

Dayton Lane Anderson

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FOR RACHEL

Anderson's taking a sack lunch with him on this trip, and he'll eat it one of these days. He holds his breath, though, because there won't be many chances. Once it's gone, it's gone, and God knows when there'll be something else like it. So he'll walk along and not really care about the natural way of things or how he ought be living because that's not how we live right now. And the future's never promised. And meat can go bad. And it's starting to smell. So he doesn't trust anyone but himself, because he, also, is desensitized to war games played in the cul-de-sacs of rich white subdivisions. And urban warfare in studio apartments, and just forget it. He just says "Fuck it all" in a way that shows he knows the extent of his involvement, in a way that burns the cash in the church's severed heads, the ones the lonely folk at home pray to. This is how to influence others and win friends, with the crumbs and the blood and the imprint left on the bed. Regarding extended family, he'll ask how things are going over dinner—when he gets there. On Saturday night, he'll laugh at the jokes like they're funny, and won't tell anyone how big of liars he thinks they are. And that's why you really can't trust anyone too much so close to ground zero. Yeah, not that one, not that other one, not that one either, but he still knows what he's got on this long march. He knows the hunger he has authority over; but stop wherever you please. Know you can strip yourself of the work you got contempt for. But still it's yours, *yours*, completely. We all got trauma bonds out here, the ties that bind. Hell, he's not even hungry anymore. There's nothing inside him but the urge to get away from the city, and when he gets to the suburbs and don't know what to do, then he'll really have a dilemma on his hands. Anderson's taking a sack lunch with him on this trip, and he's taking it to the top. It's just like the car insurance in the glove box: it'll feel needed when it really goes wrong, and he'll regret having to see it when he sees it. But that's only if he still had a car, and if only he still had insurance. But since all that's gone, all there's left to do is keep going. Move forward. C'mon, now.

This is the cost of freedom. This is the cost of the routine: suffering thousands of small sufferings; life-by-a-thousand-razor-blades; sporadic relief shaped like ejaculation and novocain from lady fingers; sharp teeth all over. Keeping malice frozen and motionless—disorientation spinning down from the ceiling fan—Sakae's not cynical. Taken a pair of scissors and sliced through the cleavage of middle and ring finger, reminds Sakae of the time—alone—in the bathroom, in the morning, tore a nail off that same hand like it was onion skin. A fragment remained that couldn't be gotten off. And now it's all coming down Sakae's arm, splitting in two. I see you pursued past wasted time and vain suffering. Nothing changed, look in the mirror, and listen to somebody saying it'll look just like yesterday.

Suffering thousands of small sufferings, another begins. Family and blood, woven into Sakae's guts is a talisman. It looks and smells like childhood homes. Into the darkness, stabbing hands swing and climb where joints connect, tearing them apart to find swallowed souvenirs. Find a palpitating history in childhood night terrors in gushing wounds, none to possess or recall belonging to. The American body is a rotten nesting doll with nothing of Sakae's inside: no flesh, no memories, no seed, no blood. It is proof of life to watch the face in the glass go white while the sink splashes red. It tastes like Kool-aid's factory sugar smell and stick on the hands. And then crash into the vanity, and linger against the surface of your skull, watching the ceiling like it's the sky; and there's bleeding; there's floating. You make vertigo making waves in an above-ground pool—in the backyard, in the summer, in childhood, in the foreground of burning trash—and look at all the people around. Stand on nothing, get wiped out, spinning down the drain like dead insects. Sakae watched teeth empty from somebody's skull.

Adrenaline made no feeling but the hyper-vigilance of a man about to die, senses overdriven, senseless, then, and entirely willing. He took out a pocket knife and scooped a chunk out of the other man's calf, and then he got right up and kicked him until he pissed blood all over himself. That day, Sakae found out you can't stop a man who wants to see death. And it was all over TV time after dinner. So he kicked his son to silence, and his sweat and blood was all over him, and it was all the cost of freedom, just one of thousands of small sufferings, just how you live by a-thousand-razor-blades.

Travis extended himself into the cesspool. Travis stood on stiff legs in muggy summer pond water, barefoot and pants pulled up to the knees. He was a sick kid with a bad kind of infection. But he was alright. And then he watched pale lovers skinny-dipping in the rain, all twisted joints, pubic hair and numb, gelatinous flesh. He knows they probably won't die of exposure, and they probably wouldn't get poached, either. So they shouldn't have to die at all—fate leaving them not knowing what to do—with all their sex, sinews, youth and prospective suicide. They don't know the cost of vulnerability in a place like this. They don't know how easy it was for Travis to go out and get a license to kill them. It's as easy as buying a gun. And then, now he wears an orange hat and forest camouflage and slings a bolt-action rifle around his shoulder, walking around all made up of fake boredom and deep rage. When he bought L&M reds from his neighborhood Walgreens, all he could see in that 16-year-old cashier was the stupid youth of cold nakedness. Now, it's time for the midlife crisis: out of envy for what can't be had, he'll try and destroy it. There has been a lifestyle change. He wants to kill those damn kids fishing for condoms and dirty needles and shopping carts. You can't legally shoot a fish, shit, but he sees them do it all the time, and it looks pretty cool, and they seem to have pretty good fun with the burst of fire and sound, so he leaves them be. They're living his dream, and despite all the murder he wishes to them, he hasn't done it yet. Maybe he isn't hungry today. Maybe he's just saving his stomach. He has dinner with his trophy wife and malformed children tonight, absorbed spiritually and nearly completely physically by plastic and tablets. And it was on AliExpress they bought their personalities: daughters and sons with Sublime and Evangelion t-shirts, twice their size now and perfectly fitting at forty. Funny thing, even having clothes anymore, it's a damn funny thing to think you're more than the things on the hooks in the garage. This is Travis' choose your own adventure, and he's decided to eat irreversible consequences. Now no one will know if Danny'll make it to the state championship, or if Angela'll give herself a DIY abortion, or if Murphy'll drink anti-freeze, or if Travis will get there first. Read on and you will find out.

I've seen what it's like to stop living. To the men who made you farm animals, I've seen what it's like to pay respect. I've seen what it's like to become everything you've let yourself become. In that ghetto, there was a face in a puddle of gasoline all with holes in the smile. But there was still a smile, even when the worth of the human being was rubbed out on the curb like dog shit. And when the lawn was mowed that day, the toys the children left out were ran over, including their severed arms and legs scattered across the grass. The bones are smashed all to pieces. I went to the Catholic church and saw Jesus Christ hanging from an M4A1. The pastor passed around a decapitated female head for people to fill with bills. Napalm should pour on this subdivision like salt on a slug. Green grass should shrivel under the weight of picket fence cage matches, high surveillance and a strong militia. The pests should know who they are. The exterminator has been called to assassinate, and the plumber has been summoned to fuck your wife. And here on Peppermint Drive lived Charlie Brown III, who was in a seven or eight-year-long affair with his sister-in-law by the time he was twenty-one. She was about seven or eight years older than him, and had known him since he was about ten or eleven. So a grown woman had been fucking a child until he'd come of age, and that persisted for an uncertain amount of time after. It wasn't love, it wasn't love, it wasn't love. It happens all the time. It reminds me of a fourteen-year-old girl I knew with this older kid, and they had a consistent sexual agreement, and it was a type of dysfunction that was preferable to her own. Here is adult play with an upperclassman—student body sugar daddy—young enough to think "okay enough" is fucking a fourteen-year-old from a bad home to commit oneself to, but also old enough to have the authority to get it done. Reminds me of how fourteen-year-old fantasies are cut short by social alienation, filth, trash, ugliness, and so on. See it with that bastard Travis' kids, or what's left of 'em. It wouldn't be me, though, because I've never been a desperate and suggestible fourteen-year-old girl and never had access to one; and also, I wasn't Charlie Brown III. So morality shrivels like sex organs after ejaculation, and all that's left is the hollowness. It felt good, though. Feel good, feel good. My name is Anderson, and I keep on going. I have a sack lunch, and I'm taking it to the top.

Death comes from above—torrentially—Sakae thinks. And then Sakae thinks about this flexible mortality. It's "subject to change," in opposition to what's still "unbending." That reminds me of the smashed VCRs and those thin arms, the sound of heavy, sexual breathing, dirty knees scraping cement, and smashing with a hammer. After, Sakae waits awhile, until the beating restarts. It's a long time to go a long way down. It's a lot of that, and a lot of persistence. Sakae continues through twilight until finally facing the bitter morning wind, pressing against the skull, lighting the forehead with vomit-inducing soreness. But keep walking all the way back to that place. But we're not there yet, and Sakae might vomit all over bare thighs and lap, crouching and fitting hands over the eyes. But we still haven't made it there yet. And when there, it's about eating facing the front lawn, watching for dinner, or lunch, or breakfast. Sakae prays to press on as the brutal atmosphere rubs against flesh, like a firm surgical appendage, inspecting all with hard authority and fatherly cruelty. These guts are clean; you won't find anything. And to put something there, it's up to whoever finds Sakae alone in the woods with no shirt and no pants and no shoes and no food. You can do the things Sakae won't say no to. It's all procedural anymore. Standing in the summer, in the trees, genitalia invades flesh surfaces, spreads apart and intersects with Sakae's gaping insides. Two or more bodies slash-and-burn, rubbing shame and muck into pores and pits; and blame it on destiny; and blame it on you. Lots of things wrap around Sakae's cleaved fingers for no one to see or hear but the bastards around, for Sakae's repulsed and amorous eyes and tongue lashing into all the scars and hair. Sakae can feel it, feel it, and embrace; but there is no kindness. You won't earn joyless approval. You've finished: now forget yourself, get lost, eat the last bowl of ice cream, burn the house down, take off all your clothes and dive into a concrete mixer. Or don't, because not even Sakae cares. And this must all say something about rage, about suggestible mortal quality, about Sakae's disregard for so many things, about contemptuous apathy. But then, it wouldn't really be apathy. It would just be contempt. It looks like indifference like cheerleaders look bulletproof, and they aren't. Sakae'd kill you all, I swear. I swear, in the middle of the night, Sakae'd go upstairs and just stab you repeatedly, not sorry for staining the mattress.

Think of all new crimes: theft, murder, abuse, misconduct, and so on. Think of the addictions he's had. Think of all the other kids growing up and the trading card games they'd play in their backyards: OnlyFans for freezer food; Zyn for canned meat. Think of that transfer, Travis, and look how far you've gone. There's this twisted compass in his stomach and these hard thoughts churning in his guts. Finally, some essence inside of him has itched and scratched its way out, snatching his face in its teeth, grinding it to fragments, crushing it, swallowing it, digesting it. It must be the true self, the thing sticking matches in gas tanks, following some folks home, coming at stray dogs with chains and branches, and it all makes me remember the small things in life that seem easy to take for granted. At it's most awful, he is the real, hard truth: what exactly will find us cowering in corners with our hands between our legs. The curtains are drawn; we hide from every window; but you can't shake the smell of procrastination, boredom and self-pity. We treat ourselves, we cheat ourselves. And you're the proof of that, Travis. This bloodhound is better and more eager than most, to a point of hedonism. We embrace filth, we eat garbage, we stay up late. We avoid thinking, doing or making anything. We spend all day getting ourselves off; we're voyeuristic; we dream of sex; we sedate ourselves; find medicine in porn—cake and ice cream—and nicotine. So we eat so we can be eaten, eaten by somebody with an orange vest and Remington 700. Since he tried it on himself, he knows it feels like dry ice when the brand hits the skin, all with scalding, bloody shame against you. He shouts "Sooey!" and runs, "Run *faster!*" Last time it was a bolt gun, before that a sledgehammer, and before that a knife. Nowadays, Travis will shock you still, stick you, bleed you out, spread your guts, and then it's done. This is the new addiction. This is what started from thinking to kick dogs and kill cats and working the nerve to scare things to submit. In his subdivision, I hear all this sound, and it reminds me of a lack of sleep. It reminds me of the death-wish and spite it takes to move out here. It's really a nasty, mean way of life. Travis and all his many neighbors live by killing anymore, knowing that they'll die killing, and therefore living with little attachment to mortality, or anything but their livelihood, hobby and religion. They don't live long or well. It is a violent society.

This morning, Sakae kneels with arms to the ground, like pushups for girls. Stare at the floor and then at the gut, and admire the skeleton inside, the one that feels like a bike frame on the worst days. Maybe I hear a laugh, and it's probably for nothing. But yeah, it's another day of infinity, another day of what exactly yesterday was, and Sakae keeps going on, knowing not to expect anything new and not really caring. A warehouse was found out on the highway, all yellow windows, dust and grit, rat carcasses. It was a little cute, I'll admit, when Sakae walked through the walls of spiderwebs wrapping around every doorway, searching for something to drink that wasn't smelling of ammonia or smeared with dead insects. Out of no other option though, and having had the experience, Sakae would dig across the ground, ass in the air, sticking beetles, ants, flies, and the rare centipede or caterpillar in half a Pepsi can. Now, the bugs will taste sweet, Sakae thinks, and I will not starve again. Sakae finds a mannequin. This place must've been a Spirit Halloween whenever everything went to hell. It's a maid costume. It's ridiculous is what it is, yeah, but desperation makes ridiculous things happen, like eating maggots in the smell of corn syrup. It isn't any worse than what Sakae was left with last time, having dragged this body all the way here in nothing but ill-fitting underwear, bunching in the crotch and riding up the ass. This will be warmer, Sakae thinks; but why does it always have to be this way? It's like there's some brutal twist of fate that always gives Sakae all these embarrassing wardrobe changes, whether it's just girl's underwear or *this*. And then, after having had so many outfits destroyed by dogs, poachers and stiffness, who knew how much longer this would be a thing. But fuck it. It's better than nothing. And putting it on, this building can be smashed, Sakae thinks, raining clay fragments, slamming into the sidewalk. It's the end of a three-part story: birth, life, death. Life makes birth, making life, making death, and even making life again. And again, it starts all over. Brick, by brick, by brick, destruction accounts for every piece. The apathy of death and time makes no reservations, and then it's done: over; cleaned up; decided; cleared out; disposed; incinerated; time passes; it's forgotten. For you, it ends whenever *you* feel like it. But Sakae won't ever die. But here Sakae is—even still—still playing the game of living human remains.

I think I'll just keep going regardless. I think without bothering to feel. I'll just move forward, and just keep on. The stress is secondhand. There will be more opportunities. There will be further chances. I don't really see another option but death. Disregard the rage everywhere I look, because I could take it or leave it. I could take or leave my frustration, and really, maybe I should feel sorry for all this crap. Maybe I should feel pity. Maybe I should talk to the caterpillar before I pick it up, and smash and grind its guts against my teeth. Maybe I should talk to the caterpillar before I pick it up, just to trick it into trusting me. And then I'll pick up the caterpillar, smashing and grinding its guts against my teeth, working it like dough. I have to eat whatever I can get, and I gotta save what I can't get again. There was this little fella on the cement, and also last week's wasps and molasses. The sweetness covers the sting, and describing the sensation's like staring at a bare wall. You'll imagine that puffy, throbbing burn is really there when it isn't, when the thousands of small pains of today all look like tiny little cuts at the corners of your lips, spitting dumb blood for all the hungry stupidity. That's my face. That's the thing I'll show Serenace whenever I get to finally see her. There's statues: the portrait; the figure; the symbol; the icon; the homunculus. Bite on your knuckle as an older man deflowers you, the 15-year-old virgin bride. Harbor feelings of anguished arousal for the exploitation, amorous and repulsed. The indoctrination—lack of self worth, fluctuating soreness—will rise like teeth from out of a child's gum line. And then keep going, being handled with callused hands, brisk words, crude, wanting grasps, and moments of satisfaction, even pride. You never died or faced accommodations for the plight, Serenace. You stayed there as long as you liked, regardless of whatever choice you might've had. You continued forth without dying or being released from your domestic prison. It was so easy to disappear. It's easy to not be acknowledged by anything. There are rocks everywhere to live under. And so now everyone holds you in their heart, Serenace. Every sick bastard knows just where they fit with people like you, fit with girls half their age they fit their hands all over. Because you make the world turn, and you make me keep going, and you mother all our deformed children, and are still tied to a planet of mad, raving insanity. The prisoner lives in death row.

Sitting at home, Travis gets so ill. It's like sickness, or something better yet, like disease unreconcilable. He gets so worked up on his sofa, watching Nascar and drinking Budweiser, caressing the woman's soft back and latex skin. His face gets red as a rocket, he sweats like an onion and his pants shrink. He curses the urgency, the compulsion, the poisoned want. With his dick in his hands, he curses it all to hell until he sucks the urge clean, the same way Sakae would: eaten out, drained of fluid and left like an oyster, some mollusk twisting apart in the sun. Then, it crawls into cakes of mud, shreds of garbage and signs of the crime. It must be here where meaning is deconstructed, where the purpose of any exercise is lost to the act, which is now the ends in itself. Travis screams at the sky: "Forever is an empty threat! It's been done to death, said once and then again without *additional* commentary. Really, *purgatory* is your grand, declarative statements about existence: life, death, and all the other bullshit. Your wisdom is second-rate. You're hosed, fucker, *hosed!*" He looks down at the girl dancing in his hands, his shaded face swallowing her vision, his blood-red eyes the most colorful thing she ever saw. And he towered like the corn field, all her vanity spraying out as her pretty smile banged against a wooden fence. And then she ate dirt. And then she died face-down in a bath of scalped blonde, red piss, and phlegm. "A white smile is a status symbol," he says to her gaping mouth, the one that died screaming into the ground, choking on pain all over. And he can't think of anything else to say, and he feels embarrassed by the words. What the hell was that for, anyways? I guess tonight, there was just no better waste of time, a better way to slowly kill yourself in a form of suicide he'd never confess, in a form of self-destruction he feels righteous for partaking in, for a kind of self-control akin to a hostage situation. This is manhood tonight—for him—half-hearted vengeance against so many things. This is always something to feel. So regard it with nostalgia, with death by cheesecake, wasps in molasses, life-by-a-thousand-razor-blades and stale saliva. So take it all in like grandma's hard candy, chew at it like sand 'til it turns to mud. Your imagination will tell you the rest of the story. You'll put your hands to it. You'll work on it, kill for it. It believes you, really, it believes you. You make everything sick.

Sakae used to feel elevated in a swarm of 14-year-old daydreams, fantasies about consumerism and overhead lighting. That place was a morgue. That oblong, geometrical maze was a slaughterhouse, where people bought their own body bags and brought them to be shoved in. “Have a nice day,” Sakae says, turning the key to the baler, watching the body turn to clay, stretched and smeared into a sheet of skin. They just couldn’t take it anymore. Life proved too horrible, too long, too insistent, too unforgiving. Travis would call sissies; and death scares Anderson; but Sakae’s just working, though, just surviving. “Have a good one after that too; and hey, how is tomorrow, anyways?” Sakae says to the paste leaking out from the seams. Some things you’ll just know when you see it. That’s all it takes: just stick it in the face and it’ll click. Sakae sees mouths like the cracks in sidewalks, the ones stomped on repeatedly like they were their mothers’ spines, like they’d finally get their vengeance. They’d finally get their vengeance for the example Serenace set, finally get their vengeance for being condemned to this existence. And when they come of age, they’ll open their mothers’ doors and drive nails into their spines, polishing their necks with shards of a broken mirror, in their hands and cutting them apart. “And that’s what I also wanted to do for you for so long, Ma, that’s the fantasy of the kid with the cracked teeth.” At the time, Sakae’d sit on the burned-out tile of the Homeowner’s basement and read through someone’s dad’s old porno mags and paste them all over the wall and staple family pictures on the women’s faces, beating on them with heavy, wanting sighs. ‘Cause now Sakae sees it all. Clarity comes as an illusion masking the illusion underneath. Sooner or later we oughta make sense of what the motive is behind every unnerved smile of every wasted family gathering: like the face reflected in your eyes is the barrel of a gun. Sakae wanted to feel a bit clearer, a bit less the type a person whose mother ate her placenta after birth, a bit more of a careful thinker with real, serious plans, and so Sakae left. But not before Sakae was stripped naked and pinned against the wall, the Homeowner working his square hands between Sakae’s arms—and other places. So that’s how Sakae leaves with nothing but panties. So that’s how anger led to murder and self-mutilation. With a wad of bandages on the left hand, Sakae took the scissors with.

Chronology's an illusion. Sitting in front of unchanging pressure—never relenting, never exacerbating—it gives a sensation of paralysis. It used to leave Serenace in expectation, waiting for worse things to happen that inevitably never came. Envious as it is to have greatest fears fulfilled, this is deprived of *her*. Serenace placed her hands together in prayer, and we would come to know why no God presented itself. The faith came from the experience of so many childhood simulations, of a fake, video reality: cold and alien, though also existence's definition. Here is the childhood anxiety, that odd, lingering thing in the back of the eyes that you can't pin. It's the nervousness that comes on some odd summer day, sitting in the room with the slanted windows, playing secret games. There's nobody outside, and if there is, they're mundane, expected, part of the scenery. Everyone else in the world is an accessory to this solitary, helpless act—scratching the pervasive, mental itch—unidentifiable, untouchable, and stimulated all over. So Serenace searched all afternoon among a stack of sex that bored and hurt as a kind of boredom and pain less boring and painful than the alternative: staring at the wall. The world doesn't exist in this domestic vacuum—some room with open curtains, slanted windows—and outside the simulation rots slowly, dissolving into a black pool filled with maggots winking at her, all day, until it's done. It's dark out, which doesn't really matter. It was dark inside all day. This isolated, silent instance has no narrator. The things happen on screen and the audience stares through blinds—passive—watching Serenace play games downstairs, jerk off in the bathroom, eat on the couch, and not wash her hands. And nobody says anything when cycles repeat themselves, when days pass of the same singular, mechanical narrative. So feel good, feel good. Wait for her to be stuck with a knife, gang-raped or killed with the baseball bat hidden behind the television. Succumb to the baseless anxiety of a boring, rote entertainment that never ends with gratified terror. She feels terror; she hates herself and a lot of other things; Serenace dreads violation and also looks forward to it. Anguish, familiarity and comfort all blend together like zebra meat in a blender, smeared red, black and white all over her—the color of her shit, his semen, their blood. And it's all thanks to you again. Fuck yourself out of lack of anything else.

Sakae stared at all the blood in the mirror on that day, and underneath it was pale fear. Hands felt sticky and filled with lemon flesh, eyes stinging with tears hot as unbathed sex. Aquarius lighter and pieces of chicken wire and adrenalin forced one hand against the other, fraying the womb-shaped chasm, stretching from the webs of the fingers down to the palm's guts—where the scissors lost their nerve. Sakae lost the nerve, that's right, and is now playing doctor, making a messy miracle, a miraculous, stinking mess. And there's no memory of how the wires shot through, wrapped themselves around the flaccid, tired skin. And the bruises were—the bruises are—disgusting. Sakae slept with the crippled hand wrapped in a rag soaked with Svedka, traded for a kiss that tasted like Culver's, like ice cream and corporate warehouses. And he didn't buy Trojans at Mobil, and he didn't even care what he felt stirring insides Sakae's guts. And past it all, the edges still turned cigarette gray and brown, growing to look exactly how it smelled for so long. This is what Sakae sacrifices for this indulgence. Little thought is given while sinking deeper, dedicated to the one thing there still is dedication for. All-consumed of conviction otherwise, nothing else matters at all, all with exception to the thing that snuffs everything else. "These are the sacrifices I make," Sakae says out loud, staring at the festering wound, a thousand suffering things digging through the body, digging it out and leaving it naked, empty and covered. This is renovation for what comes next, for what new body will be with this same mind, like losing a virginity that's returned forever, satisfaction guaranteed. So, in the Meijer dumpster—sorting through maggots, stink and spills—is the silhouette of undated milk, a strip-tease in a plastic sack. It'd be easier with two hands, Sakae thinks, staring at the knots, snapping the scissors open and preparing to tear. And the cheap stained metal does just fine, just as discolored, warped and side-ways as it was before, flowing through the flesh jagged, thick and sporadic. And the hand that was fucked so hard—still wrapped in the Svedka rag—rested against the dumpster's mass as the gallon raised to the face, coming down in an arc into the mouth and down the chin, leaving a distinct smell of rotten eggs all over Sakae's only clothes and the stains of white liquid all over everywhere. Nothing's new.

We all try and let it pass over. We see if we can't shower in it—that feeling—something like angst-ridden loss, impatience, spite and weakness. It reminds me of childhood, like so many things do anymore. I once heard that what can't be improved can't be destroyed and vice versa. Some monoliths we keep around here. Some tidy headstones we reward innocence with. Some innocents we scatter to the dust. Watch it piss all over them from the woods like javelin darts. And in our mothers' eyes, they go. This is the pledge everyone makes to their legacy, I and we. There was a distinction, but anymore it's become impossible. It was easy walking around with utilities phallic and polished for abuse, castration with scissors and sodomy with God—*guns*. Bullets and blades will rip through everything that's you, remembering the last thing you see is a ram-shaped charging man. Crash into you, that is the substance of your being alive dying and with sophisticated technology desecrated. But remember it could be anyone, including the ones I speak specifically of. I keep waiting with my hands tied behind my back, walking stupidly, and expecting. I can hold my eyes shut for a minute straight to give myself a chance to let anything happen. I'd imagined I'm somewhere else. I haven't died yet. All the teeth I spat before bare feet and waiting victories for me was the loss that made the thought of losing so much seem to need a greater effect. I don't feel anything. Imagine it's a cycle of grief that keeps on resuscitating. It passes carelessly—like wind through middle-American flat-lands—like butter through a hot knife. So I keep going and wait for cheesecake time where I finally die by dessert, deserted of walking and wanting, too fat to get off my ass. But being a rail, I don't believe I'll ever die. I think I'll just keep going, keep filling in the crossword puzzle of other people's murder with unnamed faces. I've seen everybody just walking down the street. Because they all look the same, living can be summed up with an identical animosity. And regret to have been born, so many accelerate towards a point of continuous return, closing their eyes standing up and imagining there'll come the punishment they want. There is want within pain for the future it offers, for the fetish that makes the rote act of compulsory missionary sex less filled with the undying hatred of still living. And that's only until getting off to the violent sense in the back of the eyes, breeding suffering and breeding.

It's all falling down. Anderson prays he was wrong as an active self-identifier, representative of his whole being. And Travis lingers in the kitchen looking for a way out of the family gathering, not out the front door or even the back or garage, but somewhere he can't see or force himself to consider, let alone ignore. So a face of old maternal blood sucked dry but undying, yet bleeding, approaches and tells him "Submit." So he'll have to relinquish high-school-aged contempt: must refrain from swearing in front of children; will hold the door for those coming in; will dance in front of family and friends without pretense. And Sakae wills the mind to dream these lies not as story but autobiography; but then really, maybe the story's just a twisted confessional, gushing out of holes of increasing size. And including Serenace, their javelin dart eyes burn out their skulls, the sight of *real* time leaving them all in misshapen shadows framed through unfamiliar, unseen objects. And what is sensed is silently shared, deathly unspeakable, like a part of the person has been summoned and coated in tar and feathers. It's all to be set on fire and finished, fucked done and forever. So June overdoses and vomits its death all over its own face, dies in its sleep and is found next morning. Today is July, and the last of mundane brutality explicitly stated. This ditch has always been a warlord's Potemkin Village, erected to allude to other preoccupations than all what passes overseas and under the table. Life here was good for killing and destroying banally and without consequence. You could make a good thing out of that here. In the cities as well, there was the endless driving to the promise of hell and bondage and misery as a sensual, warm end to misery. Things are as tight as the snake around the neck is willing to constrict, the one bought and paid for out of novelty. The strip malls lean against empty condominiums like the legs of a centipede, pushing forward a grotesque and freakish body to somewhere it doesn't know. And nobody lives here, and yet the buildings still quiver under the pressure of thirty-something days of apathetic, natural rot. For once, Sakae, Anderson, Travis and Serenace get to see something really disappear forever. And it's taking them with. The world is ending, and it's a consequence that I exist. Anderson's so busy really experiencing his wasted time that he can't report on bureaucratic violence. My name is not Anderson, and I'm taking nothing with me. There is no top.

Sakae doesn't recall childhood in fragments. Sakae doesn't recall childhood at all, just the vague impression of what it was supposed to be, resting on the shoulders and running its tongue down the back. There was food and fragments of affection. There wasn't enough to deserve coming out with anything, now spreading legs on the streets of an alien landscape. And with all the confidence Sakae can claim without facetiousness, this is known truth: "I know what lies I've been made to believe and really the full extent of natural love. And that love isn't natural, I know. That I never learned to love my mother never prevented me from briefly resenting her and then wishing death of her." There was a mother that punctuated screaming with forced infantilization and eventual silence. And that happened for years to a half-naked Sakae, in no perfect safety until vengeance is declared. Run from the suburban sprawl with scissors and nudity and no history. Where the hell are we going? "And in hindsight, I recall putting a lid on it and hating myself alone for years in my room until I only loved myself and ignored everything else; but at least I loved something, the thing you gotta really love first before anything else. And then after that, I don't know how it was possible to come and make something of unbroken malice. Unless it was wasteful." And Sakae still never did feel wonder or safety or worthiness in any direction. But what was coming happened still for the first time so much later than it oughta been. It oughta been so different, but it was what it was, and so Sakae turned to the Homeowner's rape and lacerations with rape in shards and fire. And the glob of female flesh melded into the bed looked nothing like the freakish pain in the mirror's stabbing eyes, inheritance rinsing through her shoulders and licking down her back. There's no returning the fear of another bad night, the shame and loss of self-respect for defying defiance, forced into position out of no path of less resistance. "And I thought first of suicide at twelve-years-old, maybe with consequence and maybe not. I was worthy of the spite I saw everywhere I looked. And it was always real. But it doesn't matter." There is no past anymore. Imagine nothing. Keep going. Sakae needs to know the end of the long, long way down, where memory is dead, floating face-down in an above-ground pool, eating algae and slime. Something is missing.

Don't be sorry. Anderson felt disgust before. And with this fatigue in him, just keeping on moving forward, only death occurs in mind; but killing the self would be for shame. That's what he thinks, still not dead, standing wide-eyed and bushwhacked on some state road fucking somewhere. The great level nothingness don't bother dying, not now, and not without his wanting. Solar fields, cell towers, "corn kills," she said. The woman at the Marathon was dressed in death-red, like American blood on the 28th day of any odd month. "We have heroes, you know? They get erased, stricken away with whiteout. And corn *kills!* Don't you get it? Look around you." Anderson hadn't the slightest idea what in the hell she was talking about. All the spit running down her face was the only thing he knew inside her. "In the end, though, it all came to be exactly like we would've guessed." Together out here they heard the bark of the militia's megaphones and the *ping* and *patter* of their machine guns firing hopefully—only at the sky. The world is over, and that much was known. There was no conspiracy in Anderson's mind. Nothing to speculate, this was for certain. He trusted what twisted inside his guts, the horror in the restroom mirror, the one he bought a Hostess snack cake to see. You think you know the furthest extent of your leisure until you get to this, a wad of cash emptying from Anderson's hands for a bored 17-year-old to sort through. And it still comes to feel like licking a stockroom floor, reflex turning on hunger and gagging. Regrettably, just another wasted sacrifice vomits on the way to the trash can, the sun watching it all. Taking his hand from the brick, splashing gravel and dust against the face, he could feel breathing against his leg. It was in wanting: cracked face, dry snot and poor complexion all over. Its legs were like antennas stitching the pieces of a dead slug, holding it up in the air and stiffly, clumsily pulling it around. It smelled like real shit and death, a haze of insect-brown radiating from its body. Anderson stared aggressively at the damned thing, taken aback as it shifted, stuck its nose in the chunks of his discharge, and licked. The woman watched him leaning there against the wall, one eye against the swollen sun and the other on the thing. Maybe fifteen minutes passed before it finished, and it was within the hour that its poisoned flesh roasted on a sheet metal pancake, Anderson rotating it over a pale fire. Eat yourself—lacking anything else—and keep going.

You could turn into a real dough-boy: getting yourself off, all cold, alone in your room. Wrapped in a bedsheet smelling of cyclical must, self-filth and biological waste is absorbed and reproduced, feeding off of itself. Reek, your potential is squandered, thrown away unceremoniously so many things, so many futures that would've been kill for before. This is all to the effect of returning to childhood, all to the effect of self-infantilization: sheathing oneself in a blanket, unsheathing, and then shedding tooth and nail back into the mother's womb. Become again one with nature, inalienable, indistinguishable. That's Serenace's perfect promise. The windows of her hostage home snap together in the shape of half a hexagon. Mounted and ridden by a horde of spectators, everyone watches the exposure of private acts, the way they're meant to be consumed. Eaten as an anticipation trophy, the mind suffers a thousand neurotic things, flogged by branches of tension, unremitting and remorseless. They want in. They want the destructive process of making the caesarian wound: killing the virgin bride; doughy body plowing into her like airbags at the car crash; fat folds like layer cake on a plate of fresh, un-rinsed sex; skin freshly porous and sinews finally, only able. Our virgin bride, our mother, our slave, our child, Serenace becomes so many things at once between wide hands, curling into themselves as they curl into her, as the child is retrieved in the shape of spilling entrails and shooting fluid. All for the sanctity of motherhood, they said, all for the séance of the never-born now-complete. The story just goes on and on. Deep in the black vacuum of vapid night, watch her twitch in pissed-on clothes, soaking on the floor in regret that can't be sucked dry or given away. The television's nuclear blue projects erotic animation and esoteric late-night media, reminding us at all hours in any weather how pale and plastic her skin is always, how little life is but her unwilling bestiality: screwed as a cat. The mannequin Sakae desecrated had a better complexion than the rotting anime figure that was Serenace, covered and left in too much semen, not often left to her own devices but never up to any good when she was. There was no better use of time but repeating whatever couldn't be avoided. It helps you stay used to it, helps you look structured. With time's last repetitions being taken in, wasted or not, Serenace cared, only because it could all stop for once.

Travis refuses to feel paralyzed just sitting here. He feels if his body rejects gradual atrophy, the great entropy party days ahead will be deferred. Then, the sky and the earth will be in reverse, and he lingers atop nothing, uncentered and free-falling into the dirt rapidly coming to crush us. He imagines how his skull's substance will snap in two like sidewalk chalk—in a mist of multi-colored powder—either half of the whole held in children's hands. But for now, he tries to forget, just wearing the burden of expired malice around his neck in severed ears, tokens of employed violence. If not wasted, nothing is wasted. He admires a pouch of gold teeth and days spent in the basement of his suburban home, snapping necks and crushing legs to hip-hop and heavy metal: KRS-One and Craw; Dr. Octagon and Dazzling Killmen; Mobb Deep and Melt-Banana; Gang Starr and Godflesh. Travis thinks of the shape of affairs unchanging. He doesn't miss anything but feels like he misses so much right now. He misses watching them grind into each other in the Elkhart River, all sex, self-harm, fast food, used condoms and shopping carts. Those pale bodies, half-fed and hole-headed, maybe here's a return to form: reclaiming what now he thinks are the things he hadn't known he lost. But he's lost so much guts, gorilla-strength rage, blind spite. It's a meditative process, growing in years but not in spirit. Somewhere between the body and the mind is the cherished artery, what death starts with no matter what. Some live long enough to lose their minds first. Some don't even make it that far. And when you drop dead it really matters where. It'll ring differently if it's in the bathroom with your pants down or in bed during a home invasion: floating on a ceiling fan or laying in a pool of driven-by blood; children's hospital or hospice; natural causes or Travis. To have killed so much and never suffered more than willing scars makes death impossible. It's impossible for living people to be dead, Travis knows. Travis knows he's never feared being killed because of how ridiculous the idea was. With the threat presenting itself silently, almost unknowingly now, it was sudden to come to existence. He always promised himself, righteously, even, the willingness to give it up all impulsively, without thinking, without giving a shit. He'd die in the center of murder, passing the torch down to whoever got the best of him. It was easy to imagine a successor, not just blank fate. In his hand, it's rosary beads and casings.

Concrete is clammy. It's stiff with misshapen bloated patches. It's a pasty life for dead people's skin; and in the abdomen, they're mush. This is the place where people play stupid games all day long until they peel off the ground like stubborn scabs: their stupid prize. Dead and dumb, they're shoveled away to join the heap of similarly-shaped things. In the pastoral wasteland, emitting vapors and consolidating, they lose definition like newspaper in the rain. They think they're good at waiting to die, to get that coveted opportunity nobody has living. But nobody's good at life-by-a-thousand-razor-blades like Sakae is, no one. Here on this malnourished city street, a bottle smashes to Sakae's left, and the bright green shards fly like stained-glass missiles. It reminds Sakae of being born and the first thing to see being that cherry scar, leering like a bright red smile. Fingers grazed the face and spread spit everywhere, that which resistance failed. That was the first suffering, the premonition before the revelation, the urine yellow-brown warmth running down the face. If only Sakae could remember this event. But still, Sakae would learn either way how much of the self was the object of others, materialized to do bidding. Beyond them empty-handed, it was soaked in their blood that Sakae could finally not be given to surrendering self-assurance. It was the right thing to do, going to the parents at night with killing, left splintered with glass and smoking away on burning beds. Sakae don't feel sorry for staining the mattress. Now, really-not-living people can't ever prevent vengeance. The score's been set forever, and so even after knowing it's all coming to a head, nothing really matters. It's been done, and still alive, Sakae can't die. And it's been since that finality that the screwing and wandering's been willing. "It is what it is, I guess." The natural phenomena is unrelentingly violent across the board, and so there's ample encouragement to join the elaborate, phallic dance. It's been fun so far with these scissors and this kinky costume, cuckolding blue-collar people with a new kind of tight, cherry ass: abstract, foreign, toxic and fetish-making. "This is the new pornography," Sakae says, blowing on the clammy, bloated center of the stump. And like that Impossible Whopper, on the edges it's charred; but it's still mush in the center. Giant flies sweat all over the warped black mass in the 7-Eleven parking lot, red lemon flesh leaking from the seams of cigarette-shaded gangrene: Sakae's severed hand.

The scissors hung from a thread around Sakae's neck, rocking back and forth with every step. So Sakae's own blood dripped on the milk stains, other blood stains, semen and unknown stains from the past couple weeks. There was lots of it to go around was the realization. "I figure I should go to the ER," Sakae says, not to anyone in particular. There's a stiff, pig or poacher leaning against a Jeep Bronco smeared in shit, and Sakae thinks to give him sodomy or castration or some combination of the two; but there's no time. Yeah, not even Sakae's immune to that kind of debauchery. You'd think the most of it would be sitting in an abandoned Spirit Halloween with a jaw full of insects, just spinning and bearing it. You'd be wrong. Sakae wants more than that. But when Sakae looked past this schmuck and got to walking, it was the strangest thing. All the numbered X-ACTO scars and shadows of fire from an Aquarius lighter rode up the arms, proof of love for the discomfort, the electricity of top-to-bottom pain. But staring at the nub's circumcised gristle—recalling the sound of *snipping* as the blade's legs chafed together, watching scraps of skin slap to the pavement like Kraft Singles—the urge developed as regrettable instinct. Sakae refuses to be threatened by death even as the will to live rocked the scissors back and forth, bare feet tenderizing themselves against gravel, betting that all cars passing thought Sakae had a DUI. But Sakae never did learn to drive, partly by choice, and partly by fate. And by God, this journey's just like the Messiah's, in all starvation still dragging an M16A2 through the sand, going wherever the hell he was going. But Sakae doesn't have time for that comparison. None of this shit. Sakae's left heel crushes the Fireball logo against an upright crescent of glass, a skinny trace of whiskey digging into the middle of Sakae's foot and jerking circuits inside. For once, Sakae screams: "AAAAH! AAAAH!" Sakae splatters against the pavement and sits in the dirt. The sole is raised to the eyes, the sticker's film and filth stuck to the skewed, bleeding moon, nested in sheets of road shoulder scum. Sakae shuts eyes and lets fluid flow carelessly, agony again soiling clothes and slowly pulling foreign body from a swollen cavity. This was more like the kind of invasion run from, the kind of shit-talk, rain-dance sex cage-fights with dad at home, hostage behind white picket fences in hell. So inevitably, Sakae did pray for a hospital gown, watching *Rhoda* in waiting, sole soaked in Svedka rag.

A rottweiler snapped into Travis' calf, gripping away a piece of meat. He was so pissed off after that incident, he tied the thing to a fence and beat it with a branch for fifteen minutes. He left it there, chain around its stupid neck, filled with splinters, leaking foam, and silently twitching. He hobbled away, the branch beaten under his long shadow. He had better things to do. That night, he went to bed knowing he probably wouldn't sleep at all that night, knowing he would be tired all day even if he slept all day, knowing he wouldn't care either way anyways. But even still, just like always, the next day, he sliced the wrist open of his best friend. "Kill or be dead," he told him. "You're *hosed*. They'll eat you up like a fat kid with ice cream, *fucker*." And his friend patted him on the back and chuckled, this being a pleasant pastime exchanged between the two men, just camaraderie in the community. And later in the afternoon, Travis, having a license to shoot fish and kill skinny-dippers, bought his first rifle, the girl that came to be more of a wife to him than the trophy he kept in the kitchen cabinet. Remington "Rachel" 700, he was kind enough not to get her involved when he did away with his indentured servant, the contract woman mothering the shreds of children gumming up his lawnmower blades, the remains of his wasted seed. And he beat his flesh-and-blood wife to pieces with a golf trophy, one he had never earned kept in a study he never used. He didn't care for golf or studying. Books were no good. Everything he really liked presented itself before and after that gun auction, on that day. Even just pressing the hands into the walnut stock, waving the finger over the steel trigger, it made you feel tough. It made you feel big just riding around with it. You never even had to use it, so you can imagine how the ego swelled when you did. Killing another person, it collected soul and power and emptied it into Travis. It felt as good as eating nachos and watching Nascar at a local sandwich chain, which in itself felt even better caressing Rachel. Travis reflects on these early days with premature nostalgia, with wanting for the promise this wave of inspiration granted, that which seemed now already dead and dry. When did it become boring, he asks himself. He got good at it too quick, probably, and now it's just a chore, just what it took to buy bread. And he never did win friends or influence people. Really, he was just an executioner among bored executioners, really wishing to be a skinny-dipper.

“If I spend too much time in one place, I’ll notice when the paint starts peeling. I’ll notice when the carpet starts to shrivel at the corners, tightening and pulling upwards like recessed gums,” Anderson says. “But a mouth can still smile. Battered carpet don’t. The house is a face; dogs look just like their owners; homes bleed at the same time they do. This is like a rubber chicken in my mouth, and I gotta chew on it like I want it. I can’t close my eyes, I can’t sleep, and can only watch the consequences of my indulgence: intestines slithering to the ground while I just stand there, sliding them through my palms like a wet ladder,” Anderson says. On his way to the top, he’s got in hand a paper sack wrapped in electrical tape, the thing he’ll only eat when he gets there. But not the only thing he *will* eat, desperation has taken him to trash fires and dog flesh, skinned and processed with pocket knives, leftovers dragged along in a bag of ice; ‘cause nothing gets left behind. *How many times has the damn blade broke, how many times has the damn bag broke*, he wonders. And there was a pretty good day where a deer killed a Ford Fusion, wiping its wounds against the windshield like snot and then dying. It was a good favor. Anderson peeled the body from the hood, took a leg and pulled. As the sun and road softened it and its sewage failed, it began to leave a trail that would stretch for miles, it felt like. Its crude c-section grew in severity, smelling like forest and dung as the digestive tract came loose, kinks snapping straight and flowing like a hose. Now, it would flow, and just not stop. And when Anderson would stop to piss or sit and do nothing, he found himself adjusting the carcass, trimming it, prettying it up, dignifying it. He was eating it, after all. So he had a leg that night, whittled off with a Swiss Army blade and roasted on top of a kid’s bike, Stephen King and Tom Clancy books burning underneath. Covers torn, returned to manufacturer, and tossed in the convenience store dumpster, Anderson enjoyed what he dug out: Hostess Coffee Cakes and Simply Lemonade, commercial literature and combustible stuff. He even kept one of those books to read, eating spoiled meat, hard dough and bad blood. This tradition carried from corner to store to corner and back: days of spreading deer death from county to county, walking with corn fields, imploding into a single sheet of flesh, expanding, spreading itself throughout the world at large. This was everything. It was even fun.

“Everything I live in I become, and that serves to symbolize my existence,” Serenace says.

“Okay, now I see. This venture failed, finally I’ll admit. I closed my eyes, opened them and couldn’t believe what I was holding. The smashed pieces of a nest, eggs just chewed, unborn fragments, it isn’t my fault. It had to be this way.” Serenace can see another option though. Serenace could make it the neighbors next time around, writhing naked in the sewer, squirming as the water stiffens against their thighs and forearms, crawling. Serenace could make them throw it all away and eat shit for free: burning their paychecks and insurance cards before their eyes; molten plastic seeping into the cracks of their driveways; disease and war spreading on their green lawns; a trail of acid in their footsteps. “It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.” If there’s nothing she’d ever give up, it’s the chance for them to suffer for what went so wrong. They must suffer loss. They must suffer consequence. They must be objectified and faced with treason. They must be persecuted. “I will exhaust myself of wasteful consumption, and come out of the process selfless, humanized, knowing, efficient and centered,” Serenace says. “My humanity is more than responding to your data: noise, imagery, flavor, physical *touch*. I become human showering, cleaning the house, airing my tires, flossing, finishing dinner, sleeping well. I become human having the self respect enough to take care of myself. I become human taking enough care of myself that I don’t have to complain about chronic difficulties, of poor sleep, arbitrary stressors, and the consequences of my actions. I become human not making a commitment to what I can’t stand to live with but will feel shame for abandoning.” Serenace stood there, fully dressed, scolding her addicts on the other side of the slanted windows, watching her like a zoo animal, eating on their couches, jerking off, playing their games and not washing their hands. “I have the right to overcome struggle, to be solidified and reshaped by it into something greater. I should feel ashamed of myself if I savor or treasure my helplessness, if I infantilize myself. There is no romance, poetry, or enviable quality within wasted misery,” she says. And like extended family at a bad gathering, they laugh with huge, stupid teeth, sending her way thousands of small sufferings all over again. You’re so *young*. You’re just a *kid*. You’ll learn some day. I was just like *you*. This is *your* fault. *You* did this.

“Now, I can remember better all my wasted time,” Sakae said. “And when it ended, he looked like a deformed taxidermy, overstuffed face and twisted grin. And that shit really got me off. I waited all day for him to come, and then dug him out of his hiding spot. *Fucking* freak, stay on your knees. Get down. Get down. I don’t bother to strain myself. I don’t bother to overextend myself. I’ll stay easy in my wrath. I’ll pull it out of the garage and I will fucking use it on you, just you watch. Here is the substance of the *end*. When I die, I’ll have a rare freedom. I won’t possess anything and I won’t belong to anything else. I don’t want to want forever, to hold on. I’ll let go without much effort. Cling to me and come on down. Come on down to my place, *yeah*, and listen to Teenage Jesus and the Jerks with me, *yeah*, c’mon and have a time, have a time! You and me, we aren’t original, special, or nothing. We don’t deserve to feel anything. We don’t deserve our empty livings, our complacency and futile passive-aggression. We won’t change anything, I’ll count on it. And when I watch you leave out the garage, I’ll still smell the wasted affection on the family sofa, and I’ll start shivering. So cold, I gather every piece of stationery I can from the cupboard and burn it in the backyard, watching childhoods curl at their edges and splinter. Smoke fills picture frames, and I think I’ve finally done the thing that would lead to that other thing that’s been on my mind. I think I’ll go into my dad’s room and my mom’s room and to where my mom is curled on her side of the bed and give it the best I got. I can see my face reflected in the fire, all the years of no fulfillment leading up to what I really wanted. And how much more I could’ve done to make my point, I think to myself. I think I’ll have some fun the way I wanted and nobody else agreed to, tonight. Smoking on the porch, I don’t feel sorry. I don’t feel sorry. This is what I wanted. None of this will mean anything when the sun comes up tomorrow, dad, *Homeowner*. Mom, your skin really looks like an egg shell. It was bad before and it’s worse now, you fucking *slut*. Yes, dad, it’s been done, and yes, dad, it’s a long way down. So when I meet you in the front yard, twisted sideways in the driveway, who even gives a shit? I have scissors around my neck, and I sure wish it was the Fourth of July sometime soon. Bang, motherfucker. *Bang*.”

Travis ran out of ideas. It doesn't go anywhere past this point. This is finished. This is it. Anticlimax doesn't smell like this does. Anticlimax doesn't smell like tap water, warm beer and stale incense. That's what he wished it smelled like. Instead, this just smells like the search for a way to kill time and not feel disgusted with himself for killing time. This smells like shame beyond a bad habit he guiltily clings to, shame for himself for not being strong enough to give it up. "No, turn off the music," he tells Siri. "I won't waste my time living in this feeling, this reminiscence. I don't want a *past*. I don't want a name or a *face*. I don't want an identity at all. I'll just have a presence, *sure*." But for all his trying, his past was everywhere. He's piled it on his shelves, worn it on his sleeve and splattered it across his chest. It was all for the purpose of thinking over wasted summers spent swimming with Rachel. *Rachel*—his flesh-and-blood high school sweetheart—was more the wife he ever wanted than anything. They danced at the Snowball having not known each other for Homecoming, twisting around in a lurid fever that can't be explained other than to say it felt like being violated when it was done. And after driving her home, he watched her parents' stiff faces shoot warning his way, standing on the porch and waving with bleeding maternal blood and raging fatherly cruelty. *Stay away*. And there were others, so many naked moments seeking him out, shocking him still, sticking him, bleeding him out, spreading his guts still. There was the time, yeah, there was the time Danny made it to the state championship, or when Angela gave herself a DIY abortion, or when Murphy drank anti-freeze. And Travis didn't get there first, just like all the dead people in bathrooms: and every neighbor's home invasion; all the cousins floating on ceiling fans; or soaking in driven-by blood; little siblings in children's hospitals; mom in hospice. Sometimes it wasn't naturally caused, and sometimes it was, and that's when it wasn't Travis, which was most of the time. Travis missed it all, so many opportunities, so many futures, so many choices smashed like caterpillars, spun away like insects down the drain. So now, he sits surrounded by talismans of youth—woven into his guts—caressing his Remington 700 like he had *Rachel*: in muggy summer pond water, all twisted joints, pubic hair, and numb, gelatinous flesh, fishing for condoms and dirty needles.

A stolen bag of ice sits in the garage next to smashed VCRs. There's dirt in the creases of the window, the smear of weather clouding it, the paint peeling in the shape of rain. The handle makes a pathetic sound as it twists, the hand taking the grime from its bruised limbs. This was Sakae's backyard: patches of grass receding; amputated mounds of wood; pale fire screaming in a pile of trash, cardboard; the playhouse like an old man sitting in the corner, growing moss and losing teeth; grimacing stone gargoyles sinking into the dirt. There's a boombox on the table. Loud music cracks and breaks between the mesh, crushing at sharp edges and slithering out like paste, like vomit through a funnel. And the music's mechanically smashed like body bags in a baler, and there's nothing else to say about it. It was just empty volume in the shape of feeling, nothing else. "And it was everywhere," Sakae says. Now, bold streaks lacerate the July sky, painting it a swollen purple with hot, red-orange edges. The blue world goes the way of that old lawn, blackening, releasing fluid, gas and substance, expanding in some ways and shrinking in others. Within hours, it will be a molten, rotting mass, maggots winking white and weird throughout this summer night's carcass. It's just like the fragment of something Sakae saw in the road—on that slow, ham-fisted walk—kneaded gently by days passing and the grinding edges of unwilling tires. And here in this hospital bed, wearing a hospital gown and watching *WKRP In Cincinnati*, *Rhoda* reruns and rethinking—rethinking everything—Sakae's just killing time as punishment for killing time. This is the end result of waiting to wait: waiting even longer. And between the night-terrors characterized by horrifying experiences of entrapment, total darkness flooded with imaginary colors burning away in rapid succession replaced one after another, like a mutated hydra, like an advanced, sadistic form of the childhood shock of a Chinese finger trap—now permanent, fatal, unending, crying and bleeding all over you—sometimes Sakae dreams of the stillborn baby-blue of last year's new pool, the one deflating and growing muck and rainwater for this winter's ill-fated squirrel: stuck, scared, stupid, still. But Sakae won't see it in the cold six months from now. Sakae *would* see it all coming next time: "I swear, just hanging out in the backyard, or garage, or front lawn, or anywhere. I won't eat. I don't wanna sleep. I'll say it one more time. I'll say it again."

Anderson hasn't said a word, even if he's shouted all day and wasted his breath. He'll shower himself in sloth and agitated boredom, because he just can't rest. He's moved until it hurt, and he'll keep going until there's nothing further. He'll see it all: "I'll burn in hell and cup my hands; fill them with mud. I'll drink if I have to. I'm taking it to the top, god-fucking-damnit." Out of compulsion, he'll say it over and over again until the spit crusts at the corners of his lips, like it'll somehow make it true. He tricks himself into feeling a greater warmth than he knows. So he keeps on with his long pilgrimage to the holy land in a neighboring state, a place of more corn fields and more Dollar Generals. He can't make this plight his fault without destroying himself and he can't find salvation without tearing something else down. It seems that it's illusory what progress he claims to be working towards. He ate the deer's last leg last night, grabbing at its flesh and stripping it apart between his teeth, grinding the dirt and decay between the stains. This trip's been like beating a rabbit with a stick chasing a carrot, an analogy which means nothing other than to say it's been a confused, directionless torture. And it'll scream when it fucks; and it'll scream when it dies; and somebody with Anderson's face will slice his ears off and take them home; stick 'em on a cork board. And in his dark teenage bedroom with the tan walls and thin black curtains, he used to sit in front of the fan smoking cigarettes with the lights off and the sun shining on his chest. He'd scratch his wrist with the boxcutter scars, work around the bruises of wasted time and effort that will never be learned from. And when self-mutilation saw its comeuppance, it was due to cable television and gratuity. Sitting in the corner away from every window didn't change at all. That was just the same, but the way he forced his body on itself changed, working his hands between his thighs and not forearms. He didn't just stare at his face in the mirror anymore, eyes weighed down by endless restlessness, acne seasoning his bad face. He tried not to stare at anything but her, hand fat grinding against his shaft until irritating and bleeding. And when the scabs set in at night, they were reopened that next morning, rubbing one out to work up the energy to rub one out all day long, bearing the suffering, feeling justified in his domestic hole. Because Anderson found God through televangelism, finding it deeper behind slanted windows, and inside Serenace's snatch.

Sakae never found God. Reflection sticking out of the hand, crawling up the forearm, zigging and zagging in itchy slants, Sakae carved self-wood for years. Sakae was rare. And being carted to the hospital lobby in a wheelchair, stump wrapped in fresh bandage, bathed and dressed in a fresh gown, the thought occurs: “I think I’ll try driving just so I can get to know for a minute how it feels to try and kill somebody while I die. I wear so many faces, I am a chameleon in the shade of wet newspaper. Conniving, two-faced, sideways, pathetic, *inverse*, I’ll go all the way this time. I’m not sorry. I’ll keep *going*.” Sakae found it so easy finding something to say when you don’t care what anyone else will think. There were no consequences for people of Sakae’s generation. Even Sakae, through the long and hard process of endlessly spiraling—that which is now inflicted on the self instinctively—could not think that anything really mattered. Where it was a place of aggressive desperation, denying death, it now became just reality. Sakae was going to die soon, an unwilling subject to the direct apathy of time, acted on indiscriminately. Sakae could see the traces of laugh lines, the darkness under the eyes, the sun damage on the arms, the many scars that never ran. If Sakae was still young, the fatality of getting older seemed all the more impending, final and absolute. “I heard midlife crises come sooner and sooner,” Sakae said, speaking nearly from experience. In fact, concise to say, Sakae nearly wanted to hate being alive. Sakae really wanted to gratify that drive for instant masochism, that silent fetishization of suffering. It was a status symbol, hurting the self. It was a status symbol, experiencing domestic violence. And Sakae thinks of all the potential addictions that would add interest to the personality. “But I guess this is all the substance abuse I need,” and in fact, that must’ve been true. This was a good, hard drug. Nothing mattered more, and this was the thing that snuffed all else. “But fuck ‘em. I’ll kill ‘em *all*, I’ll kill ‘em all over again. Hey, look, there’s me now. There I go. There I go again, and hopefully this time I won’t come back.” Sakae felt good about the externalized violence also, even if it didn’t impress anyone the way it did the self. But Sakae secretly second-guessed the understanding of everyone else, unconsciously micromanaged their opinions, consciously deprived the self of a face, name, and identity, and ran. Like salt on a slug, Sakae disappeared, and would really die.

In the church, they eat impossible whoppers and drink a cam girl's menstrual blood in front of two televisions: one with *Yu-Gi-Oh*, one with *Candyman*. A youth pastor asks a domestic terrorist, "How long until hard work becomes sadomasochism? How long until dedication becomes my death wish?" "Psycho-economics is the cultural pathology," the terrorist says. "Give me some beef, bondage and bath water. I'm ready, *shit*." And in the parking lot, Sakae kicks somebody in the head once, kicks him in the head twice: "I'll keep going all my *life*, so get busier than a tongueless man in an ass-eating contest!" Sakae watches the unnamed face try to discern the grit in the pavement from the shards of his teeth, scraping them up with grimy, barbecue-stained hands, feeling around with black and yellow nails and empty violation in the back of his sorry eyes. "You look pretty in those clothes. I like the way you smell with nothing on and scared *shitless*. Some fresh shame and peeling makeup, some scrapes by your genitals from a rough shave, a quivering down there in anticipation and helplessness, I don't even wanna *fuck* you," Sakae says, scoffing, modeling the crass words of the Homeowner so long ago. And Sakae offered a free handjob to the asshole who'd buy—and wear—a schoolgirl costume from the last Spirit Halloween in the entirety of Indiana. And he did exactly that, put it on, and was now and here on the Mishawaka pavement, about to be greased. So Sakae stood barefoot in a dust-whipped hospital gown—without any underwear—scissors in the only hand left. And it was easy, unceremonious stabbing him to death, jamming it into him like an ice pick until he stopped moving. "God, what a *mess*." So Sakae stripped and switched into the costume chunked and splintered, feeling the fractions of the kid's body pressing against the chest inside. And so Sakae stood there outside the University Park Mall. It was a sunny day, and Sakae's white skin was dipped in red and blackened by the gas can, like a zebra all over. Sakae's hand, the devil's plaything, attempted and half-failed to raise the can to the face, coming down in an arc into the mouth and down the chin, leaving a distinct smell of apocalypse all over. And so Sakae took the Aquarius lighter and set the self on fire, on this sunny day at the end of the world. And Sakae didn't think it'd ever really happen, but here it was, becoming an unnamed face on the crossword puzzle. Now, suffering thousands of small sufferings all over, Sakae was dead.

“On holidays I think about setting my house on fire and blowing my grandfather’s inheritance on strippers and cryptocurrency. I remember listening to Voice of America and hearing from a man with a soft voice that the world was finally ending, and I sighed in relief.” But that last part was a lie. “I was worried I wasn’t going to be able to find a signal all the way out here in Hammond, Indiana. The other day I mistook a mother giving birth in the street with the remains of scaffolding from an abandoned housing project. That afternoon, I’d visited a dust bunny farm with my family and sold them all for gas money and lotto.” That was also a lie. He *killed* his family; he sold someone else’s out of necessity.

“But then I realized the car floated up the Saint Joe River and out into a duck pond filled with trash and cigarettes in some town nobody’s ever heard of. So I figured it was time to finally get to things, so I went home, and poured every single drop out of the can all over the carpet. It was sopping wet, and mushier than usual, and I felt satisfied. I lit the match. And then it started raining.” Travis is talking to his gun again. He was trying to impress it the same way he tried to impress his flesh-and-blood high school sweetheart, the one he left behind at Concord High School, not at all far from that duck pond in some town no one’s ever heard of. The rain comes down in thick, nervous clots, washing away the effort and time. There’s no more time. But he just floats in the aboveground pool for a while, alone, empty-headed, covered in gunk from seasons, ash and little dead things, just hoping lightning’ll strike. “All I have anymore is hope, which I know is useless, but it’s of even less use to not hope for anything. C’mon, in the shadow of my American flag, the rain will strike me down for my wrongdoing. I’ll drink what remains of the antifreeze slowly so I can really get a taste of the fundamentals of my life. It’s all been very repetitive and violent, like the night terrors I had growing up. But this one just *don’t* seem to let up.” Travis didn’t regret any of the things he knew were wrong to do, but still felt shame for subscribing to his exploitation. It was never for him, working this job. He never had the control as much as he was just a dull shape swaying in the elaborate, phallic dance: all pointless energy, noise, and volume notable for nothing but empty size. “Don’t have me cry now, with a shotgun itching my chin. It’s no good. What hasn’t been tried won’t work because it’s all been tried before.”

Hedonism drives downward progress. Into the wormhole they keep digging, looking, searching for an answer that eludes them. The words indicate meanings they can almost grasp. They always fall short. They don't know if a negative self opinion comes from a place of irony or honesty. The lines are blurred so that anyone who's come to this point has likely abandoned any intent to grasp the situation. It becomes *the dance*: a blur of moving shapes tarred in strobe lights, bright colors, darkness and loud music. Just loud music, any other description is extraneous to the point, secondary to the biting gain, sheer and inflating. You hear so much of one thing it becomes all you hear. And the thoughts in your head are crushed, leaking from your eyes, ears, nose and mouth in a grainy pink film. You can't think. You can't feel. You can perceive nothing. Yet as they dance, they still aren't dead. They feel immortal in the heat of it. They're a part of the motion, mixed deep into the whirlpool, spinning, spiraling somewhere they can't be aware of and can only experience. This is a maze the shape of infinity, bearing down in a thousand negative, searing shades. The exit is just a door leading back to the entrance. For as long as they can, they will do it all again without thinking, because there's nothing in their heads but noise. They do nothing but feed volume, empty and fattening, made of too much love for self-punishment, too much obsession with destruction. There is little self-respect. They must enact their fantasy and continue forth without questioning anything. There is little clear distinction between how much of what said is half-hearted and how much is earnest. And getting lost and forgetting where you're going will only return you to it without a chance of escaping. Travis, Anderson, and what was Sakae defaulted to the same pattern of engagement invariably; they'll be here all night. This is the show they share with friends and neighbors, repressed teenage angst's violent manifesto. And if they have work in the morning, it will be more of the same formalities they seek here. The rhythm is unbroken: they'll write more death threats, play with human rat traps, and fetishize atrocities. You should know what to expect will happen next. In the pastoral wasteland, their bodies merge into a shaking blur, soaking in kerosene and neon, emitting vapors and consolidating, losing definition like newspaper in the rain. They keep going, not knowing they've already killed themselves.

Swearing at the blood moon on a summer night, Serenace watches the flies pick up what's left of her dinner, and what sweat is left on her skin. She watches all the husbands and wives walk their little dogs home, mutilated, fearful and conveniently speechless. It doesn't even sound like music to her anymore. She can't feel the wounds on her hands sitting here shirtless inside. There's a cluster of trees next to the retention pond in the neighbors' backyard where you can go sledding in the winter. And she has never gone. She heard there's a church overlooking the subdivision, just across the road and available for whoever felt the need. Whenever God was thought of now, it was just about that kid with mental health issues. They all said he smashed his truck to shit with a baseball bat. "It happened right in front of that church," her husband said to his wife: her mother. Serenace hardly ever got to see mom, and never learned the hard authority to want to kill her with dad's AR15, the one decorated with an American flag stamp and cross. It was some real cool, Vietnam-era shit, the image of raw masculinity. And that was seemingly sucked of the young men of Serenace's age: bloodless, nationless pansies. "Youth eats youth," Serenace was told, faced with the same random sensory experience that confronted her at any odd time, day or night. Really, Serenace wasn't a virgin at all, taking her dad's dick in her mouth, polishing it and just plain hurting, slightly widening at the edges every time. And this was dad's vengeance for his daughter's hindering existence, eating off him throughout their extended, arranged engagement, sucking his seed away from him. And Serenace swallowed with her eyes shut, lips smeared against each other, teeth clenching like it was dad's manhood in her maw. Serenace wanted to do it, and was crushed by love every time. Serenace *was* loved: by dad; by her fans; by so many people; by all the lonely folks at home praying to *her*. The imagination forever allows for the generation of worse possible circumstances, situations that make Serenace's defilement and deification tame by comparison. And Serenace got busy coming up with those alternatives, praying to no one that things would get better, that it didn't have to just end forever, but could really change. Because the boredom and pain had finally become boring and painful, Serenace searched all afternoon for a less boring and painful alternative that wasn't murder-suicide. There's no reason to keep going.

Danny won the state championship and got his photo in the newspaper holding a trophy. Travis was glad everything worked out well in the end. He put that photo on his cork board, and he looked not at it, but through it, at the memory of that day, of all the high-fives exchanged and every defiant “Hell yeah!” And now, Danny didn’t exist anymore, not because he was dead, but because he had settled down, drifted away, and exited Travis’ ever-shrinking microcosm. There was nobody left anymore: Danny was in Tennessee; Angela’s dead body was found in the dumpster behind a Rulli’s Pizza; Murphy killed himself with anti-freeze; and Rachel was just gone; he didn’t even wanna know. Who they were as they knew him, however, were immortalized, unchanging, never dying, forever sixteen and seventeen-years-old, listening to hip hop and heavy metal in their basements, skinny dipping in the Elkhart River and counting all the shopping carts *here*: where industry came to die. And now, having stucked and bled out all the wonder and safety his career provided him, his last option presented itself, the one he’d saved his stomach for. Their blood sprayed all over him in a way he didn’t figure it would. It gave him a sensation he hadn’t felt in an extremely long time, taking him by surprise, reminding him of good-humored repulsion long-gone. He’d stood on stiff legs, barefoot and pants pulled up to the knees. He aimed Rachel at their gelatinous flesh and all the youthful stupidity he envied, hated out of wanting, having changed his life to attempt finding. The cost of their vulnerability was defined and their prospective suicides cut short. Travis didn’t even feel angry. He felt free the way it used to make him feel, towering like the corn field, Rachel dancing in his hands, his eyes the most colorful thing she ever saw. Rachel was never gone. Here she is, buried inside him at the end of the world. It was for her, really, finally using his license to kill them, finally getting what he really, really wanted. They died in a way not remarkably unique, face in shattered mirrors, snatched by the essence wearing Travis’ skin, grinding it to fragments, crushing it, swallowing it, digesting it. It also didn’t seem to matter, failing to absorb the emptiness he expected, snuffing it out like salting a slug. There was no failure, and with his graying eyes, he focused on Rachel’s mouth in his, pressing his leather hands into her walnut skin, sliding his index into her trigger, not feeling so old.

Nobody said anything to Serenace. She began the slow process of destroying him. First with dad's baseball bat, she struck him repeatedly, contorting his joints in new and uncomfortable ways, ultimately deciding a hammer was better, and getting on her knees to commit herself to the work. It was her birthday. She'd turned sixteen-years-old, just like the headless body mass stagnating in the Elkhart River, what's left of Travis laying dirt-down next to them. Rain peeled against the house in a snapping, twisting funnel, crashing against everything all monophonic and everywhere. It was as much sound as it was space, flashing the mind with fast floods of ecstatic, empty fullness. Lightning would throw its horse-hair whip and make Serenace want more, more meat, more fragments of plastic, more shattered circuits and molars ground to dust. And watching him lick at the piss at her feet, it makes her forget about the merciless sensations in the back of her eyes, unseen and having seen everything; and then there's nothing there but dad's final, animal weakness. Serenace presses her palm against her chest and can find shared collections of shit and piss and all his blood on top of it. She looks down and sees a naked mess of scum and peanut butter, like margarine and sugar burning on a poorly-greased skillet. Serenace crouches down to her canid father, at the toothless dog grinding her excrement between his bloodied, hollow jaw: "I think I've reached the halfway point of hedonism and could possibly benefit by giving up, but my judgment's been hijacked, and there's only going down from here." He folds into the fetal position while his naked daughter flogs his back into brains and beef. She will say callous things with a soft, distant voice while her heel twists into his abdomen. She adjusts her hair and doesn't even look at him. He whimpers like a German Shepherd in a cage, sticking his ass against the grate, sitting and intermittently digging, *grasping* for an exit. Serenace's sorry father doesn't beg and plead as much as he just yips, hollers, spits and moans. Part of it must be agony and the other part must be hunger. All of it must be sadomasochism for the years of deprived virginity and enforced marriage. Wedlock was a cage for dogs, anime girls in the garage, mothers that hang themselves on the ceiling fan. Now mom and dad are dead, just like the rest.

Better ideas don't come, so Anderson comes back over and over again. Suffering thousands of small sufferings is the home usually returned to and the exact place sought refuge from. A skeleton in a charred skirt rested outside Spirit Halloween, unremarked, faceless and unnamed. In its hand was an Aquarius lighter. Anderson takes it in his, rubbing away ashen shame with his thumb, settling against the folds in his palm, flipping it over and obscuring this twisted existence entirely. Lighter in hand, his thumb rides up the teeth and slams into the big red button, revealing to him a big, beautiful electricity filling up the entirety of his sight, lighting up and killing everything. The world has ended without him having stood outside those slanted windows, watching passively his biggest waste of time. And there's no more time to think up all the other petty, unimportant things he'd wish he'd done and never did. He wanted to shower, clean the house, air his tires, floss, finish dinner, and sleep well. And for so many reasons, he can't do any of this now, because the apocalypse is starting. And he's one of the first to go. The hydrogen bomb consumes the entirety of a highly-populated urban area, turning city blocks into man-made canyons. Office buildings become mounds of dust and wasted housing projects pile on top of each other with brainless, reckless abandon. A lot of people die in a rage of fire, disintegrated as the world unravels all over, around and under them. See the charcoal residue of skeletons: squeezed from shells of skin; dehydrated and then digested by the atmosphere; becoming one with a great many fatalities floating around in the closest thing to heaven to ever experience. This is the end of Anderson's purgatory, the death of a feeling of eternal confinement in a self-identified state of living. As the sky brightens to no end, he unrolls his sack lunch and stares long at the clump of wasps and molasses. It's hardened into an amber, stuck permanent to its vessel of transportation. Anderson took a sack lunch with him on this trip, and he took it all the way to the top—to no end. He kept going until the finish and found nothing but his own desperation and naive impulse. As Serenace continues to die all by herself, the experience is shared by Anderson: standing outside the last Spirit Halloween in the entirety of Indiana; the fragment of something dead and molten smeared into the pavement; dead skinny-dippers, Rachels and Travises floating in muggy summer pond-water. It's been done.

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