

Manifest Destiny

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The Russians were impossibly beautiful and arrogant in a way Colin could never hope to be. Colin was sound through and through, but sound didn't mean much at a hostel in Hollywood. Dmitry and Timor were all square jaws and flush lips, graceful and slender. Not gangly, like Colin; slender. Colin welcomed them after the three months he'd just wasted here. He knew he had no shot at a proper gap year, what with the recent losses and all, but failing to get himself somewhere overseas at this stage would leave him shy a major rite of passage. He thought he was so lucky to have Bill and Sarah stick their necks out, but this country that was so much like his own he wondered why he'd bothered. All that paperwork, all that effort to get a work visa, and what opportunity did it afford? Three months wiping counters and washing margarita glasses the size of fishbowls at a strip mall in Phoenix. A room in a house with a screaming three-year-old and a constant feeling of intrusion. He was just going to work long enough to pay for a trip to the Grand Canyon - and Las Vegas. He promised his old man he'd go to Vegas. The old man always maintained was the only reason to go to the States. But there was no Grand Canyon, no Las Vegas. They'd have to wait until he came back with some money; who knew when that would be? He maxed out the emergency card by the fifth week. Now, he'd barely have enough money to get on the plane from LAX back home. If he stayed exactly here, in the cheapest dorm he could find, eating from the kitchen and sharing six packs with more cashed-up incoming travelers, well, he might survive the next ten days.

"Is bullshit place, mate," said Timor. "Is all fake fucks here."

Dmitry and Timor had been traveling for the last 18 months. Soon, they'd be going back to South America, but for now, they were reloading. Colin noticed their canvass rucksacks by their bunks, small and utilitarian. By contrast, his metal-framed nylon pack looked cumbersome, a turtle shell he stooped under.

"Fake fucks," Dmitry concurred. "With money poison."

"Cannot see world right in front of them because of slave work for money."

Colin, at that moment, was feeling enslaved by a lack of money. Money's absence had taken his desert dream from him.

"Slave for shoes and cars. Big TV. Still die one day."

"And never see world what is."

“If you don’t want money, you can leave it with me,” Colin said. “I could use some. I’ve only got a few more days here, but without some cash, I can’t get anywhere. Just have to sit here and wait till I go home.”

The Russians looked at each other, perplexed. “I’m sorry, but this is...weak?”

“Stupid?”

“Pussy?”

“Universe provides, mate,” Timor declared, that word false in his diction. “Is all about manifesting what is already there, do you understand? Always possible to go somewhere! Always possible to do something new! You are free man in free country!”

“We are gift to universe now!” Dmitry said. Colin wondered if that was what he meant to say. “Universe returns gift to us. We have harmony with world now. Take what we need. Give what we have. Is *essential life*, do you understand? Is natural way of life. All else is rat cage.”

“We can show you such things,” Timor said. “Is stupid to stay in shit here.”

That was how Colin ended up in the girl’s Toyota, turtle bag between his knees, three across with the Russians in the back seat while the driver and her American girl friend talked about inconsequential people all the way up the 101. The car rattled at higher speeds, and the girl warned that she always took the long way for fear of being stranded in Bakersfield. The Russians alternately slept off last night and leaned forward to mildly but sexually engage the girls. Colin could see that some kind of coupling process was underway, and if nothing had happened last night, it would probably happen tonight. Colin had to admire the trick. If he was reading things right, they had been able to manifest transport, companionship, and most likely overnight accommodation.

“I’m following you lot when we get there, eh?”

Through the windows, California spun around him. Paso Robles vineyards gave way to strawberries and artichokes in Gilroy until, soon, farmland gave way to the glassy office parks of the Silicon Valley. He didn’t know these people, didn’t know how he was going to get back to LA by the 24th, but Colin was damn well on his way to San Francisco. He might salvage some adventure yet.

The sticky sweat Colin had built on the July highway deserted him instantly as they neared the city limits. A frigid billow of fog swept across the highway, obliterating the sun. The long summer day turned to, not night, exactly, but to the end of the day. “No sky left, “ said Timor, laughing. “Where goes sun?” The girls kept discussing whatever minor outrage had been their

occupation since they passed through Palo Alto. Colin nudged Dmitry. “Where do we stay tonight? Do we find a hostel or what?” Dmitry and Timor spoke Russian through Colin. Timor leaned forward, broke the girls’ chatter briefly, then leaned back. The chatter resumed. “No hostel tonight,” Dmitry said. Colin was not sure what that meant to him, but here he was: on his way to somewhere he’d never thought to go before.

In the dark that was still day, around 7 or so, they stopped at the house where one of the girls had a bedroom. She lived there with several dozen people, or so it appeared from the hoard gathered in the kitchen. The house was majestic and mysterious, a railroad flat stretched deep along a sinuous hallway. Half-closed doors disgorged papers, books, bicycles, and dirty clothes. Finely detailed woodworking had lumpen angles from years of careless paint jobs, the cracks of which littered the sashes of the rattling windows like confetti. A smell of onions, stale pot, and melon shampoo permeated the hallway. The Russians took up a proprietary position on the sofa; their bags magically disappeared. Colin’s, on the other hand, stayed attached, as though he were invited perpetually to move on. Rather than appropriate a chair himself, Colin propped himself against the bag. He had to watch it. His passport was in there, after all.

Beer cans appeared, and Colin took one graciously. Beer had recently become a luxury. Timor smacked his arm in approval. “He manifest beer for you!” he said. Three girls huddled in the corner of what was presumably their own house. “Manifested straight from the fridge,” the lesser of the girls said. “No great mystery there.”

Emboldened, the greater of the girls said, “I keep hearing you randoms talking this ‘manifest’ shit. I have no idea what you think you’re talking about half the time. You’re just talking about dumb luck. There’s no karma. Or prayer. Whatever you want to call it. It’s all randomness. You might have good luck or bad luck, but most of that is a product of the choices you make anyways. The rest is pure accident.”

“You’ll never get anything with that attitude, young lady.” The voice came from the doorway, from a man whose face looked about 18 but who had a middle-aged hairline. Did he live in one of those rabbit holes? “It defies experience – my experience, anyway. It’s especially apparent here in the city. There’s a web of energy, fluxing all around us. It has everything there is to give and all you need to know is how to ask. If you know how to receive that energy, you can abnegate all your petty greed.”

“Big talk for a man drinking borrowed beer,” someone muttered.

“I like this guy,” Timor said. “This is what we are trying to tell you. Mate.” Colin suspected his name was forgotten.

“We manifest for you guru,” Dmitry said to Colin. “Excuse me, I think you need guru.”

Though the sky had gone silver with fog, no one had yet switched on one of the half dozen gold baroque table lamps scattered around the room. The shredded red velvet couch sagged under the weight of bodies, piled on, dripping off arms. They curled around the corners of the bricked-up fireplace. They leaned on milk crates and coffee tables. The Russians; the girls from the car; the girls in the corner; the guy in the doorway; two guys on the floor, tapping on twin laptops; more in the kitchen; a couple more on the back porch. Dozens of people here with him tonight. Still, with all these people, Colin had no idea where to light. There were six little conversations going on at once, and Colin sought to grab one, preferably one with a girl in it. He noticed the Russians slowly entwining their limbs with their respective girls. The excitement of being in this strange place, well-peopled as it was, slowly gave way to a sense that he was marginal. He couldn't hang onto the Russians. Timor was looking at him quizzically now, when he looked up at all, as though he could not remember where they had met. The girls from the car tacitly refused ownership of him. The guy in the doorway had edged closer. He continued to talk about means and possibilities.

"You know what I'm talking about, right?" he asked Colin, specifically. Everyone else had ceased to listen. "The way you need something and it shows up right in front of you? Like, for me, I stay outside, right? People leave all kinds of useful shit lying around, right on the street. Painting tarps. Armchairs. Shoes and shirts. Whole birthday cakes. Found one of those once. I haven't bought a necessary item from a store in maybe 5 weeks. These streets boast a great generosity."

"Here we go again with Father Balzac's vow of poverty," a representative from the Cluster of Three asserted. Colin wasn't sure, but this man may have been addressed as "Ball Sack." Colin looked at the girls again, in case he might have a chance with one of them tonight. There was no interest that he could detect.

"This energy has provided me material goods. I do not deny it. I have lived very well off the refuse of the bourgeoisie. But that's not all the universe provides. It provides wisdom! It provides teachers! How do you think I know so much about World War I? And quantum physics?"

Colin finished his beer and was hoping somehow another might arrive as the first had. Slowly, though, the party was thinning. A contingent faded to the back porch; others, who might be legitimate tenants, retreated back to their warrens. The Russians and their drivers vanished as a piece. Who knew what debauchery would ensue within these walls? They were old and solidly built, but their proximity still seemed less than private. Each room was like a different knuckle on the same finger.

He looked at his watch and wondered what to do next. Almost 10. He had no idea where to go to find a room now. Maybe one of the girls or even Ball Sack lived here and could let him stay until the morning.

“Who actually lives in this place?” Colin asked.

“Well. You know Kayleigh, of course,” Ball Sack said. Colin knew this was one of the girls from the car, but he wasn’t sure which one. He did know Kayleigh was the name he remembered, because it sounded like someone’s girlfriend’s name. “Jordan lives up front. Tempest is the cook.” Tempest? Were they all kidding with these names? “Eva doesn’t live here. She just hangs here because of Kayleigh. “ Eva! That was her name. Fourteen hours later and both girls identified. Colin prodded. “So. You don’t live here? Act like you own the place, I must say.”

The room was almost empty now. Colin thought, relaxed as the residents had been, they were probably huddled on the porch or something, trying to come up with a good plan to eject him. “Nah, not me. I stay outside. I thought maybe you did, too.” He indicated Colin’s bag. “I just came here to manifest some fucking lentils, bro.”

When Colin woke the next morning, damp and cotton-mouthed, he found himself with his face on a bath towel and a sweatshirt over his knees. Only the towel separated his face from the dirt. The morning air was heavy with the smell of fog and gum trees - fresh compared to all that dry Southwestern heat. This shrouded, primeval grove was a world unto itself. Colin couldn’t even tell if he was still in a city, since all he saw was dense forest. Around him were scattered, human-sized pods. Colin again felt appropriated by strangers. If one of these pods was Ball Sack, he sure couldn’t tell. All he could see was that every body but his was curled on a brightly colored rubber mat, the sort his mother rolled up to take to yoga class. Under these looming trees, it gave the effect of a nursery school. Who was it that, in the fairy tale, slept in a bed of flower petals? Thumbelina. Bunch of filthy Thumbelinas.

In the distance, he heard the rhythmic sound of foot fall. Panting. Horses. An army. He looked off in the distance. Between the trees, he saw troops of joggers. Their trainers slapped the pavement, over and over. Some were stick-straight and effortless, immobile from the waist up. Others ran from the neck, caved in and desperate. Slap. Slap. Slap slap. Slap slap slap.

Ball Sack’s voice came from over his shoulder. “Wake up, newb! You’ve got some exploring to do!” Colin shook his head and stretched. The same low gray sky had followed him into the new day. He took the sweatshirt from his knees and put it over his head, but it was wet from the night and wouldn’t hold off the surprising cold. He went to look for his bag for something dry and felt the sudden, invigorating fear that it might have disappeared. But no. It was right behind him. Ball Sack had rested his foot on it. “Welcome to beautiful Golden Gate Park!

Forget that big yellow bridge! Forget those death trap cable cars! This here is San Francisco in all its wanton purity! This place will answer all your questions. I know you are a *questing man*. ” Other bodies rustled. “But first, hey. I know you’re not a savage. You need some sustenance. Get your ass up!”

Colin stood and grabbed his bag. There were trees as far as he could see. He had no idea where this was in relation to the house where they were the night before. They just left that house and started walking. He remembered that Ball Sack did all the talking, then as now. The houses looked like Easter candy. They walked down streets and at one point, the streets turned to trees, and the trees turned to dark, and the dark was obstacles. They stopped in an attempt to avoid the obstacles and got lost in a cloud of skunk weed. That was the last thing he remembered.

Ball Sack headed straight through the trees and got him onto a path. The pavement delivered sudden civility. Tennis courts resounded with their universal *smack-ping*, and children’s voices heralded the nearby presence of a playground. Old Italians played Bocce; old Chinese did Tai Chi. How had this all been so distant while he slept? The grove where they spent the night must have been just meters away. He knew intellectually that it was a big country, of course, but Colin was still surprised to feel so far away from the America he’d come to know. Gone were the sprawling suburban boulevards, shimmering with heat mirage. No big car parks for all those big cars. Here, it was all green, wild and loamy. And so cold. It wouldn’t be this cold at home, in the Brisbane winter. The athletic citizenry was covered up, solemnly.

The two men walked along the path, Colin with his rucksack, his companion with, surprisingly, nothing. “This is a really awkward question,” Colin said, “but I’m not sure I exactly know your name?” Then he added, “I’m Colin, if you didn’t know.”

Ball Sack stopped and extended his hand, a disruptive formality. “I’m Balzac,” he said. “Like the writer. Only in my case, not much like the writer. Never read a word of that fucker. I’m Balzac, more like the sculpture.” Here he took an odd stance, with arms behind him and legs scissored on a tightrope, his round belly pushing forward. “Have you seen that one? Rodin? It’s in Paris.” He kept walking. “I’m sure I told you my name, though. What did you think my name was?”

“To be honest, I thought it was ‘Ball Sack’.”

Balzac nodded sagely. “Happens. But, to be honest, I thought your name was ‘Colon.’ ” Here he laughed. “Now there’s a team! Scrotum and Asshole! I’m sure we’re superheroes, in a parallel universe.” They passed under a stone troll bridge and came out on another array of campers on mats. Beyond them, commerce.

“There’s a café up the street where I know a girl who used to stay with us.” They crossed the street to where there was a grocery store. Unlike the groceries stores at home, however, this one seemed to be patrolled by the merchant marines. “Keep it moving, Balzac,” said a rough man in a semi-official uniform. Balzac gestured rudely. They kept walking behind the store, to the dumpsters. There, two men with blue and purple yoga mats rolled on their rucksacks were dragging paper bags out of the trash. They were his age, he noted. Should they be considered men? More just lads. “Fuck off, Balzac,” they said. “We get first pick on Tuesday and you know it.”

“But I have a new visitor,” Balzac answered. “This is Colin. He’s come a long way. He’s from...where are you from?”

“Brisbane,” Colin answered.

“Brisbane,” Balzac said. “Be a little hospitable, won’t you?”

“I don’t give a fuck is he is from England,” one of them said.

“Australia,” Colin corrected.

“Fucking kangaroos and shit,” the other guy said. Colin couldn’t tell if this was approval or not. Apparently, they couldn’t either, because there was no further comment. The four of them stood unproductively. Finally, they handed over a stale loaf of crusty bread, which rained dusting flour across the whole transaction. Balzac cradled it like an infant and ushered Colin up the street, toward the coffee. The café they went to was dingy, with dark wood paneling and bench seating. Scraps of colored paper littered the walls and counters. It had probably been there for thirty years, just the same. The large glass windows onto the street probably would have brightened it on a sunny day, but a day like today, they only served to amplify the gloom. Balzac brought him a giant white go-cup. Must have been a whole pot in the thing, he thought. He was thirsty, and recognized he had no assurance of future refills, but it still seemed excessive. He wrapped both hands around it, grateful for the heat radiating through the cardboard. Balzac drank his coffee in leisure. Colin noticed that his cup, though also enormous, was only half-full. A concession to his bladder? Colin somehow felt the need to drink faster, to meet this emptiness. He needed to be woken, yes, and he needed a better taste in his mouth than the taste from last night. Still not quite sure how he got there, or, now, what courtesy he owed Balzac for his hospitality. Balzac’s silence, for a change, matched Colin’s. Colin studied Balzac’s go-cup blatantly, but he could not phrase a query about it worthy of the silence. Balzac noticed his gaze, and seemed, for a moment, to challenge Colin’s cleverness. Finally, he supplied it himself.

“Look at you. It’s the butt crack of dawn and the day has already granted you undue kindness. My point exactly. What more do you need?” He slurped at the top of his cup. “You just got in last night, right?” he asked. Colin nodded. “Probably haven’t seen much. At the very least, you should let me take you on a tour of the Haight-Ashbury.”

Colin gathered his bag. He grabbed his cup, still heavy in his hand. Cooled now, it no longer appealed, but he still felt a little guilty as he went to throw it away on the way to the door. Balzac stopped him, forcibly. “The fuck do you think you’re doing? All the work to make that thing, and you’re just going to throw it away? You can use it all day! You can drink from it, eat from it, piss in it, build fucking sand castles with it. You can use it twenty times for twenty things before it really, truly becomes useless. That’s the problem with you fucking *insiders*. No sense of *value*. No sense of *utility*.”

Balzac led him down Haight Street, where shuttered boutiques promised the purchase of new, more glorious identities. The many stores selling old clothes added to the timelessness that Colin was starting to feel. The clothes were from another era, like the houses. It was like stepping out of time, although which time, it was hard to say. The 1960s, sure, but also the 1920s, or 40s, or the 1890s. Balzac stopped periodically to point to the houses. “That’s where Janis lived. Jerry lived two blocks up. We’ll pass by Grace’s on the way back. That’s one of the great things about this place. You’re not in danger of losing track of history. No one’s ever gonna tear down Janis’ house.” They veered from Haight deeper into the neighborhood. “Keep an eye out,” Balzac said. “If you stay with us much longer, I think you’re going to need to manifest some supplies.”

Colin kept walking, but internally hesitated a little at Balzac’s assertion. He was flattered to be welcome, of course. He appreciated the local host. It was sure a switch from the crowd at Los Amigos Locos. There were a few nights drinking, there, but the hierarchy – good god! Half the staff had known each other through school, and those that didn’t were running home to their kids as soon as the shift was done. They had no interest at all in Colin or where he lived. A few of them, at the end, could be overheard mocking his accent, bastardizing it for statements regarding everything from renunciation of hygiene to thwarted sexual urges. He was well done to be past that. On the one hand, he hadn’t really thought about nights spent off the hostel track. It was cold and dirty, and he would not have thought it was safe. On the other hand, it did address his most pressing problem.

“Now, see here! This is just the kind of thing I’m talking about!” Balzac stopped in the middle of the block, mesmerized by something not immediately apparent to Colin. “Folks throwing out a perfectly good glow stick. And where there’s one...” Balzac looked to the entry stairs. Sure enough. Three more glow sticks were resting in a pile. One had been opened, but the others were good. “These will come in very handy indeed! Save the fire for when you

really need it.” He put them in the knee pocket of his cargo pants. Colin wondered what else might be in there.

They walked back to Haight along Clayton. As they walked, a man carried a television set from his house to the curb. He smiled hello, set the television on the sidewalk, and went back into the house. Too bad they didn’t have use for that. “All the fucking time,” Balzac said. “Sometimes I think all the stuff – all the *items* – that the world will need for a full generation has already been produced. What’s the point of stores, you know? People need to feel like if they go to the store, something in there will be just for them. Something new. Something that can define them, even if it defines them as someone just like everyone else. And when it’s not new anymore? When the promise of a new, more transformational object presents itself? Out with the old. People willingly enslave themselves to the cycle. And I sympathize, to an extent. I see the urge for a permanent state of transformation. It’s just that this is the laziest way of attaining it I can think of.”

They walked on. “See this house? In the day, they used to have parties there where you’d walk through the door and someone would squirt blotter acid into your mouth with a syringe. Whether you wanted it or not. They called it the Summer of Love, but you’d think it would be more of the Summer of Florid Psychosis.” Offers of “buds” and “doses” floated in the mumbles of passersby as they had all morning. Now, they made sense. Balzac smirked. “Some things never change.” Maybe that was Balzac’s preferred method of transformation. “Hey!” he said. “We got your nightlight. Let’s go get you a bed.”

They walked a few blocks to Stanyan, where a confluence of yoga studios competed for attention. None of them had activity at this hour, but all of them had flyers in the windows that appeared to have been warped over time by the sweat of acolytes. Besides the rubbish bin on the corner, several scarred mats were standing, in neat rolls, as though someone might return to pick them up. Colors on this occasion were olive and ice blue. “Take your pick,” Balzac invited. “You’ll definitely want one if you’re going to stay with us. They weigh nothing, but they’ll keep the ground dry underneath you. When you’re done, you can just leave it back here. What goes around, right?”

Colin evaluated two mats, not carefully, then selected the olive one. Good thing, too; the blue had a suspicious yellow stain on its outer surface. “Is this ok? I mean, from the standpoint of hygiene?” Balzac looked blankly, then reformed his face, as though he’d actively reset his expectations. “That’s right. You’re still new. Trust me, you’ll worry a whole lot less about that as time goes on. They’re all right. The worst thing on there is the trance sweat from half-naked supple women. Consider it added mojo.” Colin shrugged and began to arrange the mat within the frame of his bag. He did wish he hadn’t raised the question of hygiene, as he began to have

doubts about his own. “We have a couple more stops before we go back,” Balzac said. “It’ll be good on the hill later if the fog burns off.”

The first stop was the pharmacist. Balzac led down the aisle to the cold/flu section. He counted down one shelf until his finger fell in the spot denoting the absence of his chosen product. “Shit.” They then went to the corner bodega, which was not patrolled. They went to the bakery aisle. Again, absence. “Fuck. I hope it’s because we got it all.”

They walked back towards the top of the street and as Colin looked into the green depths of the park, he realized that he was seeing the tops of the trees for the first time. The fog had lifted above, and further, it had begun to break, in patches at first, and then in a full circumference. He could see the storied hills to every side, with houses crowding each other like jagged rows of shark teeth. The morning’s camp had dissolved; only the ducks and pigeons remained. Balzac led along the path where they started, which, now, at 11 am, had lost all its mystery. With the mist lifted, it was populated by athletes and young parents – robust, wholesome, and comforting. The playground had sprung to full life. How fun it would be to join them, Colin thought. What gloriously innocent fun he could have. He mentioned this to Balzac, who laughed. “Dude! They’ve got perv cops all over that place! Just wait till tonight, though. We will tear that shit *up!* Just look at that slide! Taxpayer-funded euphoria.”

Drumbeats in the distance. “That’s where we’re going,” Balzac said. “You may not buy the whole hippie dippie vibe, but that’s where it all goes down.” Now that the sun was shining, Colin was pleased to be outside. He liked the smell of the trees and the dirt and the air. He could even deal with the drums. They sounded compelling. Alive, for a change. Colin wondered if he’d heard anything this spontaneous since he’d been in the country. Certainly not in Phoenix in the summer. Everything there was sealed up in air-conditioned sterility. “Do you have any of that bread left? We got the glow sticks and the extra mat, but otherwise, we’re a little light on the hunting and gathering.”

Colin became vaguely aware that he would, at some point, find a way back to LA. He knew better than to trust the fates with something that important. He and the fates were just getting acquainted. He followed Balzac up the rise and sat in the sun patch he’d chosen. There had been some next thing all morning to bring them here, and he expected to keep moving in some manner of preparation. But preparation for what? Balzac had ceased his searching and was sitting, silently, staring forward, letting the rhythm speak his mind. Perhaps this was the moment they had spent the morning preparing for. Perhaps, for a moment, he could have a break from the going and could just be in this place. It was a chaotic journey, but here he was, basking in a meadow sunbeam. He reached down with two hands and raked a carpet of tiny daisies. So that’s what this place was. He was buoyed by the sound and the cloud of weed around him. The anxious striving of that plagued his journey relaxed a little. He waited for

Balzac to speak again, to launch into some new distraction. He looked to him. Balzac didn't acknowledge him. He rolled onto his right side and propped himself on his arm. Then, his arm dropped from under him. Then, Colin was sure he heard a snore. He thought, for a second, to get up. Go somewhere and sort himself. Instead, he stretched his legs in front of him. His back found its way down to the grass. His eyelids slid closed and he melted into the hill.

He woke from what was not really sleep under a rustle of chill. The sky had begun to close again, with slips of fog passing through the cypress trees. The crowds had thinned some, but the drumbeat continued, joined by the incongruous calliope of the carousel. Balzac was not readily apparent, which was both a source of concern and relief. Colin appreciated the inclusion, of course, and was curious to see what might happen next. At the same time, if left on his own, he might better be able to pursue his own agenda. Make some plans. "Hey, asshole!" he heard. "Hey, sleeping beauty! Asshole! Come join the party."

Balzac stood among a sea of seated young people. Were these the same people from last night? Colin didn't see familiar faces, although last night seemed like months ago already. He vaguely speculated on how many of these ambient packs there must be around here, and further, how many of which had Balzac in alliance. He grabbed his bag and wandered over. They must be the pods from this morning, he figured, if they were to be identified only by the skunk. The mats, rolled, were now serving as lawn chairs as the denizens passed around 40-ounce bottles of Olde English. Colin stood before them. Balzac introduced him: "Colin." The dozen gathered remained nameless, but accepted his identity. The breezes became less gentle and the sky less blue. Colin debated whether or not to open his bag for a few more layers of clothing. Most of what he had was t-shirts and shorts, although he did have that fleece for the winter that faced him at the airport at home. He resisted opening the bag, though he couldn't quite figure out why. He felt strangely vulnerable exposing his possessions like that, although they weren't worth much. A worldly friend back home told him he always kept his passport in his y-fronts when he traveled, fastened to his belly with bandage tape. This would be the time for that. Colin shivered. Fuck it. He was going in.

Another announcement: "Finola!" A new girl had arrived, and stood at attention before the assembly. What was this, the king's court? Finola was greeted with much greater appreciation than he himself had been, Colin noted, and the spotlight flattered her. All the pack girls of the last few days had started to blend together. Finola shouldn't have looked so different, dressed in the same jeans, same shoes. Even her hair was the same as the other girls. Still, there was a glow to her, a freshness. It was as though she was the original model that all the others had knocked off. She sat by Balzac, who gestured to Colin. "You remember Fin?" Colin certainly would have remembered her, and didn't. Still, he didn't want to insult her. "Sure! From...last night, was it?" Balzac tried to remember what had happened last night. His

face had that same strained patience. “What? No!” Colin wondered what aspect of last night could cause affront. It had all seemed ok then. “This woman granted you the infinite benevolence of a caffeinated daybreak and that’s the best you can do for thanks?”

“Oh!” Colin said. “You’re the girl from the café! Yeah, cheers for that. I don’t think we paid you. You need some money, yeah?” Colin realized he hadn’t paid for anything for the last two days. That eased his budget considerably. His companions grinned. Finola let a beat of silence fall. “He’s cute,” she said to Balzac. “Where’d you get him?” Balzac shrugged. “Part of my stray-a-day plan.” “Don’t worry,” Finola said to Colin. “That’s not your world. Not for right now, anyway.”

A call came from across the hoard. “Fin! Did you bring us anything from work?”

“You’re a bunch of 18th century degenerates!” she called back. “There has to be an easier way to get where you’re going.”

“But it’s all natural,” someone said. Everyone laughed. Finola reached into a shiny clean handbag from some store up on the street and pulled out an industrial-sized bottle of powdered nutmeg. Colin absently mused how many lattes could be completed with that quantity. Where were these kids going to get lattes? Balzac read his expression. “If ingested in large quantities, nutmeg has hallucinogenic properties. Makes you piss the sky, under the right circumstances. It’s perfectly natural, and perfectly legal. Not the biggest thing, but still helpful.” Colin remained blank. Not interested, not disinterested. He wouldn’t have opted to piss the sky at home; not sure if he’d want to here.

“What’s your story, Colin?” Finola asked. “Just passing through?” Her voice was vaguely accented. Maybe Russian again? Maybe it was just an echo from his companions yesterday. He wondered if he’d see Timor and Dmitry again. Who knew how circles worked here? Who knew what life they’d manifested for themselves in these last hours? Probably being paid to be adored again. Colin suspected they were Staying Inside.

“Passing through,” he said. “Up from LA. Last few days before heading home.”

“Home is where?”

“Brisbane. Australia.”

“Why’d you come here?”

Well, it’s a good question. I came here because I could. Because I didn’t think I’d get that chance again. Because I’ve never been anywhere, for fuck’s sake! Because I thought I’d be a changed man. I went to Phoenix because that’s where I had a floor to sleep on. Thought I was

going to Las Vegas from there. Sure, it would have been easier if I'd had more money, but I didn't have money, I had time and opportunity. I reckoned that any job that paid enough to support my trip would probably suck me in too far to leave it. I'd be a sad old geezer before I knew it. Then, there was Carmel.

"I never really traveled before. Thought I'd take it easy first time out. The parents knew someone who could get me sorted for a job without papers – see what happens, we all thought. But it's been mostly shit, to be honest. I got a shit job that I could have done anywhere. Gave it a go, but it wasn't much. Until I got here." Finola looked skeptical. Balzac sat silently, watching, calculating. If she had more to say, she didn't say it then. The nutmeg bottle returned, as though on legs. Finola gestured around. "Anyone?"

Balzac put his Dare Ya face on. "Ever try it? You won't feel it for a while, but there is going to be a long, cold night coming. You're going to need some entertainment. What are you afraid of, huh? It's a cookie spice. It's fucking snickerdoodle. Come on! You have to take a lot before it really does anything. Have a couple hits. Give me your vessel." Without asking further, he started spilling the powder into Colin's paper coffee cup, now filled with dregs from a water fountain rinse. Ah, fuck. Well, Balzac had been a benevolent force so far. Colin doubted this would produce any sensation except the unpleasant one now filling his mouth. He sputtered a little but then, it was all right. He'd done stupider things.

Balzac looked outright pleased, Colin thought. More importantly, Finola looked not displeased. "I have to do something about this," he said, indicating the cup. "We have now defiled my vessel." Finola stood. "Come on," she said. "Let's go for a walk. I have some cool stuff to show you."

Colin didn't notice the drums stop, but they had. He'd been pleasantly warmed by the beer and the passive skunk weed, and he took the opportunity to take in a wide-screen look. Funny how he's started to think of it that way: looking down, looking up. Looking up, he couldn't see where this park could end. It was high and dense, surrounding him on every side. He looked for Finola, but he saw she was looking down. She had waded into a dense patch of greens with round, flat leaves and riotous orange flowers. "Hungry," Finola said, munching on one of the flowers. "Have you tried these? Nasturtium. They're delicious. Packed with Vitamin C. And you can see, they're everywhere. Try one." She handed one to him. These people kept giving him things to put in his mouth. He'd almost forgotten he had a mouth; until now, no one had been much interested. He took the flower and smelled it briefly. Finola put her hand on his. She pulled a petal from the blossom and held it tantalizingly close to his lips. He was dopey from the day and they were alone in the world at that moment. It might be poison, but he didn't care. He let her feed her one petal, then another, then another. He was surprised how

good the blossom tasted. Not cloying at all, as he'd thought. It was sharp, distinctive. Vegetative. He wanted more of the blossoms, especially if they came with the fingers.

Finola moved on. She was gathering armloads from the bushes, collecting them in a rumpled paper bag she'd produced from her handbag. "That's a lot," he said. "Really having a feed, eh?"

"Just gathering the bounty around us," she said.

"You and your man Balzac. Scavengers, the both of you."

Finola extracted herself from the foliage. "It's right here in front of us. Why wouldn't we take it? I'm all for radical self-sufficiency, but that's not even radical. That's just self-sufficiency. It's just responsible. Once you free yourself of the mindset that you have to get your food wrapped in plastic, the world becomes a generous place." She started making her way back to the path, which he hoped led to the drinking fountain. "I actually learned most of what I know about foraging from Balzac. Otherwise, you can get some really suspect stuff. There's hemlock and shit lying around here. I would never do the mushrooms, but he finds some that are unbelievable."

"That's very romantic, yeah? Living off the land like that."

"If you ask me, it's not all that romantic. Anyone could do it. There's so much waste and carelessness. I think that's the difference. Waste, carelessness; ingratitude. I mean, do you really go to the supermarket and get a sense of your place in the world? Out here, you can't help but get it. This is the same as it's been for years. It's got its own kind of eternity. Just imagine how many little gnats like us these big Monterey pines have seen. Have you ever seen any place more beautiful? And you and I, all of us here – we can just walk right into it. If you respect it, it provides for you."

Colin tried to remember what he did look at all day, in his real life. Certainly nothing like this. Maybe he was just the sort of careless wastrel she was talking about. He bought his food from the supermarket and threw his rubbish in the bin. He was the enemy to her ethos, but he was not compelled to cling to his carelessness right then. He was more compelled to imagine utopia, which, come to think of it, maybe he never had before. Still. He had one question. "If it's as easy as that, why bother to have a job?"

She shrugged. "How else am I supposed to pay my rent?"

"Rent?"

“Oh, I don’t stay outside anymore.” She lifted her sleeve. Her arm had a scarred gouge on the outside of her bicep. “I got a MRSA. I can’t take the chance of another one. I was in the hospital for six weeks. Trust me: there is nothing free or radical in there. But that doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten who my friends are. There are some beautiful people out here.” She dodged off the path again. “Come here. I want to show you something. I haven’t figured out what it means yet.” She pushed into a flower bed, parting red from pink from yellow. Interred in the dirt was a tableau: lined up in a studious grid were plastic black-green soldiers, buried to the waist. They were arrayed in lines by stance – before, during, after the shot - but all had guns fully freed from the earth. Some looked as though they’d been chewed by animals or maybe children. By the bleach and the grit, they might have been there for years, although, maybe in the echo of timelessness, they might have been there only for days. A haphazard few had orange syringe caps blunting the tips of their rifles.

“You can tell that someone thought about this,” she continued. “It looks like something excavated from an ancient civilization. I keep looking at it, and I can’t figure out what side these guys are playing. Sometimes, I feel like they’re benevolent. Protectors. Other times, I feel like they’re hidden for a reason. They’re trying to stay hidden, until they have to mass. Lying in wait. Ready to rise from the dust should the war come on. Crazy, isn’t it? Someone put them there. Maybe they didn’t even think about the questions that might come to mind. And what is this, really? Just a little prank. Just a patch of undergrowth.” She stood up and released the bushes, which instantly obscured the find. Behind them, Balzac had appeared. Colin would have welcomed him to be more scarce just then. He wouldn’t flatter himself that his intentions were being purposely thwarted, but it sure felt like that.

“Ah, hah!” Balzac said. “You’ve discovered our Terra Cotta Warriors. Not the least of the little mysteries you’ll find around here. Keep your eyes open! People scatter their shit wisdom everywhere. You guys going for water? Always some shit wisdom over that way.” Colin felt a growing sobriety, with the familiar warmth of the beer receding. At the same time, he felt a new strangeness, an imbalance. Probably just from sleeping outside, he figured.

Balzac moved quickly out of the grove, with Finola now in his stride. They got on the paved path, and Colin could see discrete municipal service buildings. He was hoping the water would be there. The flowers had helped somewhat, but he still had the bitter taste of the nutmeg. Colin also became vaguely aware that he’d been counting on Balzac to watch his bag while he was gone, and the more he thought about it, the more he thought, intellectually, that he might want to panic a little bit. They couldn’t have gone far. They got to a heavily patinaed drinking fountain and Colin refilled. By the trash, he saw dozens of discarded coffee to-go cups. Funny how quickly Colin internalized the lessons he was learning. Look, he wanted to say. Look how they have so wantonly discarded their *vessels!* Now that he was aware, the waste was

shocking. Some of them looked barely used, which, after the nutmeg and whatever else, he could not say about his own. It may need to be, uh, *repurposed* soon. He never would have thought he'd be someone to pick through the trash, but they all looked pristine. Jackpot! He'd be taking these back with him. Maybe give them a quick rinse first.

He took a stack to the water fountain for a quick appraisal. One after the other, clean and white, untouched. The abundance of them encouraged Colin absurdly. Just left for him, just as Balzac had said, just when he needed it. Maybe it *was* possible to live strictly off detritus. He went through six, seven before he found one with any evidence of previous utility. Sliding off the eighth cup, he found something genuinely marvelous.

The interior of the cup was covered with an etching. Delicate strokes, in what appeared to be ballpoint pen. It was a panorama, viewed from above, of an elaborate pavilion. Its gracefully curving dome sat atop a Gothic spine, both covered in an intricate lattice. The shading of each square gave an effect of openness – a structure of windows and not walls. The building was foregrounded by lush flora, evident despite the scale, and backgrounded with palm trees. The detail was nearly photographic. It would have been well accomplished even on a flat surface, and Colin thought perhaps it had been assembled after the fact. From the outside, though, the cup was indistinguishable from any in the stack, the base commercially sealed. Staring into the cup, he felt like he could fall right through, right into that place and time. He looked down and down and down.

He turned around to show Finola, to impress her, and Balzac, who would help him impress her. They had already started heading back, and their few paces took them out of Colin's sight. He thought the clean cups might also be useful. He almost brought more with him, but decided to leave them where they were. In situ, they were someone else's stroke of luck. Hoarding them would disrupt the flow, would deny them to someone at the moment they were most needed. They would be an encumbrance and would eventually be discarded. Wasted. He counted out six, and no more. The drawn one didn't count. That one was all his. He kept his day's *vesse/* with him. Somehow, he lacked the agency to discard it autonomously.

Their group on the hill came into view, and though he wouldn't have thought he'd recognize them instantly, he did. The group seemed exactly as it had when he left. He couldn't see his bag, but he could see the impression of it. It had not been replaced with its absence. The group was slowly falling into a huddle, most lying, a few standing. The upright gesticulated. Enacting something, it seemed, but Colin couldn't recognize any standard tropes. Colin tested himself by appraising the other girls. He tried to see if any of them would be just as good as Finola, but they all seemed ragged by comparison. He was losing his will where she was concerned. Leave it to me, he thought, to pick the one girl who won't be out here tonight. As they came closer, and his bag reassured him, he resisted to the urge to throw himself on it.

Two of the people standing seemed to be performing a small drama for the benefit of those gathered. "You don't get it, *maaaannn*," said the first, drawling in the manner of the chronically stoned. "Those buffalo could fucking *crush* a coyote, *maaaannn*! There's a whole fucking pack of 'em! Ten fucking tons, *maaaannn*!"

"Yeah? Well, that coyote was fixin' to eat 'em all, *maaaannn*." They both reeled in an exaggerated manner.

"Coyotes, the fuck! asshole. You don't know a coyote from a damn Chihuahua!"

"What do you call a coyote bitch? You call her a *bitch!*, bitch!"

"Who you calling a bitch? I'm going to fight you, *maaann!*"

The actors took wild swings at each other, miming fists and knives and what appeared to be a baseball bat. The crowd broke into appreciative guffaws.

"Ooh!" Finola called. "My turn!" She assumed the wobbly stance of one of the combatants. "You don't get it, *maaaannn*," she said, sounding precisely like the man had before her. "The sun is fucking quincunx with the *moon*, *maaann!* And Saturn is in the third *house!*"

"Mercury's retrograde, motherfucker!" the actor said, resuming his baseball bat. "I'm going to fight you, motherfucker!" They flailed.

Colin turned to Balzac. "What's this about?"

"Aha," he said. "That's just our nightly entertainment. Let's just say that not everyone around here has such an evolved sense of community. These two guys that show up now and then are like Shakespeare's own fools. You've just got to sit back and laugh."

"...you stole my fucking DRUGS, *maaann....*"

Balzac demanded Colin's cup and handed it back in the darkness. It had gotten too dark to see anything, but Colin figured it was too late to start doubting. The cup tasted of sweet, cheap wine, with a kick of...cough syrup? "What's in this?" he asked Balzac. Even in the dark, he could see Balzac measure his words. "You understand we need to apply resourcefulness to our revelry? So it's a poor man's K-hole! Still gets you somewhere new." He shrugged. "Maybe." Colin vowed to moderate the cup. He suspected it would be in high demand from other quarters anyway.

The fog had returned in force now. The last of the summer evening light glowed lilac while black cartoon cypress trees fingered branches across the sky. Finola returned to them, fuzzier than before. Colin consider the drawing on the cup. Maybe she would approve of his

scavenging acumen. He was unproven as yet, but maybe this was a way he could manifest a little romance and mystery. She more than any others also qualified as a friend.

“Hey, Finola,” he called, though she was standing right next to him. “Take a look at this cup I found. Reckon it means something? It’s really beautiful.”

“Let me see.” He handed it to her, fingers brushing. “Oh, wow.” Quiet. Not glib and brash. Might be something. “That’s amazing. It looks like the Conservatory. Have you been there yet? It’s right over there. Looks just like this.” She rotated the cup around, swirling like a glass of wine. “I wonder who did this?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I was kind of wondering that, too. I really wondered how it was done? I mean, you’d have to have the tiniest little hands, wouldn’t you?” He looked at hers. Could it be? That wouldn’t make sense.

“Where’d you find this?”

Colin quickened at the thought of another trip away with her. “Back where we were,” he said. “There were heaps of cups that looked almost new back there. I brought some back, just because I thought we could use them. I wonder if there are any more. Want -” he suddenly felt too bold “- want to go back and check it out?”

She turned away from him. The waning light left her face in silhouette, like the portraits of Victorian children that had once been fashionable. She regarded the play actors for an extra beat, waiting for their next attempt at entertainment. Leave now, and she might miss something. Maybe he should be paying more attention to them, integrate himself better, but given a second to consider himself, he felt thicker than he had when the sun was shining. It wasn’t drunk, exactly, but he began to feel a vague lifting from somewhere in his belly, as though he were on an elevator, hurtling upwards. He was not sure he could be trusted in public.

“I need coaching,” he prompted her. “See if I’m doing this scavenging right.” She turned her head back to him, and said, “Why not? That cup does look ready for a swap.”

He left the six clean cups behind.

He started lurching off into the general direction from which they’d come, then slowed and waited for Finola to lead. She led him towards the drinking fountain as the dusk fell dark. The mountain of white paper cups shone through. He went to the stacks and started shuffling. The last one had been buried.

“Don’t know how I’m going to do this,” he said. “Can’t see much now.”

“Oh, yeah?” she said. “Well, that’s easy. Got anything left in your cup? The one you got this morning? Kill it! And give it here.” He could not say no, although the shock of the last foul gulp shook his reverie. As she took the cup, her thumb punched through the sodden seam at the base. “You’ve been carrying this all day, huh? The first thing I ever gave you. You didn’t even give me a thought, did you? It was all just manifestation. And now look where the day’s brought you.” She paused. Her features were indistinct, but Colin saw her smiling.

“And to think how many of those I’ve thrown away in my life.”

“It’s time for this poor fucker to serve its last purpose for us.” Finola stood the cup in the center of the asphalt and swiftly lit a match. She dropped it into the cup, which burst into flame. She watched it for a moment. “Ever it shall be,” she said. She turned to Colin. “Glean up quick, here, man. Light’s going fast.”

He peered into cups, expecting what he’d just found: blank, or illustrated. Instead, most were stained. Coffee was the least of what he found. Cigarette ash. The reeking remnants of a burrito. Smells of fetid trash, not just earthy trash. The darker it got, the less he could tell what he was looking for. The cup torch started dimming, producing plenty of heat but less and less light. Finola was not picking through the trash. All the stakes were his. “Hey, wait,” Colin said. “Out this morning, we found some light sticks. I wonder if Balzac still has those? Make it easier to dodge the bombs, at least.” The perfect thing at the perfect time. It would require returning to the public.

“Glow sticks, huh?” She chided. “Need to get your trance on?” She was a sudden blur of dancing arms in the pathway embers, but just as suddenly, she regained herself. In the distance, Colin could hear that the drums had restarted. The evening rhythm was half what it was in the afternoon, starting and stopping, just persistent enough to draw attention to itself. It created the opposite of trance.

“Well, well! What’s happening out here?” They looked behind them. Balzac had followed them - again! This time, he held a green glow stick between his teeth. The light made his cheeks fleshier and his eyes beadier, a Halloween menace. “The party’s just starting and here you are, stuck in the trash. Are you killing time, or injuring eternity?”

“Just over here looking for something that might be something,” Finola said. “Shine your light on me, brother.” Balzac came to her and did as she told him. She pointed the fluorescence into the cup. “Holy shit!” she said. “New kid! Come look at this! I got one, too! It’s the Tea Garden.” In her cup, in the same hand, was a lush Japanese garden. A glassy stream passed under a steep, barreled bridge on one wall. Approximately opposite, a three-tiered pagoda rose over what was clearly a mature wood of bonsai – a miniature of a miniature.

Surrounding them were cherry blossom trees in full bloom. Even here, in the sick green glow, the white blossoms were rendered as delicate as foam.

Balzac looked in. "I like it! Someone's taking the time to *internalize* the beauty of our glorious landmarks! Get it? That'll be a hell of a gimmick one day. But I advise you right now to grab anything you're going to grab out of this little corner of the world and vamoose. I manifested some magic from this self-same dump, but we're not going to be able to show face around here for a little bit."

Colin thought to resist his imperative. He'd been following plenty these last few days, but for a change, he felt that he was right where he wanted to be. He was finally receiving some revelation. Finola had followed Balzac, though, and with her, his resistance. They got to a spot just behind the hill, where theirs was the only light. Fog had already obliterated the path they'd just left. Colin could see that Balzac was holding his own stacked cups, which made him wonder a little. Had he found more drawings? He was strangely, childishly affronted by the thought. Or was he also sharing utilitarian wealth? This thought, too, set Colin on edge. He couldn't figure out why – Balzac hadn't been anything but generous in his interest so far – but for some reason, Colin wanted him farther out of the frame. If Finola did, too, though, she didn't show it. "Check this out," he said. He made gestures with the glow stick towards the cups he held, and the effect was flashing, like a neon sign. He had two cups stacked, but the top one did not fit flush. Instead, it made a sort of lid, which he now withdrew. "Voila!" Finola gazed in with him, and almost immediately, the two of them burst out laughing. "No. Fucking. Way!" Finola took the glow stick and poked around at the content of the cup. Colin couldn't see much, but he could hear a rustling of plastic. "What dumbfuck leaves something like this right out there like that?"

"I propose thus," Balzac said. "Whoever abandoned this did not intend to return. Either it was ditched out of peril or it was lost out of idiocy. Whatever happened, it was delivered to us at just this moment." He paused. "Maybe it was just to celebrate our latest addition." To this, he raised the cup in a salute to Colin. He looked toward the cup, flattered, embarrassed, suspicious. When he looked in, he saw a plastic sandwich bag, wadded around something dark. Hash? No. It wasn't solid. He reached in and pulled the bag out. Earthen, crumbled mushrooms.

"Who are you that you can bring us straight to a stash on the first night you're out?" Finola gently pushed his arm. To prove he was real? Somehow, he managed to grab her hand while it fell, squeeze it, and leave off before either she or Balzac could deny him. His head was free now of any residual boozy clumsiness, but, somehow, his skin was charged. He looked again at the bag. He'd never eaten these things. Wasn't sure what he was supposed to do with them. Wasn't sure what they were supposed to do with him.

“Certainly not enough for everybody,” Balzac answered to the question he hadn’t asked, sparing him the embarrassment of his ignorance. “We got provisioned earlier today, so we might want to hang onto this. What do you all think?”

“I think that’s right,” Finola said. “But I think we could maybe have a little. For finders’ keepers. Just among friends.” Colin realized she’d just committed him to something he probably wouldn’t choose to do, but he felt clear in his acceptance of her proposal. Day was fully dark, and the cold that had rushed in so suddenly had attained a strange stillness. How could it be hot and cold at the same time? It didn’t make sense. How could his mind be so centered while his knees and wrists and elbows twisted in circles on themselves? He started a new life when he got to this place. Maybe a new body came with the deal.

He waited for the others to do what they were going to do. It became apparent they were waiting for him. He’d taken everything they’d given him so far, so they had no reason to doubt him. Still, they did. “You done this before?” Finola asked. Colin shook his head. “Are you afraid?” He shook it again, then said, “Why? Should I be? Are you sure that is what you think it is?”

Balzac regarded this sagely. “You ask two different questions, my friend. I’m quite sure it is what we think it is. I am confident in my mastery of fungi. Should you be afraid? Depends on what kind of dark knowledge you’ve been hiding from yourself.”

“Don’t worry,” Finola added. “We can’t dose you enough with this to get all the monsters out of your brain. We’ve only got enough to help you see a little better. If you get scared...I’ll hold your hand.” She and Balzac laughed. Balzac stopped laughing abruptly and dug into the plastic bag. He withdrew a non-specific amount of the contents and immediately began to eat. “Mmm! Tastes like poison!” he said. He passed the cup to Finola, who did the same. It came back around to Colin, illuminated. He went to grab a few slivers from the baggie, but was startled to see that the interior of the cup, which he’d previously noted was white and clean, now appeared to be illustrated in the same hand as the others he’d found. This time, he saw a riot of Disney toadstools sprouting from the bottom of the cup, with spindly stalks and huge, polka-dotted caps. As he looked closer, the caps reached beyond the top of the cup, spilling over the sides, engulfing Balzac’s hand. It was lovely and fanciful and seemed to be drawing itself, even as Colin watched. Then, without so much as a blink, it erased itself. Colin halted: wait, what? And he hadn’t even eaten any yet. Should he? Glacial time in the considering. He stared into the cup. It remained as white and mundane as he’d originally seen, with the janky baggie shoved inside. Of course, it was nothing. Of course, his imagination was playing with him. He was by no means fucked up.

“Give me some of those,” he said.

Back on the hill, the drums were building. Colin saw his rucksack, where he left it, in a way that now seemed inevitable. All the shapes of his group were recognizable. Other groups had gathered, too. Colin tried to concentrate on what might be happening. His skin lacked the familiar alcohol warmth, but did not quite feel natural. At times, he would feel a sudden, spreading awareness. It was like the mechanics of a snowflake melting, but without the sensation of cold. Other times, his skin seemed to pull on and off his muscles, bubbling. His muscles, underneath, were still in good working order, which was reassuring. He strode toward the gathering with this new understanding. The hour was no longer awkward and in-between. It was prime time now, and the evening was in full swing.

A girl with blond, streaky hair lurched towards him. "Did you see? Over there?" she asked, eyes wide. "There's a whole glare of cats over there!" She lurched back to the crowd. Voices were starting to join the drums, chanting. She threw herself into the kind of rolling shake Finola had mockingly assumed earlier. The blond girl flung herself around with no such irony, as though she'd never moved another way.

The drum circle advanced itself from the hill to the playground. Colin had seen the playground in the broad daylight, but now, shining through the mist, it was nothing like he thought he'd seen. He was surprisingly reassured by the simple fact of illuminated vision, after the stumbling he'd done in the dark. And it was a beautiful playground. The large, primary-colored structures evoked the tree house forts Colin always wished he'd had in childhood. Elsewhere, a spider web cargo net climbed to the tree tops. Behind the playground, an undulating concrete slide rolled down the hill. It was here that Colin's eyes rested. When they did, the hill seemed to melt before him. As he closed the distance, his eyes adjusted, and he saw the dripping was merely the flow of bodies, issuing squeals for the whole downward slope. What did she say about some cats? Were those cats falling down the slide? No. He knew that was ridiculous. They were humans. But she did say something about cats, didn't she? He had housecats, back at Mum and Dad's. He'd be back there in a matter of days. Mum and Dad's seemed impossible right now; it was impossible to live in any other world. Colin felt he would like to see these cats, feel them purring. Just the thought gave him phantom purring in his right hand. He enjoyed it, at first, but couldn't figure out how to make it stop.

Colin wanted to climb everything at once. He settled on the spider net. He hadn't climbed one of these things for years. No matter. His purring hands latched on and his arms were all sinew. He trusted his body to his arms, which scaled the structure so effortlessly that his legs merely floated, weightless. As he approached the top, a ballet of climbers suddenly fell backward through the cargo loops, suspended by their knees. Without thinking, he did the same. What a relief to be hanging like that! These people were doing everything right! His

body was right to follow them so readily. He didn't need his mind at all, he thought, and immediately wondered if he actually still had his mind at his disposal.

A cotton silence had enveloped the hangers. Colin broke it. "What are we doing?"

"We're bats," someone said, matter-of-factly.

"A *cloud* of bats," someone corrected.

They hung in stillness.

"Beats a hole in the head," someone said.

"Excuse me?" Colin said.

"For increasing brain blood volume."

"What do you mean?"

"There are people who believe it's good for the health of your brain to drill a hole in your skull. It increases blood flow. "

"I have one of those holes," a third hanger said. "From that time Drakemore came after me with that bottle? Guys remember that?"

Heads nodded. All Colin saw was a rippling of hair.

"Dude, that was fucked up. When that happened."

"I can feel the blood coming to my brain now."

"Can you feel it coming through the hole?"

"It doesn't come through the hole."

"I would so love to feel your brain right now."

Where Colin lived, it was crawling with bats. They'd cover the trees, thick and heavy as mangoes. The only way you could tell they were alive during the daytime was that, every so often, one would stretch out a membranous wing. Colin did this now, because he'd always wondered what it would feel like. He felt it unfold and fold again, but unevenly, like a cheap umbrella.

The drum beat infiltrated his cloud and became suddenly raucous, and Colin wondered how he'd managed not to hear it these last - minutes? Hours? Who knew. He raised himself

upright on the cargo net only to find that the density of bats had abandoned the apparatus. So much to play on! He was falling behind. He looked toward the dancers. The blond girl, and three or a dozen others he could see, were flailing hypnotically, as though on ropes, twisting from the top and bottom. It almost looked like someone was juggling flames. He heard Balzac's familiar voice, droning from his left. "Let us explore the rectitude of voluntary impoverishment. For instance, soap." If he knew anything, Colin knew he had to stay away from that right now.

The playground stood in a candy floss of ocean mist. Everywhere else Colin looked, green eyes flashed in the black trees. A glare, indeed.

A familiar voice sang over the others. "Who's next?" she brayed. "Supersonic Spanking Machine, fuckers!"

He didn't know what that meant, but he knew it was her, and because it was her, he needed to know. He exited the web climb with a radical uncertainty. Once on the ground, his mechanical body stood firmly while his skin kept seething. He looked to the slide, fully expecting his now affirmed mirage.

"Bring that ass on down," Finola called. She stood at the base of the slide, facing up. Her legs were spread in a proud straddle. Three other girls stood behind her in the same stance. Colin could not quite fix the distance between them. They might be an arm apart; they might be embracing. The rider, whose gender he could not determine, crouched at the top of the slide. The heels were planted on either side of a slick concrete rut while the hands were hidden somewhere behind the body. With a heave, a whoop, and the rattle of wheels on concrete, the rider lay supine as a hidden conveyance hurtled it down the slide. It was hardly a smooth ride, but the speed was formidable. As the body came careening down to the sand pit, the rider was roughly ejected and flailed through the standing legs. The last in line was knocked down, but for a moment, the rider lay supine, gazing upward at a cathedral of crotches.

"That was awesome," the rider said, in a female voice. "I need to go again."

"Not so fast," Finola said. "It's Sharla's turn. We need to mix up the junk for the next go-around. New kid?" She smacked her ass playfully. "Park it back here."

Colin moved into place behind her. Another girl moved behind him. His muscles were all architecture, creating the perfect tunnel for successful passage. His skin raced furiously. Sharla climbed a hill so high, he wasn't sure he could see the top. Maybe if he moved closer to Finola, he could. He was still thinking about it he heard the howl from above. He heard the wheels rattle, punctuated by periodic skids, punctuated by cries of, "Fuck this!" The skateboard

flew out from under Sharla and landed across the opposing slide. Sharla landed hard and her momentum slowed. She seemed lost and trapped, though she could easily have reached the skateboard.

“Dive it!” came the voice from behind Colin. “Superman!” He’d never even looked at the girl, so now he did. Wasn’t much. Sharla flipped herself onto her belly and stretched her arms out in front of her. She pushed herself forward between her arms, like a swimmer. When momentum failed her, she did it again. In this way she propelled herself down the slide, fits and starts, the neck of her t-shirt stretching down her chest as she went. When finally she reached the bottom, she tapped at Finola’s legs, bidding them open wider. “I got all the way down here,” she said. “I’m going to get some crotch!” She crawled off the slide on her hands and knees. She easily cleared Finola’s reach, raising her gaze briefly but offering no further comment. When she got to Colin, she grabbed the outside of his legs, making herself taller instead of smaller, which would have eased her passage. The top of her head knocked him in his balls. He jumped aside, but her hands held onto him, and they fell twisted onto the sand. As they lay there laughing, the girl who had been standing behind him came roaring down on the recovered skateboard. Board and rider collided with the pile on the ground with a sensation that initially failed to register as pain.

“Your turn, Newb.” He’d been waiting for this, readying himself. Sharla and that other girl unceremoniously absented themselves, leaving only Finola to witness his daring. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Colin took the skateboard in hand and began his ascent up the shallow stairs. If he balanced himself right, he could go full on, brakes off. He wanted speed. He was going to fly off this hill, and then, if he was lucky, he could keep on flying.

He got to the top and sat on the skateboard. That lying position would be awkward, he realized, but since they didn’t seem to be playing that game anymore, he stayed sitting upright. He grasped the nose with one hand and balance his feet on either side. He gave himself a strong push off the top and started downward, slowly at first, but with good form. He kept one hand down and raised the other in the air. I’m a fuck of a cowboy, he thought to himself. He sailed, straight and steady, unimpeded. It felt fast, but he wished it was faster. The slide looked a mountain tall from the bottom, but at this speed, it would be over too soon. He vowed half way down to turn straight around and ride again. And again, and again, until the sun came up. He might never stop. Next time, he’d do it standing. He skated a little as a kid and could probably pull this off. He was invincible tonight. Silver Surfer. Caught air at the bottom and landed perfectly in the sand.

“You got a knack for that,” Finola said.

“Ride with me,” he said. “I think we’ll both fit.” Without so much as her customary smirk, Finola took the skateboard from his hand and went loping up the hill. Colin followed quickly after, having not yet exactly configured how this would work. Finola dropped the board on the slide and said, “Saddle up, cowboy.” Colin assumed his original riding position, seated, knees apart. Finola sat behind him, barely on the board. She threw her arms around his chest. She wrapped her legs around his waist and gripped with a strength that didn’t seem physically possible. Together, he felt, they may actually be aerodynamic. Maybe the extra weight would make them faster than before. Precarious as they were, Colin felt it best to kick off with only one leg. He kept one hand on the nose of board as they started rolling forward. It was easy, so easy, so comfortable. He was ready to fly down the hill.

“Whoa!” Finola screamed behind him. Her legs flew apart and out to the sides. She was off him, just like that. Her hands clutched at his chest as her weight fell, slightly at first, to her left. She gripped again with her right leg, to draw herself upright. Her heel dug into his belly. The weight dragged him to the side and off the board, which flipped backwards, spearing him in the chest. Ouch. Finola acquitted herself a bit better. She bore the brunt on her right thigh, which was crushed by Colin’s weight.

She couldn’t stop laughing. She was laughing so hard, she didn’t even push him off of her. He laughed, too. He might have kissed her then, but he felt like he’d been kissing her all along.

“This is all new to you, right?” she said. He nodded, though he wasn’t sure what she meant by “this.” “There’s so much more to see! Please tell me you’ve been to the carousel?” He shook his head, dumbly. He was still lying on her; now, she pushed him gently. He got up slowly, tentatively, as though the speed of the slope would suck him inevitably downward. He was able to stand, and so was she. He bent to collect the skateboard, but she shook her head. “Leave it here,” she said. “It lives here.”

He followed her past their saddle-swinging compatriots, past the sculpted concrete ocean waves, and toward what looked like an old stone church. “That’s the one bad thing about playing after dark. No one’s learned how to jump start this guy yet.” They went to a round pavilion adjacent to the church. Finola pressed her face to the darkened glass. “Don’t know how much you can see tonight,” she said. “For me, I’ve looked at this thing so many times, I always feel like my mind can fill in the blanks from any little glimpse I see. You can take a look, though.” Colin stepped up and looked in. It was a carousel, a big, fancy one. He’d seen those before, of course, on holidays to NSW. He couldn’t tell where he’d seen one like this, though, so immaculately preserved. From where he stood, it looked like it went on forever. It looked like a vision out of the old-fashioned story books his English grandmother sent him for his birthdays until he got old enough to protest. He could see the rich, vivid colors even though

they were lit only by the distant street lamps around the playground. There were horses, yes, but other creatures, too. Some were from nature and some were most definitely not from nature, hybrid monsters, though just as tame and bridled as the blue-purple-green ponies. He imagined he could see the lights go on, one by one, each fragile filament shyly glowing in its clear glass globe. He envisioned the tiger pawing forward, the zebra leaping upwards, the silver horse with the chain mail armor shake its head and commence to battle. This they did not with the calliope background he expected, but with the vigor of the drum circle. He found this sinister. He hoped it would not begin turning.

He felt a tap on his shoulder. "Look." He turned and found Finola facing a cup to him. A glow stick lit from an oblique angle. It featured, in the same black line drawing, this very carousel. It started spinning around and around, slowly, and he thought it must be moving within the paper confines. Then he saw Finola had been twisting it in her hand. Of course. She must have known how it would look to him right now.

He looked back to the carousel and reassured himself that it was not moving.

She tapped his shoulder. "Look."

She had another cup.

"Where are you getting more of those?" he asked.

"They're everywhere," she said. "I'm just manifesting them."

He stared at it for half a beat, expecting to see the carousel again, welcoming its return. Instead, he found himself staring into open jaws. Dagger teeth jutted from top and bottom, drenched in spittle, he could see even there. Around the jaws, very clearly, he could see a nose, and ears, and vicious, slit eyes. It was the mouth of a wild dog of some sort, ready to bite. It was quite a skillful thing, he thought absently, and yet, it was so realistic that it could have been a final document.

"What is that? Some dog?"

Finola looked into the cup, double checking. "It does look like a dog, doesn't it? It's not. It's a coyote. At least, that's what it looks like to me. I ran smack into one of those fuckers here once. I went to pet it, even, before I realized that wasn't a good idea. It just ran away."

"You have coyotes here?" Colin said, incredulous. "I thought I'd see one out in the desert. Chasing a roadrunner." He shrugged. "I don't know anything about your exotic North American animals."

“There are signs everywhere in the park to look out for them,” she said. “It started with one or two, but now, I think there are a lot of them. Every so often, someone loses a Chihuahua or something.”

“Now I really want to see one,” he said. “I want to look for one.” The vaguest sense of a new pursuit turned him inside out.

“And what would you do if you found it?” she asked.

“The only thing I’ve ever seen done with a coyote,” he said. “Drop an anvil on it. From the sky.”

There was rustling behind them. Finola snapped to attention and turned slowly. “Don’t look now,” she said, “but there seem to be some exotic North American animals behind us right now.”

Colin looked behind her. He could make out one, maybe two figures behind her. They were about the size of cats, but he was not going to be fooled by *that* again. These things were more hunched in the back, almost round. Then he saw the mask-like markings on the eyes. Raccoons! He’d heard about these things. God, they were getting awfully close for wild animals. Cheeky bastards! The bolder one – the leader, he assumed – came all the way to where a discarded white cup lay at Finola’s feet. It must be the carousel one, he thought. The raccoon picked it up in both hands – they looked like hands – and lifted it, then looked inside. Did it see the art? Shouldn’t the art be protected somehow? The raccoon apparently approved, because it took the cup between its teeth, brought its hands back to the ground, and skittered off with its compatriot into the darkness, until only the paper white of the cup was visible.

Finola laughed as she watched them go. “You know what a group of raccoons is called? A *gaze*.” She looked after them, but now they had vanished into the dark. “You got to watch out for them, though. They will get all in your shit.”

Colin jolted slightly. What if they got into his bag? That would be a silly disaster. He could just seem himself now, inadvertently trying to bring one through customs. That might be fantastic, though.

“Should I go check my bag, do you think?” What a joy it was to be free of that damn bag, even for a moment. It was heavy for those few paltry belongings. Heavy with the self he was before today, someone he wasn’t sure he’d understand if they ever met again. What would happen if he let it go? What in it was so valuable? He could manifest clothes, for sure, and anyway, he already had clothes. He would find a way around a toothbrush. Sure, there

was his passport, and the last of his money. But if it was gone? This world he'd found could provide for him.

"Hell, yeah, you should check it!" she said. "You can't go leaving your shit lying around like that!"

He couldn't tell if she was joking, but she seemed so convinced that he instantly sought exit from the brightness of the playground. He couldn't even remember where he last left the bag, but he knew he last saw it before he entered the light. It had followed him all day, he calmed himself as he hit a trot through the grass. It was always right where he left it, for hours. Hours. Colin began to wonder what time it might be. He wondered when the question of sleep would arise. Did everyone drop off one by one, or was there some point where everyone would agree to silence? Colin remembered what Finola said: she didn't stay outside anymore. She was at work early this morning. Maybe she was planning to leave soon. She had the option to do that. He had no options. Unless. She could leave him like they'd never met, but she'd stuck with him this long. Maybe she really liked him. She didn't seem to have another man. Maybe she'd take him home with her. How Russian would he be then?

The bag was there. The bag was fucking there. Worried for nothing! Spell broken for nothing! But he fell for it. He fell for that same old-life paranoia. Just when he was starting to trust a little. Just when he was releasing some of that scared, provincial kid. He should run right back to Finola now. But why was he going to check the bag in the first place? For those creepy little raccoons. Little bastards. The bag was closed, and as far as Colin was concerned, that should be sufficient evidence of its sound standing. He had little to gain by opening it up, less still in taking inventory. It was here, where it belonged, unfucked with, end of story. And yet. He couldn't help but wonder how clever those things might be. He looked again to the bag. There's no way they could actually fit in there. Wait! Did it just move? It couldn't have moved. He should just open it? What if he opened it and one of those things jumped out? And bit him? Now the thought became inevitable, a horrorshow loop. He must deal with this bag and get back Finola. She hadn't followed him? He would have thought she'd follow him. He was her man tonight. He had no one else tonight. Fuck the bag. He just drag it closer to sight line. He was high now, but that didn't make him a bloody twat, for fuck's sake.

Colin was by the drums now, close enough to watch the drummers drumming, and this was also disconcerting. They were movie soundtrack. They should not be human. Those drums could hide raccoons. But could they hide coyotes? Damn, he was high. He could see the fire show more clearly now. It was just one person. It could have been a man, but didn't have to be. The fire swung on ballasts on either end of a length of chain. The trails of fire made hoops in the air, above and around the twirler. They looked solid enough to jump through. Maybe someone would do that next. Maybe one of those beasties. The drums throbbed. Just

as he settled into the constancy of these rhythms, they started de-syncopating, with one drummer after another falling out of rhythm and, ultimately, falling silent. Angry voices carried over the remains of the beat.

“We’re done here, gentlemen. You have to go now. Thanks for dropping by.” Balzac’s sonorous tone rang out, with its unhurried, professorial tone. Behind it, indistinctly, was a more frenzied chatter.

“Don’t give me that shit, asshole,” came a grizzled drawl. “Our shit is gone and I know your ass had something to do with it.”

“That was not your shit, *maaaan*,” came the echo.

Colin stopped and looked around. Were these the voices he’d heard lampooned earlier? He wondered if he should move in, alert to comedy.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, Drakemore.” Colin figured it was one of theirs from the relative steadiness. “We don’t have a stash today. And we don’t owe you shit, anyways.”

“This ain’t about that, *maaannn*! This is about *our* shit! I know it’s gone, and I know you bitches been here all day. Nobody coulda took it but you.”

“These accusations grow tedious,” said Balzac. “Run off and find yourselves another tree house. We have nothing for you tonight.”

“You know what, motherfucker? I’m getting a little tired of your attitude. I get some sick of kids like you, straight from Mommy and Daddy’s. Like it’s some kind of big adventure. Think you’re better than us. Talking down to us. Stealing our motherfucking shit and then acting like we’re some crazy motherfuckers. “

Where was Finola? Was she safe? Was she enjoying this?

“Look,” came the steady voice again. Colin now wished he knew who this was, and knew whether and how to ally. “We got no problem with you guys. You stay on your side, we’ll stay on ours. Everyone’s happy.”

“You’re not hearing me, asshole. You fucked with us. You stole our shit. I think you *been* stealing our shit. That’s just bullshit.”

Colin could not figure out what was happening. From the display this afternoon, they were not to be feared. They seemed pretty righteously angry, though. Clearly some history here.

The twirling fire stopped. The light vanished.

“I will get my shit back if I have to tear every one of your assholes inside out! Starting with the pompous fat one.”

When did Colin become so suggestible? He had no gut all day, had been free of his animal nature. All of a sudden, it kicked at him and he starting sweating.

“What are you going to do, Renfro? You don’t want to start anything here. There are too many of us.”

“Hey! What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” More shouting and the sound of the chain, jangling on itself. He could see the smaller of the men had taken it from the fire artist and had started to wield it like a weapon. Colin heard the clink of the chain as it resumed its trajectory, flamelessly, speeding faster and faster until the sound ceased to be metal and became only air. More yelling of threat and counter threat. And then a thud. Followed by another thud. He couldn’t see who was hit, couldn’t see if the intruder had been mollified. He felt he should go back in and fight for the honor of is tribe. He should go and protect his damsel. He heard another thud; this one sounded wet.

The cramp in his belly shot to his knees, crippling him. He hunched around his gut and the sweat rolled in waves. His mouth started watering in the precursor to a retch. His urge to vomit was so strong that it precluded standing. He was helpless to this nausea, but he knew nausea. If he could just puke, he could be free of this new weakness. He could run back in there and add muscle to the fight, although in truth, he’d never been in a fight before. He could find his girl. He’d have to find some water first, maybe some toothpaste. The nausea ebbed, without the satisfying release of the puke, but Colin didn’t trust himself to action just yet.

Another thud, then screaming – a girl’s screaming. Was it her? Surely, it couldn’t be her! That was a scared little girl’s scream, and Finola was scared of nothing. She was probably better at this than him. She’d probably need to save him. He was still so sick. He could still feel that new skin on his arms and his legs, that racing, roiling, alive skin, thrilling in its novelty, but the pain inside him was stubbornly familiar. It was a pain he knew from his childhood, pain that came with a bucket by the bed and three changes of the sheets. How long had he been gone, now? How long had he been pondering this? How long could he disappear before he’d be completely forgotten? He should shake this off and go back in, for better or worse. These were his people now. He had no alternate plans. He had no idea how to get out even if he’d tried. He had to get back to his girl. If Finola could tell him the story of this brawl, it would give him just enough distance. He’d get his head around it, without fear of blood or bruises.

He picked up his bag and started crouch walking across the grass, towards the playground. He felt invisible in the darkness, but he was hardly hidden. The trees were well behind him, and ahead of him, the arc of lamp light. He could see the drums standing, abandoned, and a gathered crowd that seemed half the size it had been minutes ago. He didn't know how to enter the scene without drawing attention to himself. Funny time for social awkwardness. He thought about the bag again. He'd planned to leave it right around where he was, but he didn't want to do that until the disrupters were gone. The sweats broke over him again, and his gut started cramping. This time, he felt it not just from above, but also below. You've got to be fucking joking, he thought. Surely, this would pass. Another wave flowed over him and he knew he had to go. It was one thing to chuck out here in public view, but he'd be damned if he would shit himself in the middle of all this. He spied a deep grove – the grove, where, he now realized, he probably slept last night. Voices rose again from the distance, fewer, but louder. Colin grabbed his rucksack by one strap, threw it over his shoulder, and bolted to the trees. He dropped it just inside the grove, and took the slightest of privacy to be righteously sick.

He dropped trou and draped himself over his knees, hoping to direct the torrents of vomit off his shoes and into the inky blackness of this tree trunk. His first moments of imperative were almost poetic, in their own way. After a whole day of uncovering buried treasure below his feet, here he was, leaving the worst of himself to this generous ground. He hung suspended over this realization, and the realization that he may be part of a repeating pattern. For all he knew, he wasn't the first, or even the first today, to baptize this ground with his humors. For all he knew, his feet were now in a pure cesspool. Maybe this was a vacuum for the illness and disease of all the wanderers. He was grateful after this determination, grateful that the universe had provided him this black vortex. He would leave his poisons here and exit this grove, never to return, strong and healthy as he'd ever been. He was able to purge here. He was in a purgatory. Where was Finola? Balzac? He needed to voice that thought aloud. It was clever of him.

If he gave himself a second to notice, it seemed that the bubbling skin that was distracting his arms was starting to migrate to his esophagus, working its way down, through the tube that held him up. He liked that sensation on his arms, that percolating, but in the middle of him? Didn't like it. It should stop. It should have stopped, with the sick, but that was what seemed to get it started. The smell of his own vomit started to rise through the mossy ocean air and a new sense of time descended. He'd hoped to leave this poor little hiding place stronger, but he clearly was not. He had no idea how to get back to his people, and the way he felt, he saw no wisdom in doing so. He was weak and dirty and ugly now. Forget the girl now. He was beyond repellent. And if he showed up like this to the thugs' row – well, he'd just get

beat. Only thing they might be able to help him with is what he decided he really needed right now: a bed.

He puked a little more and shat a little more. No guarantee that this would rest him, but he figured this would at least give him the advantage in terms of quantity. He decided that when he left this place, he could never return. It became sinister as he stood in preparation, as though the spot could transfer poison back into him. He spied his bag, an oasis of tangibility, and he went to it with a dramatic leap out of his own toxic swamp. He sat square on the bag, afraid now of the ground. Maybe he should just abandon this and find himself a place to sleep. He'd saved some cash these last few days. It could be enough for a dorm bed somewhere. He had no sense at all of this city, and hated the fact. He really should have fought to get himself oriented instead of leaving himself to the whims of others. He did it once, and it fucked him. He remembered back a thousand years, to this morning, or last night. They weren't far from the road. If he could step outside this park, he could find stoplights. Someone would know where he could find a cheap bed. He could find water and a proper toilet. He could find bleeding *food*, although that was the last thing he wanted now. Only question was which way to go now to get out of here.

He sat, willing the throbbing panic out of his ears. He'd burrowed himself deep into the trees. He listened for the sound of the drums. He had every reason to believe they'd all fled, but right now, he couldn't trust anything he thought he knew. He heard nothing familiar. He would like traffic to go to, but the cars would pass one by one, disorienting, first to the right, then the left, then behind. He didn't hear any other human sounds. Just wind. The fog obscured the moon and the streetlights he'd escaped. He caught a whiff of the stench he'd delivered here, and he knew that he had to move. He picked up the bag. It had the weight of a body. He wasn't sure it hadn't been invaded.

He started slogging through the woods, looking down carefully, as though he could avoid traps like he'd just left. He couldn't see what was below his feet, and therefore, it was all shit. He finally found a paved trail, and he followed it. It had to get him somewhere, sooner or later. As he walked, nothing looked familiar. He wondered how he could have lost them all so soon, that whole pod of sleepers. Man, there must have been two dozen of them this afternoon, and nearly that the last he saw them. Where did they go? He got the sense that the whole place was a campground this afternoon. It was safe and domestic. On the path here, there was no one. If he had come here to hide himself, there was no one to hide from now. The quiet reverberated in his head for a few steps. Then, he heard the sound of his blood, and it was louder than anything around it, because his body didn't work right. He felt for his new skin, which should have abandoned him with the rest of the night. It didn't. Without the distracting spectacle, he couldn't hide from the skin. He had the skin down his gut again, too.

He thought he might have it in his heart. It was fucking with his blood right now. He didn't know what do with this body now. In truth, he was walking around now in the body he built for her. He made this body in her world, and now she was gone. Now, she never existed. Now, he was stuck with this thing, and he had tasks for which it was unfit.

He lumbered onward with an irrational sense that this darkness would soon disgorge him back out to where he started his day: the Haight-Ashbury. He wished he'd paid more attention this morning, but at the same time, he was convinced it would be familiar to him when he saw it. He didn't know what time it was, but there was sure to be an open door somewhere. Someone would take pity on him in this state. It seemed like a cool place. He was looking forward to tomorrow, when he'd have some time to himself. Maybe he could have a look around. If he was walking tomorrow, he could. He would be walking, right? Surely he'd return to himself?

After 10 minutes or three hours, whichever, he saw a light appear beyond the trees. Here it was! Just what he was looking for. Must be the road. His salvation. When he came to a clearing, he looked out and saw a delicate, white glass conservatory rising from a bed of marigolds. He knew this place, but didn't know how. He was quite sure he had not seen it earlier today, or he would never have left it. It reminded him of the carousel, like it had been imported wholesale from another era. It was a well-lit place, and better yet, it had, in front of it, a paved road. Where did he know this place from? His vision tunneled, and in his mind, he could see it. This was the place depicted in the first of those crazy drawings he'd found. It looked exactly like this. It was as though someone had taken this vista and rolled the edges. What a magnificent thing, he thought. What an amazing day this has been! There was no one to be seen despite the welcoming lights. He walked to middle of the gardens and sat on his bag, staring up. That thing was so beautiful. What happened to those cups, anyway? He thought. He wasn't usually sentimental, but he wished he'd tried a little harder to keep track of them as he discovered them. Maybe he'd kept one or two. He looked at his bag. He realized he hadn't looked in it since the fear of raccoons, and now, since their absence had not been assured, he feared them again. But the value street light brought to an efficient inventory overrode the detriment of public view. It didn't occur at that time that he should be hiding himself. There was no one here. He'd become invisible again.

He patted the bag, hesitantly at first, then more firmly. Of course no living thing had climbed in there! He unzipped the side pocket, the one where one could keep a water bottle. It was the right shape to contain a *vessel*, though he had no clear memory of secreting one here. He pushed and patted again and felt an encouraging cardboard give. He found, stacked, a good four or five white cups. Well, he had these, at least, the clean ones. He pulled out the stack and started absently shuffling through them, looking specifically for the mirror of this

place but also looking for some clue as to what his day had held. He removed two clean cups from the top of the stack, and there it was: the careful, magnificent rendering of this rather magnificent thing. He hadn't dreamed it after all. This small, accidental find was carrying him through the day. It was a narrative beginning and a narrative end. It made him wonder more about the other cups. If they weren't random - and now he was certain they weren't - surely, they must be leading him somewhere. He hoped that they would do that literally, and lead him through and out of this vast green space. But he also hoped they would do that figuratively. He left home for experience, after all. He left home not because he questioned what his life would be, but precisely because he did not. He saw a life ahead of him that would never vary from the life his father was living, and his brother, and all his cousins, except maybe Russell. He was hoping maybe this time, he'd find something, he didn't know what, that would mean something, anything besides just counting the days to payday and the hours to the pub.

He continued through the cups, just to see how many tracings he kept. Next was blank. Next was blank. Inside the last was the bag of magic mushrooms.

His first thought was chivalrous. I must return this, he thought. I must return this to my *friends*. He mused briefly about his absent self. He'd hated himself in his sickness, and preferred to think he'd never existed lest Balzac and Fin know him at his worst. Now, well, he wondered. He looked down into the cup. The walls were clean white. No whimsy, no meaning, just white. Did he want this, maybe? Did he want to just keep it? A single line snaked its way behind the baggie, still in the cup, and slowly began to draw itself. It slowly began tracing a toadstool, the same as he'd seen before. It must be true if he saw it twice. One line tracing itself against the convincingly true white. Slowly, the line became sharper, and where it would have traced the spines of the mushroom cap, it became more and more jagged. He'd seen this, too. Slowly and deliberately, the line traced snarling coyote jaws.

Colin flung the baggie from the cup. It sailed into the deep and dewy grass, where it sat motionless and benign. The cup, too, embraced the literal, starting white, staying white, no matter how expectantly Colin fixated on it. He looked again at the mushroom baggie. He and it would both be readily visible to anyone who happened by. Under the gaze of this mist-shrouded crystal palace, in a field of marigolds and pansies, he and the baggie would be bound together. He needed to get moving.

He went to the road, the straight, lit road. Surely, it would lead him out if he just stayed on here long enough. At the same time, his belly was not yet right, and he was still uneasy about those he left behind. He wanted to keep a hide in eyesight. He saw tennis courts to his left. He must have heard this at some point during the day. They were too bright and open for his current state, but to his right, he saw a path in the trees. It seemed to follow the main road well. He shouldered his rucksack and walked purposefully away from the tennis. As he walked,

he had a wave of clarity. Suddenly, he felt sober and in control. Must be the exercise, he thought, although it may have just been the vision of a good road. He rested into the clarity for a while; but if he felt himself inhabit it too comfortably, for too long, the bubbling would come back. He set himself to the task of discovering the formula for vanquishing the bubbling. Surely, it would have to leave him soon.

He followed the path and heard his feet. He heard his feet falling on sodden leaves, steady at first. His footsteps sounded rhythmic in his clear head. Then, after a period, either the footsteps or the sound of them became unsteady. Then steady again. Then improbably light. Then dragged behind him. Then echoed, multiplied, with a click of claws behind him. This sounded rhythmic again, natural, until his clear head thought: am I alone? He roused from his reverie and stopped in his tracks, awaiting the response of his phantom follower. The shadow steps stopped with him, which reassured him initially; but then, he envisioned someone or something behind him. He didn't know what he would do if something was there. It was probably one of those bloody raccoons again. What if it was? What if it wasn't? He spun around. Nothing. No one. Never was? Or maybe it was hiding? Or maybe he should hide from it? If he could, he would avoid hiding. He'd been too lost today.

He walked on, aware and weary of the tricks of the air. It became suddenly sweet, with an obvious smell of roses. This had to be a lie. This had to be his memory of earlier today, his first moments with Finola, and those flowers. Finola might have been the first flower-eater he'd ever met. Girls at home weren't like that. He looked to his right and saw a formal garden bursting with roses of all colors. Red, white, pink, yellow, orange. One color fading into another. The smell was thick but fresh, not that cloying rose like his Gram's bathroom soap. He had to go to them. Big, fat, open blossoms greeted him from thorny bushes, shedding petals. He scooped up petals by the handful and sunk his face into them. They felt soft as skin. The petal skin, here in his hands, far surpassed the skin he was stuck with now. He wondered if he could employ technology in the matter. He laid a coral-colored rose petal on his forearm. It felt soft and cool and he felt like it dampened the electric charge that was racing stubbornly on the surface of him. He put on another one over it, then another, in mosaic. Could he build himself an armor here? He raised his arm briefly, to see if maybe it was just this easy to contain himself. The petals floated through the air and settled on the ground. The sensation of his new rose skin intoxicated him, and further, created a desperate longing in its absence. He dropped his rucksack and lowered himself to the ground. He rolled around in the fallen petals he found – like a bloody dog, he thought, unable to restrain himself – and felt the softness blanket him. It felt good to lay down. If he had thought to bring his yoga mat, he could have stayed right here. He was tired of walking, and felt like he'd been doing it much longer than was strictly necessary. The grass was cool and much too wet, but from the ground, covered in rose petals, he felt embraced. Finola should be here with him. Carmel should be here with him. He saw

the roses above him, pink and red, yawning open. The roses above him were wanting him. They wanted his mouth. Where were Finola's delicious fingers when he needed them? He didn't know if roses were edible – that was another thing he needed Finola with him for – but they must be. He ate rose-flavored Turkish Delight as a kid. And Violet Crumble, but that tasted nothing like violets.

He reached up and delicately pinched a stem, his fingers deftly dodging vicious thorns. He bent it too his face, burying his nose in it. The scent and the softness spread over his face. It cooled his lungs as he breathed in and out. It fell onto his lips like a kiss, undeniably. It was as though it was trying to kiss him. He tugged at the petals, gently, as first, with his lips. He felt the flower respond and pushed further, with his tongue, with his teeth. He pulled off one, then another, and they melted onto his tongue. The calm they imparted to his skin now rolled through his throat and into his gut. Did she know how she was feeding him right now? This was all Finola, his florivore friend. The ghost of her fingers was on his lips.

He stayed, where he was, on his back but bent upwards, chasing the bending rose. He gnawed it until it was completely denuded. He wondered if he should have another? Should he go to yellow next? Would that be lemon-flavored? He let go of the stem, which sprang back into the rose bush and rearranged itself. The stick of the devoured blossom looked violated in the company of the bouquet still on the tree. Colin felt equally ashamed and desirous of another. His skin had decelerated to a gentle fizz. He found a yellow bud and drew it to him. Nose first, smelling, touching. He couldn't decide whether the perfection of this one should preclude its ingestion or make it that much more enticing. He'd give it a little longer. He looked deeper into the foliage as he stroked the yellow rose on his cheek. A mirror? He saw another young man laying on the ground, eating rose petals. He should have been startled but wasn't. It was the face of Dmitry from LA, and next to him was Timor. They were lying on the ground together, eating rose petals. Then Dmitry locked eyes with Colin and grinned wickedly. When he looked closer, he saw that each Russian was hovering over a female conquest in full root.

Suddenly, he heard a shaking in the trees. Funny. The Russians were silent, for all their ardor. He looked again and they were gone. How long had he been here? He looked for the bag. Still there. The shaking returned. A bright beam of light glared from a thicket of trees. Whoever was here didn't care if he knew it. Coppers? He stared dumbstruck at this light. It got closer and closer. Suddenly, crashing up the embankment, he saw a bicycle. It was ridden by a small man with dark skin that was obscured in the dark of the night. He had a purple, fur-trimmed king's cape sailing behind him and a red tufted crown on his head. The light was mounted on his handlebars, along with a stuffed zebra. Actually, it was a zebra only to its head. Its zebra head was replaced and had become a lizard. The bike bore down on Colin but he

couldn't move. The bike came at him full speed. The rider stood when approaching the bag, then, suddenly, he reared up and flew over Colin, crashing into the rose bush on the way down, trailing a mulch of roses behind him. Then he was gone.

When Colin lifted his rucksack to his shoulder, yet again, he staggered a little under the weight. I am so sick of hauling this fucker around, he thought. He was scared of the roses now, and had to move on, but he felt the adrenaline drain from him the further he moved further down the road. His ligaments loosed and stretched, leaving his muscles dragged behind him. He had to stop every now and then for them to spring back onto his bones. More darkness. More sea mist. More cold creeping over him. Why didn't this park end yet? He couldn't figure out why he hadn't reached civilization. He did wish he'd brought that yoga mat. What would happen to it, with him gone? Would he be replaced on it by another explorer? Would it be appropriated? Maybe by Balzac? Or would it be abandoned as easily as maybe he had been, donated to the night without sentiment? If he tried, he might be able to find his camp again. Maybe he just misunderstood the situation. He couldn't imagine sustained discord in such a deathly quiet as he was in. By now, maybe they were all piled together for warmth like puppies, dry over their rubber patchwork, dreaming dreams that were only slightly tainted.

He kept moving forward, unable to see the end.

Colin startled up again. He was draped over his rucksack, face in the grass. Never been face-down in a ditch before tonight, he thought ruefully. Now, I can't seem to find enough ditches. The sky was the silver-black color that he knew night to be around here. He had eyes on him again. He was learning to disregard eyes like this. It made no sense to be found in as vast as loneliness as he'd been wandering. The skin of his knee stung when he bent it. Must have fallen on his way here. No surprise there. The bigger surprise would be drawing himself upright. He heard a wet grunting sound over where the eyes were. Whatever that was, it was not human. He should run, but his body wouldn't let him. His body could only plod now. If that thing could race him at a plod, it was very well welcome. He looked into the eyes. They were still there when he looked twice. This might be real. The eyes were on a massive, shaggy, bearded black head not two meters from him, and they fixed him, intently. He could not be sure, but he could have sworn it was the face of a buffalo. But that was absurd! Buffaloes were extinct, weren't they? Even if they weren't, they surely wouldn't be here. He wondered if he stumbled into the zoo. That thing was so close it could charge him. It didn't. It just kept staring at him. He looked for a fence and, eventually, found one. It didn't seem enough to keep himself and the beast separated, but this standoff suggested it could be trusted. It kept breathing in heavy snorts. It gave off the familiar stockyard smell of dust and excreta. He roused himself and sat square on his bag, looking the thing in the face. It had to be what it looked like. It seemed just as interested in him. Never seen an Aussie, mate? Another one

came up behind it, and another. A line of calm snorts greeted him. They seemed to be on his side, the buffalo. Maybe it was his smell, he thought. Maybe I stink like an animal now. How could there be so many of these things, these symbols of freedom and open plains, staring him down in the cold ocean breeze?

He wanted to pet one. They were gathered like cattle, and so far, just as docile. He stood and walked to the fence. The buffalo stared steadily. He fixed his eyes on the beast who found him and slowly started to reach out. He reached farther and farther until he could almost touch it. He felt its hot breath. Just before he was able to make contact, the buffalo nonchalantly back up and turned around. The others followed. He had been one with them, and then they left him. He was so close to communion with the mythical.

He returned to gather his bag. He wondered if he should even bother pressing on. He lost track of the time a year ago, but the night could not go on forever. He looked down and saw a white cup. Strange to find it here. There was no other rubbish, no other evidence of humanity. The white glowed in the midst of the black grass. He was not sure if he was strong enough for another revelation right now, but he knew he could never leave a white paper cup alone again. He picked it up and looked in it. It was the right kind. In it, he saw a windmill. It covered the space in inverse, with the legs reaching from the lip of the cup inward. There, three blades balanced on the top. It was as though it had been rendered from below. It was much more simple than some of the others had been. Only a few tulip tufts adorned the classic structure. The benign image calmed him. He would hang onto this one. He draped himself over his bag again, just for a second. He balanced the cup on his forehead. It was a sweet, safe place to be.

Slap, slap, slap, slap, slap. It started gently, distantly, but the hoof beat rhythm grew stronger and stronger. Feet, on the pavement, sheathed in rubber, light, persistent. Slap, slap, slap. The sky, still grey, had undeniable daylight in it. Feet on the pavement. Seagulls, crying. Waves, crashing.

Colin lay on his side. His bag was still on him, fallen behind. He had four t-shirts piled on each other. These now bunched around him. He became aware of an uncomfortable stickiness in the crotch of his trousers. He took inventory of his discomfort. He was surprised to find that his primary sensation was hunger. He had none of the wrenching nausea that he'd become so accustomed to. His head was not quite what it should be, but he wouldn't call it pain.

He tried to lift his head. For some reason, he could not. He released the effort, and thought he might go back to sleep. He went to adjust his arm. This, too, refused. He had

become cement. He moved his arm again, this time with more force. It was then that he noticed the scraping of boot tread against his skin, digging. He had a boot on his head and a boot on his neck. Hands stayed his ankles. He felt a tugging at his shoulders where the straps anchored his bag to him. He felt a sudden blaze across his shoulders and heard a ripping. His lower arm was pulled behind him and he felt like one joint or another would give. It would probably be his elbow. He felt a twinge and then a pop. "What the fuck?" he finally screamed. "Who the fuck is there?" He scissored his legs, wrenching free from the restraining hands. For his effort, he got a kick straight on his heels, shocking him up to the base of his skull. He was being pulled, pulled from the back. The boot grazed his temple, dropping dirt in his eye. He tried to wrest free. He felt the skin open across his back as the bag pulled back on him. Suddenly, he fell backward with one final tug of his bag. And then, it was free. He was light again as his shell was severed.

The boot on his face dug and twisted. The wet of his dripping blood grew cold across his shoulder blades. A boot tip smashed into his back ribs. He fell forward. Just as quickly, the boots released him. Hoof beats, hoof beats. He turned around, but only saw a rustle of trees and crackle of leaves. Seagulls screeched.

In front of his eyes, he saw shingles. Tulips. A windmill creaked serenely in the gust of the Pacific, which rolled behind him, beckoning him home.