had hair. like i was 5 years old. 'sayonara, cherrytop.'

im such an idiot. how could i forget that? brown. his eyes are light brown. both of them. just like ours.

just a few days ago it was all fine. and even now i can see myself on that train. sunset sinking into the ocean through the window. leaving the hurricane behind. and all the footprints too. and oh my days my days my days.

and prince came all the way over just to help me put the suit on and he tied my tie for me. said i looked gorgeous, my dear. he's leaving the city too in a bit. on his own way.

ursula put makeup on me to hide my bruises from the fight with dad.

dizzy gave me a bottle of montague gold as a wedding gift.

mona gave me the money to get some flowers on the way.

i put it all with some clothes and this typewriter and some papers and ribbons and that was all i was ready to take away with me. everybody put so much work into making sure i left this place behind.

if only that redshirt didnt look at me on the way there. why did he turn his head? you might ask me why i was heading through reyes to get to the station. i guess i was going sightseeing one last time.

and so instead of sitting on a train to a life outside of here with prudence in my hands, im sitting on the roof of some empty building with a broken typewriter and a fifth of montague gold and hands that hurt real fucking bad.

the watch she gave me stopped as soon as she left. 6:05. right on time. and i dont know how to fix it. the orange of that old sky is fading away now. the train is far away from this hurricane. sun go up. sun come down. and there may be something out there after all.

prudence said it's too cold for summer here. new eden is getting colder than is reasonable. her words. it's summer, not jacket weather. the winds are too strong and they blow through the windows of empty

buildings like concrete flutes. theres nothing for me here. so why did i stay? why am i still here? im suicidal she ~~says~~ said.

when i showed up to the station and she turned to look at me i thought i was gonna die. the wedding dress looked so good on her. and when she saw my face i had to deal with the fact that i broke hher smile. i gotta apologize to you too. i hurt her the same way you did.

she saw my face and the first thing she did was say 'it's ok. we'll take care of it. just get on the train.'

i put my bag on the ground.

she said 'no no no no no. take the bag. put it on the train. you need to take that with you. we cant spend time shopping for clothes and another type writer and everything. we have a lot of work to do. come on. wake up. pick up the bag. no. open your hand. open your hhand and take the bag. no no no. open your hand for me. no. what are you doing? no no no no no. please. cherry. please. for me. open your hands. for me. please. no no no no no. im begging you. please. why are you doing this to me now? whats the matter with you? why wont you pick up the bag? what happened on the way here? what did you do? dont you hear that? thats the train. it's on its way right now. you need to open your hands. quickly. for me. it's so easy. look. look at me. look in my eeyes. just do what i say. breathe. open your hands. ok. forget the bag just take my hands. my hands. cherry. my hands. take my hand. cherry. wake up. wake up you idiot. what are you doing. you ruin every thing. why are you all the same? are you going to make all of this a mistake? everything we did? it was all a mistake? open your hhand for me please. i fucked up? i fucked up. ill make up for it at home. our new home. you can wait for me there. please. ill do anything. ill do anything for you just get on the fucking train right now please.

it's so warm in there. why are you just standing here?
it's so cold here. why cant you just take one step?
whats for you here? whats waiting for you hhere? whats
so important? please. just tell me. why are you so fuc
king suicidal.'

i said karina needed to be taken care of.

'she has the girls.'

'cairo.'

'he has so many friends.'

'prince.'

'he's leaving too.'

'old man green asked me to water his gravestones.'

'he can find someone else.'

'and mom.'

'now you care about her? she gave us her blessing.'

'and if i leave this city, will they know about me
when i die?'

'what?'

'will my death reach them? will they be able to
bury me?'

'oh my fucking god. why are you so obsessed with
being buried?'

it's the only thing that was ever promised to me.

'i promise you right now. i promise you a life. a
life outside of hhere. you have my word. as a watch
maker. as your wife. i promise.'

the wind rose. it was cold without your jacket. i
took off my suit jacket and put it over her
shoulders. a wedding dress is for better weather than
this. i said she looked real bridal.

she looked disgusted with me. her lips turned up.
i tried to give her the flowers. her favorite.
hydrangeas. i worked hard to remember how to spell
that. but she smacked them away.

i said she would make a man very happy somedayy.

'i was supposed to make you happy.'

i told her she did. but i cant give this all up.
even though i hate it. even though i know itll kill

me. but that world that would keep me alive wasnt made with me in mind. they didnt make titan shaped holes for me to fit through.

'why did you even come then?'

'cause you wouldve missed your train waiting for me.'

she said that was her choice.

i asked her about the new movement she wanted to make. 'youre gonna keep that from the world? time needs you, old girl. time doesnt need titans.'

the train whistled and grinded on by. it brought the warmest wind new eden ever felt since last summer. i wanted to hold her hand one last time but she took her bag and went on the train.

she didnt look back at me. i think thats better. if i kept her here i wouldnt be able to keep talking to you.

an alone girl in a wedding dress on a train to somewhere. she'd be better off if she could get rid of the jacket i put on her. it's too warm for jackets out there. yeah. get rid of the jacket and the kids who cant help but keep breaking her heart.

since then i vomited a bloody screwdriver. im gonna keep it in the night stand. first time i had one of those and i finally have something to put in it.

a nigga couldnt step outside your footprints even if he tried. and now theres none of them left. that was the last of them. is this your idea of a joke? youre supposed to be the funny one.

and now when i die, i wont even have a pretty girl at hhome crying for me.

Name? big bird comes to town

Big bird was born on August and he was a ^{his only have 2 humps!} ~~red~~ falcon and a goose because his mom was a goose. ^{He capital!} He had a long neck. He could jump high but not fly so his family didn't like him. Very sad.

He wanted to be good at basketball so he could make ^{Commas between every 3 digits} 100,000,000 dollars in ^{Accapitalize countries!} America but he was short. Even though his neck was so long. But still, some girls liked him and wanted to be his girl friend or bird friend to be rich with him but he didn't like girls not because he was ^{Inappropriate} gay but he just didn't give a ~~stick~~ carrot. Violent! I still see that!

Finally he beat up his dad. His dad ^{Kept!} kept working in his auto shop working on cars but his bird wanted to leave and find his mom's mom ran away from his dad because he was a piece of ~~stick~~ Ew! Yucky!

Use quotation marks →

She died but before she died she ~~sang~~ ^{and sang} sang to him a song for him. It was like goodbye my son i'm so sorry but i love you your friends are cool and i like them. i used to be evil but not anymore. i followed the sunset but i went too fast and nothing right were started. goodbye, her voice was like a guitar, and so big bird, put on his ~~glasses~~ sun glasses and went to his car with his girl friend to new eden again. Where did his girlfriend come from? Who is she?

He ^{shot} shoots at the cops and ^{all} all of them died. Then he beat up his dad back but ^{didn't} didn't kill him because he ^{didn't} didn't like it, and then he drove with his girl friend to a better place. and he got her flowers he never told anyone he likes flowers, and he has a seedness inside his brain, and his girl friend took the sedana

"lit"
out and ~~lighted~~ his ~~sticks~~
cigaretts for him.

I'm happy for their
return!

then he met big bear and
big beetle. he could tell
already they were strong,
but he beat them up and
they said to go with them,
so big bird left his girlfriend
and killed people with big
bear and big beetle. Why are
they killing people now? They didn't ~~beat~~

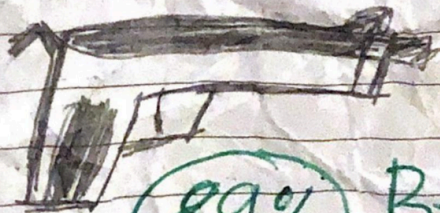
Then it became his 20th
bir thday and he went with
big beetle and big bear to
get some ~~beer~~ Monta-
gne rum. but the shop ran
out so he went to the next
one but they ran out too.
so he thought everybody is
drinking Montagne because
of me. he was right every
one was copying him.

so he went to a faraway
city where they didn't fight
fairly he never had a cho

Quotation marks please!

if they fought Fair he
was going to kill them
all but they knew that, so
they ganged up on him, he
still killed 100000 or 200
0000 of them but they killed
him and threw his body and
the birds carried the body
to the fire where everyone's
bodies burn. his last words
were i'm gonna kill the mayors.

goodbye



~~###~~
(89%) B+!!

Cherry,
Truthfully, there were too many
mistakes to count. I grew tired of
correcting your capitalization, spell-
ing, grammar, and incorrectly written
"m's". But somehow, I struggle to
fail you. I loved this story, and I'm
certain Wing would love it too.
But only show it to him when
you're ready. Heavens, I really have
become a softer grader!

i was walking down leuin thinking about prudence. thinking about you. thinking about time and the bridges we cross without even knowing. thinking about cities with no alleyways suffocating.

i was trying to find someone or something to fix this typewriter. it's breaking down. i cleaned between the keys a million times. i asked old man green he said it's on its last legs and the only guy in the world who can fix it wouldnt be caught dead in new eden in a thousand years. sun go up. sun come down.

then i saw a cassette tape in the window of an antique store. casablanca. humphrey bogart. ingrid bergman. paul henreid.

the store was shutting down so the tape was worth about 15 dinar. ive been working so i thought id buy it with my own hard earned money. it feels like i got robbed.

ive been whoring. nothing too crazy. it turns out guys arent in high demand except to other guys. i just do handjobss and a little bit of mouth stuff if the guy isnt too gross. i didnt know who to ask about sucking dick. i didnt wanna hear anything from anyone about it. i dont wanna talk about it.

mona said 'your ukrainian friend with the long hair would be much better at this. he is beautiful in a way that actually makes money.' but it's not my fault.

she told me if i wanted steady money i should do what the rest of the girls do and find someone young (like karina) and rich (not like karina) to fall in love with me. only problem is her girls got stuck with river titans and we dont like to pay.

and man, just think about how many girls actually need to pay to get fucked or to have their clit sucked on.

i said that to dizzy and she called me retarded. said thats not what girls pay for. said thats why i

have no regulars.

i almost did have a regular though. a guy who called himself vilencia. he had burns on his face and hands. and on the third time he came to me i almost was gonna do butt stuff but he walked out of the room with boogers in his hair. ill tell you about it later. but yeah. no regulars.

i asked mom for help about that. she didnt know what to tell me. she never fucked a burned guy. and she didnt know what to say to a guy in the business. there aint no secrets to whoring good i guess. you just gotta be born with it.

i got a long way to go, but im on it. ill become a good whore someday. until then, whoever is left in new eden is gonna have to settle for a guy who handles tits like lemons over fried fish.

so i bought the casablanca tape and went back to mona's and asked if anyone wanted to watch it. i asked enough times that it stopped being asking anymore.

the girls were so mad at me when i showed back up that night. they made me sleep outside and it was colder than a bitch. karina brought me a blanket but even she was disappointed in me. still now the girls treat me so much colder than usual. i half wanted everyone to just watch the movie and forget.

it ended up actually being a deal and a half. we were gonna watch it on the new tv in the lobby. emmy brought her new man. ursula brought both her cute and ugly cousins. old man green showed up. mom showed up. i called cairo but he couldnt show up. he's body guarding with bouzizi's family now. at least he stayed away from the spiders. im thinking about it now and mona wouldnt have let cairo in the door anyway.

we had karina in the kitchen wanting to make some chicken biryani so me and green got to work finding some chickens to feed the whole party. mom gave us

some money to buy them but i figured it would be better to pocket the money and find a chicken running around in the butcher's strip. but i stayed away from sidi's shop.

so we all sat our asses down and watched the movie. and i sat real close to the tv cause the girls kept talking over the lines and i wanted to hear.

and everyy time this lady called ilsa showed up, i said some shit cairo would say like 'shes stellar.' or 'what a fox.' and it would make the girls laugh everytime. mom asked why i never talked about her like that.

thing is i was holding a shit in so bad i ended up leaving the movie around the part where ilsa heads over to meet up with humphreyy bogart and i didnt come back until the part where the 2 guys were walking into the fog.

the end. a warner bros picture. it was still a splendid movie.

when the movie was over and everyone was getting drunk mom came to smoke outside with me. she told me she couldnt believe me and dad got her to see the same movie twice in 1 year. i asked her if she liked anything about the movie. she ssaid she liked the guy named victor. thats all she remembered.

'so im never getting my ring back?'

'i didnt think about that.'

'you never think. i never taught you how to do that. but it's ok. the girl will be fine. better that you didnt get married in highschool. aiyai! but now you have to stay here. astaghfurillah.'

'yeah. but it's not so bad. im taking up the family trade.'

'dont laugh. it is because you dont think. the only one who thought less than you was your brother.'

'i wouldnt say that.'

'i will. always it was you who had to keep him from hurting his self.'

i dont remember it that way.

'no. it was that way. trust me. i remember. he plays and dances with the knives. you catch the knife and bleed. he tries to drink the thermometer, you catch it before it goes in his mouth. he fights with a police man. you get in the middle and become deaf in 1 ear. ah. you two were so beautiful together.'

i like being called beautiful but i really think you were doing the heavily lifting there.

and then mom started crying. she said 'hold me. hold your mother when shes crying. idiota.'

so i did.



i was sitting on the bleachers at aljeciras field in the morning when judi h Keller walked up to me and handed me the gun. they finally got the lights working again in the field, but only a little, so you cant play past 7:30.

'the kids have good touch. good control.' i said. 'maybe the city can finally have a champion.'

'mm. no defense.'

we sat there watching the kids play for a while. left team was mopping the floor with right team. little laudrup in the midfield was carrying his side.

'he's better now.' judi said. 'you teach him?'

'yeah. yall dont know jack shit about baseball or football in the westside. maybe if you got him into cricket.'

'rather kill myself.'

i took the gun and looked in the cylinder. no bullets.

'had to put down a horse.' ssun go up. sun come down.

'mustve been tough.'

'not really. it was harder doing everything else.'

'did it ever get eassier?'

'it's hard to tell. the good times, wwhen i have them, are so beautiful i could start crying.'

yeah.

'and when theyre gone, all i can think of is ways to punish myself. the best way to forget it was just to get into shoveling the shit and rolling the straw. milking the cow. carrying the water from the well. sewing the clothes.'

'theyre big on prayer over there.'

'i left prayer behind last year. but i like reading the books.'

little laudrup was sending so many throughballs it's like all he saw was space between the defenders. he saw right through it all. i hope he ends up with a good striker when he's in highschool.

i lit h heller a stick. hope you dont mind. it was his first in a long time.

'luckies.' he said.

'yeah.'

'you have no taste.'

when we finished, he slapped his thighs and got up, same way we do. i held out the gun. 'for if you ever have any other horses you need to put down.'

'get that thing the hell away from me. i need to get back to the scripture.'

i dont think ill ever see h him again. i hope thats all good with you.

later that week, the roads started to crack open even more. it was impossible to ride a bike anywhere. holes were showing up faster than anyone could fill them in, and no one was filling them in down here. people started filling up the streets again cause theyy had to walk. or hop around cause you couldnt take 3 steps without falling th through the cracks. in the eastside, 2 sinkholes showed up and swallowed 7 lives.

any cultured man could tell this was titan's work, so i went across the river. at first i was way farther downstream, where all the new deaths were. about 200 feet from you and your class. wasnt anyone there, so i waited. then i walked upstream, passed diarrhea shits, wwing, yyou (hello), jaws, rig, and kept going until i reached decades before we were born.

there was an old man there, digging the biggest grave i ever saw in my wh whole life. he was short and wide, and he had a coat and pants so grey i couldnt tell if they came like that or if he just never took them off from the day he got them.

right next to him was the naked body of a man made of skin and bones. tall skin and bones, but just that. it was in the class of 59.

i said hey to the digger. he looked up at me. 'what you want?' he h had that thick accent from way

before the americans.

i asked him who he was burying.

'old friend.'

'whats his name.'

'atlas.'

around then, cairo showed up. his sweater wasnt doing anything for him in this weather. he was toughing it out. his jaw was clenched. his eyes were red. maybe he was coming down off something or with some thing.

cairo pointed. 'grave's pretty wide, chief.'

'i am digging for 3 days now. if i was young, would be finished already.'

i asked him if hhe needed some help.

'i dont need.'

'do you want some help?'

'yes. i want. take.' he handed me the shovel.

cairo ssat on the edge of the hole. 'you aint got another shovel?'

'i only bring one. i am not expected for anyone else to come.'

'what, did you think every single river titan up and died already?'

'yes.'

i got to work. pretty much instantly he interrupted me. 'no no no no! who teached how to dig a grave?'

im looking at you right now.

'you dig like you are digging for a man! you must dig a grave for a titan! this why you yyoung boys never go away! look! like this!' and he took my hands and pressed the shovel into the sand, and he twisted it at the handle, just barely, and it broke away so much easier. 'try like this.'

i tried again. i didnt get it exactly right, but it wwas a little better. he told me cause i was right handed, to work on pulling back to the left just barely, to let the hard dirt fall into the shovel, and to put more of my lower back into it.

cairo hopped in. 'let me at it big dog.' his hands were still all bandaged up.

i asked him if he really could do it, and he snatched the shovel out of my hands and looked at me like i was some kind of animal dog.

the old man started showing him how to do it. i figured id leave and find some other shovels. there were a few laying around, but they were bent or rusted to shit and worth about as much as gold is these days.

i ended up finding just one shovel on the grave of a guy from the class of 79. i brought it back and got to work with cairo. i asked the guy how his friend died.

'loneliness. that is what comes for you when are alive this long. such a tiny needle, but it is death for a titan.'

cairo asked 'howd he get his name?'

'i.' the guy smacked himself on the back of the head. 'i cannot remember.' he shook atlas's body. 'hey. they want to know about your name. you remember?' he looked over at us. 'he does not remember.'

i asked if he ever had anything to do with roads or streets.

'he did work on them. always, he was doing working the roads. from before school even, he was making a road. he said it was the road to old eden. where we all are from. angel. demon. titan. monkey. lion. serbian. albanian. all come from old eden. i found him on his road few days ago. a long, long walk. and a longer walk back, carrying him. he looks light.'

'but he's heavy as a bitch, aint he?' cairo said.

i asked where the road is.

'behind a alley somewhere. i think it was close by zayed. hard to find now. it cuts through the city like a knife!' and he used his hand to slash the air. 'but still is hard to find. and you will never see it on the bus map.'

for hours, we just worked those 2 shovels, digging

that cold hard sand. we never asked him if it was deep enough. if we should stop now. whether it made sense. he knew how deep it had to be.

it was a damn big grave. makes the stuff weve been throwing guys into look like potholes. we dont take thhat much to bury, i guess. and still im thinking. what does it take to fill a grave that big? how does a nigga do it?

when we were done, all 3 of us laid there. it was a grave big enough to hold our graduating class. atlas was heavyy. cairo couldnt believe the old man carried him by himself. and that skinny guy at the bottom of that gigantic grave managed to fill every square inchh. we packed him in tight. the guy pulled out a bit of ssalt and sprinkled it on top. 'to make sure.' of what? i didnt ask.

we lit a stick over big atlas. the old guy smoked these old brown cigarettes. he let me drag one. shit damn near took my life. he said kids these days were soft. wwe gotta cut the filters off our sticks if we ever wanna fill graves that big. and i dont even have filters on mine.

i asked him whhere his grave is, and he took us to the class of 62. he pointed out his grave. teos was his name. 'it was my first yyear in eden, but atlas took care of me. i loved him more than my father. more than god, even. now, i am a athheist.'

sun go up. ssun come downn. i once knew a guy who lost his god. he did a lot worse than this.

he told us if he ever died, to give him a big grave. and carve a cross in his pole for his mama. if we dont, no one else will do it.

we showed him our class's rows. i showed him yours and wwing's. he told us how thhings went down back then. apparently a lot of guys burned to death back then, and a lot were killed at the gallows. if you survived burning and hanging, then you just had to deal wwith familyy grudges. some store catalogs or

magazines under your shirt were enough to stop a rifle bullet from going all the way through your skin back then.

after we crossed the river, we waved him off, and then it was just me and cairo.

'you gotta stay alive.' i told him. 'long enough to bury me at least. after that, you can go.'

'and who's gonna buryy me?'

'you got calcutta and maxypad.'

'maxypad aint gonna last.'

'really?'

'his mama told me she thhinks he's running heat.'

'damn. cutta's sticking around, though.'

'yyeah.'

'and maybe i will too.'

'maybe.'

'just dont let that family life take you.'

'yeah.'

he was staring down at this rock he was kicking while we walked and right then it fell into one of the cracks in the road.

'i might make you an uncle by next year.'

'with wwhat bitch? you left the only bad bitch in the world that would put up with yyou.'

'ill give it another shot with ursula.'

'inshallah, big dog.'

'so you better get your hands better if you wanna hold myy kid.'

he looked away. 'i dont give a fuck about that shit, nigga.'

'im gonna raise them on all the best comics. that sspiderman looking guyy with all the chains.'

'spawn. his name is spawn. i gave you his comics. youre a fucking idiot. you gotta show them the good stuff. early 80s spiderman. new teen titans. batman and jason todd. johhn burn's superman stuff. plus you gotta get the timeline right. your dumbass would forget all about detective comics and action comics.'

plus you dont even know where to get yyour hands on the japanese shit. touch. dragon ball. devil man. today i am. tenshimuyo. gigaking hitler. you dont know any of the niggas translating that sshhit. and youre a rube so they'd sell to you for 200 percent up. matter of fact, dont even bring up comics to your kids. i dont wwant you putting more retards into the world.'

'so yyoull handle it?'

'ill handle it. retard.'

by that point, he was shivering again. cold got to him. now im hhoping you forgive me for this, but i took off my jacket and put it on his shoulders.

cairo looked up at me like i just smacked him. 'why?'

'cause yyoure cold, nigga.'

he looked around at it. 'it still has the bullet hole.'

'so you know wwhere not to get shot.'

'it just lets the wind in.'

'tell me if it's not warm. if it's not, ill just throw it away.'

'hands off.' it's still reallyy big on hhim though. i think he'll grow into it. and with luck, he'll grow out of it too.

sun go up. sun come down. the strongest men i ever knew were taken from this world by the smallest things. a knife. a bullet. a gallon or two of the wwrong blood. things yyou cant even see. like sicknesss or bad luck. apparentlyy lonelinesss can get us too.

ill try to skip the shshortcut. i wanna take the long road. the scenic route, prudence would call it. and mayybe by the time we see each other next, fire wont hurt, and gold wwill be wworth something, and we'll be so far apart we wont even need to sayy anything to each other. but if i wanna do that, i have to offload this busted ass typewriter. weighing

me down.

me and cairo hit up the corner store and split a popsicle. blue as the sky was that day. plus side of having popsicles in the cold, they dont melt down your hands and make your fingers all sticky.

and im happy because even with that being the case, cairo is still the type nigga to get popsicle juice on his jacket his first day wearin