You Fucked Up
YOU fUCKED uP

by

rOBERT rOWBOAT

In memory of
Demetri Demas
I heard a story about someone who survived a shooter rampage in a restaurant by climbing inside the empty dish washing machine and closing the door. He was the dishwasher. I liked that story, the dishwasher as the only survivor. Total reversal of the pyramid power structure, he used his personal power to triumph. I thought of that story when I saw them coming, searching house to house in brightly colored hazmat suits. The gunshots were getting closer. I saw the outcome of this situation clearly in my imagination. I took the racks out, stashed them behind the fridge, then crawled inside the oven.

I was the only one left at the house. It felt like hours with my body contorted into that sooty cube before the kitchen door squeaked open. The cat meowed. God damn. A gunshot right there. How did I keep quiet? I loved that cat. It seems impossible. I stayed in the oven for a day and a half, silent, pissing myself. My knee still hurts, I limp when I walk.

Most of the neighbors left right after the Catastrophe hit Minneapolis in October. I figured the damage had been done. The sickness hadn’t gotten me yet, so it wasn’t going to. It could only survive outside
a human host for several hours. The infected are all
dead and burned. Dumb luck, or natural immunity-
I’m alive. Quiet here now. Depressing, I have learned
that I never really knew what loneliness was, only
tasted it maybe. Now I have consumed loneliness,
month after month, and I see no end.

My name is Taffy, that’s my punk name, which you
don’t get to choose, someone else does. It’s not a bad
name, I’ve heard a lot worse ones. I say it to out loud,
and it sounds like someone is there with me.

“Taffy.”

Try saying your own name out loud, it does
something weird to you brain. Try saying your name
out loud and mimic someone else’s voice. Now you’re
a step away from having conversations with yourself.
That’s right, your favorite person to talk to.

A month after the Catastrophe the military had
gone. They were patrolling every night, I would hear
the engines. Saw a transport drive down the street, a
month ago? I stayed in the house, in the basement, in a
hole that I dug. Worried they could see thru the walls,
some hi-tech imaging thing, find my body heat or hear
my heart beat, drag me out, stick me in quarantine.
Incinerate me.
All the people I trust in this city are gone. I imagine them burned in the crematory trucks that rolled up and down every avenue, every street, every alleyway. Converted garbage trucks with robot arms extending to pick up bodies left at the curb, dropping them into the rolling furnace, diesel engines roaring, metal chimneys protruding, belching hot ash.

Snow finally came. Late in the season for the Midwest. I notice every change in the weather, like the snowflakes falling were a group of beautiful old friends coming over to visit. I talked to them as they arrived, each one.

Sun melted everything yesterday. Last night when the temperature dropped the puddles froze into ice sheets. I can hear squirrel claws cickety-clacking as they run about, looking for food to store up for winter. It’s been hard on them. When the Catastrophe hit, store owners were hoarding food, and that scarcity drove people to harvest all the nuts from the trees in their yards, possibly for the first time, and eat every scrap available. Including the squirrels. You can hardly get closer than a hundred feet before they turn tail and run. Only the smart ones left. The paranoid ones, smelling the scent of their own flesh roasting, smoke floating down the alleys, gagging them in the trees.
I found a winter snowsuit inside an abandoned satellite t.v. installation truck. Wearing it now while hunched behind a barren lilac bush. Waiting for a squirrel, or if I could be so lucky, dog, rabbit, possum, raccoon… a fat catch would be too much to hope for. The bow was easy to make out of a bicycle brake cable and an old fiberglass cross-country ski. The arrows from slats of a roll down window blind, arrow heads made from the letter hammers of my old typewriter, sharpened with a file from the tools in the basement. Not much poetry writing anymore. I remember using this typewriter to write lyrics for the band I was in, the expression that used to pour thru it kept me sane. The typewriter actually kills now, draws real blood, and puts food in my body.

Poetry never did that.
Or did it?

I’ve lost a few arrows, starting from A I’m only up to G, got the whole rest of the alphabet, and all the numbers and punctuation too. Time? I wonder how long the wildlife will last. There’s gotta be other hungry people out in the city, and the animals eating each other. Birds will be harder to catch.

The squirrels give me something to do. We have a relationship. They are not easy to catch. Or else I suck
as a hunter maybe. I don’t eat those albino ones, with
the red eyes, they creep me out.

Squirrels. How could they ever run out? There’s
always squirrels. Thot I heard one out there, right close
on the house, scratching around, looking for buried
acorns or nuts, maybe a stale bagel. The smart ones. All
the dumb ones I’ve eaten already, lured thru holes into
the house, holes that smelled of nuts but contained
death. The trapping is played out, so I sit out behind
this bush, waiting. Silent. Unmoving. Might be here
awhile. No hurry.

Early winter day. Crisp air, sun shining, hard ice.
Quiet. Contemplative.

I haven’t ventured more than three houses away. I
know damn well there must be an endless supply of
canned food all around me, but I am paralyzed with
fear. Just walking up to a door, who might be inside?
Another crazed survivor, clutching a gun with shaking
hands, watching me thru the windows? All the houses
have become faces, all the windows eyes. They watch
me walking down silent streets, at night they can hear
my shoes cracking twigs and my hands on the chain
link fence, they hear my boots crunching the snow.
They know I’m here.
Who am I. Looking down at my hands and arms, the black lined tattoos run out to the end of my fingers, swirling, spiraling, knotted, I remember the people those fingers have touched. Will my memories of everyone who is gone hold who I am now together? Without my old friends around me I begin to forget who I am. Their words and actions, my interaction with them shaped me and gave me form. Without them, I expand, I feel amorphous now. I could be anybody. I know I am loosing something. It's natural, I think. You wouldn't be human if you went thru this and continued acting like everything was alright. I have changed.

I stay close to home, it's the only thing that holds me now. I hunt the block. Fantasize about a can of chili. When I get so hungry I cant stand it I sneak into a new house. I never knock. In the old counter-culture I grew up in the only people that knock are authorities, people you don't want to talk to. People that knock always want something. Money. A jump start for their car. A cup of sugar. Your body. Your life. Your house mates, your family. Sometimes the person knocking wants to give you something, but you don't want it.

I don't knock. I open the door, jimmy the lock, or crack the thing open with a four foot long crowbar.
After the symphony of splintering wood I say, “Hello?” and listen to the silence. “Hello?” a little louder, “I’m your neighbor! Hey, I was just dropping by to let you know we are thinking of having some bands play at the house on Friday, it’s a birthday party, and we wanted to see if you had to get up early Saturday morning, maybe we should have the music end at a certain time? Feel free to stop by and hang out! Hello?” No one is ever home anymore.

The house is nicer now, I don’t have to stay in the basement to avoid the stray bullets flying thru the neighborhood, like during the height of the Catastrophe. Peaceful Powder Horn Park, a war zone! Who would have guessed? The culmination of our love for firearms and biotechnology. What a wonderful combination. Our very life force confected into a big shit candy bar and everyone gets a bite.

Martial law. Somewhere out there it seems a government still exists. Government radio station broadcasting, and what seems to be a fake commercial station broadcasting the same info as the government channel. Same media situation as before martial law, right? Occasionally a guerrilla broadcast interrupts the government frequency with some wild ranting and suggestions about who is responsible and why they
should die. Patriots, religious fanatics, nihilists. They never broadcast for long. The power grid is down. Broadcasting would require a generator, and apparently the gangs like those. The government broadcasts occasionally have specific messages warning about gang activity. I imagine they are actually proto-tribes of like minded people, out there trying to survive while resisting martial law. Small circles of people forming in the absence of government control, relations based on previous affinities. Family, friends, race, religion, culture, sexual orientation? Is there going to be a civil war between these groups and the government?

I have no idea how far this has spread, I’m totally cut off from communications here, doing nothing but surviving. It can’t last. Change is coming, change is always coming. I’m terrified but I’m trying to be relaxed about it, like before the Catastrophe, cause things have always been fucked up, and there’s always something fucked up coming at you. Everything is extra fucked up right now. Maybe it will get better, yeah?

I thot I was in a community here, I thot we had a tribe, but a lot of them swallowed the hook and allowed themselves to be ‘relocated’. Like nobody ever
heard of a thing called history. I assume they have been relocated into a mass grave. Enslaved at best. Names on a database, past activities checked against a black list. Perfect time for cleansing what remained of the populace. Mysterious goings on. Whole truckloads of people driven off into the night. The virus. Finger pointing and chaos. Martial law. Fire bombs and firefights. Anything goes! The false face of friendly government slips off and the bluff is called, the lip curls up exposing fangs! Those who’ve been programmed all their life to obey did what they were told, no questions. Others broke loose and rebelled, the system cracked and the truth began flowing like blood from it’s orifices, the media began telling the truth, in the face of the virus the profit motive was forgotten, and sentiment turned against the government until a critical mass loomed, real civil war on the horizon. Then martial law, and big brother took hold to save us from our sickness. The voice of dissent disappeared. The rebels were crowned with target sight halos. People sat on couches in darkened living rooms, restricted by curfew, isolated and fearing certain death, wondering what would come next. Flinching as gunshots and engines out in the streets moved closer.

It was a Hill of a time.
I laugh at myself thinking back, riding bicycles with my friends up and down the hills leading to the Mississippi River. Hills were the hard part, going up the hill. We changed the curse ‘Hell’ to ‘Hill’, cause we knew hills actually existed. We appreciated the experience of ascending a steep hill, and so the curse became, “Fucking Hill!” or “Aw, Hill.” or “Hill no!” or “What the Hill?” but also used in the positive, such as when a bike rider might reach the peak of a hill and begin to coast down the other side, saying: “Hill yeah!”

Those moments of pure memory are what keep me going.

The streets settled down fast after the initial purge of infected. Stores closed and looted, fires burned and put out. A short time of resistance, firefight like the fourth of July as you would expect in a country with so many guns in it, but there were only so many bullets to go around. The government held all the cards. Eventually everything and everybody went away, and it was quiet.

I do what I do every winter, hang out in the living room on a couch, reading books. Looking at the punk show flyers on the walls, thinking of my friends in those bands, and bands I was in, people I knew that used to be living. I laugh thinking of my existence as
this queer anarchist traveling post-punk musician, the
good old days I guess. Are there any others left with
the spirit, or even a single breath in our lungs? That
youthful vigor sucked headlong into a premature
death.

Somewhere. Out there.

I put up heavy curtains on the windows at night
when I’m cooking with the mini backpack stove, trying
to keep light and heat in. Winter is gonna be hard. The
more heat, the more likely they could detect me. I
actually ran sections of stove pipe over to the
neighbors house to vent the cooking stove, so if they
detect heat- airplanes, satellites? They will raid the
neighbor’s house and not mine. I fantasize that this
will give me enuf time to flee and continue surviving.
Slip off in the opposite direction to meet my destiny.

That’s the plan. Feels like any day now. A question
of when. My intuition says they will find me. Never
trusted the government before, definitely not now.
They can blame it on terrorists, but we know
something this powerful had to be our demon. Some
asshole got up out of bed one day, drove to work,
parked their car in the lot, walked into the lab, and
clicked the DNA together to make the virus that
caused the Catastrophe. Why would you do that?
Fame and fortune? Patriotic duty? In love or hate? Something else?

God bless the military’s black budget, even elected representatives weren’t allowed to know where the money was going.

I found a few guns in nearby houses, someone’s old .22 caliber rifle, a few pistols in bedrooms for personal protection. I don’t use them for hunting, gunshots could attract the authorities. I think there’s an outpost nearby. I consider the near future. What if some goon came strolling up the sidewalk, would I pull out the pistol and shoot them, treat the body as meat? Hundred pounds of meat could last a long time now that it’s cold outside. Couldn’t leave it laying there. Could I cross that boundary? Has it been long enuf? Have I lost enuf of who I was to do that? Survival. If I’ve got natural immunity, how many others have natural immunity? I will survive, even if I have to eat my way thru the rest.

Funny to think I was a vegetarian seven months ago. Still think factory farming is an extension of the same philosophy that created the virus, grotesque contortions of biology to maximize profits. Bad meat. These neighborhood squirrels are a quality tasting meat. The level of toxic amplification can’t be that high,
since they’re vegetarians. A vegetarian makes for the best eating, I’ve heard. I scavenged some multi vitamins to supplement my diet, still got a few cans of corn. Always the last thing left, isn’t it, that can of fucking corn. I made some dried jerky from a golden retriever that was limping down the street. I like dogs, I did it a favor.

How did I survive. I’m not a genius or a ninja, just a random post-punk traveling queer musician feminist anarchist anti-artist type. Why did I survive? There’s got to be other people who survived. Somewhere out there. It’s a big city. Big country. The world still spins. I hear noises. I see airplanes. Strange lights move thru the night sky.

I’m looking forward to having a conversation with someone.

(two)
If you can’t be happy hanging out with yourself, then who can you be happy hanging out with? Gotta love yourself first. I still floss everyday, got into it before the Catastrophe. Too many green toothed friends suffering
bad dental hygiene. All that sugar in our food. I always wonder how people got along before toothbrushes and floss and dentists. What were their teeth like five hundred years ago, out here in the Midwest, eating deer and wild rice and fish. A lot less sugar to rot their teeth with. I went and worked the sugar beet harvest out in North Dakota, piling up millions of sugar beets to go in some sugar coated cereal and get a buncha kids hyped up and bouncing off the walls while rotting their teeth cause they just faked brushing their teeth by running the water and standing there.

Ran out of real floss a week ago, so I re-used every strand until they were too short to hold onto, even tied broken pieces together, rubbing the short lengths back and forth, bumping the knots into my teeth like anchors at a tug-o-war game. It was something to do I guess. I had to let it go finally, all those bloody little nylon strings. Then I found something else, the strings on teabags, nice and thick, rough, really grind the squirrel gristle out of the gaps. Satisfying. There’s real floss in a house nearby sure, but that’s a whole other adventure. If I take care of all my business and have nothing left to do, what then? It’s good to have something to look forward to.
I miss little Chuckles, the kitty. It was just me and Chuckles at the end. I gave him all the beef chunks out of the canned stew. We were gonna stick it out, our own private storm party, and fuck all these leaving-to-be-with-their-family, gotta go where the government tells us to go, run to the hills people. Our plan was to be here when they came back and say, “Ha!” Now I wish I was with my people, wherever they are. It’s a lonely death here, a couple bullet holes thru the linoleum and plywood of the kitchen floor to mark the end of my companion’s life. Death is death, who really cares what when your dead. You fight for life even if everything seems doomed. Why? Millions of years of genetics, programming. A luminescent spiritual desire that defies definition, no words... Living is something to do, I keep doing it.

Lots of time to explore the house library. The social calendar wiped clean, no longer a choice of which three punk shows, parties, potlucks and fires on the beach of the Mississippi River to attend. Now it’s what book shall I read today. I find myself enrolled in a course of study that involves all the books my friends and housemates placed on the open bookshelves here. The books I have appreciated most are not the ones put on the shelves by someone thinking, “This book sucks,
I want it out of my room. I’ll put it on the community shelf.” but as you might expect, the books placed there where the person was thinking, “This book is incredible and has changed my life, it would be selfish to hoard this book, I want other people to read it.” Having gone thru nearly the entire library, I can tell the difference. The shit books are down next to the shit buckets in the basement.

Masturbation doesn’t come up these days. The problem is with fantasizing, thinking about situations, people. Being conscious of my solitary existence in this house and the probable extermination of most of the faces in my memory, their non-existence, all the beautiful, hot bodies… My mind turns them into hosts for the virus, their imaginary beauty sags as the disease spreads thru my sexual fantasy, just as I go to kiss sensuous lips their sphincter fails and shrunken half-liquefied guts shoot out onto the ground and blood pours from their nose and mouth as they crumple in my arms. Instantly I am flaccid.

There’s always the amusement of devising new squirrel recipes. Squirrel pizza was almost as good as the green curry squirrel over rice.

When the mood for reckless excitement hits, it’s explore the neighborhood time! I’ve cracked the
houses directly adjacent, loaded up on food and such. Most of them were locked, people expecting to be returning soon as tho this were a flood or hurricane perhaps, return in a few days to clean out and re-stock the fridge, then kick back on the couch and turn on the satellite t.v. Some houses weren’t locked, people who thot they weren’t going to leave and then found themselves running out the door or dragged out by soldiers, leaving a deep skid mark of their own blood across the floor, down the steps, out to the sidewalk and into the gutter, human paint brushes wielded by unintentional artists.

Cans of tuna, beef stew, chicken soup. Ingredients for hot dishes. I was immediately intent on surviving the long haul. Found a 9 mm pistol in the upstairs bedroom of the house next door. I had never held such a thing before, how strangely heavy it was, the weight of the world. My own doomsday device. In the future I might decide the only option left was to fire it on some uniformed tentacle of the empire, and bring down the wrath upon me. That would be it.

This desire for survival, holding a gun, having this trigger to roll the dice of change one more time… maybe I could get away? I could shoot and run, they
wouldn’t know what I looked like, or where I had gone…

What a thing that would be, to trade in a life for my own. Here is this soldier or cop, also trying to survive, and to survive that soldier thinks he must follow orders and patrol the streets and shoot anyone out there because they might have the virus... are the shoot-on-sight orders still standing? What if the order has been rescinded, and they would just arrest me and take me to a refugee camp? If I draw and fire upon a mis-communication then it’s senseless murder. I imagine you can’t escape from that, branding your guts, burning a permanent scar, you feel the wrong and it will haunts you as long as you have memory.

As I stand here in the cold of winter after surviving the fires, I have transformed into something that has no name. They used to call me Taffy, that was my punk name. There’s no one left to call me anything. I say the name over a hundred times trying to make up for the void, “Taffy...” I look at that word in my mind like I’ve never seen it before.

And without my people, who am I? I am someone who used to dance wild at punk shows with music played by my friends and strangers from afar, I filled my time painting and drawing and playing music and
writing lyrics, riding bicycles with friends all over town, sometimes making sculptures out of objects I found laying in the streets. They called me Taffy then!

Before all that I went to college, they called me Jason Euclid Smithe then. Ha. I learned some things, and then I learned that jumping thru hoops was not for me. A dropout, yes. I saw where the future of my schooling was taking me, after a lifetime of jumping thru hoops I would make myself into a professional hoop jumper, able to spout facts and statistics and seem very important, a dominator. Completely miserable. I didn’t want to Know that way, to be a trained monkey, a finely machined gear, fitted perfectly into a corporate or government scheme. I wanted to know Everything, not to make money or dominate, but just because I was curious about this planet I was a part of.

I read some books. I know that smallpox was used as a weapon against Native Americans by European invaders, right here in the Midwest. Nothing I read was about how bio-engineered virus might spread, how to stop it. Did our cat really need to die, to save everyone else? So maybe I need to die to save everyone else. This is their philosophy. That’s what pulled the trigger. What if I am immune to the thing, but still act
as a carrier? I don’t know anything about it. What I do
know that I don’t trust the government, or anybody
else. My life, even if they sat me down and rationally
explained exactly why I had to die to save the rest of
humanity from infection, I would refuse. All of
humanity can die for all I care. I’m not giving up my
life. A part of me hopes that I am a carrier, and when I
transmit to another person, humanity is introduced to
a fine new strain of virus that wipes the slate clean,
gives our poor tired Earth a rest. Maybe I survived
because now I am a superhero, the first anti-punk anti-
authoritarian anarchist superhero. What do I do with
that? Start shitting on blankets and leaving them out
on street corners for the military to find. Take some of
your own medicine, those who still honor the old
powdered wig murderers, and go to sleep big brother,
go to sleep.

I miss the music. This is no life. What the fuck am I
doing here? I’m going out. I’m going away. If it’s
death, then not the slow death. This nothing of
nothing. Waiting to live again. Never felt like I was
living before, now I understand how good it really
was. Always wanting something a little better, what
human is really content? Happy? There’s always
something… desire, even if it’s desire for other people,
for them to rise above the terrible situations... Wanting something more for someone who is suffering... To be content with suffering, no! Sick! Fuck this house, burn it down and walk away. It's just a house with all the love gone out of it. No going back. No stopping until I've encountered someone I can trade names with, "Hello. My name is Taffy." No stopping until I've found a friend or music.

(three)
It was early in the morning when Taffy left a candle burning on top of a five gallon plastic gas can sitting in the living room and walked out the back door, resisting the urge to turn back, a feeling like in a dream when you try to run from danger but can't move forward, invisible ropes holding back... He didn't look back. Walked north up the alley, crossed 33rd Street. The air was chill, invigorating. No movement or sound except his footsteps crunching slightly on the thin snow, a slight breeze blowing thru the branches of trees, a few golden leaves still tenaciously clinging on. No sound of engines at all. It was still hard to get used
to, no cars passing, squealing tires, distant collective roar of highways. Nothing, Like walking across the set of a movie... expecting to turn a corner and see nothing behind the facades of buildings, or a film crew standing next to a table stacked with bottled water, bagels, and cream cheese.

Taffy made it to 31st Street, looked East, looked West. Nothing moving. A few abandoned cars, some burnt out, blackened and empty. He hadn’t been this far from the house since it happened... Exhilarated and terrified. Taffy continued another block up to Lake Street. Something moved into view on the four lane street, Taffy almost shat himself. A dog, shuffling along west down Lake Street. Seeing Taffy the dog began a full run and disappeared out of sight. There went three days of food, Taffy thot.

He poked his head around the building onto Lake Street, nothing in either direction. He pulled out the astronomical telescope he had found in a neighbors house, peered west. Some kind of military post at Chicago Avenue and Lake Street, but no signs of movement or occupation... empty razor wire fences, a few open crates... they think this area is secure, nobody here to guard against, moved the perimeter outwards... Taffy considered crossing Lake.
Something held him back, like the feeling you get when looking down from the edge of a high place, that feeling like you want to jump but you know you’ll die, so you don’t... He thoroughly scanned up and down the street with the telescope, East, West. Nothing. He backed up a ways to get a running start and kept low to look like some kind of animal, breathing heavy he loped across the first lane, to the middle double yellow line, to the other side. Pulled up next to a brick walled building and stopped to listen. Nothing.

Taffy walked up to 29th Street and turned left. The old Sears building still sat in the sky, old light brown store, it’s green neon Midtown sign atop the tower was dark. Taffy walked along the buildings on the south side of the street, the pedestrian greenway to his right lay a story below street level, built on an old Rail Rhodes grade that ran under the city streets. He did a double take upon noticing razor wire topping the fence that separated 29th from the greenway below. Razor wire? Taffy crossed the street, approached the fence, looked down the hill to where the bike path was. The pathway was no longer visible, being covered with a layer of burnt bodies that looked twenty feet deep, the pile extended to the horizon in both directions, like some giant blade had slashed across the city and the
burnt bodies became the scab crusted over the cut...
Taffy could hear no sound but the slight wind of the
planet still breathing, and his own participation in that
life, breathing in, breathing out. Suddenly he looked
left and right, afraid, not knowing how long he had
been standing there. He slowly turned back to cross
the street to the sheltered side, stopping to turn and
look back at the pile once, then twice, unable to
continue believing more than a second that what he
saw was reality.

“There’s nobody left.” he said aloud, and startled
himself.

Walking west down 29th, heading for the Midtown,
he continued to turn and look at the razor wire fence,
and the empty space beyond. Never Again, but
eventually, it always happens again, doesn’t it. Here it
is again, for a whole new generation. Or is this the last
one, cause there’s nobody left? Who are the killers
going to kill when there’s only killers left? Taffy
continued on, noticing that the bridges on a number of
Avenues crossing the bike path below had been
collapsed and bore tread marks of large trucks going
up to the edge where the bridges had been- dumping
platforms. Whole dump trucks full of bodies, or even
living people, dumped into that chasm… a burned
tractor with a huge front blade lay atop the 11th Avenue ramp, used to plow the bodies for an even cremation? and then sterilized by fire itself... The entrance to the greenway was a large sloping area where a grain elevator once stood, now the pleasant little path that led downwards was covered in blackened bodies, the whole area, half a block wide, burned bodies, like an enormous barbeque that the grill master had gotten drunk and passed out, burning the whole load of meat.

Taffy turned away from all this and headed for the large building, dazed, and trying to still be careful. He looked around the corner, west on Lake Street, and there was the military post. Definitely abandoned. Lots of trash, plastic bags stuck on the fence, nothing there. The liquor store there was intact, all it’s windows with garish advertisements still intact. The military was here and gone and didn’t loot it? Must have been on a tight schedule. Nobody else even left to loot and get drunk. Well... maybe... Drink sounds pretty good now. Top shelf.

Taffy walked up to the front doors of the Midtown, where the market was inside. Doors were locked. He looked around for something to bust the window. Pulled the heavy gun out of his backpack, and
hammered the window with the butt of it, cracking the safety glass, then kicked until there was a hole big enuf. A nasty smell wafted out. Taffy stood listening on the concrete steps of the place, the silent street was terrified of him. The buildings refused to comment. The wind still sang it’s acquiescence of everything.

Inside the market it was dark in places, but being surrounded by windows, and the skylight, gave enuf light that he didn’t need a flashlight. The stench was rancid but tolerable. Some perishable food products had been neglected. Don’t open any refrigerators…

Taffy strolled down the isle of the open air mall, grocery, restaurant, and international merchandise stalls to left and right. There was some food left, he pocketed some health bars and popped the top on a fancy root beer, tepid but still carbonated. He drank and walked further, strolling as tho shopping, relaxed, in a way he never was when there was all the bustle and talking of the place when it was open. Here was the skylight illuminated stage area, the dance floor made of frosted glass bricks illuminated from below, where once he saw a man and woman demonstrate how to Tango. It was quite beautiful, as he stood in line hung-over, aching head, waiting on a burrito to be rolled up. There was a frightening silence in the place,
nothing. Nothing but what noise he made with his feet, his clothing rubbing, his throat swallowing the root beer down and the fizz in his mouth like a roar in his ears.

Taffy continued on down the way, into the middle building area with the security desk, doors exiting east and west, the entrance to the hospital north, a corporate sculpture pointing down the stairway to the basement level. He walked to the stairway and looked over the railing at the level below. Nothing. Nobody. Taffy went behind the security desk, and soon found a drawer that contained a master key. He found the stairwell up to the loft apartments and began climbing. Taffy went all the way to the top of the tower, found the roof access door and used the master key. The wind was stronger, Taffy pushed on the door to get out and then was there with the tall flag pole and the open sky. The little wind fluttered the straps on his backpack and slapped at his face as he viewed the city from this unobstructed, 100 year old man-made mountain. Covered in a dusting of white snow, Minneapolis looked like a skeleton. No movement or blood in it. A human body being returned to the earth, natures time line of decay advancing. In a few years the streets would be filling with weeds poking their
arms out of cracks and potholes in the pavement, cracks filled by the wind with dirt and seeds.
Volunteer vines would reach out of yards in violation of city codes and cover everything, reaching for the sun.

Taffy slowly walked the perimeter of the roof, looking across the city. Nothing. No smoke from fires. Nothing. I can't be the only one. That is statistically impossible. Somewhere out there, in some basement, some rat-holed bastard just like me, gagging down canned corn beef hash, scoring jars of pickles from the neighbors house, turning dials on anything battery powered, trying to find out what the fuck is going on in the world.

Taffy looked up at the tall flag pole, the red white and blue thing still flapping away up there like nothing. Taffy went to the rope cleat and pulled the flag down. The wind blew a gust and the flag wrapped around his torso, smothering him, knocking him over. It was a big flag, a sail in the wind. He wrestled it down, switched the clips and pulled the rope to raise it, it now flew upside down. The signal for distress. Taffy looked up at it, and laughed, held out both middle-finger-extended fists to the fluttering fabric and made the noise of a happy madman.
Civilization! You gotta love this shit. I made this. I helped make this. All of this. I paid taxes. I turned my head. I drowned my sorrows. Otherwise I’d be in jail or dead… So now what. Keep on living, just like I was doing two months ago. Adapt to a different way of life. No more stress of paying rent, working a shit job… just now a possibility of a random death from anything between and invisible organism to a real human size killer with a gun. This is chaos. This is what we all wanted, wasn’t it? For the government to fall, is there a government? Not here… But out there, little bunkers and shit, full of government seeds, ready to spread just like the disease that brought this holocaust, a new government… fuck, endless government. If there are people out there, we’ve got to find each other. We’ve got to organize. There will be people coming to exert control, eventually, something will come. This is no utopia.

Taffy stood for a long time, just looking out across the city, the sun shining down in a clear November sky. He smelled smoke, something nasty burning, looked for smoke. There it was, south of Lake Street down in Powderhorn Park neighborhood, a house burning. Taffy watched the fire for half an hour, it seemed to be spreading to other houses, growing
larger. Burn then. There’s your civilization. Fuck you. All of you. Scientists with the genius to destroy us all. Governments with the morality to efficiently slaughter everything. Burn, and goodbye to you. I’m going to find just at least one friend and go live in the woods. Or two thousand friends and organize to fight the future I know is coming back.

The column of black smoke rose high, above the tower of the old Sears building, bending far over the Mississippi River to the South East, dispersing into the horizon.

And then Taffy heard the noise.

A mechanical vibration. Unmistakable in the silence. Far off, resonating on the buildings of the city, offending the sky. A big engine. A big fucking helicopter. The hairs stood up on the back of Taffy’s neck and a wave of electricity passed over his entire skin surface. Taffy melted, turned and launched down the stairs, down floor after floor, listening to the helicopter coming closer, catching glimpses of it’s tiny black shape out the windows of the stairwell, growing bigger, sounding louder. Down on the fifth floor her stopped to stare out the window, the helicopter was over Powderhorn Park now, over the fire, dumping a substance on the house fire, dousing it. Taffy doubled
his speed and closed the remaining distance to the
ground floor. He headed for the exit on the opposite
side of the building from where the helicopter was,
grabbed the handle of the glass door. There was
something written at face level in black marker on the
glass of the door, written on the inside: “all surviving
punks meet at the Twelve Nasty Smells House”

Taffy slowly pushed on the exit door, it was
unlocked.

(four)
Taffy stole along swiftly, shielding his body from sight
by favoring one side or the other of the alleyways and
streets he jogged along. Eventually the sound of the
helicopter faded back in the direction it had come from
and no other sounds replaced it. The silence returned.

The silence now was more ominous that the
mysterious silence of before, and when he came insight
on the old punk house in Phillips neighborhood he
relaxed a bit, the house itself was like an old friend.
After the months he spent in hiding at The Rocket Shit
House, coming here was like returning from a long
journey, covered in road dirt, full of wild memories and lust for life.

This feeling was not so triumphant. Taffy walked up the sidewalk to the house, there were no lights on. The last time he was there bands were playing in the basement, the yard full of people drinking and talking, lights blazing. It looked dead. He stepped onto the porch, looked in the window to the living room. Ragged couches, junk strewn about, weird art and flyers for shows on the walls, dirty dishes and scraps of trash covered a rectangular coffee table, several bicycles laying around. Empty bottles and cans scattered about. Very normal looking. Except: no people.

He stepped to the front door and tried the knob, unlocked, like most punk houses. Open to visitors. Only society suckers who have not been deprogrammed would knock and wait for the self appointed butler to appear, them or the police. Either way, a knock on the door of a punk house is gonna be a pain in the ass. The dogs always barked like hell when someone knocked at Twelve Nasty Smells House. He walked in, closed the old hardwood and glass door behind him. The house was old, hundred years at least, bad electric wiring, of the sort that were
preserved for their exterior beauty, but undesired by most people, like a computer that had become obsolete. And here the punks once lived. Taffy smelled the air as he slowly entered the dark living room, no trash-picked onions and potatoes frying in a skillet, no sound of wild laughter from the kitchen, no tangy pickle smell of smoking weed, no vibrations from people playing music in the basement, no odor of cat spray emanating from the free box by the front door… Taffy explored the house, no signs that anyone had been living here recently, everything dry, dusty. On the third floor he opened the door to a bedroom and encountered a strange sight, a wooden chair facing the door with an open laptop computer on it, apparently wired to a car battery beneath it, and to a metal globe with antennas sticking off it, like the wireless network transmitters stuck on telephone poles around town. Doesn’t look much like government style… Suddenly a green light on the laptop came on. What the fuck! Then a digital beep sounded and the square screen exploded with blue light, then went to black with the usual computer-turning-on logo displayed in the middle.

Motion activated?…Taffy took a step back into the hallway, a sudden heat wave rose thru his body and flashed over his head, like what happened when there
was a big insect right next to his head that he hadn’t noticed. He came to understand that involuntary heat flash as the Fight or Flight alarm. His entire body was backed out into the hallway now, but curiosity was throwing water on the burning desire to run. The sight of an active electronic device after so many months off the grid was terrifying itself. If this was supposed to kill me, I would already be dead. And so in the few second it took for the operating system to boot up, he made the decision to see what the computer had to offer. What if it’s connected to the web? I could find out everything I’ve wanted to know... its too much to hope for. no way.

The screen changed. Words were displayed. Taffy moved closer to read it. A mini video camera built into the computer stared out at him, tiny gleam on the glassy eye. This cant be the government, why would they bother? Taffy read the message: “First of all, have a beer. They are in that box by the door. We are sure it’s been a hell of a journey to get here. Hope you like warm beer. Now. To make sure you are not someone who wants to kill us (before getting to know us!) we ask that you complete this little quiz.” What followed were questions that only someone who was friends with people in that punk house would know about
their life. Taffy knew most of the answers, he had been around more than five years, which is an epoch in time for the traveling punk. Wait, what’s this? ‘Who was the drummer in Pee Freely? How did I miss seeing a band called Pee Freely? Maybe that’s when I went on that rafting journey down the Mississippi… a band that lasted less than 3 months. that’s punk as hell. they must have really sucked since nobody told me stories about them. Fuck! I hope this test doesn’t require 100%…

Taffy finished and clicked on Receive Grade. The computer processed. Taffy started feeling hot in the face again. “Fuck, I hate waiting for computers! Drives me insane!” Taffy said aloud.

“I feel the same way, Taffy.” a human sounding voice from the computer replied. Taffy shat himself.
“Who the fuck are you?”

The computer laughed. “Listen, alright Taffy? The security of this connection is always in question. You wanna come hang out with friends, go to this address.” Taffy read the address on the screen. “You know where that is?”

“Yeah, I know where that is.”
“See ya soon, sexy bitch!” the screen went dark, the green lights went out.
Taffy walked halfway to the address the voice had shared with him. Then he turned and hit Bloomington Avenue and walked to the Super America corner store and tried the door, found it locked, and bashed the safety glass with the ash tray stand. He hunched thru the new opening and went shopping, first to the isle where toilet paper was stacked and cleaned up his accident. Then after some handi-wipe sanitizers he moved on to the food isle, selecting stale powdered cheese snacks, bottled fruit juice, a pack of mini chocolate donuts, and a can of chili. The door to the bullet proof cash register booth was open, Taffy strolled behind the counter and sat on the stool there to eat, laying out his dinner on the counter in front of the slot where once money went back and forth. While eating he contemplated the strange invitation while staring at the abandoned gas pumps in the parking lot.

He was there a long time, sitting, thinking. Too much, way too much. He pulled a pack of smokes off the shelf and a lighter from the counter. Chain smoked for awhile. Then he laid down and took a nap. When he awoke the sun was shining in beautifully thru the west facing windows, the time before sunset. This
morning I woke up at the Rocket Shit House. So long ago... Taffy put his pack on and headed for the door. The address wasn't far. The building was anonymous, a red brick structure which might have been a business at one time and now might have been converted to a home or studio, or maybe just vacant. The windows were glass bricks, with small transoms in the top. No lights. He went to the apparent front door and opened it, a dark room inside. There was no mistake, the address was clearly posted on the building outside. He stepped in and closed the door behind him. Waited a minute for his eyes to adjust. There were three doorways in the room, he tried the left, locked, he tried the right locked, he tried the forward door, open. Beyond was a stairwell going down, and a faint light at the bottom which could not have been sunlight. Even more shocking was the sound now entering his ears, it was also coming from the basement, and no mistaking, it wasn't a radio or electronic device... It's music! Being played by living humans... For a long time, Taffy stood at the top of the stairs, frozen, listening, listening... music...

Taffy started down the stairs.
The music filled his mind the closer to the bottom he got, and when his feet landed on the old hardwood of the lower level he turned towards the light and saw a large room, the size of the entire building above but with no walls. The light was coming from many candles arranged in the middle of the room where a dozen figures were circled and lounging on piles of cushions or pillows, most of them playing musical instruments, sometimes melodious, sometimes falling into a strange discordant noise. Taffy walked towards them slowly, wondering and terrified. It was like arriving late at a small basement punk show when the whiskey and gravity had pulled everyone down. Silhouetted in the candlelight, a charged mo-hawk, a leather coat with metal studs, someone wearing a mini skirt and tights, ragged clothing with brutal hand stitch work. As he entered the range of light, all heads turned toward him. Some stopped playing, others continued with the music.

"Taffy!"

A familiar voice, and body rushing out to him, tackling him to the floor and laughing while rolling on
top, “Taffy!” he had his arms around the person, embracing them wildly and smiling while still trying to comprehend their existence. His voice would not work until he drew back and looked them in the face, locking eyes, “Julius!” his voice drew wild laughter from the crowd and Julius wrestled Taffy again, rolling over the floor, both of them hooting wildly. Suddenly there was weight upon them both, as various bodies sprung from the pillows and dog piled on the two, shouting “Taffy!” like a battle cry, the music ceased, replaced by wild voices.

Taffy began to recognize a few more voices and faces, someone bit him on the head and growled his name in his ear. Taffy screamed back, “Crasstina!” She bit him on the head again as a reply. There was pulling of his hair, pinching of his skin, a flopping ball of human riot, a momentary planet where everything outside was incomprehensible and sucked in by the gravity of their mass.

A glass bottle was put to his lips, “Drink!” Taffy gagged down the liquor, expecting a horrible burn from some cheap blended whiskey, in accordance with this squat-like scene, but the heat was smooth, top shelf liquor, money was no longer an issue. From the
bottom of the dog pile he laughed and roared and shook the whole pile.

“Should we let him up?” Crasstina shouted.

“No!”

“Oh god, it’s too much! I’m going to puke!”

“Puke then! We’ve got liquor to spare!” Julius’ face spoke from somewhere near his armpit.

“Ohhh mama! I cant believe I’m with friends! I’m going to shit myself under this weight!”

“Squeeze him like a tube a toothpaste!” some near the outside of the pile called.

“But I’ve already shit myself today once!”

“Ew, nasty.” Julius replied, then he joined Taffy’s sentiment, “Let me up! Doo doo!”

Two people that Taffy could not identify began making out on his right, wildly sucking each others tongues and biting each others lips. Fuck, Taffy thot, everyone’s completely wasted!

“Alright!” Crasstina growled, “One more good pull before we let you up!” the bottle again found Taffy’s mouth and he gulped down three times. She pulled the bottle away and Taffy gasped in a breath, breathing out he made an appreciative noise. Suddenly Crasstina’s lips were on his, wet with bourbon and soft, then pulling slowly on his lip, delicately, then
pressing down and slowly penetrating him, their warm liquor sweet tongues danced long enuf for Taffy to grow dizzy and forget everything. Someone nearby in the dog pile made a noise like they had just taken a bite of the best food ever.

One by one the pile separated, the weight lessened and at last Taffy was laying on his back staring up. Julius took one arm, Crasstina the other and they rolled him up onto his feet where he stood wobbling, shifted one foot back to catch himself from falling. Julius held his waist, Taffy had his arm around Julius who with his free hand placed a bottle in Taffy’s hand, “You have nothing and nowhere else, so drink with us tonight. Tomorrow does not exist.”

Taffy looked around the circle and now in the candle light noticed the wild alterations to everyone’s clothes, there were holes cut in shirts and pants, exposing various skin areas, almost everyone had cut holes and their nipples were hanging out, pectoral muscles and breasts exposed, the crotches cut out of almost everyone’s pants, everything hanging out, cocks dangling flaccid, some of them hard and pointing, pubic hair, some shaved in mo-hawks or bi-hawks and spiked up, and intricate paintings on open skin. Some had strap on cocks of fantastic color and
shape. The two who were kissing in the dog pile were now on the mound of cushions and pillows, legs and arms entwined, undulating like ocean waves. Taffy felt the bourbon buzz tingling on his skin.

“I’ve been hunting squirrels.” he blurted. Everyone in earshot laughed wildly. Crasstina took his arm, “Come and sit with us, Taffy. Fresh off the road, out of the closet, wherever the hell you came from, it’s probably been a hard time. We’ll play you a song. Keep drinking the bourbon. Everything will make sense soon enuf. Welcome to The Last House.”

Taffy stepped into the circle of candles, reclined on the fluff, Julius on one side, Crasstina on the other. He noticed across the circle a person wrapped only in a see-thru dress made of insect screen, they sat down on a pillow and stared across at Taffy smiling. Franklin. They had kissed once at a party, a long time ago. Why hadn’t their paths crossed again? Why now? Taffy smiled back. He looked around the circle of friends, queers, fags, lesbians, transgender people, anarchists, queens, kings, nerds, dorks, geeks, wild asses and mild asses. These were his people. Freaks of society, they were normal in his mind. So many in one place, a party! From nothing to everything, the working of the world.
The players of instruments found bottles to drink from and picked up their instruments amidst slapping and shouting, then began to play a spastic jig. Someone played a little percussion on the ass cheeks of the person on top in the sexual pile, keeping rhythm with the movements of their hips. Taffy raised the bottle to his lips and drank, lowering it his smile widened and he roared and laughed and choked for awhile, a sound like something dying and then coming back to life.

(Six)
Taffy opened his eyes in the dark. He was laying on some mattress, blankets covering him, bodies surrounding, skin touching skin. The sound of breathing. Taffy was still drunk, and a terrible knot gripped his guts. He stirred and the bodies next to him moved and made noise.

“Oh god damn…”
An arm tightened around Taffy, the body on his right pulled closer, a soft female chest pressed into his back.

“Crasstina?”
“Yeah…”
“I’m still drunk.”
“Good.” she moved around a little, her arm around Taffy stiffened as her other arm went searching above their heads, clanking empty glass bottles around until one made a deeper sound, then she put the full bottle in his hands, “Morning shot. It’s the worst thing to fall out of a drunk suddenly. You have to taper off at least.”

Taffy laughed, took a drink, laid back down.

“Don’t worry about hangovers anymore. There’s plenty of everything.” she laid her head on his shoulder and pulled close, right hand skimming across his naked chest, thru the soft hairs there, rhythmically rubbed her four fingers across his nipple like a washtub, Taffy breathed deeper as a wave of electricity washed over his skin. Her hand slid down and wrapped around his hardening cock, slowly pumping, while whispering in his ear. Taffy made a small noise like he would make upon walking out of a cold winter house and stepping under the rays of an unobstructed sun.

The body on his left now stirred.

“Hey, you woke me up!” Julius spoke, “Where’s that bottle?”
Taffy handed it to him.

“Yeah, that’s it. Um, were we taking turns? Last I remember... Was it my turn?”

Taffy laughed thinking about the endless months in solitude that brought him to be in bed surrounded by lovers, “It was definitely your turn for something.” He reached for Julius, found his stomach, hairless, Taffy’s hand felt cold on his warm skin. He slid his hand down and pulled Julius’ cock like a handle, “Up here!” Julius slid his body until he was wrapped around Taffy’s head, Julius and Crasstina’s head met up in the darkness and they began kissing as Taffy placed the tip of his wet tongue at the base of Julius’ cock and slowly slid up the sensitive underside until he reached the bare head, sliding even slower up the small V under the head and reaching the tiny opening he flicked his tongue and Julius pulled back from Crasstina’s mouth to moan. Taffy could feel Crasstina’s free left hand between their bodies, thrashing her clit. Taffy put his mouth close to the cock head and breathed hot on it, then sucked back deeply, cold. With his right hand around Crasstina he moved fingers to her tit and began gently rolling her nipple, she squeezed his cock and pumped faster several times then returned to the steady.
Taffy opened his mouth wide and took Julius all the way inside without touching his lips until the head of his cock touched the back of Taffy’s throat and Julius shuddered. Taffy tightened his lips around the base of his cock and sucked all the air out of his mouth, sealing Julius’ cock and slowly moving, grinding the head into the soft flesh of his throat. Taffy held tight the base of Julius’ cock in his left hand, cutting off the out-flow of blood and his cock swelled thick, the head grew fat and Taffy began slowly sliding up and down, feeling the delicious thickness and tightness of his skin, the bulging veins rippling on his tongue. He pulled his head back and held his lips tightly around the head, circling the soft skin with his tongue.

“To much, too much!” Julius whispered.

Taffy held Julius in his mouth, keeping his head motionless.

“Don’t move! Too much!” Julius was gasping, holding his orgasm.

“Not yet! Take it easy now, Taffy.” Crasstina whispered, “Lemme try that.”

Crasstina rolled out of Taffy’s arm pit and straddled him, sliding his hard cock inside her. “Ah shit!” she put her hands on his hips and began grinding, slowly she bent forward until Taffy could
feel her breath in his ear again, “You like that? You like me riding your cock?” Taffy moaned loudly, even with Julius’ cock in his mouth.

“Oh shit, no vibrations too! It’s too much! Let me out!” Taffy opened his mouth and let Julius’ cock out, still holding tight at the base, Taffy turned his head to Crasstina’s lips, they kissed long as she rode his cock, sliding back until he would almost come out, then grinding back so that his cock slid all the way back inside.

“Alright, I’m ready for more.” Julius said.

Crasstina pulled her lips away from Taffy and took Julius’ cock into her mouth, taking over Taffy’s hand position at the base of his cock, and giving him long, slow pumps with her thick, kiss heated lips. The rhythm of her hips matched the thrusting of her head on Julius’ cock. It was perfect. Julius captured her bouncing breasts and cupped them, taking each nipple between thumb and forefinger he rolled them hard now. One of Julius’ hands was touching Taffy’s hair, face, Taffy began sucking on his fingers. Everything disappeared. There was nothing.

How long? Suddenly Crasstina rose up from Julius’ cock, gasping for air and moaning, she grabbed Taffy’s arms and rolled with one motion onto her back, Taffy
on top and still inside her, immediately he continued
the rhythm, riding hard.

“Shit! Ohh…” she put her hands on his ass and
pulled him harder into her.

Julius’ hands came out of the darkness and cupped
Taffy’s head, guiding him down to his cock, he sucked
tight and fast on Julius and heard him moaning
appreciatively. Julius’ breathing grew faster, his moans
became short noises, Taffy gripped the base of his cock
harder and felt the orgasm beginning to pulse, but he
would not let it go yet, Julius was begging for him to
let it go, Taffy released his grip and Julius came, a
sweet and salty flow, Taffy swallowed in time with
each pulsing spasm, also in time with his hips riding
Crasstina. Julius sighed and became motionless,
collapsed slowly back to the bed. Taffy very slowly
licked his cock clean until Julius was giggling and
begging for him to stop.

Taffy sunk his head into Crasstina’s shoulder and
neck, kissing that soft curve there, biting and pulling
out on the skin in time with a deep thrust. He rose up
on his hands to look down on her, took one of her
hands and placed it on his tit, she began rubbing the
nipple with her thumb.

“Faster!” he gasped.
She put both hands on his chest and thrashed both nipples, he fucked harder and soon they were both gasping, Taffy tightened his muscle holding the orgasm, and then Crasstina had also arrived, he felt her cunt tighten and her body convulsed as the orgasm swept her body, he pumped faster and felt his own coming, tightening his muscle to hold the orgasm, and when it arrived his gasping reached a higher pitch and he pulled his cock out, sending his bolt out onto the soft skin of her belly and tits until he was emptied out. He slumped over her, breathing heavily, kissed her lips, neck, tits, licking his syrup off, teasing her nipples.

“No no, don’t get me started again. Lay down.”

Taffy laid down, wrapping his arms around her head.

“Julius, come over here.” Taffy requested.

Out of the darkness his body was again touching theirs, his arm slid over the small of Taffy’s back, his head laid next to Crasstina’s, kissed Taffy’s arm and left his lips there, touching.

Everything disappeared. There was nothing and nowhere. There was no tomorrow. The sound of breathing, perfect breathing, like they had never done it before. Taffy listened to the sound of it: in, out.
(Seven)

“Science. That’s what did it.” Franklin’s voice rose in the small room on the second story of the brick building, windows south over the rooftops of the city, the sun shining. A wild pile of scavenged computer tech, the womb that created the device that led Taffy to the Last House, all wired up to a pile of stolen car batteries. Franklin was wild eyed with flopping black hair, a black navy p-coat and scarf, even tho the appropriated propane heater in the corner kept the room tolerably warm. Underneath the black wool coat he was wearing a very attractive red mini skirt with white lace leggings which flashed into the open air when he moved or sat down in his chair. Matching his black coat and black wave of hair were the elbow length black gloves he was wearing, of extremely thin and seamless material. Taffy was fascinated. He kept thinking of that party, long ago. The kissing. It had been so good. But then, some dumb reason had taken him away that night, and Taffy hadn’t seen him for years.
“The whole fukn thing a plague from our new god, Science.” Franklin drank from the rum bottle and handed it to Taffy, “My guess: the virus wasn’t sent down with intentional wrath, cause think about it. Where’s the profit in a generalized human extinction? I think it was an overzealous accident. Competing scientists! One of them is going to get to the finish line first, and a lot of nasty abominations will be created in the race to get there first. Somebody got careless. And then, the finished product might also be an abomination. For example: the fuckin atomic bomb. Thanks a lot science! Mass murder made easy, real fuckin genius!”

“Like the HIV virus outbreak in Africa,” Taffy said, “one year after a mass inoculation with an experimental Polio vaccine made with chimpanzee blood... and decades later: 100 million infected across the globe! Death at an early age! For sure, all the hard evidence disappeared real quick. Scientists watch each others backs, all for the good of humanity! If proof had gotten out, science itself would be put on trial, who would trust the assholes ever again?”

“Fucking scientists!” Franklin cracked his fist on the table and the laptops jumped and fell back down, “We let them take the steering wheel of the whole thing:
Life! They tell us what to do. We pulled all our eggs out of religion and put them in science. Trusted their conclusions. Made gods of men. And men, as they have always done, betrayed us to aggrandize their egos. Some scientists even apologized for what they did, but hey no, if you build a bomb that kills tens of thousands of people at a time, you don’t get to apologize. You fucked up. Straight to hell. If some of us survive this current mess they will try to cover it up so our faith in science isn’t shattered. I think a lot of problems could be solved if men could just suck their own dicks. Eliminate all that dangerous free time.”

Taffy smiled, “Like at the Last House here. Take scissors to crotch of their lab coats.”

“Yeah, that’s a fun style, eh!” Franklin laughed and clapped his hands, kicked his high heeled boots up onto the table, “All fashion to the people! Of course if now is not the time to do all the wild shit you ever wanted to do, then what time is it?”

“Strange. Yesterday was the strangest day of my life. And then this morning I think, oh fuck! No one using protection! And I start laughing, protection! Safety? Seriously? Do I expect to grow old in this world? But then, what if… we don’t know the future, it’s a blank page!”
“Ya gotta live. Disease! Ha!” his hand shot out a finger towards the window and the empty city beyond, his voice was amused as he put his other hand on Taffy’s shoulder, “Oh yes, we are aware of disease. Very concerned. We must preserve ourselves to repopulate the planet. Ha! Quite the opposite. We are unleashed, drinking and fucking. None of us wants to think about the shit anymore. And so it’s funny, right? Cause now we are engaging in risky sex. Totally over the top. protocol has gone out the window. Most of us don’t expect to live that long. Those that do, they don’t play. So, you don’t have anything do you? I mean, we’re not intentionally playing russian roullette.”

“Uh, well, I don’t think so. I’ve been itching a lot lately, but I can’t figure out if I’m going insane or if I have scabies.”

“Ah, well. Medical care is free to everyone now, if you can figure out which medicine to prescribe yourself. Maybe we should swing by the hospital, pick up some of that nasty remedy I’ve heard about. Scratching. That doesn’t sound fun.”

“Yeah. Maybe it’s fleas from all the squirrel pelts I’ve collected.”

Franklin smiled, “A little rest and relaxation here at the Last House. Take a fuken bath.”
Franklin again looked out the window, “When we first got here, everyone talked, everyone seemed recently tested. So fuck it. A closed community, we trust each other. That’s about as safe as it gets now. Not everyone is into the wild partying. A few people hide out in rooms on the first floor. They seem much more depressed than everyone else tho. Like they’re waiting to be called in to work or go back to school or something. Hello!”

“I can relate.” Taffy drank from the bottle, “I spent the last few months holed up. It didn’t do me no good. When I walked out, I was done. Ready to die. I set the house on fire so I couldn’t go back. Fuck that. I never really appreciated having people around before. Now…” Taffy lifted the rum bottle to his lips, drank again, felt the liquor burn his cold chapped lips, “Not just any people, but my people again. And I appreciate this. Everyone. There’s nothing to distract me from that now. What about others?”

“Ah yeah. Well. There’s some others.”

“In town? Other punk houses? Other people?”

“Well, yeah, we’re not the only ones. There’s a bunch of greasy weirdos out there. Little tribes. The Minnehaha Waterfall people living in the woods down there. Then there’s a group of knuckle-draggers down
on the river bank, old drunks and thug types, sketchy, totally jacked on pharmaceuticals all the time. They might all be dead by now. Then there’s some East African immigrant tribes on the west bank too, I mean, look: here you are, what fuckin rock did you crawl out from under? Of course there’s other people. Not everyone ran to the hills or agreed to be re-located.”

“Is there organization amongst them, or some communication- I mean you got the computer, world wide web, right-”

“Oh no. Satellites are all locked. They’re still up there, but we don’t get to use them. We got short wave radio. With the right weather conditions you can bounce a signal across the planet. I’ve talked to some people, quite a few. I mean, it must not be seen as a threat cause otherwise they would just send a bomb down our signal or something.”

“So there’s a presence out there, the virus didn’t waste the whole system, the government is out there-”

“Hell no, its just a virus after all. People with money can escape a disease pretty easy. It’s called having your own private doctor on a leash! You know damn well all the billionaires are hunkered down, waiting for shit to blow over. The Waltons of Walmart, they’re sitting in their big ass bunker right now, eating
gourmet meals prepared by chefs. They’re all out there punching numbers in computer programs, figuring it all out: how to make money off the Catastrophe. That’s what people on the short wave are calling this thing: The Catastrophe.”

Taffy felt the liquor hit him and stared out the window, “It’s all still there, waiting to sprout again.”

“Yeah. You know, they love this shit. Things were getting boring before. It was like someone was about to win the game. Checkmate is boring! Now capitalism has a challenge. Everyone is gonna rally around it. As our freedom becomes fully eclipsed, theirs will be fully realized. Finally an excuse to do at home what they’ve been doing all over the world. Or, a chance to do again what they did here five hundred years ago. Wipe slate clean! Rebuild everything exactly as they want it. It’s all too gross to think about for very long. What the fuck could we possibly do about it? Hope the people behind the controls are still human? After all I’ve seen and learned, it’s too much to hope for. The brainwashed tools would shoot their own mother.”

Taffy stared down into the open mouth of the rum bottle, and looked up, “So is this it. World government, are they gonna fly in here and repopulate the city with the chosen race-“
“Hard to say, eh?”

“Damn! Why are we here? If there’s control, why are we still here? Why aren’t we in that pile of blackened bodies down by 29th Street? And what the fuck are we doing? What are we doing with our lives, right now, I mean, we’ve been given this! It’s not a coincidence that we all survived somehow, is it? Why did we all survive? And really, what are we gonna do tomorrow? This fantasy is going to end, its all going to end, and we’ve got to be ready, organize some shit, this is it! This is the goddamn revolution isn’t it?”

“Shit. I don’t think we won.” Franklin smiled and held out his hand, shifted in the chair he was sitting in to cross his legs to the other side. Taffy glanced down at his muscular, curvaceous legs while handing over the bottle. Taffy’s eyes wandered back up to meet Franklin’s.

“That’s right, I’m up here honey.” Franklin laid a rapid slap across Taffy’s face that shook him from his gloom, now smiling and red he watched Franklin orate, “So! The future! Tomorrow! The future is a question. Nothing lasts forever. Every day now, five minutes from now, could bring the ultimate transition…” Franklin took a good swallow, black gloved pinky finger extended beyond the neck of the
bottle, “It always has been, but now, its just more apparent. What I mean is, I’ve been aware that I will die, we all die, people die all the time. Young, old. But a lot of people lived to be old. Now it’s right here, we can feel it, can’t we? We will sleep next to it tonight. We can’t anticipate what goes on behind closed doors. Maybe a few people guessed it right. But what are we supposed to do, live each day with our hand on a gun and our eyes back over our shoulder? Chewing our fingernails down with worry? Go hide out in the woods, start a new life separate from everyone else? This is our city. We live here. So we’re just going to keep on living, taking care of each other, like we always have. People ruin their lives worrying about the future. If someone comes here to fuck with us, we may havta shoot them dead. Maybe they shoot us dead. Chaos. Endless possibilities. Fuck man, what do you think about tomorrow?”

“So it’s a merry life and a short one for you, eh?”

“Sounds alright. Ah, the inevitable decline.”

“You don’t think it could get better.”

“Hey, you got any great ideas, go make a fucking speech or something, rally the crew. Good luck getting them excited about anything besides a run to the liquor store.”
Taffy killed the rum bottle and tabled it. Franklin picked up the empty bottle and opened the window, chucked it out, then closed it fast as a gust of frigid air slapped them. "Woo! Shit!"

“How’s the rum supply?” Taffy asked. Franklin scratched his cheek, “I think this may be the last bottle. Lots of vodka and gin left.” “Let’s go get more rum.” “Alright.” Franklin agreed, “A walk sounds good. God. I’ve got to get out more.”

They stepped into the daylight, snow underfoot, closed the door behind them and stood in the parking lot a moment, adjusting eyes to the brightness. Franklin was now wearing an ankle length fur coat with matching hat, he began laughing and held his arms up to the sky with now thickly gloved fingers clutching the air, “We are living the dream now! Ha! Ah! Hah! Hah!” “Too much.” Taffy shielded his eyes with his palm. “Come on, let’s stop by the Super America,” Franklin put his arm around Taffy’s shoulder, “get you a hat with a brim or sunglasses or something.”
The liquor store was dark inside, the front row of windows along lake street were dirty and covered in painted liquor sales, but let in enuf light to still make a good selection.

“Rum!” Franklin sang as they walked in the unlocked back door, “Rum!” he ran down the isles. Taffy heard a crashing noise and chased after to see. Franklin lay in a pile of broken bottles of wine, laughing.

“Oh, Bacchus!” Taffy stood pointing down, “That’s a lot of spilled booze.”

“For sure I will be drowning in the afterlife. To Bacchus!”

“It’s too late to toast, you have to dedicate it to Bacchus before you pour it on the ground. That’s all going to be waiting for you in the afterlife, buddy.”

“Well hell. So be it. Rum!” Franklin got up with a hand from Taffy and they strolled carefully thru the red wet floor to the liquor isle.

“Hell! You’ve barely put a dent in it!” Taffy eyed the top shelf and it’s few missing bottles.

“Mostly we’ve just been taking cases from the back. All the rum is out here now…”

“Looks like plenty. How much can we carry?”
“Oh, we should load up a car out front.”

Taffy’s eyebrow raised, Franklin shrugged, “What? Just hot wire a car. We’re already breaking and entering. Oh that’s right, you’ve spent the winter hunting squirrels.”

“You just drive shit around? That doesn’t attract attention?”

Franklin frowned, “Never has. We don’t park right next to the house. Gotta hump the stuff a few blocks at least, in case someone is watching. Walk thru a house and hang out a minute, then go out the back door. It’s kinda fun! But really, who fukn knows what we need to do to be off the radar? What radar, who? Our damn footprints are all over the snow, wouldn’t take a great detective to find us.” Franklin grabbed a bottle of Sailor Jerry rum and uncorked it, “Thirsty?”

A bottle crashed to the floor in the front of the dark store, Franklin twitched, a splash of rum spilled from the bottle. Franklin and Taffy looked at each other. Something shuffled on the floor, thru the broken glass, with another low noise, an old dry throat. They continued staring at each other, eyes bugging, listening, listening- the noise again, louder, a noise like a drunk makes when someone tries to wake them up, angry, resistant, unconscious, almost dead, glass
skittered across the floor again, banging into a metal display case, feet shuffled thru it.

Standing in the dark isle between cold liquor bottles Franklin and taffy felt the neck hair electrify. Franklin motioned towards the noise and began sneaking that way, Taffy remained frozen, watching Franklin disappear around the isle’s end cap.

“Shit! You don’t look so good, buddy.” Franklin said, Taffy came alive and ran down the isle, caught up to Franklin and peered over his fur coat shoulder. A wretched looking man stood balancing in the fifth check-out line down, torn and filthy clothes clung onto his body as tho completely forgotten about. He moved towards them, towards Franklin, limping.

“Hey! What’s your name, guy?” Franklin asked.

The figure twitched and puffed up and raised a hand towards them before uttering a vicious noise that sounded like a drawn out curse, unintelligible.

“Fuck this Franklin. Let’s get out of here. There’s other liquor stores.”

“Fuck that. This store is liberated. It belongs to everyone. This guy is so drunk he’s gonna smash all the fuckin bottles. We gotta get him outside to sober up.”
“Are you serious? This city is full of liquor stores. He couldn’t break all the booze if he tried.”

“Well, at least we should help him outside. He’s trapped inside the store, just tryin to figure out how he got into candy land, you know? Freaking out. We should help.”

“Maybe yer right.”

The man was upon them, baring his broken green teeth, “Bblaagghhhh!”

“Alright guy, you want to get outta here? Lemme help, c’mon.” Franklin reached out an arm. The man grabbed Franklin’s arm and used it to leverage himself closer in, then swung his right hand towards Franklin’s head, baring teeth in a wide open growling mouth, lunging for a bite.

“Fuck you!” Franklin twirled the man into a shelf full of gin, he crashed to the floor in a shower of glass and booze, and lay there groaning.

“That was helpful.”

“He tried to bite me!”

“Yeah but, damn, look at that. Poor guy.”

“I don’t want him to chomp on me with those nasty teeth. Shit, This guy was a wasteoid a long time, maybe most of his life. There’s probably not much left up in the skull.”
“Let’s put him on a dolly and roll him out.”
“Good idea.”
They found a keg dolly in the back and rolled him outside, all the way to the backyard of a house nearby, set him up in a lawn chair. He seemed to have spent most of his energy in the spazz out and didn’t fight them.

“Take care guy. Get some rest.” Franklin said. They returned to the store, “How you think he survived? Natural immunity?”

“Maybe alcohol is like an immunization against the bug, a high enuf blood alcohol content to prevent entrance of the disease.”
“Well, good for all the alcoholics, that’ll prevent mutations of the disease from taking hold.”
“Oh yeah. It’s been real good. As good as it gets these days.”
Franklin smashed the window of an Oldsmobile out in the parking lot of the Vend-a-Wash and stuck his head under the dashboard.
“Lots easier on older cars.”
“You gotta show me how to do that.” Taffy demanded.
“Alright, but you have ta drive, I’m too drunk.”
“Well, what is there to hit?”
“How about my head on the fukn dashboard?”
“Ah, yeah.”
Franklin showed Taffy the key-less method of starting an Oldsmobile, stockinged legs jutting wildly from under his mini skirt as he squirmed under the dash.

“Every style of car is different, but all basically the same. You just havta figure it out. The easiest method is finding the little magnetic spare key box under the back bumper. First car I ever had outta high school, young and naive ya know, I lost the keys all the time. I had one of them little spare key boxes. But you know, with a car like this, it’s faster just to hot wire than to be crawling under the chassis looking for the stash spot…”

Franklin connected the starter wires as sparks flew from the copper hairs. It cranked a good long while, sucking down the battery juice so much that it began to slow, Franklin pumped the gas pedal with his head as he held the wires, at last it turned over and rumbled reluctantly to life.

“That’s it! Get in!” Franklin ran around and jumped in the passenger side, Taffy got behind the wheel, drove around to the back of the liquor store and left it running. Franklin jumped out and ran in the store,
Taffy followed. They loaded the backseat up with the entire top shelf of the rum and some of the whiskey.

“Let’s go!” Franklin shouted and ran for the car, jumped and slid over the hood on his ankle length fur coat, jumped in the passenger side and screamed when the coat got stuck in the door.

Taffy stuck his head in the driver’s side window, “What the Hill is the rush?”

“Just fun. Little excitement, little bit of the good old days maybe, huh? Back when we had to earn this shit, you know? Role playing Taffy. Get into it. There’s not much for excitement in this town anymore.”

Taffy shrugged, took a look around the horizon: unmoving streets, there a squirrel on a fence, dead dark stoplights. Light posts rising skyward, a few power poles, blue sky, some birds, nothing. Taffy smiled, got behind the steering wheel in the Oldsmobile.

“Drive it like you stole it!” Franklin screamed.

Taffy stomped the gas pedal and they sped out of the lot, squealing tires around the corner, bottles jumping, making music in the backseat like a holiday concert.
I decided to spend the winter there at the Last House. An obvious decision, but still a decision. There was more world out there, but it could wait. The unknown was extra frightening now. Franklin was the perfect find.

What to do at the Last House. Play music, dance, drink, fuck, paint, read, write, be a trickster. My new curriculum. My environment overcame my willpower. I became one of them. The inner freak released. I had to stop caring about the shit, it was killing me in the head. Drinking. Drinking and then drunk, staring out the windows at the world, wondering at this madness…loving the flocks of geese that still flew in formation…staring out the windows, wondering why…same thing I did before all the shit! Ha. only now I had different things to brood on and exult over. I didn’t have to pay for anything, just had to go get it. A fantasy come true! No wage slavery, free everything! We dreamed of this day, didn’t we? But then we had the time bomb to taint the well. The mystery of contraction was the only thing to spoil this festival of freedom created by the deaths of millions. When was it
all going to come crashing down? When were mom and dad coming home? When was Canada going to invade?

Some of us dealt with it better than others. I didn’t deal with it well. Not sober or drunk. I had to go get some pills from the hospital, muscle relaxers, painkillers. My old aches and pains were gone, no more sore back, no cold of winter taxing my bones. Julius helped me out with my prescription. He was addicted to some of the same. Temporary, when I need to I’ll just quit. A couple months later I knew my truth had changed. I was in love with that shit, I had it stockpiled, hugely. Slightly disgusted with myself at being addicted. Rationalized. I needed it to survive, to keep calm. I was a survivor for fuck’s sake! I deserved something to keep me floating.

The philosophy of the Last House had fully gotten to me, it made perfect sense. Even the recluses in their little rooms were strung out on something else, obsessively venturing out of the Last House and returning with a backpack full of looted merchandise, turning their rooms into small post-consumer shrines, multiple distractions, obsessions. Strange fashion shows for each other, fetishes, massive clothing collection. It made as much sense as anything else. No
One was judgmental about the activities that went on, unless they crossed purposes. But there was plenty of room for everything and everyone.

One night in early February, a deadly cold day with nothing in the sky, one of us snapped. Her name was Sand. She was short, beautiful. Sometimes I would think about falling in love with her. Before the Catastrophe she worked in a bicycle shop, she loved bikes. Still rode them, even in the winter she was riding her bike around the vacant streets, first driving a hot wired city plow truck around to clear a track. It kept her sane, biking around. I think it may also have made her snap, just biking around the dead streets, going in circles, no other people on the streets, riding past dead houses where friends used to live.

Sand was in a discussion that day that triggered the snap. Suddenly there was an argument, objects were thrown, screaming, punching. Crasstina wrestled Sand down and held her to the wood floor in the basement while she ranted. I remember her brown hair splayed out from her head as she lay there with Crasstina and others on top, Sand’s angry face looked like the center of a red sun, her tongue a solar flare of rage.

They talked her down. They convinced her to take a pill and have a drink. She remained snapped. Broken.
She had to get out. She was getting out. Nobody was interested in passing judgment. We were family then, the only people in the world really. There were people in radio contact, there were other little tribes in our city, but we all stayed away from each other, just brief interactions, communications, trading of knowledge about the outside world. Not much beyond that. The other groups all appeared to have leaders and hierarchies, religious cults, nationalists, nihilists (we almost got along with those). Scary people. Nobody at the Last House trusted anyone outside our tribe.

So it was us, a dozen people that mattered in the world. And it came to be that February night that Sand wanted more than she had. Half a year playing music, dancing, drinking, fucking, trying not to care about anything except what was at her fingertips. The illusion collapsed. She left. We gave her advice, convinced her to take a gun. She already knew most of what we all knew, how to hot wire cars. She sparked up a van and drove away. I think all of us who stood in the hard frozen snow that night watching Sandy drive away were dropping tears, some in sadness for her leaving, some in sadness that they were not going with her. A fuckin road trip. Get the hell out of town! That
sounded real fuckin good. Even if it meant taking a chance on death from above.

(Nine)
Taffy and Franklin lay in bed under an expansive puffy comforter, feather filled, sunk in the pillows, holding each other, warm. Their exhaled breath rose in billowing clouds as the morning light shone thru the window of the room they had moved into upstairs. The walls were covered with clothing hanging from hooks, all kinds of outfits for different characters, they were now part of the crew, a group of six. They would arrange parties, sometimes in adjacent houses so there were only people in costume and in character, the illusion was maintained. The Catastrophe never happened during these times. Feasting, drinking, smoking, reclining in wicker chairs in living rooms cleared out and filled with hundreds of house plants to simulate a fabulous forest or garden. Piano and vocal recitals, fucking in the candlelit bedrooms upstairs...
“Cold! Shit! Damn this paradise! We must have cashed that propane tank.” Taffy looked at the gractals of the ice crystals in the window.

“I’ll keep the bed warm.” Franklin said.

“Fuck.”

Taffy got up and crossed the wooden floor naked, barefoot, “It’s burning! My feet are so cold they’re burning!”

“Oh my god.” Franklin pulled the comforter over his face and imagined it wasn’t morning. Taffy switched out the empty tank, clanging the empty metal bulb like a dinner bell. He pressed the ignition button and gas hissed out into the element, triggering the lighter a poof and a blast of orange arose on the screen over the element with a noise like a rocket.

“Liftoff!”

Taffy ran back to bed.

“Holy shit!” Franklin complained and rolled over so his back was to Taffy.

Taffy spooned up to Franklin, “You think my hands are cold, try the feet—”

“Aaaiiiiieee!” Franklin tried to recoil but Taffy had him in a snuggle lock.

“Be brave Franklin, you have a chance right now to save my life. Warm up my feet. C’mon now…”
Franklin stopped screaming, “Just hold them in one fucking place, quit moving around.”

From their spooned position, Taffy’s cold hardened cock rose up between Franklin’s warm legs, he moved his hand down to Franklin’s chest and circled a nipple. “Hmm, yer not all cold.” Franklin moved his hips back into Taffy.

Taffy spit in his hand and graceful moved it down to the head of his cock, not spilling a bit, a skill to be learned. His hand went back to Franklin, brushing his now hard cock on the way back to his nipple, Taffy slowly moved the head of his cock inside and held there, rapidly flicking Franklin’s nipple. “I like it.” Franklin said breathing deeply, and worked himself rhythmically back little by little on Taffy’s cock until he was fully impaled. Franklin was moaning, slowly stroking himself. Taffy slid his torso back so he could stretch his arms out and hold Franklin by the shoulders while slowly pumping him. His strokes became shorter, his breathing faster, with a deep thrust all the way down he pulsed once, and pumped again now with his wet cock shrouded in slippery cum, he banged a dozen times, slowly gradually, until he stopped with his cock all the way in, and wrapped his
arms around Franklin, pulling him close. They lay for awhile, breathing.

“Now that I saved yer life, I want to ask a favor of you.” Franklin said.

“Can I guess? Is it this?” Taffy reached around and took Franklin’s cock in his hand, moving Franklin’s hand out of the way.

“That’s it.” Franklin moved his hand to his nipple and began fanning it, “Faster…” Taffy stroked it, keeping rhythm with the slight movement of Franklin’s hips as he played on Taffy’s cock, still sunk inside. “Oh yeah… Faster!” Franklin’s finger tips on his nipple and Taffy’s hand on his cock were matched in tempo, Franklin cried out and pinched his nipple hard, Taffy clamped down while still jacking him, felt the orgasm come, then released it, shooting everywhere, the physiological supernova igniting everything that could burn, a new star appeared and everything was different.

“It makes sense to be hunkered down now during this season. Winter! You never see anyone cause everyone is trying to stay warm in their house. And when you do see them they have so many layers of clothes on
Taffy took another bite of breakfast at noon, butter biscuits with shitake mushroom gravy, scallion dill peppered scrambled eggs, while sitting on a pile of the cushions next to the window, “Feels pretty natural to hide out. I hope there’s still some comic books left at the library that we haven’t read. What have we got left, a couple months?”

“Spring is just around the corner.” Franklin sat across from him, drinking tea, “I think it’s March now, isn’t it?”

“Shit, April is next. April showers. No more snow-rain!”

“April showers.” Franklin smiled looking out the window at the still white landscape.

“Spring, summer.” Taffy said optimistically, “Time to go traveling. What do you think, can we make it? Any word from the world? What do the short waves say.”

Franklin froze in the middle of sipping his tea, then threw his cup down with crashing porcelain, he grabbed a gravy covered biscuit from Taffy’s plate and threw it smack into the window, gravy splattered everywhere. Franklin left the room, slamming the door.

“Shit.” Taffy sat with his fork in hand, “Damn.”
Franklin came back in the room.

“Taffy, I’ve been talking on the box to the same couple of assholes every night for months. If they know anything about what’s going on out there, they aren’t saying. We know something’s going on, right? A big question mark. What’s going on. They’re building a giant question mark and they’re gonna bring it here and use it just like a croquet mallet and start whacking us with it until we go rolling thru the last wicket in a bloody ball. Fuck!”

“I’m sorry. You told me not to ask. I shouldn’t have asked. I shouldn’t have asked. I trust you, if there’s something to know, you would tell me. Sometimes I just think too much and I want to talk about what I’m thinking.”

Franklin sat down and wrapped a blanket around himself, “You can’t escape that. You can’t run from what’s inside your mind. Wherever you go, you’re still there, still thinking.”

“Thinking!” now Taffy’s hand slapped the table and the mess of gravy jumped, “There’s no solution to this equation I’ve been thinking about for almost a year now. I don’t, and I can’t think about that shit all the time. I’ve been pushing it aside. Goddamn Gordian Knot, and I don’t have the sword to cut it. You can only fucking wake up thinking about some fucked up
stuck situation every day for so long before it starts to kill you, and when it’s starts grinding into your bones like that you gotta do something, something has gotta change. It’s a warning from your soul or something, get the fuck out, get away. Something terrible has built a structure inside you! You tried to bury it but there it is, clawing it’s way out the grave to rip you apart. Something has to change or else I will be broken."

For a moment they were silent. Franklin spoke, “What do you need, Taffy? I don’t want you to break.” He got up and circled around, put his hands around Taffy’s hips, encircled him as he stared down at the plate of gravy with a round spot where a biscuit used to be. Warm electricity from Franklin’s arms melted a cold illusion of finality, a tiny sun shone a single ray from the horizon within.

“Let’s go somewhere.” Taffy breathed quietly, “No matter what.”

“When the snow melts.” Franklin agreed.
Warm summer was a dream to hold onto. Arctic winds swirled down. The drinking continued, even with endless heating devices rounded up from the neighborhood and brought to the Last House, the brick building was a drafty home and the bitter cold found its way in, the heat hid up near the ceilings. Drinking and sleeping and eating, days spent in bed, drunk, rolling around in crumbs, short periods of freaking out running around smashing things, screaming. Cold plastic jugs full of piss spilling next to them when they lost motor skills.

“Sing me a song so I don’t die.” Franklin said. Taffy rolled his head to the right, saw Franklin staring up at the ceiling. “On the cello or tin whistle?”

“On the bongo.”

“I don’t know songs on the bongo. It’s still new to me. Maracaibo gave it to me just a week ago.”

“And I’ve seen you playing that congo with her every night for a week.”

“When I’m focused on the rhythm I don’t think about anything else.”

“Rhythm.”

“You’re jealous.”
“Jealous, what does that even mean? What could we possess now. There is no possession. We have everything except the future. Everything dies. What’s my problem. I want to hold onto you and live in a fantasy. Maybe I think that if you and I are solid that the fucking universe will recognize that we should not be fucked with, and maybe I like the way you fuck me and want to keep that.”

Taffy rolled closer and pulled Franklin against him, entwining their legs, “It’s been awhile, hasn’t it?”

“I think it was last night.” Franklin said, “We fucked last night, Taffy. Fucking is about all we do.”

“What else is there?”

“It’s really about all we do since our workdays are now about an hour a day. Walk somewhere, pick stuff up, walk back here. Crack a bottle and eat dinner, get red faced, play music, dance around, make asses of ourselves, then go fuck. Do it all again.”

“What else is there? Stare out the window at reality, compose a philosophical discourse?”

They lay there silently awhile. In the lower level of the house someone was playing a full drum kit, cymbals crashing snare cracking, the bass drum vibrated the bed.
“Remember that casserole you cooked?” Franklin said.
“Oh yeah, that was a good casserole.”
“Cheddar cheese and crispy potatoes.”
“Mixed with mushroom soup. Yeah. We have Stewart to thank for hooking up the oven. He’s a genius with those hose adapter attachment plumber things…”
“Maybe we could get him to heat up a Jacuzzi.”
Franklin grabbed Taffy’s arm in excitement.
“A hot tub—"
“-with the jets blasting out on your back and butt-"
“-a hot tub that ten people could fit in-“
“-or just two. Have you ever fucked in hot bubbling water?”
Taffy climbed on top of Franklin, grabbed his wrists and held them up above his head, lowered his head to the nape of Franklin’s neck and gently bit the soft flesh there, increasing pressure while pulling back stretching the skin out. He whispered in Franklin’s ears, “Pull the blankets up over me, I’m cold.” and let go of his wrists, while kissing his neck and moving into his cock with one leg, sliding his own cock on Franklin’s leg which he straddled.
Franklin pulled the covers up and moved his arms along Taffy’s body, touching his ass, lower back, shoulders, Taffy grabbed his wrists and pinned him down again, Franklin made a noise.

“Hmm. You like the way I fuck you.”

Franklin made a noise, while taffy continued riding his thigh, hard cock skin on skin.

“You like the way I fuck, don’t you? Tell me.”

“I love the way you fuck me. Fuck me.”

“You’ve fucked everyone in this building, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And who fucks you the best?”

“Julius.”

“You little bitch. Now you’re gonna get it. I’m not letting you go until you to suck it like you want it. Come here, on your hands and knees. Suck it like you want it.”

Taffy rose up and the blanket fell off him as he knelt on the bed, Franklin rolled up and swung his head to meet Taffy’s hard on, he took it all the way in and began slowly moving his lips and tongue like a brush dipped in ink that had finally touched paper.

“Ah, good boy. You’ve sucked a lot of cocks, haven’t you? Let’s see what you can do now, suck it
like you want it.” Franklin passionately sucked his cock, moving one hand down to touch his own raging hard on, he stroked himself.

“Hey! Did I tell you to touch that?” Franklin put all fours back on the bed, Taffy grabbed a belt from his jeans laying on the bed from the last time they had fucked, and began lashing Franklin’s ass, one cheek at a time using the full length of the belt, “Tighten it up. That's it. Suck it like you want it.” Taffy was now whipping Franklin hard, laying the belt across his back until the tail end wrapped around his ass cheek and snapped him. “Good boy. You’re getting it. Give me your hands.” Taffy pulled him off his cock and wrapped the belt around Franklin’s wrists and pushed him down to fastened the belt to a bar in the headboard. Taffy began oiling their cocks.

“I like it slippery, and that’s what you’re going to get too.” Taffy slid his cock alongside Franklin’s, pinning him to the mattress, the oils turned their skin into an icy sledding hill. Pressing tightly together Taffy made small movements into Franklin, gauging how far to move by the gasping from Franklin’s mouth, charging up the electricity and holding it there just perfectly, “That feels good, doesn’t it? You’re lucky that I fuck you. Tell me you like it.”
“I love it. Fuck me, please. Do it.”
“I think you are almost ready. As soon as you feel me cum on your skin, then you can come.”
“Please let me cum.”
“After I cum. Ready?”
Taffy increased the rhythm gradually until he was thrusting wildly, then spastically, cementing their bodies with his orgasm, Franklin moaned feeling the slick heat on his cock and then he let go of everything, the shock treatment tensed his calves and his ankles and toes pointed towards his head, involving his entire body, floating on the last note of the song.

(Eleven)
Taffy awoke facing the window, sun shining thru icicles that were like bars, half melted bars dripping water from their pointed lower ends in the heat of day. The sound of falling and running water came thru the glass, thru the roof, thru the walls.
“Franklin. It’s warm outside. You hear that?”
“What?”
“Lets go for a long walk. It’s warm outside.”
“Oh shit.” the crust of a hard sleep fell away from him as his eyelids opened, “Alright.” Franklin rolled into Taffy’s arms, “You make the coffee, and I’ll walk.”

“How far should we go? Beyond the river?” Taffy said from inside his grey union suit, head topped with a straw cowboy hat, standing next to Franklin in the middle of Bloomington Avenue with actual black pavement under his feet, dark and wet with former snow, the gutters ran with melt. "Beyond the river.” Franklin echoed, standing in calf length black leather boots, three layers of tight leggings, a green simmer dress, black leather jacket, “I haven’t been to the river since before the shit happened.”

“Let’s go.”

The tiny roar of trickling water brought a smile to them. Flowing off roofs, down gutters, across yards and over sidewalks to the street and down the storm drains in swirling underground waterfalls. A few clouds rolled in the sky, long formless stretches of white, the blazing sun overhead at sometime past noon.

“Did you bring a gun?” Franklin said.
“No.”
“You didn’t bring a gun? Shit.”
“Did you?”
“Hell yes I did! You know how this neighborhood gets all crazy in the summer.”
“Summer? It’s not even spring yet.”
“There have been rumors of sightings.” Franklin said sternly.
“Real live excitement? I’ll do the talking. You keep the gun stashed, alright sheriff? Mr. itchy fucking trigger finger?”
“Are you seriously bringing that up now? I thot we had dealt with that.”
“Alright. I know. You’re sober now, so it’s alright. But what if we got drunk later, that’s what i was thinking.”
“I said I wouldn’t touch the guns if I’m drinking. So obviously I’m not going to be drinking. I’m going for a walk in a fucked up world with a person who is my best friend in this fucked up world. I brought the gun to protect this friendship not destroy it.”
“Alright. Alright.”
“Did you bring any alcohol, Taffy?”
“Yeah. I brought whiskey. I mean, it’s warm out, but it might get cold you know, and I that it would be
fun to have some shots and walk out under the open sky like an old school human being, just go out street drinking! I guess it wont be as fun without having the cops to dodge. You know what Franklin? I hope we do meet somebody. Just gimme a chance to pull the flask on em before you pull the gun.”

“Jesus fuck!” Franklin stomped, “Are we gonna walk or what?”

“Right, lets go. Little vigorous exercise. Make everything better. The mind body inter-connection-what’s that look for? I’m walking! Can I walk and talk? Talking and walking?”

“That’s right.” Franklin looked ahead to the horizon, “You can never go wrong with a walk. Or a bike ride.”

“As long as you say that before you go, then its true.”

“Okay.”

“Then it must be true. That’s right. Shall we stroll up 24th Street and take the pedestrian bridge?”

“Yeah. Scenic.”

Taffy and Franklin walked. The snow glistened with liquid and packed down under their boots, making the
low frequency scrunching noise, unlike the high
pitched squeak of hard frozen snow. The sun reflecting
off the white was blinding, Taffy wore mirrored
sunglasses under his cowboy hat, Franklin wore all
black wraparound shades. Strolling down 24th Street
they neared the park and the old stone catholic church
up near Cedar Avenue.
“Hey, let’s bust in the church and grab a bottle!”
“You fukn asshole.”
“Oh right, the gun. Here listen, I will give you the
clip, and then there’s no danger right? And we can get
on with our street drinkin!”
“That’s a good idea. I take back my curses.”
Franklin handed Taffy the clip, “Chamber’s clear.”
he showed it to Taffy.
“Extra bullets?”
Franklin padded himself down, “Nope. I wasn’t
planning on a killing spree.”
“Alright. Lets hit the trinity.”

Taffy and Franklin stood on the pedestrian bridge
looking towards the skyline downtown, the bright sun
reflecting off the glass sides of the towers there.
“The buildings downtown look the same, full of people or not.” Taffy said.
“Uh huh.”
“This wine is awful.”
“I’ve had worse.”
“Guess I’m getting spoiled.” Taffy looked at the freeway below, Highway 55 covered in a blanket of undisturbed snow, smooth except for an occasional lump where underneath lay an abandoned car.
“It’s beautiful now. The highways, the overpasses, they are beautiful now, just, like brush strokes made with white paint thru the sky.”
“I never thot I could look at a freeway and see something attractive, but yer right. The death traffic. Silenced. Totally sublimated to nature, like the sky put a finger up to it’s lips and said, ‘sshhh!’ Tucked this nasty little brat into bed. Nighty night!”
Taffy nodded, his hands on the rail, “This is peace right here. Peaceful.”
Franklin stuck the wine bottle neck thru the chain link fence of the overpass and drizzled wine down onto the pristine snow, “All it would take is one asshole in a plow to wreck the whole thing. But the plow people are gone.”
“You think about them a lot?”
Franklin nodded, “Isn’t that why we drink and do all the crazy shit we do now? To forget?”

Taffy reached for the bottle and swilled some down, looked down at the unbroken snow fields, “After seeing this now, I remember how hideous everything looked when the city was full of people. Snow and dirt thrown up in huge piles everywhere, like the winter skin of the city had been cut and ripped off, exposing the guts underneath.”

“It’s true! Every street, every sidewalk- man versus nature, continuing thru every season. Battle the rain in spring, fight the weeds and grass in the summer, combat the leaves in fall, and assault the snow in winter! Bomb the fucking ice with salt and sand! Every season has it’s weapons: umbrellas, roofs, raincoats. Machetes, mowers, chemicals, weed whackers. Leaf blowers, rakes, trash bags, street sweepers. Snow blowers, snow shovels-”

“A never ending war...” Taffy drank again and the bottle was empty, he lobbed it over the chain link fence and it stuck in the snow below, “I don’t think I can go back. I don’t want to go back. Return to society, or society returning to us. Cars and people and cops and bosses and all the world fulla assholes. Having to get a job again. Or beg for money or be digging my dinner
out of the trash again. Leftovers. How the fuck can we go back after living like this? Almost a year now with anything we want, there it is, grab it! Fucked up and weird. No network of friends and family, but we are living like gods! None of us talk about it. Cause, why? Cause we’re afraid of breaking the spell, facing that it’s gonna come crashing down someday? Our toys taken away and our puppet strings re-attached. Even the concept of going back is taboo at the house. I guess it might push some of us over the edge. What if what if? I can’t do it. I don’t wanna do it. Survival inside the empire again, just existing anyway we can, always running out from under the fucking iron boot heel, silencing our voices in the face of authority just to go on existing outside the walls of their prisons. I don’t want to do that ever again. Right now I feel like I can’t.”

“You adapted to this. You can adapt to that. Humans are extremely adaptable.”

“Yeah. Well, my buddy Franklin, maybe its time we stopped adapting just to survive. Maybe its time we stopped adapting to these fucked up oppressions these assholes keep heaping on us.”

“Like live free or die, huh?”
“Yeah. That is what I’m talking about. Making a stand.”

“If you stand alone you will end up alone in a grave.” Franklin said, “So you’ve got to have others stand with you, right? Organized, strong, unified, like this a people could not be defeated. So how do you organize these millions? And under what focus, whose focus among endless ideologies, religions, whose ideas do we decide to follow, whose idea of freedom? It’s all not so easy. It’s been done, been tried. Always ends up back at some few motherfuckers riding on the back of everyone else, in one hand they hold all the wealth of our life, and in the other hand they hold a finger on the trigger of our death.”

“The earth is full of the bones of people who have made a stand. Righteous, true-to-who-they-were bones. Sometimes I think I might end up among them for the same reasons. Feel like I’ve had enuf, you know. Look what they’ve done. They knew this was coming, they were ready for it. If it came from a bio weapons laboratory or from a devastated tropical rainforest, its all the same, unexpected consequence of environmental exploitation or intentional genocide, the same fucks are going to be stuffing their pockets with money, someone’s going to get rich off this mass of
suffering. Maybe I should throw my life into the gears of this thing, try to take a few of the bloodsuckers out...”

“Yeah, you could. It’s been done. We’ll make a full color t-shirt of your face. Won’t that be nice. People like dead heroes. Martyrs. Dead heroes can’t fuck up their legacy by saying stupid shit when they get old, or even just getting old. Not a lot of old people are heroes, maybe you should wait till your like 80 and then rise up. Inspire the older generations.”

“Yer making fun of me now.”

“No-“

“Now yer lying to me. Alright. Great. Well, you’re right tho, maybe I’ve got some time. Don’t need to finalize any wild revolutionary plans today, huh? Let’s walk.”

“This is the farthest I’ve been.” Franklin stood in the snow covered street, at the corner of Franklin Avenue and 19th Street, “That was before you showed up. I got drunk and decided I had to visit the cafe, see if someone was here. Ha! When I got here the snow was piled up in the doors, nobody had been there for months. Then I heard a military diesel coming from the west, same way I had walked, and I turned around looking, but all I saw was my footprints in the snow,
just my footprints weaving all drunk side to side, all
the way leading up to me standing there. Drunk as I
was I realized- Shit! My footprints were the only
human marks in the fucking snow, and this military
vehicle is following my footprints! Fight or flight? At
first I think: run all the way back home, then I think
they’ll find all of us. So I run around to the back door
and kick all the snow out so, it looks like the door
opens, then walk backwards to the fence and jump up
on the fence, crawl along the side of the fence to the
parking lot and climb over the fence and drop down,
walk along the side of it, follow the fence thru the
garden, and run down the alley back the direction I
came. I did this as many times as I could on the way
home. walking on top of fences, climbing trees and
jumping down, trying to loose the footprint trail in all
that snow. I did crazy shit! I never heard them
following me. Apparently it worked. Or, they weren’t
actually following my footprints in the first place. That
was a long night out on the town, for sure.”

“You came all this way and didn’t even make it into
Zipp’s?”

“Yeah, like I said, liquor was sure the last thing on
my mind.”
“Times have changed, eh? Let’s hit em up now. The wine is treating me right. They’ve got a decent selection, you know, way more than our little roost at Chi-Lake.”

A few blocks east they stepped into the Zipp’s parking lot, and both stopped. A beaten down path in the snow lead out the north east end of the parking lot and up the road towards the Highway 94 overpass, towards the west bank.

“Shit. I hope they left us something…” Taffy stepped towards the door.

“Lemme have the clip. Taffy.”

“Are you serious? C’mon get on.”

The glass on the building was all intact, Taffy pushed on the door, it was unlocked. He stepped into the foyer, pushed the interior door, also unlocked. He entered the dark store. The silence was shocking, a tomb of liquids.

“I will never get used to this shit. Creepy!”

“C’mon Taffy, gimme the bullets. You know how wild people can get when they’re shit hammered. What if-”

“Ah, whadya call that? A paradox! Give the drunk guy a gun to shoot a drunk guy with a gun so that we
can be safe from the drunk guy. But then, wait- we
ARE the drunk guy with the gun, shit!”

“Forget about it. With all your ranting I’m
surprised Captain Morgan himself hasn’t jumped off
the fucking bottle and whacked yer ass…”

“Holy shit look at this! All the boxed wine is
fucking gone! Why would you take that shit?”

“Orcs have been here! Crusty punks! They love
spacebags. Glass is too heavy to carry when you’re
wasted, and the bottle can break when you’re drunk
and fall down, but mostly space bags are the cheapest
booze. Old habits. I didn’t see any tire tracks out front,
so I guess they’re humping the booty all the way back
to wherever.”

“Yeah but, only 13 percent alcohol?” Taffy
shrugged, “Why not just take hard liquor?”

“This is why. Check it out.”

Taffy stepped around Franklin to look at the
shelves on the other side of the store. The hard liquor
side was completely empty.

“Holy shit! I thot we drank alot!”

Franklin looked down every isle, “Two possibilities
in my mind: a few people or even one person has
devoted a lot of time to stockpiling this booze in some
other place, or there is a huge crew of people
somewhere nearby pickling their livers for the future of mankind.”
A moment of silence passed at the empty shelves.
“So- should we go hang out with them?”

The trail was clearly leading towards the university on the west bank, they stepped in the footsteps already there.
“This is such a bad idea. This is totally the horror movie bad idea.”
“Taffy. You must be chill. Like the snow.” Franklin let a deep breath out, a cloud of steam in the cold.
“Fuck you. We are going to die.”
“We were dying back at the house. That’s why we came out here, remember?” Franklin hiccupsed and cursed.
“You’re drunk.”
“Fucking drunk. Thiz good wine. Beaujolais.”
“Gimme the gun.” Taffy demanded.
“What?”
“Gimme the gun.”
“Yer drunk too!”
“No no no, you’re drunk enuf for both of us. I took a sip off that bottle, and now the shit is almost gone.”
“Awright.”

Franklin dug the gun out of his coat and handed it over.

“Dood what is that? What the fuck is that?” Taffy pointed ahead of to a dark lump heaped in the middle of the trail, uncovered by snow.

“Shit. A body.” Franklin said.

Taffy scanned the buildings, the horizon, nothing, just the trail of boots thru the snow, the body, a boot sticking up, an arm outstretched. Franklin started jogging towards it. Taffy followed him, hands in both coat pockets, pulling out the gun and clip he joined them and loaded one into the chamber, then stepped off the trail into fresh snow to get a view around Franklin of the body, and a clear shot if it should leap to life. Franklin bent over the man, he was wearing only a thin cotton sweatshirt and blue jeans.

“He’s breathing! I can see the steam. He’s got a head wound. It’s bleeding.”

Taffy pocketed the gun, “Damn, look at what he’s wearing, it’s like he just ran out the door. Good thing it’s warm today.”

“He would have been dead last week! Fuck. We gotta get him inside, get some more layers on him, get him back to the Last House-“
“One thing at a time. Shit! Hey buddy, are you awake? Can you talk?”
Franklin pinched the skin on his neck and the man made noise and moved his head.
“He’s conscious.”
“A little bit. Hey guy, what’s your name? What’s your name?”
The lips moved and syllables passed into the air.
“Did you understand what he said?” Franklin said.
“No. But maybe it was Somalian or Ethiopian. You know, if he’s east African, he probably has an east African name.
“Yer a genius Taffy. I know exactly where we should take him. Let’s get on either side, carry him.”
“Wait, we shouldn’t move him, right? What if his spine is broken, we could kill him or paralyze him by moving him.”
“Um, I think that’s mainly for crashes and stuff, like, there’s no other tracks in the snow here except for the ones on the trail, right? So he didn’t get attacked right here, he must have walked or ran here, so he’s already moved since getting injured.”
“Alright, yer drunk, but you can still cut thru a crisis. Let’s move him.”
The university maintenance garage was locked. Taffy took the gun and shot the chain off, “Ow! Fuck!”
“Are you alright? What happened?”
“Fucking! Argh! Chain link ricochet back and bounced off my head. God dammit, this day is really going downhill.”
“So now we have two head wounds?”
“I’m doing way better than this guy.”
They hauled the man into the office, sat him in a swivel chair.
“Key box! Bingo.”
“Alright Frank, lets find one with juice in it. I’ll stay here with the guy, you go scout it.” Franklin ran out into cavernous garage. Soon Taffy heard an engine turning over, and chug to life, the familiar clacking noise of a diesel engine. Franklin came running back.
“Got it. Good thing it’s warm today or these fuckers wouldn’t even start. Let’s go.”
They carried the man to the truck, a heavy diesel dump truck with snow plow attached to the front and a blazing safety orange paint job.
“This is gonna be a bitch gettin him up there!”
“Climb up in the cab, I’ll lift him from down here.”
Taffy wrapped his arms around the man’s thighs and
lifted him up, Franklin took his arm pits and hoisted further. The man made angry noises and spasmed, Taffy and Franklin both cursed, pushed and pulled till he was in the seat. “Put the seat belt on him. We don’t want him to wake up and freak out. I’ll be back in a sec.” Taffy dropped down and ran to the office, dug thru the lockers and ran back. “I found him a onesie snow suit!”

“We can’t put that on him now, he’s belted in!”
“Just put it on top of him. It’s something.”

Taffy jumped up and shut the door, Franklin was behind the wheel and tweaking the heater controls, “Hopefully the blower works on this thing, cook him up quick!”

“Let’s hit it, let’s go! Sherry needs to look at this guy, I don’t know much about trauma care.”

“Alright, here we go. Lemme remember how to drive now, uh...”

“Oh fuck. You’re drunk! I forgot.”

“And what are we worried about hitting when we are the only ones on the road?”

“I think that’s what we’re about to find out.”

The big truck blasted black smoke as Franklin released the clutch and roared the truck thru the
garage door, jammed on the hydraulic lever and dropped the blade to plow a full speed path home.

(twelve)
Sherry looked the man over, shone a light in his eyes, took his pulse, cleaned and bandaged his head wound, “NOBODY but me cleans this head wound, if he has a skull fracture it could aggravate the swelling of his brain and that’s bad.”

The man lay on a mattress covered in wool blankets, moving slightly, mouthing words, “He’s not in a coma you can see. That’s good. He’s been beaten with a blunt object, like a bat. Took a couple good hits but he got away, eh? One thing I think is still wrong with him, he’s drunk. He’s drunk and has a concussion. Someone should stay with him all the time, keep him from freakin out when he comes around, or smacking his head again cause of the intoxication.”

“Can you give him some medicine?” Taffy said.
“I’m not a doctor, I don’t know what the combination with alcohol would do, with some of this
shit I got from the hospital, ya know. I gave him a big dose of ibuprofen to lessen the swelling. As long as he’s stable like this, we just gotta wait... keep him warm, not too warm tho, and don’t let him fall asleep, keep talking, even if not directly to him. Hold his hand, squeeze it. Let him know you are here. Watch his breathing, put water on his lips constantly, till he comes around."

“T’ll watch him.” Taffy said.

“I’m gonna get my laptop and books, medical texts, read up on head trauma, I’ll be back.” Franklin headed off.

“You do that.” Sherry said.

“So what’s your prognosis? Is he gonna live?”

“As the wounded man’s advocate I advise you to seek a second opinion and more extensive medical care immediately. Seems to me like he’ll live, with a nasty hangover.”

“Look here what it says in the medical manual. It says we should elevate his head. I think we should elevate his head.” Franklin said.

“I don’t think we should fuck around with him. He may be still drunk and start thrashing against us, it could make it worse.”
“Aw, look, now he’s sleeping like a baby. I think we should elevate his head.”
“Let’s ask Sherry.”
“Ah, never mind. She thinks I’m dumb.”
“She’s a bitch, that’s what she is. That’s how she works, and it works quite well. Not tactful or subtle, she’ll break the ice and take the lid off a situation in two seconds. I admire that kind of personality. You think she hasn’t schooled me? Everyone gets it.”
“Well, I feel like I get more of it.”
“Yeah, she doesn’t bitch at me as much as you cause I’m not dumb.”
“Ah!” Franklin punched Taffy, “Back to our man here, shouldn’t we be doing something?”
“Not much to do. He got jumped, got in a fight, ran away, fell down. Got smacked in the head, concussed, I did that one time, you know. Cracked some bone off my skull I think, that ridge above the eye socket. Went down hard and drunk! Horrible time.”
“What the hell, what happened?”
“October, Halloween night. Got a bottle of whiskey to share with people at the Barebones show out on the river. So I ride out there on my bike, meet up with some friends who drove, kicked back on the grass and watched the wild show. Nobody really drank much of
the whiskey but me. I was hoping they would be enthusiastic about drinking whiskey, it was cold ya know, people all bundled up. So then I’m buzzed and it’s fun. But I had just broken up with my girlfriend a week ago, and I hadn’t drank since then for the very reason that I didn’t want to loose my shit because you know, sometimes that happens. I get emotional. Well, the show ends and all my friends, some of them happy couples, drove away in their cars or rode on their bikes. I stayed to hang out with my friend Chip, he was in the crew of the production, helped them strike the stuff cause Halloween night was the last show. Chip drank some whiskey with me, but that only encouraged me to match him shot for shot. So then they’re all packed up and headed for a party, and I realize that everyone still there, cast and crew people, they all came in cars, so I was the last bike rider there. To brace for the long cold ride home I had a few more shots before getting on my bike. Then I hit traffic and felt the spirit of drunken indignation rise in me. Bastard robots, filthy car driving scum fuckers! Hiding in your glass and metal bubbles, what are you afraid of? Cowards! And so the numerous shots made their way into my blood and met up with the confused and hurt state of my mind, alone, unloved, confronted by
roads filled with terrible metal ogres. I threw down the
glove when one rolled up too close to me, displayed
the middle finger, the terrible middle finger! It's funny
to think of, that by showing someone just that middle
finger you can inspire them to to kill you. How many
people has the middle finger killed? Ha! The
aggressive car was full of aggressive men. I could hear
them curse, rev their engine. I cruised on as they
waited at the light. down an empty residential street
with no other cars on it. I began to imagine that they
were irrevocably pissed off, they were coming to get
me. Earlier that night while riding to the show on the
east bank, I remembered the bicyclist who had been
shot and killed as he was riding there by the old Ford
plant, randomly shot by dudes with guns driving
around, shot and killed him just cause they could, to
feel like gods, to feel powerful? Who fuckn knows why
people do the crazy shit they do. The people that do
the crazy shit maybe don’t even really know, cause
everything is interconnected, and how can you
understand everything? Eh? So I’m thinking these
guys are gonna come kill me, or at least jump out and
throw some punches like has happened to me a
number of times when I lived back in California where
many of the psychotic drivers in the world live. So I
start riding my bike faster, coming up with a plan, and I hear a car coming up behind me, it’s them! They’re gonna run me over, no chance, so I see a street coming up and I think I’ll make a hard fast right turn onto it and ditch the fuckers, loose them in the neighborhood. I make the hard right on top of a pile of wet leaves, it was like hitting grease, I flew! Headed for the pavement, landed first on my left wrist, then left elbow, then my left temple. Bam! A whole new world opened up. Glasses gone, I can’t see shit, my left side is busted. The car goes past me. I hear voices laughing. Struggle to my feet. I see the tail lights on the car go bright red, braking, maybe turning around to come back and finish the job. I feel around on the ground for my glasses, fuck! Can’t find it, grab my bike and try to push it, wheel is bent! I drop the bike, I’m crying and cursing like I just got beat up by a school bully. Flashback to childhood! They’re coming back, I gotta get the fuck out of here. I head into the neighborhood, turning left right, zig zagging, and then I stop, no sound of any cars. I think they must be gone by now. I try to figure out where I am, stand directly under a street sign and squint my eyes looking up at it, cause that somehow makes it so I can see a little better, changes the shape of my eyeball or something. I read
the street sign. It means nothing to me. Where the fuck am I? And where is my bike? I try to find it. No luck. Fuck it. I start the long walk home, in the direction I think it is. A long long fucking way, a hundred blocks. Drunk, pissed, injured, foggy headed, like some beacon in my head, a long fucking way, all I can think is, home, home, home... Walking walking, enraged, hating the world, wishing I was dead! Wishing everyone else was dead, but that seemed like too much work and maybe impossible, and I was the one who got myself stupid drunk. At last I’m closer to home, done crying now, and just enraged and fearless, hating every car I see, putting all the blame of everything evil on those demons with the two glaring headlights, those cyborg fuckers. I cross Cedar Avenue, and a car rolls up towards the crosswalk, I give them the middle finger and say, “Fuck you!” again I hear the shouting in the car, here we go again, Taffy versus the world! I know they’ll come after me. When I get to the sidewalk I start looking for a weapon to defend myself. I find a nice looking rock there next to someone’s yard. A slender black rock. I put it in my right pocket. The new car that saw my naked middle finger and read my lips came around the corner. Car full of dudes again. Four or five of them. I was about to get it bad. Blind, drunk,
wounded. I was in for it. They rolled down the window and matched my speed as I continued walking, never changing my stride. What they yelled at me I have no idea. I turned my head to look at them with dead eyes and pulled the rock out of my pocket, clutching it in a certain way with my thumb and forefinger so that it looked like the barrel of a gun. Like a kid playing war, my face locked in a mask of hate I raised my arm and pointed the gun at them. Frantic screams erupted from the back seat, and the driver hit the gas. Their tail lights disappeared as they turned a sharp corner up ahead. Thinking they might come back, I pocketed my rock and made some turns of my own, disappeared into the neighborhood again. Eventually I made it home.”

“You crazy asshole.”

“Yeah. The drinking was a problem back then. These bottled up emotions would get triggered sometimes and then come flying out of me. I learned how to deal with it, take care of my emotions, be aware of them, and not drink when I felt the volatility. Had to learn to recognize the emotions. Liquor greases the wheels of your emotional train, lookout! Terrible shit. I was lucky to have friends that cared about me. Like when I finally made it back to my house, clutching this
fucking rock in my pocket, and it’s Halloween so nobody is home, and I go in, crazed, still drunk, with a mild walking concussion, pacing around the house with my left arm dangling by my side and my right hand holding this rock! Walking around the living room mumbling shit to myself, totally lost. Shell shocked. That’s how Cake found me, just like that. She says, taffy, are you OK? Why do you have a rock in your hand? Then I came back a little, just from hearing her voice, and I start crying like hell and asking for her help. She wants me to go to the hospital for sure, but I’m like, no no no I’ll be alright but my fucking glasses and my bike! We gotta go find them! Eventually I convince her to drive me way the fuck down there, shes like, fuck! You walked all this way? It wasn’t long before somehow I directed her to the place, well, maybe it actually took forever cause my concept of time was skewed, but then we turn down a street and and there it is- my fucking bike! And there’s the fucking leaf pile! Stop stop, we don’t wanna run over my glasses. We stop and walk up and I decide to just start feeling around on the ground to find my glasses, and my right hand touches something- holy shit my glasses! The very first spot I put my hand down! What the fuck! So we load up my bike, drive back to the
house. I’m sobering up now, and shit is starting to hurt. I lay down on the couch, but Cake is going to a Halloween party and says I have to go with her if I don’t go to the hospital, because if I have a head injury I can’t go to sleep cause I could die for some reason. No fucking hospital! Even tho I’m sure my hand is fractured and maybe my elbow and god knows what happened to my skull, I have an awesome gouge above my eye, down to the bone, and it feels like there’s bone fragments floating in there. So I go to the party with her, broken, disoriented. I didn’t want to make her stay home with me. What a weird party experience! People were like, ah, bummer dude! Crashed on yer bike yeah? I’m in this state of mind I’ve never been in before, shock, like I just went thru the craziest self inflicted life and death shit, and here I am. At a party, the far ends of the spectrum! That was a good idea tho, helped bring me back to a happier state of mind just being around friends, feeling safe, feeling loved. I felt like such a dumb ass. I really put my friends thru some shit in those days. I was all twisted up inside and didn’t know what to do.”

“You figured it out? How to be happier.”

“Yeah. I still get all twisted up, but I can untangle the knots now. It’s strange to say, if you give a thot to
the world around us and the shit, but happiness has always been this thing that I conjure inside of me, no matter how fucked everything else is outside. There's always going to be fucked things everywhere, always something to hate. So you just choose not to do it, not to hate. Not to be ruled by emotions, anxiety, fear. I think of my friends, all the gone ones, purged during the pandemic. Where are they, I don't know. But what good would it do anyone for me to fill myself up with hate and thots of revenge? That's the narrow vision, right? I could let my life be consumed by it. I work at being happy that I'm still alive, and still have friends, and appreciate that we are not suffering much. The future really is nothing. We'll deal with that when it comes.”

“Its hard to be happy wondering if someones gonna kick our door down and execute us at any moment, or wondering if that new itchy red spot on your arm is a mutated form of the virus come to wipe us out.”

“Yeah, people died all the time before the Catastrophe, just not so many all at once. Death can come at any moment. So what are you gonna do. How are you gonna live yer life? Chewing yer fingernails
with anxiety, hiding in a bunker for fear of the worst?  
Fuck it. You’re alive. So live.”

“I agree with your philosophy.” the wounded man on the mattress said.

(thirteen)

They sat in a circle drinking hot tea with the mystery man who spoke, the bandage on his head looked like a wild third eye, a round bloody spot in it's center, “I look into a mirror, see a man smiling. Then there's the twitch of the head, like the mind inside is trying to keep some thot from locking in on consciousness in the present. It works, the bad thot goes away, the smile on the man continues.”

“Where others lock in and brood for a time that could be minutes, hours days years, that person has shaken it off and let it go. A skill that cannot be priced, as the longer you are on the planet, the more bad thots you have cataloged in memory. They must be dealt with, recognized, hey, I see you! Nasty black cloud! Life is brutal. Now, piss off!”

119
Taffy added, “Some situations are triggers for the unfun. You must deal with these situations before they overwhelm you, or else get out of the situation. Painful to leave a comfortably miserable nest, but one year later, you thank yourself.”

“The twitch isn’t always a twitch.” the man continued, “With some it’s a breath that goes in and out, a deep breath maybe, or perhaps a burst of wild laughter, followed by a holding of hands to the sky with head tilted back, and then a guttural animal scream, followed by relaxation smiling and hand clapping. It is essential: recognize the demon, thank it for showing you how you don’t want to live, and then give it the dragons breath, smack it back! The person that cannot do this, you do not want to live with them. They are objects of compassion. Tormented people. Many people that I know.”

“It’s good to hear you say this. You can still have compassion, after loosing faith.” Sherry said.

“I’ve known many non-believers in my life. Just because I don’t believe anymore doesn’t mean I’m an asshole too.”

“A lot of what I believed in got put in a box, you know. Cause I don’t know what to believe, most days now.” Franklin turned to his laptop, wired up to a car
battery, and clicked away at something, "Listen to this, Abadal, it's a recording of the band I was in before the Catastrophe. We were called Smash-n-Grab."

"This is referring to some criminal activity?"

"Well, yeah. I thot it was a good name for a punk band, but you know, when did any of us in that band ever smash and grab anything? Even once? I actually wanted to call it Electric Cheese. I miss playing music with them. We all play instruments here sometimes, acoustic instruments, you know we have the pick of all the shops now, it's like a small orchestra when we all play. Not like dancing around at a punk show with two hundred people, or jumping in a van and going on tour. Now I don't play music so much anymore, but look thru people's houses for their computers to find what games or music or weird shit they have on them, bring it back here and try to get someone to play with me. I can run a network line over to a second computer and we can play head to head games if you want. You like computers, video games?"

"Fucking computers. God damn." Abadal shook his head and touched his fingers to the bandage, "I would go to the library, see stacks of books and a few people wandering in there, but on the vast array of desks and computers, hundreds of people are lined up staring at
screens! Like when you go into a casino, they are sucking up this audio visual extravaganza, overstimulating their brains."

"Some of it is intelligent. There was amazing information available." Franklin said.

"Yes, instant messages to friends and family across the world. That is something good, that is something I used." Abadal said, "But to see the kids, just staring at the screens, hours and hours and days, it saddened me that the world outside had become so uninteresting. What happened to exploring the real world, swimming, climbing trees, playing games. Playing face to face war even. On the computers the kids played virtual war with real weapons, they know all the names of the guns and how many bullets a gun can hold. They have their favorite weapon for how well it kills other virtual friends. I see how they act after they play a game like this for hours, they cannot control their bodies, they slap each other, throw things, their emotions out of control, they scream and throw tantrums! They were taken too much out of reality, it seemed unhealthy. But we speak of the past. Look at you now, here you are. I cannot believe you guys. A city full of possibilities, I mean really, you could be doing anything, and you guys are piecing together
batteries and wires and computers. Here is this chance to be free of everything like this, an opportunity to create a beautiful loving world that we would want to live in, and you are resuscitating the way of life that brought us here! I think you should be burning all this shit.”

Franklin laughed and clapped, “You may be right, but we’re just using the tools around us, it’s here, it exists. We started trying to reach the internet, to communicate with survivors. We want to know what’s happening on the outside.”

“You think you’re on the inside?”

“From my perspective, yeah, I’m inside of something, there’s something out there...”

“Or maybe, Franklin, you are actually on the outside. In the middle of this former city, you are on the outside of something.”

“So where is the inside?”

Abadal laughed, “Hey, I’m on the outside too. I don’t know.”

“You’re fucking with me. But maybe not.”

“It’s kinda the same, either way, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Taffy spoke up, “So who are you? What did you do before the Catastrophe?”
“I was a cab driver. Rainbow Taxi. In Somalia I attended university and then became an officer in the military. The situation can change rapidly.”

“And on your time off here in Minneapolis, what did you do?”

“Family.” Abadal held his hands before him, “I was a good Muslim.” He took a bottle of rum sitting on a small table and added a double shot to his tea, “How long has it been now? Six months ago, first time drinking. It keeps me from despair now that everyone is gone.”

“Everyone lost someone. My, family, they live across the continent, alive, dead, who knows, all I have is question marks.”

“I have only periods.” Abadal said, “I know where my family is.”

(fourteen)

Taffy entered the room that had been set up for Abadal’s recovery. A propane heater with a stainless steel pot of water in front of it to humidify the room, a mattress and box spring set up on a wooden frame
high enuf to enter the thermodynamic cloud that was three feet off the floor. Wool blankets, a down comforter, pillows, a small table with water, juice, foods. Sherry dubbed it the recovery room, and advocated the comfort care approach to healing, which was what her family had traditionalized. In this excellent tradition, the sick person got almost whatever they asked for. Abadal was adjusting the temperature on the propane tank heater when Taffy set a bowl down on the table next to the bed.

“Brought you some of this soup I made, it’s got a good spice in it. Keep your immune system up.”

“Thank you. I’ll be better very soon.” Abadal looked down at the bowl of soup, shivered, his head trembled slightly, as tho internal winds had become a tornado. His breath went deeply in, then out, and he laughed, “It’s good for me to be among other people who will show compassion just because I'm human.”

“What happened to you out there? Maybe you don’t want to talk about it. You can forget I asked.”

“I can talk. I have energy now! We escaped the purge by hiding in the mosque, six of us. All men. Months went by, and at last I had to tell them: when I saw the soldiers shoot my family, I no longer believed. It happened instantly, but I ran to the mosque anyway,
I ran to try and make it unreal. To reverse reality. I prayed, but months later I knew I was the only one left of my family. I told the other men, Allah is a lie, Jesus is a lie, Buddha is a lie, everything was a lie. The only truth was death. I was exiled immediately. Kicked out! Old friends of mine pointed to the door and said get out, turned their backs. A friend took my arm and spoke with me. For hours he tried to bring me back. I was gone. He cried. I could not cry, my eyes then and now are still burnt by the things I have witnessed, they are burnt and dry and grief cannot come out of them. Now they see only truth.

So I left the mosque. I knew of no other survivors. I lived on my own for months. Completely alone. It was like I had died. I was a ghost. I lived in some other dimension. Then I saw the man. He was getting groceries from the same store I had been looting. I called to him from far away. We talked at this far distance in the street for some time, in English. He invited me to meet his people. I followed him. he was Ethiopian. He said it would be alright, that I was Somalian, because we were all Africans. True? Some of them were Muslim, some not, it was alright. He said it was alright I was Somalian, things were different now. We must join together and help each other, he said. I
did not tell him I had been an officer in the military. We went to his house and there were many people there! A dozen or more, living close together. tho they could have occupied many houses that were empty. For security I think, and control, they lived like that. The house had leaders. The man I had met was second in command. I got along well with the people tho and became drunk form the first time. Some of them enjoyed the fine liquors now freely available! They were open that way. It was the second day and we were again drinking into the night, talking, playing games, when the leader came home, the number one. He was introduced to me and I was drunk, hardly seeing straight! He said to me, ‘I recognize you. I do not forget the face of a Somalian butcher! An officer in the army, giving orders to kill our grandmothers, slaughter our children! You were not just following orders, but giving them! I remember you!’ I was terrified. I did not recognize him at all. Everyone around me went silent. I ran out the door. I ran far. I heard footsteps behind me. I stopped to look. A man was following me, a very young man, he had something in his hand. As he got close to me he began yelling, ‘Butcher! Butcher! You killed my mother!’ I tried to talk to him, but he kept coming, he swung the
liquor bottle in his hand, hit me in the head. I fell down, and he was on top of me. My hands were around his throat, and then I was on top of him, and he was dying. He was dying. I stopped. God, I stopped. I heard shouting, cursing. I knew I had to keep running. The boy was breathing when I left him there. God...”

(15)

“Snowing again.” Taffy said. In bed next to him Franklin stirred under the covers.

“Snow.” Franklin mumbled.

“You love it.”

Taffy slid out of bed and walked to the window, squinting, the bright day burning. The snowplow parked across the street was covered in it. “Hey buddy, forget about it. Why don’t you take the day off. Let’s all stay home today. No driving. Let it snow. Let it snow. Let it snow. Alright.”

“Taffy?”

Taffy had already left the bedroom. In the kitchen he ground coffee in the old crank grinder, sending noise thru the whole house, oily black beans gnashed
by metal and dropped as grounds into the wooden drawer below. Taffy put the water kettle on the propane stove, dumped the old coffee grounds out of the press pot and rinsed it with a jug of water. Fresh grounds from the wooden drawer into the glass pot, he stuck his nose in and inhaled, huffing the scent, that smell triggered memories of everything. Drinking bottomless cups down at the cafe until wee hours of the morning, bicycling around town with Chip, hitting dumpsters for discarded booty and hitting the coffee dumpster too. Mildly fiendish behavior, trash picking coffee while trashed on coffee.

The smell recalled being on a road or river trip, rubber tramping it or shanty boating, stopping at some small town greasy spoon and stumbling up some sidewalk to sample the local roast. Driving all night getting somewhere, nasty gas station brews sitting-for-too-long-foul-ass coffee, if yer lucky they gave it to ya for free, the ones who cared.

Tweezer walked into the kitchen, interrupting Taffy’s reverie, “Hey, who didn’t wash their fucking dishes! God dammit!”

“Too early. Too early. I just woke up. Give me an hour, alright guy?”
“I’m just kidding Taffy! We don’t do dishes anymore, are you serious? This is the post-apocalyptic world. Hello! Lemme show you how I clean the kitchen.” Tweezer opened the window above the sink and proceeded to throw everything out the window, crashing and breaking on what sounded like an already substantial pile outside.

“There ya go. Clean kitchen.”

“What happens when the pile is as high as the window and you can’t throw anything more out?”

“I guess we move to a new house.”

Taffy shrugged, “Sounds good.”

The water was turning to steam. Taffy poured it into the press pot and put the plunger on, then sat down by the big window with a comic book. Abadal came into the room. “I heard the call.”

“Bean tea music. As far as we know, the whole world still loves this stuff along with us.”

“I couldn’t sleep well.” Abadal said, “Might as well go the opposite way then.”

“I have those nights too.”

“Sometimes... it isn’t working. My mind won’t let me sleep until it understands, until something is settled. The descent into madness. We are all going to be insane, do you think? If a normal world ever
returns, we will be madmen! Has it been too long? We are becoming feral humans. How could we relate to the old normal?”

“Whoa. Seriously. Too early. We need to start drinking this coffee right now. That is all that exists in the world for me. You’re right, thinking about the future like this will definitely make us crazy. That’s why we don’t do it. We all agree. We don’t talk about it, ever. One on one, I think everyone talks about it. We don’t sit around in big groups banging our head against the wall tho. I know you didn’t agree to the shut-the-fuck-up-about-that-shit policy. That’s alright, I will talk about this with you when we are alone. I’m not afraid of considering the future, the ‘why’ and ‘what if’ and ‘what the fuck?’”

“First coffee.” Abadal agreed, “Is it ready?”
“Two more minutes.”
“Two minutes.”
“You want some of this dried fruit medley?”
“Yes, thank you.” Abadal reached for the bowl and took the shrunken pineapple, mango, raisin, cranberries into his palm, held them there, “I love the pineapple and mango.”
“Yeah, that’s good shit. I like it when it’s the whole dried pineapple ring to eat.”
“It’s good to say that I love this. I love coffee with honey and milk.”

“Ah, I remember milk.” Taffy smiled, “And fresh bananas! Ha! Haven’t seen a banana in awhile.”

“Dried fruit, coffee, something I love that is still with me, still available to love. It’s good to have that now. Do you know what i’m saying? Little things. You know that coffee originated in east Africa?”

“Yeah, that’s right! I knew that.”

Abadal sighed, “Sometimes this new living is easy. Too easy. Sometimes not easy. Impossible.”

“I know the feeling.”

“And I think that is why I cannot sleep. How could I go to bed, just to rise again into the same shit? Why? It must be fixed before I sleep. How can you sleep when everything is wrong? This is not a safe place to sleep! A place where everything is wrong and cannot be made right. And so, I stare out the window. Watch the snow get thicker on the ground, watch the snow fall in the dark, and then fall in the light again. With another sunrise I know I can come pester my new friend who has saved my life. Let me pour you some of this coffee. Two minutes is gone.”

Abadal plunged the press pot and poured Taffy’s mug for him.

132
“Thank you. I’m ready now. I can handle anything,” Taffy leaned back with his ceramic mug, which he kept in his room to avoid being ‘washed’.

“It helps to say it to another human. I feel better just speaking with someone who can still smile, someone who can still sleep at night, that is inspiring. It makes me think that I just have to hold on, ride out the waves in my mind and my body. Realize that some days are harder than others, days with no hope, no light at the end of the tunnel because you are still in the middle of the tunnel, but knowing you must keep walking, you must keep walking.”

“Cheers to that!” Taffy held up his mug.

Abadal touched his mug to Taffy’s and sipped. Taffy sipped again. They looked each other in the eye and smiled.

“This is good shit.” Taffy said.

“This is perfect.” Abadal held his mug up, “This is the only thing that exists.”
Taffy moved his pawn two spaces forward, opening up his queen to move across the board. Franklin shifted from his locked stance on the opposite side of the board to examine the fresh possibilities.

“Things are heating up now.” he said, moving his knight out from the back row to threaten one of Taffy’s forward bishops. Across the room Abadal and Sherry played a board game. Julius, Crasstina, Rhea, Stevens, Tweezer, Thorn, Jack and Christopher played poker with large sums of real money.

“Action’s on you, Thorn.” Tweezer said.

Thorn peeked at the corners of his two cards, looked left and right at his opponents, and smiled. “I’ll raise it three thousand dollars.” He laid out three platinum credit cards.

“We agreed credit cards are only 500.” Christopher said.

“What!” Thorn growled and threw down three more credit cards.

“I fold.” Julius handed his cards to Christopher, who was dealing.

“Fold.” Crasstina said.
“I call.” Rhea counted out from a stack of 100’s and 20’s.
“Fuck that.” Stevens handed his two cards to Christopher.
“I raise.” Tweezer said, “Six thousand.”
“Call.” Rhea put in another thousand.
“Here we go!” Thorn flipped his cards.
“Oh shit, a flush!” Christopher said.
Tweezer handed his cards to Christopher, face down.
“What was it Tweezer? Pocket aces? A straight?” Thorn said.
“Fuck off!”
“Take it easy big guy, just curious.”
Rhea laid down her cards, face up, “Full house, dickhead.”
“Oh shit!” Christopher said, “That’s it!”
“Damn.” Thorn watched his money go away into Rheas’ pile of cash and cards.
“You slow played that shit… I didn’t see that coming.”
“Full house!”
“No way!”
“Deal me out.” Thorn said, “I gotta walk this one off.”
Thorn walked to the chess board that Taffy and Franklin stared down at.
“Hey.”
“Yo. What is happening.”
“Got any smoke?”
Taffy pulled a pack of something out and handed Thorn one. Thorn lit the thing and sucked it in, let it go.
“I think we gotta get outta here, go do something outside. Ya know. Outside. Remember outside?”
“Good idea Thorn. Where to? It still being winter and all.”
“How about a bike ride?” Franklin said.
“Yeah! Run the snowplow ahead of us, blaze a trail for the bikes.”
“You can never go wrong with a bike ride!”
“Field trip!” Taffy shouted, and turned the table over, kings and queens wrestled and fucked on their way to the floor.

The plow was fired up, Sherry demanded the driver’s wheel. Abadal was not a bicyclist so he took shotgun
seat. The bikes were arrayed in the street, Bloomington Avenue now a rally area cleared by Sherry in the plow, the starting line. Three bikes needed flat tires repaired, one bike had a bent rim, the result of some drunken indoor biking fiasco that was fun for everyone and everything except the metal of the bike tire and the objects it crashed into. Its life as a bike tire over, Julius hung it up on a nail by the front door. A new tire was brought forth and the fleet was ready to roll. Sherry gave a blast from the plow’s air horn and blazed down the street. Down the left side, the right side, down the middle, a wild winding path. The punks got on their bikes and squeaked off on the thin layer of snow left after the plow. Taffy, Franklin, Julius, Steven, Tweezer, Thorn, Jack, Christopher, and Rhea.

“This was a good idea.” Rhea said.
“This is good.” Taffy agreed.

The mass turned left on Franklin Avenue, headed west. The few clouds in the sky, solid blue shone thru, sun rays blazing on the glass and stucco walls of the shops and stores. The grafitti was brilliant everywhere and encompassing, continuous pieces stretching from building to building, blocks long. That was one thing to do in the winter. Keeping the cans warm was hard, Taffy helped make little rattle can cozies with squirrel
skins, they found some of those chemical pocket heater packs and tucked those in with each can. It became the major outdoor activity of the house. The murals stretched for twenty blocks in every direction.

As they tooled along behind the plow the bottles came out, and flasks of whiskey passed from bike to bike as they leisurely cruised down the silent street.

“Hey, we’re passing the library!” Christopher shouted.

“Not that library, we’re going downtown asshole!” Rhea replied.

“Shit!”

“Duh!”

“Yer getting exercise now!”

“You gonna make it?”

“You guys don’t understand, I hibernate in the winter. This is going to wake me up, and then I’ll be pacing the house all crazy-crabby-drunk!” Thorn pulled a flask from his coat and drank. Franklin reached into his basket and pushed a button on the boom box. Harsh music blared, insistent drums pounding a fight or fuck beat. Tweezer screamed, his voice reflecting off their art on the walls of the empty city.
The plow turned and evoked shouts of dismay. A
detour? The plow emerged again a street closer to the
ride and turned back heading west.
“She’s fucking with us!”
“She’s put the hammer down!”
Franklin turned to Taffy, his long haired blond wig
compensating for the lack of fashion available on the
outside of the puffy black snowsuit, “Weird, isn’t it?”
“Really weird.”
“No cars, no people. It feels completely safe in one
way, but at the same time, creepy! Death from above.
Who’s out there watching?”
“This is the ultimate stage.” Taffy said.
“Give me the whiskey, friend.”
“Yes, the balm. Anti-anxiety juice. Here you are.”
“Let’s drink until we only love it.”
“Until we only love it.”

Sherry parked the plow in front of the downtown
library and the crew tossed their bikes all over the
street and raced thru deep snow to the glass walled
monolith. A window busted thru with a sledge
hammer and they poured in, hooting and howling. The
main hall was four stories tall and echoed with their footsteps and buzzing voices.

“Reference materials are now available for check out!” Thorn cried.

“The closed stacks are open!” Tweezer agreed.

“Amnesty for all fines!” Taffy proclaimed.

“Yeah!” Franklin said.

“Blow jobs for the homeless!” someone shouted.


“Right.”

Taffy wandered the isles, climbed the stairs, looked out the vast windows at the silent city, carefully filling his pack with selected booty. Voices from the infinite past, something to ease the passage of time in this present reality. He found himself downstairs again, needing another shot of whiskey. Franklin was behind the librarian’s checkout desk, feet propped up on the counter by the bar code scanner, a glossy magazine in hand. “Check it out, I found the pile of smut mags in a locker.”

“Let’s have the whiskey.” Taffy said.

141
They drank.
“I’ve got a hard on.” Franklin confessed.
“Doesn’t take much.”
“Check this out.”
Taffy looked at the full color cocks and cunts, paged thru and found a couple interesting ones. “Well there, librarian guy. I’ve got a pack fulla books to check out, but, I don’t have any money to pay off my fines, maybe there’s some kinda work trade I could do? What do you say.”
“Oh yeah, we can work something out. C’mon back here behind the counter. I’ll show you what to do.”
Taffy walked behind the counter and found Franklin with his cock out, the thin cord from the bar code scanner wrapped around, hot blood swelling obscene, bulging head throbbed purple and shining, taught skin. Taffy dropped his book bag and put his hands on Franklin’s thighs, went down to his knees and took Franklin’s cock in his mouth, sliding his lips tightly over the round head, curved mouth matching the hollow under the head, that magic V, rocking back and forth on it, plunging down for three strokes, and back to the rapid head rocking the ridge 6 times. Mathematical method, dance music, a style that made sense, a rhythm that he played on drums in bands, this
cock made music, and then the song changes, and then
the song goes back to that good part. and then when
it's too much there is a bridge to the other side when
Taffy rose up from Franklin's cock and put his soft hot
salted lips on cold dry ones, sliding his tongue slowly
in and out while stroking the instrument with his left
hand slowly stroking just to remind, the connection,
then pulling tongue out and plunging down again,
sucking the full length with clamped lips, pounding
head on nail until Franklin cracked open and all
anxiety went on fire and out in smoke. Taffy slowed
his movements, sucking the life down, bonding them,
slowed perfectly like a tornado siren winding down to
leave only the peaceful sky and sun and fucking
singing little songbirds in the dwarf apple tree outside
the window.

“Taffy,” Franklin said, “I forgot how to read.” Taffy said, his mouth to the
whiskey bottle, drank a shot, put his lips to Franklin's and singed the tongue.

Sherry and Abadal sat looking out a fourth floor
window over the Mississippi River valley, watching a
few clouds slide eastward, drinking whiskey. Sherry
cupped her hand on his face and turned him to face
her. She finished their conversation by planting her lips on his. “Is this alright?”

A sparkle of life emerged from his eye and rolled down, followed by others, and then from both eyes, and stopped. She smiled a tiny smile. He touched her long hair, and his flat mouth turned up into a tiny smile.

(Seventeen)
Smoke rose thru the cavernous library as the sun set. Taffy smelled the burning, old paper smoke, and saw flashes of orange in the foyer, reflecting on the glass.

Rhea sat in a circle with everyone else around the book fire, reading from a thick dictionary: “Who wants their fortune read next?”

“I’m ready.” Thorn said.

“Tell me when.” she began letting the pages fly by her thumb, buzzing.

“Now!” Thorn said.

Rhea thrust her finger dawn on the pages and her index finger jammed down on an entry.

“Lyar: the eighth month of the Jewish year.”
“What the fuck does that mean?” Thorn said.
“Who’s next?” Rhea asked.
“Me.” Steven said.
Rhea spun the dictionary. Everyone around the fire was enthralled.
“When!” Steven spat.
“Fandom: fans, collectively, as of a sport or entertainer.”
“Yeah.” Steven said.
“I’m next.” Taffy said, stepping up to the circle and sitting down.
Rhea let the pages fly and Taffy gave the call, Rhea’s finger hit the page. “Leper: a person having leprosy. 2. a person to be shunned or ostracized, as because of the danger of moral contamination.”
“Damn.” Julius said.
“I am the outsider.” Taffy said.
“Rhea, and now you.” Franklin held out his hand. She gave the dictionary to him, and he flipped.
“There!” she said.
“Estonian: Estonia or its people, language, or culture. 1. a person born or living in Estonia. 2. the finnic language spoken in Estonia.”
“What the hell?” Taffy said.
“Y’all don’t know me.” Rhea said.
The fire of books was warming up the stone floor. A book containing biographies of all the U.S. presidents was burning on top, each page blackening and turning to ash, revealing a fresh president behind it, stone faced portraits to confront the fire and be disintegrated. They were burning anything that sucked. Newspapers, tax forms, bibles. They burnt military recruitment pamphlets. They burnt chairs from the computer area. They burnt a piece of wooden corporate art.

“Alright I changed my mind.” Tweezer said, “I want my fortune read!”

“Okay, say when!” Rhea said, and the pages moved.

“When!”

“Jerk! To pull, twist, thrust, push, or throw with a sudden sharp movement—“

“Alright, you can stop right there, I’ll take definition one.”

“Who’s next?”

“I don’t believe in fate.” Christopher said, “Free will, motherfuckers. No fortune telling on me. I make my own fortune.”

“Suit yerself buddy.” Rhea said, “For the rest of us, I offer the guiding light.”

146
“Hey.” Franklin said, “I’m ready. Let it rip.”

“Here we go!” Rhea said.

“Stop!”

“Honorary. Given as an honor only, without the usual requirements or privileges.”

“Well that sounds pretty relaxed, pretty slack. I can handle that.”

“Jack?”


“Kinda whatever you interpret it to mean. The meaning is up to you to decide. Sometimes the Psychic Fortunes are kinda head-scratchers you know? Clearly, in that case, it would indicate a cloudiness in your life, from the obscurity of the fortune. That would be my read... Are you in?”

“I have always been afraid of these things. My mother was very into fortune telling, astrology, a little too much you know. It ruled our lives when I lived at home. Most of it was eye rolling stuff you know, but then when predictions would come true, or things were revealed that we found out were true, it was terrifying. I think mostly because of how she would freak out… Kind of amazing.”
“You can freely interpret the fortune. Or not get one at all. Trust your own intuition for guidance? No stress.”

“Alright. It’s time to rise above the past. I’ll do it.”
“Yer ready?” Rhea asked.
“Ready.”

Pages spun, Rhea’s finger again poised above the dictionary, and when Jack said stop she plunged her finger down and then opened her eyes to look.
“Condign. deserved; suitable: said esp. of punishment for wrongdoing.”
“See! Dammit! That’s fucked up.”
“Your right.” Rhea said, “That is creepy. What have you done? Out with it, criminal. Or wait, maybe you want to be tied up and thrashed a bit—”
“You can spank me. Let’s start with that.”
“I’m intrigued. We should make arangements soon.”
“Me.” Crasstina said, “My turn.”

Rhea closed the dictionary and placed her hands to spin the pages, closed her eyes and spun.

“Now!”

Rhea thrust her finger down and opened her eyes.
“Gather.”

“Ah, that’s not bad. Gather…” Crasstina said.
“But, there are a bunch of definitions, and the one my finger landed exactly on is: 12: for pus to come to a head, as a boil; fester. Or, 13: to increase ‘clouds gathered’. 14: to become wrinkled.”

“Lemme see that!” Crasstina tore the dictionary out of Rhea’s hands, “Are you sure its not pointing to the one right above it, number 10: to put the pages or signatures of a book in proper order for binding?”

“Well, that was the one right above my finger. Some people read it that way, but I just read it as what’s right under my finger, because the spirits moving the telling are able to see out of the tip of my finger like there is an eyeball there. That’s what I figure. You know, on other planes of existence, things work differently than we understand.”

“Well in the expansive interpretation idea, I’m gonna take a step back, take in the whole picture, and fuck you.”

“All, alright then. Next! Is that everyone? Sherry and Abadal?”

“They’re busy.”

“Lets burn the dictionary.”

Crasstina threw the fat tome on the fire, and sparks lifted up towards the glass ceiling.
I wonder if there is something internal about the length of time we know each other, and the longer you know a person the less likely it is you will be romantically attracted to them. The mystery of the stranger, the excitement of a mysterious romantic sexual encounter, the possibility that it could be like nothing you’ve experienced before. Is it innate in our bodies and minds, why does that excite us - as a guardian against inbreeding? That could explain some patterns I’ve noticed in my romantic past, and present behavior with Franklin. Some kind of genetic memory push to move out from the people you’ve known for years who may be relatives since you have known them so well, and mate with a complete stranger to enrich the DNA pool. So cheating on your partner is actually a good thing, programmed into the very life force to keep the melting pot going, to prevent the harmful characteristics of inbreeding from being forced on fresh babies. I suppose this theory could explain why marriages and relationships only last a year or two at most. In this country, the western world. In other
countries strict laws and cultures and religions hold marriages together. After a few years they probably go off to fuck someone else in secret, which is good because they are only preventing inbreeding. Perfectly natural. Innate. Sensible. Reasonable! How could one be expected to turn off their mating maneuvers simply because they had found a mate, wouldn’t the finding of this one excellent partner encourage the body to continue looking out there in the world, god! How many more beautiful, hot fucking mates are there out there, I mean, because of circumstances, we might only be able to fuck on occasion, but why not! Live life! Travel around. While people try to impose order and rules upon this world, our animal side continues to play out every day, every hour. Thots are formed, feelings arise, desires, glands squirting, chemical reactions, ancient memories and then taboos are stepped on, boundaries crossed, laws broken, sin committed and we all have great fun while it’s happening, in that moment of forbidden lust fucking the brains out of a stranger in the bathroom at a party. The animal demands, it’s only natural, human, we try to figure out the universe and force each other to behave in some way that’s not natural, and many are enslaved to it, religions and governments, but then
someone breaks loose and laws are broken, the
neighbors are shocked, the university condemns, the
church is ashamed, the government wants your money
or someone in prison, someone has broken loose
someone has discovered freedom! Open fire! Those
words aren't real, not freedom like that. The man was
an animal, people loved him, very sexy, hot. Everyone
thot he should be let back in the gene pool, maybe just
for an orgiastic hour.

These are some thots I had today, after listening to
Franklin and Crasstina fucking in the bathroom of a
house we had went to for a party last night. It was our
thing now, ever since the library expedition, of going
out to other places to rip our minds out of the stagnant
ruts, since we knew of no other trustworthy associates
to hang out with, we decided to change our
environment and thereby change our interactions with
each other, and how we felt about ourselves, and we
would become different people in that way.

Some of us role played, dressing up in clothes
found in the closets and dressers of houses and
apartments we broke into. Then we role played right
there where people used to live, or stroll down to
another apartment pretending to be the neighbors. Last
night Franklin was pretending to be an Olympic
organizer in town for a week, looking for some street kids to play naughty with. He donned the nylon jogging suit from the condo we were in, the suite on the 8th floor, and set out drinks on a fancy tray. Julius joined his fantasy, finding a differently colored nylon jogging suit in the bedroom. They spoke in a falsified European accent to each other and pointed lasciviously at us still dressed in our ragged jeans and dirty black shits and striped leggings and patched up coats. We drank, looked out the plate glass windows at the city in late winter, sun going down and blazing red across the scene like a twenty minute long orgasm. We sang songs and made fun of the sleazy guys who had picked us up off the street and were giving us free drinks. We talked with them about the Olympics. Then Crasstina said she thot the one guy was cute, and got up, and took Franklin away into the bathroom. We laughed and it was funny. I took another gulping drink and drank faster. It was alright, why wouldn’t it be alright? Everyone fucked in front of each other when I first came to the Last House, and then Franklin and I set up a room to have this one-on-one space, just a little remnant of the old ways, people would still walk in all the time, jump on us, even join our fuck. We loved them, we loved each other. Why possess a person all
for yourself? Possession. It felt weird because I was raised to think it was weird. This is one of the laws they force on you to make the system work, to raise babies in a single family nuclear household, the ideal marketing unit, the parameter of social control. Isolation. Some cultures have twelve wives or husbands, everybody makes some token of respect for the fucking and baby making, then they just keep living like the glorified animals we are. What about it? What is jealousy? Fear that maybe this new person is going to take away someone that makes you happy, take them away thru the forest across the desert to the ocean and the beach and you will never fucking see them again. You don't want that. So, jealousy. Perhaps jealousy does indicate that you really like this person. It's good to feel a healthy level of jealousy because it's a way for you mind/body to tell you: “Hey! Don’t let that happen. You have to get up now and cause a scene and bang on the bathroom door to show this person that you love them and want them and are ready to fuck shit up to achieve the communication of this feeling to that person, even tho their hot throbbing bits might be fully engorged in another’s at that very moment, and you will be the furthest thing from their mind. But no wait, maybe it's that selfish jealousy,
mine! Mine! That’s what it feels like. but what if you
don’t say that, and acquiesce to this leaving you
behind fucking adventure, then what if that new
person says, mine! What if your lover is enthralled that
the person would take such a wildly passionate bold
stand! And here I am, Taffy, sitting there on the couch,
drinking. Taffy doesn’t want it. No passion. Taffy is
kissing the bottle, not me, and you are kissing me. A
whole new branching tree of possibilities.
So I sat there on the couch. Thinking about
communication and being animals, cause that’s what it
is, sitting there on the couch trying not to be an asshole
but also trying to figure how not to be made an asshole
out of and just to even figure it all out in a state of
increasing drunkenness. A ball of tangled string rolling
around in my head. maybe that was the first time I
really thot about my feelings for Franklin and that was
the thing that was really hard to deal with. It was too
much to deal with. I was in love with Franklin. That
was the feeling.
I shook it off and inspired the rest of the crew to go
go run around the building, jumping on the concierges
package cart and pushing people at full speed down
the hallways, crashing into large plastic potted plants
and closed elevators, kicking down doors of
apartments and pretending to be mafia strong-arms, overturning coffee tables and smashing kitchen dishes. "Next time we break YOU!" "Have our money by this time tomorrow night or the little dog get it!"

We found a large waterbed in one apartment and three of us fucked in the middle of it while others lay back on the bed just letting the waves rock them in their drunkenness, too drunk to participate.

I woke up alone. not a surprise, since I was in my very own condominium furnished with my vomit on the tan shag carpet. Carpet! As if that glue and chemical laden floor covering could be made any more sickening. On top of the pet stains from whatever tiny dog lived there was my vomit, dressing on the wretched salad. I rolled over on the bed and stared down for a long time.

We were not far from the Last House, I strolled back in the piercing sunlight, after slackening my hangover with booze from the condos. I found the crew all there, laying about watching a movie on the battery powered screen. Franklin jumped up and welcomed me. People reclined on cushions watching
the movie clapped weakly on seeing us embrace. All of
my vague apprehensions melted in the contact.
“What the hell happened to you?”
“I think I went off into a role playing scenario,
which involved only me. Me, alone in my condo.
Living the dream.”
“Lemme rub yer neck. C’mere.” Franklin took my
muscles in his fingers, gripped shoulder in his hand,
loosened it, thumbs into spine firmly, cracked popped
vertebrae cartilage connection, releasing a blockage
thru bundled nerves of the spine. I felt the surge in his
body, I laid down and let Franklin walk on my back.
“Walk it out.” I said to him with my face squished
in the hardwood floor.
He fixed me a little. I wasn’t into the movie. I went
for a bike ride to nowhere. The streets were ridable.
After the library the other day sherry and Abadal
drove the plow all over for hours, partly to conceal the
location of the Last House, just in case that mattered,
and also to open up bicycling paths. We all suspected
it was mostly to spend time together having fun. I
would always catch them making faces, and then I
would make eye contact with someone else who had
seen them and there was a smile in our eyes too. It was
a sweet thing, a real live sprout from a seed like the
groundhog coming out maybe to bring on the sun and just hanging out, something completely ridiculous, but we had nothing else to smile about, except another full bottle of liquor.

My mind steadied and sparking, frayed nerves re-attached from contact with my people my lover and the all’s well as it can be, I got up on the cruiser and rolled off on thin snow pack, rubber tires squeaking on tiny white crystals. Small bunnies bounded away from me, they had taken over the streets, eating what? I don’t know. Down by Lake Street I saw a pair of fat raccoons emerge from a vent pipe that allowed them access to a large Mercado that obviously had plenty of food left in it. There was nothing left of the human bodies in the greenway for anything to eat upon, bones covered in snow. I looked at it now in passing like at anything worthy of disdain, a limousine stuffed with money people, a police precinct station. Something fucked up that was beyond my power to change, but too close in many ways, too close to admit the feelings it scratched upon.

I thot about killing one of the racoons. Fresh meat, I had gotten used to it back at the old house, when I was alone. It was a good feeling to take my food from the street like that, like I was breaking a law and doing
what a person should do, provide for themselves, kicking over the office cubicle wall and smashing a metal rolling chair thru the plate glass window to escape the wage slavery. Escaping a life spent spooning food into the masters mouth. No more corned beef with hash out of the can, no more canned tuna in water or oil, no more plastic packed dried jerky meats, preserved nothing. Bleeding meat cooked with a howl to the winter moon, hot blood melting snow. I watched the raccoons go, waddling off to the next kitchen raid. Couldn’t kill now, without really needing to. To kill anything in this empty city seemed wrong.

(Nineteen)
“This is way ahead of it’s time.” Julius smiled, “What I’m doing, its like throwing a ball way up in the air, a long bomb, a high fly ball, and then I’m just gonna start moving that way, and sometime in the future, when I’m 40 or 50 or 60, gray hairs, I’ll reach up my hand, catch it. Dignified, glad you could make it, happy to see you here. That’s happiness, I can kick back on the mound of misery that is my past, and take
a nap on it, make a living on it, stand on it and see the big picture! All I have to do is focus right now on doing it good, putting everything into it, everyday I wake up, really living it. Very little sitting back watching it go by! No! Only when sitting watching it go by is living really living itself. Like right now, actually. Something like this.” Julius pulled the guitar back up and a chord rang out, he strummed furiously on the one string left unbroken and syllables flew out of his mouth, words barely intelligible, tiny gobs of spit flew out his mouth as he sang something about whiskey. We sat transfixed to his mad performance. Here was the wild still in us! Crasstina knew the song and she began to sing along with him. A moment of lucidity.

I lay sunk in the cushion. Our strange womb, too lazy to haul entire couches down here, just cushions, endless cushions, square round and heart shaped fluffy things, piled and blanketed, whiskey stained and crumb spattered, dried cheese spreads and slices of toast lost in the cracks. Franklin was off in the night, he decided to document our world in black and white film, sure that this would be important to posses one day, something that would be displayed on a gallery wall, even of such value to secure a small income or to
inform a future revolution. It was his answer to the question always asked in the old world, 'so what have you been doing?' No one asked the question anymore, but apparently the question had been locked in his mind.

Julius and Crasstina ended their song, looked at each other, and laughed uproariously. Then they decided to play the entire song again, faster. I watched both performances with a critical eye. Brilliant, but it could never be reproduced, their state of drunkenness was perfect for this, it would never work sober. When would they ever be sober again? Perhaps it could happen again. The end of the song was not in sight. Never. The end of the booze was nowhere to be seen. Steady as she goes, the bottom of the hill was nowhere in sight.

A tiny crack had opened between Franklin and I. It was nothing. Was it that one night? A week of nights when the smallest sound widened into a blast, the crack that went around the world. The smallest fissure becoming another split that made a whole into halves. What the fuck. We couldn't even talk about it, how can you reason things out like that. In this world, what is reasonable. We just said to each other, "I'm going for a walk, to photograph some wild life. You know." and
then, “Alright, sounds fun. I’m going to lay on these filthy cushions again drinking a bottle and we’ll see what happens then. I’m sure a break thru is eminent.” We were done loving and started hating, I think, just to have something change.

For breakfast I made tacos, greasy tacos, and left my fingerprints all over the room. Greasy fingerprints on his book he had taken from the library. He grabbed for it first thing waking up, long after I had been up. Book and coffee, his dream morning, then he cursed, the plastic cover of the thing sliding in his fingers. My greasy fingerprints. I held a final bite of greasy taco in my hand as he turned on me. It was perfect, as he stared me down, a drip of grease fell from the corn tortilla folded in my hand.

“One thing at a time. Can you just stop yourself for a moment, focus on one thing?” Franklin menaced me with the book, “Why eat and read my book? Cant you just appreciate eating food, then appreciate reading my book? Or get your own book. Now I have this grease covered book, I cant eat it, but can I read it? I can hardly keep the fucking thing in my hands, it keeps slipping out.”

“Did I ask to be born?” I said, “This is the world I was born into. This is the world we live in.”
“You’re drunk. Did you wake up drunk or what?”
“Or what.” I sneered.
“Fuck you.”
There were worse worlds than laying on the fluff drunk, watching friends sing and play music. That’s the best of the worst. Sherry handed me a bowl of popcorn.
“God. Popcorn. That’s good of you.”
“Want something to drink? Am I mothering you?”
“I love it.”
“You’ve been drunk a lot lately. Something’s wrong.”
I laughed. I looked around the room, everyone so drunk.
“I know it’s a taboo observation, but there is a deeper end to go off than even where we’re at. So- if you need someone to talk to, come talk to me. You know? Sometimes just speaking the words is all you need. You know?”
“Yeah, let fly the winged turds! Open up and soil the universe with my puke. Ah.”
“There ya go buddy, that’s a start.”
“Thanks Sherry. Not tonight tho. More music. More drinking. God dammit, could there even be dancing?
Hey, you and Abadal have been playing music together, will you play tonight?"

"Ah! I should ask him. Before people get any drunker. He’s a little shy. I think we frighten him just a little."

"Tell him Taffy wants to hear it. Tell him that. I want to hear the music you make. This is the only live music that exists in our world, how could we judge him harshly? There is only love. Get him down here."

"Sounds like fun. I’ll see about it."

Sherry and Abadal showed up after I lay there an epic amount of unknown time. She set up a cello and he set up a keyboard plugged into a car battery, we all rolled around on our cushions to set the stage and we shouted encouragement and cuddled up to it, one pie pan light bulb aimed in their direction. They were ready. We applauded louder than ever before. They played. It was something I could not name. Had it been composed by a dead white guy? What did I care! It was fucking beautiful, it was astounding, it was the time and place of hearing it. Our time had to be a similar time and place! Epic and insane, high places and low places forces shifting on the board and that old familiar human tragedy right there in the sequenced notes, human bodies moving to invoke...
(twenty)

Stevens left yesterday. He saw a sign in the sky. Something spoke to him up there. That’s all. We were outside the house feeding some blackbirds, tossing seeds, and he saw it. That was it. Pointed up to the sky. He said goodbye and walked off, heading south, nothing packed, no goodbyes. Nothing, I thot: that’s the way to do it. Better for everyone. Walk away. Before the Catastrophe it was always like that, someone could come back to town after being gone a year, and people would say, “Hey, what’s up?” Just accepted, maybe they hold their eyes on you a little longer and smile. Ah, that one.

Someone is always going away. Someone is always coming back into town. People are always moving. Moving. Endless possibility. Then you stay somewhere so long you think it’s impossible to go. Then you get in the space suit and jump into the unknown. Can people exist in this other space? A space where I have no
friends? Who knows, let's try it! I've heard it's nice there. Green grass. Nothing. Void. Implosion. The top of the world, curled up vodka drunk in a cold basement. No one knows you're there. There is no one there.

No one is watching. The story can be told later. No one is listening now. I put my arms around you, we danced side by side. House full of friends. This house is full of hate and love, suffering woven thru us, the tracer of an outside entity dancing, like a virus! We shout and slap each other and tell the stories of our lives. All these people come together, in drink and food and music and dancing and smoking, this friend is launching out into the unknown, we have gathered here tonight to watch the launching, the vapor trail soars against blue sky. A vessel from another somewhere pauses in the sky long enuf to wink at you, just at you, and then you know what to do. You start walking.

We have never been there! Go and do it! Write us a letter, shake us out of our comfortable chair and explode our mind, light the flame under the kettle. This will all be gone, this will all be changed. Everything will be different. Love now. Love this. Do you feel that little burning? That's all there is, and it
won’t be there forever. Don’t let it go out, keep it warm, that’s it. Smile into it. Reaction. Infinite possibilities.

I woke up breathing fast, ears alive, the chuckling laughter of the smooth talking deli owner up the street echoing from a dream. Why was I dreaming about that charismatic deli guy? Like a dream spirit guide, here is this deli guy, smoothing it up, still living and kicking out sandwiches in my mind, hanging out with me as the fish filet and french fries cook, saying fuck it hey man, do what you gotta do. One moment completely serious the next laughing his head backwards. His face lingered in my mind as the sound of his laughter persisted in my ears. Not the sound of blood in my veins, not my heart pumping, not some food being prepped on a board in the kitchen, not fucking with heads banging on the wall, not music, music? No, not music. The sound was coming thru the walls, thru the doors, thru the fucking roof. it was a helicopter, a helicopter. The house soon shook with footsteps, running, questions demanding answers. Something was burning, with every footfall in the hall I could feel the fear, that was the smell. I lay there wondering. Fight or flight! I wondered if we had already been caught and were dead! Death from above! If
everything evil still existed out there, that mechanical robotic death machine unstoppable, we were doomed. Why not fight back? Just for fun, for laughs. Or is it cards now, can we bluff? Play dumb, slip thru the cracks like we have lived our lives, eating the scraps in the alleys, living like indomitable cockroaches crammed in walls and closets, covered in black and hiding from the light. Cockroaches! I remember traveling back thru my hometown once, backpack on, and some rich kid by the mall called me a roach. And now the exterminator has come to give us all the chemical shower.

Franklin moved next to me, slow to wake up as usual, “Well?” I said to him.

“Shit!” Franklin sprang out of bed, took the rifle from the corner and ran into the hall. I could no longer even hear the helicopter with all the running around and shouting and wild voices. I rolled off the mattress, put my jeans on, a shirt, boots, glanced at the other automatic in the corner. Really?

I walked down the hall to the room with the exit door where everyone had congregated. Half of us stood there babbling, wearing nothing but automatic rifles, the other half, underwear, jeans, boots, the group I fit into, dressed and unarmed. I laughed. I laughed
louder and louder. Soon there was nothing but my laughter in the room. When I finally stopped myself there was no sound but the blades of that helicopter blending the sky of Minneapolis.

“So is this it, twelve against the empire? I hope they make a movie about us.” Julius said.

“Yeah. Alright. Let’s all put our safetys on, if they think we are shooting at them, that would be bad.” Crasstina said.

“We don’t even know if it’s for us.” Sherry said.

“It’s coming really close.” Julius said from his vantage at the front door, “But not straight at us. Just one, a small one.”

“One of those fuckin robots. It’s just gonna waste us.”

“A reconnaissance robot. Lets go into the hole.” Sherry said, the brown wood and black metal of the AK-47 rifle wildly contrasting her naked white skin.

“That’s a horrible defense position, they could take us all out down there, one shot.” Julius said.

“I’m thinking they don’t know we are here. But maybe are looking to find us. So we should hide our heat signatures now. Right now!”

“All agreed? It’s got to be all of us!” Franklin said.
No one objected. We went downstairs. I grabbed one of the emergency five gallon buckets of water on the way. We crammed into the hole, some kind of service access to underground pipes in the old brick building, then closed the old gray door behind and breathed in the dust of years, sifted down through the sky, roof, joists, floor boards, oak, pine, linoleum, tile, to concrete and brick basement hole, fine powder of the world gone to the bottom. Franklin couldn’t take it-he sneezed immediately.

“SSsshhhh!” someone hissed in the darkness, and half of us began laughing our asses of, was that earnest, or sarcasm? A ridiculous mad moment.

“Shut the fuck up, I can’t hear the helicopter.” Tweezer said. Somebody laughed in the back.


“If possible!”

“Oh, what a world that would be, Tweezer, the ancient white man of all ancient white men, you could be president for eternity.”

“Could I please listen to the helicopter? Is that politically correct enuf for you?”

“SSsshhhh!”

The laughter again, thru pressed lips it burst like farting.
“Dear god. We have destroyed our minds with alcohol.” I said.

“Oh, booze!” Franklin said.

“Does anyone have any? Shit!” Thorn said.

“I got it.” Jack said. He had clothes on, even a coat,

“Pass the flask.”

“Dammit it’s cold down here.” Sherry said.

“Share body heat.” I said.

“Not in the mood.”

“No, I mean it. Who knows how long we’ll be down here, and when the adrenaline wears off your gonna realize how fucking cold it is.”

“I can’t believe you are lecturing me about the body, I spent hard years studying everything about it.”

In a silent moment the helicopter reverberated down thru the building, into the basement.

“That’s really close.”

For a moment we became very quiet. The spinning blades closed on us. I felt Franklin on my left side, his arm tense on the snipers rifle, I could feel his thots, see his own vision in my mind: sprinting to the roof, drawing a bead on the thing, firing shots, three shots off, and then a hail of bullets, death from above. Where am I in the death fantasy? Right behind him? Another useless body. I’m running down the alley. Sliding out
the back window and running on the snow, someone has turned the light on in the kitchen and the cockroaches are scrambling, running for cracks, do I find one, do I survive, folded up inside yet another oven, a hidey hole, a closet where have to pay a hundred bucks a month rent, sleeping curled up behind the trash can in the post office that’s open all night, sleeping in the courtyard of the public library, curled up in the bushes with snails running across my glasses. A big fucking cockroach, a smart one, able to exist among humans and even approximate normalcy. Hard shell outside, nasty bug guts inside. A smear of gray, back in time my former lover drained of blood on the top of my world. I keep running. I survive.

It passes. The sound fades. The sound fades to inaudibility, a faint scratching noise, mouse claws on the wood in the wall.

“Who’s got the flask?” a voice out of the silent darkness.

Then the thing came back, and it went on like that for hours. Growing closer, passing by, sometimes very far away, sometimes very close again.

“Some kind of pattern.” Julius said, “Like search and rescue.”

“Like mapping. Scanning.” Franklin said.
“I wonder if the other tribes are hiding.” Crasstina said.
“You think this is about Steven?”
“Like they caught him and he ratted us out?”
“No way. He wouldn’t rat. But just finding him might have inspired them to search for more of us.”
“Oh come on. They fucking know we are here. This is just them taking a digital census or something, to know what they have to deal with.”
“Why are they going to deal with us? After a year, what has changed now?”
“Um, maybe they are running out of liquor.” Thorn suggested.
“This is the first step of return.” Tweezer said.
“Taking back the city?” Abadal said, “We know this is coming. But who is it, and what do they think of fugitives?”
“Non compliant evacuees. If they let us live, they will quarantine us, test us. They’re going to want to know how we survived.” Sherry said.
“How did we survive?” Abadal said.
I started laughing again. Softly, but it wouldn’t stop. I clutched the flask.
“You are drunk.” Franklin shoved me, “I laughed even harder and fell to the floor, coughing horribly on
the dust there that stuck to my tongue, laughing and gagging.

(twenty-one)
“I remember walking down cedar avenue, leaving out of the old Bedlam Theater there, me and my friend Chirp, heading for the Hard Times Cafe for coffee.”
“What else would you be fukn going there for?”
“To play chess!”
“Let him finish the story.”
“Yeah. Shut up. I’m telling a story. You got somewhere to go besides this nasty basement? Anyway. So Chirp checks the traffic on the avenue without breaking his stride, looks left, looks right, strolls out there, I follow. Fuckin light turns green up at 15th Street and a cue of cars roars to life like its the start of the race. Shit, I say, and start to run for the other side of the four lane killing floor. Chirp grabs my arm, “Don’t run.” he says to me, and keeps steady walking with one casual eye on the approaching wall of machines.
“Don’t run? Shit, then let’s walk faster.” I start speed walking. I get to the other sidewalk first and turn around to watch Chirp approach at the same speed. He clears the lanes of traffic and a truck that had to slow it’s acceleration begins to speed up to catch up with the race. I thot of my old maniac punk friend Sean Shit who used to wander out in the streets pretty much as an act of resistance, demanding the right to be human wherever his feet took him, demanding these systems and machines and pace of progress slow down and recognize a single human. To the cursing honking drivers he would raise his hands in a shrug of innocence, “What? Can I cross the street? Can I be a fucking human being here? That alright with you? No? Fuck you then.” So back to me and Chirp crossing the street:

“What’s up with that don’t run shit?” I said to him as we strolled down the sidewalk towards the cafe, “Why you gotta be all tough like that? Why you gotta be a badass?”

He shrugged, “Cars are stupid.”

“Oh. Yeah. Cars are cyborgs! I get it. Half human half machine. If we start showing our fear now, where will it end? Fear will lead to giving our power over to the machines. We never agreed to give them the right-
of-way. If we let fear dominate our interaction with technology then technology will dominate us, like in that one movie.”

“I don’t watch movies.” Chirp said, “Ha!”

“Oh yeah. Well, but that’s genius Chirp! I haven’t seen front line resistance in years! Throwing our bodies onto the fucking gears and levers and making the fucking machine stop, just like Mario fucking Savio said in that speech where he was standing on top of a cop car.”

“I never saw that movie either.” Chirp said.

“No, not a movie! That was real life! I mean, I saw it in a documentary. I guess it’s not like he really threw himself on the gears and levers of capitalism tho, I mean, he became a professor later, so I guess he didn’t get very chewed up. I think he was white you know. Most of the effective leaders who were people of color in that era were just assassinated. I’m ranting. Alright, I have a question.” we rounded the corner onto Riverside Avenue and continued walking, “What if you thought a car was actually gonna hit you?”

“I would have ran.” Chirp smiled, as if I was stupid, like a parent smiling on the innocent question of a child.”Well, since I’m your friend, I’m happy to hear that.”
“Usually tho, I would say, don’t run.” Chirp concluded, “Food runs. Running makes predators excited.”

Crasstina cleared her throat in the dark hidey hole, “I guess your opinion on the present situation has been expressed, ay Taffy?”

“Let me add this: I think we should avoid looking like we have a reason to run.”

“Play it cool, huh?” Julius said.

“That is assuming that we, as survivors in the kill zone, have any value to them.” Crasstina said, “Because maybe they have orders and it doesn’t matter what we do or say.”

“I think we have value to them.” Sherry said, “It is possible that we have a natural immunity to that infection which killed everyone else. I think they will be very interested to study us.”

“Oh boy,” Crasstina said, “I don’t like the way that sounds. Has anyone here ever been in a drug study for money?”

“Yo, right here.” Tweezer said, “A voluntary drug study, and it wasn’t fun and it sure wasn’t run by the government or military. Yikes! Hill no!”
“I want to hear more of Taffy’s story.” Franklin said petulantly, “Did you end up getting coffee or what? Who was at the cafe when you got there?”

“Looks like we are back to that argument of fight or flight, the same stupid shit that drove us crazy when the shit first happened, the reason we decided not to fucking talk about it all the time- cause with no real information, there’s no end to it. There’s no point. We still don’t know anything. Obviously with a robot circling overhead we are going to check-in and talk about it. Plus, with all the alcohol flowing in this place its a good bet that somebody might have missed a crucial point.”

“The unknown is still unknown.”

“But has become slightly more active.”

“The active unknown.”

“Well I’m happy we worked that down to a buzz phrase.” Julius said, “Anybody with me on some bloody marys? Do we need to make a pickle run, or have we got everything?”

“Let’s get outta this hole.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t be wasted all the time anymore.” Sherry said
“Everyone in favor of not getting wasted stay here with Sherry.” Julius said, “Everyone else can follow me to the party chamber.”

“Let’s crack a new house, it’ll be fun!”
“Alright. Grab the heaters. Let’s go.”

The drunks left, Sherry and Abadal remained. I stood there with them in the sudden silence.

“Mob mentality, the alcohol does not allow for much debate.” Abadal said.
“It’s becoming more of a dictator.” Sherry agreed.

(Twenty-two)
The mini-net alarm went off sometime after sundown. There was no one at the Last House except Sherry, Abadal, and Maracaibo. It was Franklin’s setup, the whole mini-net laptop human-filter thing, the set up that Taffy had found in that house which had led him to their world.

“We must stop that noise.” Abadal said.
“Seriously.” Maracaibo said, “Is that necessary?”
“Got it. I think I remember the way this works.”

Sherry stared into the screen, clicked on a button. The
alarm shut off. The video showed a fellow walking around the room over at The House of a Thousand Smells. Sherry took the microphone and plugged in.

“Hey you! Come on over by the laptop where I can see you.”

Suddenly he stuck his head into the view and his whole face loomed large, “Who’s that in there? Ha ha! Tiny electric woman. What a world!”

“Aw man.” Sherry moaned, “He’s wearing a misfits t-shirt under the coat, probably bought it at the Mall of America. I really don’t know about this all punks meet up thing. Do we really want to encourage that?”

“I am not a punk.” Abadal said.

“Well, there ya go.” Maracaibo said.

“I don’t even know what that means. What do you say, I guess we should reel this loner in, eh?”

“Let me ask a question.” Abadal took the mic, “Why do you approach us?”

“I guess I’m just tired of being alone. I used to have friends, seems like such a long time ago…”

“You should come meet us then.”

Sherry shrugged, took the mic, “Whats yer name?”

“Mike.”
Mike fit in alright. Another stranger, but like with Abadal it didn’t seem to matter much in this world of sparse population without scarcity, there was plenty for everyone. Food, clothing, shelter, time, love. Entertainment. A stranger coming into a small town, everyone will want him first. Fresh meat.

“Things are kinda boring now, huh?” Mike said.

“Not a lot of challenges. It’s true.” Taffy said.

“I don’t know if I can stay with you guys. I’ve been wandering just for something to do, you know? House to house across the city, exploring this skeleton that’s been sucked clean of its meat. Climbing around in the bones. Something to do. I’m not much of a reader, I noticed your public library collection here. I don’t know if I can hunker down and go thru half the library.”

“Shit, winter’s almost over. We’re going traveling.” Taffy said.

“Traveling. Out of the city?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Have you been out lately?”

“No. Have you?”

“Not technically out of city limits. I’ve been across the river, I’ve been out to the lakes west...”

“Why didn’t you leave the city?”
“It seemed like a lot more fun back here. Out there, who knows, the unknown. Why drive some car and end up in some dink town maybe hard to find gas to get back, maybe end up meeting some sketched out characters that you don’t want to meet.”

“You seen other people walking around?”

“No. Well, I seen other people, but, never got close enuf for a conversation or anything.”

Taffy held his thumb and forefinger on his throat, “Damn. My glands are swollen. I’m sick.” Taffy said.

There was silence. Breakfast halted between people’s teeth.

“What the hell do you mean?” Franklin said, the hot pink feathers on his hat jiggled spastically.

“What symptoms?” Julius demanded, lowering his fork.

“What could you possibly be sick from?” Franklin wondered, “We live in isolation world here. Where did you catch a bug?”

“Feels like the fucking flu. I’m pissed.” Taffy said.

He picked up a blanket and wrapped it around his shoulders, then lay down on a pile of pillows.

Everyone stared at him.

“The flu! It's unheard of.” Taffy moaned.
“Influenza is spread from coughing and sneezing,” Sherry said, “Unless someone here has been hanging out with other tribes in the area, then it’s got to be from Mike. Everyone else has been here for weeks. Sorry Mike, it’s just disease vector logic.”

“No offense taken.” he replied.

“Shit Mike.” Julius said, “Did you have the flu when you came here?”

“No.”

“He could be a carrier, right? And not show any symptoms of it?”

“Sure. We all know how disease works by now, huh.” Crasstina said.

“Contact with any sick people out there Mike?”

“No. I saw people but never got that close.”

“Oh, alright. So, did you see anybody coughing or sneezing?” Julius said.

“Listen, if this is some kind of problem, I’ll just leave. I’ve done alright so far on my own.”

“We’re just trying to figure shit out, Mike.” Sherry said, “After the Catastrophe, you can understand people feeling weird about disease, huh? We all lost people.”

“Oh, sure. I didn’t really even think about that. Hell. It’s been so long, I just imagine the way things are
is how it’s always been. Adaptation, you know how memories start to get like that, fluid, flowing together, like some things get forgotten for whatever reason. Some things I just don’t give a shit about. Seems to make me happier somehow. You know, a self defense thing.”

“All right.” Sherry said, “If Taffy’s glands are swollen then it’s not the Catastrophe virus. Swollen glands were never a symptom of that.”

“Fuck. The flu! What a bitch.” Franklin said looking at Taffy curled on the cushions.

“Juice! I want juice!” Taffy moaned, “Tart juice. And green tea. Toast with butter and jam.”

“Whose gonna nurse this asshole.” Julius said, “Franklin?”

“Yeah. I’m on it.” Franklin said, “It sure came on fast. You were sitting there eating breakfast a second ago.”

“I wasn’t awake enuf to realize I was sick. I get whatever I want. That’s how it works in my family. That’s the rules.” Taffy said.

“Great.” Franklin put his hands on his hips, silver sequins sparkling on tight black fabric, and sighed.
(twenty-three)
Fucking sick. Invaded. Violated. Is it really not obvious? Are you in your own world so bad that you can't see how other people are experiencing life. Oblivious: I guess most people are aware of the experience of walking in their shoes, and lucky if aware of that, cause some people are running around with no clue about who they are, where they’ve come from, where they are going, or what shoes they’re wearing. My body is racked by fever, I haven’t felt this high in a long time. When the fever takes you like this you are dropped down and you can’t see the point in anything. Insufficient energy to live. Fuck everything nothing matters. This is it. I am dying, I am probably dying. Micro organisms have mugged me, the battle cooks my brain in fever, a street fight thru the blood and guts.

I head for the shit bucket and blast my dinner into it, casualties. I’ve got all the symptoms. I lay in bed with the body aches. It feels best when I don’t move. Lay and let the body do the work. I haven’t felt this in so long. I forgot it was possible to be taken. Thinking of the bodies out there in the ditch, burned to
blackness, contagion hazard. I'm a factory spewing bugs, sneezing, coughing clouds of atomized spit full of virus. The flu. The symptoms are different than what killed off the rest of the city. My bowels aren't liquified and shooting out of my asshole. A normal loose fever stool. This is regular human suffering here. Where the fuck is Franklin, more tea! More water! Something!

That Mike guy. He brought this bug here. How else does a bug come around. Or was it dormant in one of us, and finally mutated out and bloomed like a spring flower? We sure are not a pack of virologists. What the hell do we know. Sherry says the most likely source is a large outside population, which we all suspect does exist, out there. So then this guy is a spy, a cop. Ha! Some dude they cut a deal with, we'll take it easy on you, cut you a deal, if you do a favor for us: infiltrate this group of people living in the city, some people that had natural immunity, don't worry you won't get the plague, we'll give you antidote. Go hangout with them, make a little report, come back to us. That's it.

So Mike is a cop. That's where his exposure to the larger population came from. Bastard! Shifty bastard.

“Hey, someone bring me some whiskey!”

“Feeling better?” Sherry asked.
I opened my mouth, everything hurt, “No. Don’t ask me that anymore. I’ll tell you.”

“ Seems like you might be a little worse. You want some water, pills, hot water bottle?”


“Lets fix it.” Sherry rolled me over and went at it, the human touch as a medicine itself, the power in those hands, the feeling coming thru the length of my spine, every knuckle bone dancing on vertebrae, my tense face muscles and chest relaxed, my tear ducts opened for a moment everything went soft and wet, my breathing slowed. I slept.

The days passed endless, barely strength to move around, the Last House like a prison that I had no ability or desire to leave. Eight days passed. I felt my life sliding at the speed of a glacier. Nothing. What did I do before this fever took me? What is this twisting in my chest, this clenched jaw on drugs feeling, was it too much robitussin? I hardly drank any, I thot... I know what it’s like to chuck a bottle and a half back to get high, only half a bottle over a days time. Guess that’s plenty when you’re sick, takes less. Still fucking with me. Taken down. It’s not just getting sick anymore, not in this world. Paranoia, suspicion. Everyone looks at
me funny. The real brave ones get close enuf to talk.
Sometimes I see someone with a bulge in their waist
band, like the have a gun there to take me out if I start
spewing. Come on people, it's just the flu.

Haven't seen Tweezer or Christopher this whole
week, those hypochondriac assholes are afraid they'll
catch it. They think it's the plague. Whatever. They can
see this isn't any fun. At least I can get up and walk
around now, make my own food and tea. I've drank
gallons of juice. They found good shit for me, pure
pomegranate, black cherry, my favorite shit. I can only
eat once a day now. What a kick in the ass. I think I am
over the hump tho. This morning I had a thot, that
when I was better, I should remember this always
whenever feeling depressed, and know that I should
be happy because I wasn't sick.

Franklin's been good to me. He goes out on quests
to find comfort for my sickness, pills, juice, foods.
Takes his 35 mm black and white and heads out on the
street, shooting all the way. Maybe we should hang his
art show here in the house, a photo show, ha. We've
had every sort of debauchery and profanity here, why
not gallery art. I masturbate while everyone is out,
nerves feel strange, burning, some result of the fever
battle that occurred, strange burning orgasms, raw
nerves. I'm left gasping and thinking that wasn't such a great idea, and pass out.

Snot out of my nose every morning, fantastic stuff, huge tenacious globs, blast after blast comes out. When I think its done I coax another from somewhere up near my brain to shake loose and into my hand. I stare at these things I made, wondering how I created them. Detritus from the fever battle. Smell of rot. I want my body back, want this mop up to be done. I want to pull a plug and change my dirty oil. Waiting. Sleeping. Tied down. How long have I been waiting to live.

(twenty-four)
This old dream. Old style of dreaming, years of it in different versions, always The House, some strange house that mimics my reality. I have lived in many houses, and some other dwellings too. Boats, tents, bushes. Situations, power dynamics, relations with people. In the dream, a strange other world with some tilted difference, a queasy feeling, nausea, emptiness. Always the impending doom, which we take note of, and then continue on dream living. Sometimes my
friends are with me, sometimes someone famous, 
sometimes menaced by tornadoes or floods or haunted 
by malevolent spirits. Sometimes the house feels 
comfortable, sometimes it feels like a place to run away 
from, to escape. The stars say I am a person that cares 
greatly about home, protective of it. I like the soft light 
of small flames illuminiting the center of my house, I 
like friends to be there talking and playing games, 
feasting around a good table. I like handjobs and 
backrubs and sleeping in a good bed.

Here I am in this dream house. Stomach still feels 
strange. Beers only made me tired, can’t process 
alcohol yet. The flu kicked everything down, like a 
vicious drunk left alone with a pinata, they kicked me 
everywhere. On the eighth day I arose and shook my 
head: dreaming of a cardboard cutout apartment, the 
sickfuckness, the empty wallets and vacant minds, 
what are we doing with our lives? What are they doing 
to our minds? Some landlord caused this. Some bank 
owns this. Are we paying money for it? Spending our 
lives in this? Who’s idea was this?

Another bag of salted seeds down the hatch another 
gallon of water, here i am, still breathing. Dead virus 
swarm. Be my friend now? I’m so happy. A huge 
bubble of gas rises up inside me, where did it come
from, I am tense and dying so I let it out. With a blast a
door opens onto a storm blowing down thru Canada,
right up into my nostrils, a trumpet, the alimentary
canal jazz. Something very strange has become my life.
Winter: sedate madness, everything makes sense, if
only we could have realized that back in the summer.
Everything moves slowly like film I can see the
flapping of the wings, so few frames per minute,
incredible, like nothing else, hilarious! There's no other
response but to smile. Laughter gives it back to us.
Laughter, we can hold that between us, go on living.
The fever took away something, I don’t miss it.
Something had to go. Along with the bitter fucking
cold, the fever burned it all.

Snow melting again today. In the air, moisture,
breathing it deep I stand out the front door like I might
have gone to check the mail but mail doesn’t exist
anymore. I stand out there like I would smoke a
cigarette but I quit smoking the moment I fell down
with flu a week ago. So I stand there in the warm
breeze, 40, or 45 degrees? Toasty. Breathe the invisible
water into my lungs smell the chemical reactions,
hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, what was it- everything
mingling in the warm air.
I’ve been needing the end of winter. We have no predictions for the future beyond Spring. We have no forecast for the weather, only that we are verging on Spring. Uplift your arms and grope the sky, squeeze the friendly nipples of the clouds, this is it, we made it. How do we always make it? Winter has passed out and spring found a blanket in the closet to cover him up with, a hard long night of pain melting away.

Alright then, thanks for that. Now I’ve got it, the perspective. The contradiction. This puzzle piece, I can now match suffering up to the corresponding edge of pleasure and step onto that floor, into the familiar fluid heat dance song. Lilacs will leaf out, bud out, and flowers bloom: breathing in, the smell is something to live for, breathing out, I smile.

(Twenty-five)
The smell on the street is water again. Small streams of the liquid roll down the concrete sidewalk to the pavement headed for the Mississippi River. I step outside and muscles don’t tense from the cold, breathing in something hits the lungs, that smell

194
triggers memory of good things. I think of ancient childhood, incarcerated in the house all winter, the smell of internment changing to a new fragrance. The smell of snow melting under the blazing rays, the sight of it slumping down the hill to the street, defeated, winter taken to the ropes the fight almost over, spring is winning- but no, it’s not a fight! Sometimes you see fucking and think it’s a fight, but it’s love, the snow transformed, freed from it’s prison! Running wild in the streets!

Future generations may live in sealed cities, strange domes of light, and never truly know this triumph. We are blessed to be survivors of winter.

Humidity in the warm air again, like the government has collapsed and we are free to embrace the entire world, brothers and sisters and everyone else from the other side of the wall. People everywhere soon, no more fear no more hiding away in our attics, the fascists are on the run! Come walk under the sun, come dance in the streets! Lets walk to the store and see who’s out sailing! Leave the car, leave the car! We can survive on the streets of Minneapolis again, feel that heat coming thru? Southern windows blazing, sunlight on the golden brown oak wood floor and
round oak table leg, heating my leg, if there was a cat in the house it would be laying right there.

The mailman takes her time loading up, strolling the neighborhood, the mailman is smiling, she thinks the bag isn't very heavy today.

Breathe deep, we have today, the vapor won't freeze in your lungs. The world has swung round the sun, seize the day! White cloud move under blue sky, taste the water, entire lives born, lived, died, inside this sky. Alone in your mind you can see it all. Remember the mad music, and then the wallet full of cash people who saw nothing but clouds, people who had never been hungry and so could not truly understand food. I smell the water in the air, our winter friends, crystals of ice piled up by our plow, dirty city snow, the dirt falls behind the dirt goes back to the earth and the air is perfect, breathe it in, i forget all the cold hamburgers I've pulled from fast food trash cans, I don't remember the nails that stabbed thru my shoes in the first squats I tried to crack, the broken glass and dried shits and excited flies. The river of yellow and green mucous and phlegm flowing out of my skull and the unrecorded temperature of the fever. No pity, I decided it was a luxury to lay around and be sick, no job to worry about, and a doctor would be luxury
beyond my capacity to trust. College educated thieves, yeah, I flip your burger. You want my money so you can experiment on my, here try this medication, maybe this will fix you, I don’t know. Fuck you. Just what the world needs: another college graduate telling us how to live our lives.

A piece of paper says you know more than I do. Great, so what kinda bomb are you gonna build? Can’t wait to see it. That’s what all the big geniuses do. Every genius wants to save lives in record numbers or take lives in record number. Either way, the result is horrific.

Tiny consumers come. Breeders squirt out a fresh new batch, little North American babies with a fresh set of vampire teeth, already sunk into the neck of the world. Diapers, food, baby clothes, medical visits, gasoline, Sport Utility Vehicles, coal, electricity, cars, buses, more clothes, daycare, gas, cars! Cars! Papers, school, college, books, televisions, video games, therapy, stupid plastic crap, endless mountains of plastic crap for each one. Children of color around the world slaving away, products, products, factories, mines, jungles, forests, prostitutes for rich corporate executives to fuck while on business trips. Please stop. Stop the vampires. Take care of the babies that are
already here. Go look under any freeway, there’s a haggard baby that needs love, food, clothing, shelter. If you tickle them they might even make a cute noise. The world is full of children that need your love. Don’t clone yourself. Take care of the babies that are already here.

That was my immediate reaction to the news. All in my thots, after stepping out the front door for a breath of air. I never vocalized any of this. I distilled it all down into one sentence, “Sherry, are you serious? Have you looked outside the window lately? Is this any world to bring a child into?”

“I understand your sentiment.” she replied, “A year ago I wouldn’t have considered a baby. Things have changed now. The world is different Taffy. It makes sense to have a baby now.”

“That’s so intense to hear coming out of your mouth. You encouraged Steven to get a vasectomy while you guys were dating. And now!!!”

“We’ve just been talking. Yeah, it’s weird. But I’m open to it. Not right now, I’m not an idiot. Were using protection. The idea of having a baby here, in this house, without a midwife or any other medical care,
yike! Scary. You know, all around the world women are working and they’re pregnant and they go on working and they have the baby right there, squat and drop, and a moment to catch your breath maybe, and keep on working.”

“Jesus. Sherry, yeah, but you know, this is still in the USA, sort of. You have a baby here and everyone will be running around putting diapers on it and all this plastic shit is gonna show up here, specially cause everything is free now, and there’s gonna be all these drunks flopping around with this little screaming fucking baby, god dammit! Screaming baby! That sounds like hill! Hill!”

“Well, we would probably crack a new house nearby if we were to do it soon, while the situation is still like this.”

“You think it’s gonna change soon?”

“Anything could happen, Taffy. Could be today.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Alright. I think there is something going on. Some kind of contraction. A reconstruction? There’s no precedence for this shit. But in some ways, who cares? It’s like we have lived here, not worrying about it, and I think we should keep living our lives how we want to and not live our lives according to what THEY are
doing. Fuck what they are doing. Since when did we ever care what they were doing, except when it intersected our lives and fucked with what WE were doing? If that happens, we'll deal with it when it comes.”

“That is the way we live.” I nodded.

“We can do whatever we want.”

“Yeah. We can start living some other way. Start thinking about the future, it’s coming.”

“Start worrying?” Sherry asked.

“No. Just thinking. And getting ready. We’re not ready for anything.”

“Thinking about the future will bring up lots of worry.” Franklin interrupted them.

“And that is oppositional to a merry life and a short one.” I said.

“We best not spend our last days fretting about the future.” Franklin concluded.

“If some of us choose to worry. It’s our choice.” I said.

“Just don’t bring the rest of us down.” Franklin threw his hands in the air, “Go start up a future house like you were saying, fill it up with fucking babies and stressed out wrinkled foreheads for all I care.”
“Listen Sherry,” I turned back to her, “if you end up with a baby, I’m gonna fight for it, you know, to keep all the stupid crap away. There might not even be any child labor factories or mines left in the world, we don’t fucking know! But for sure all the crap in all these stores is gross shit made by poor people around the world for rich assholes and your baby should not grow up surrounded by this evil shit. Sweatshop clothes and plastic crap. I’m going to fight it. And also help with holistic nutrition and mental health, as often as I can. You gotta help me throw all the plastic crap out the window tho, don’t feel obligated to take it.”

Sherry slowly smiled, “Plastic shit. Fine. No plastic shit. So, while you’re cleaning up the house you can hang out with the baby right? What do you think of ‘Mayga’ for the name? I like it cause it feels kinda gender neutral, you know, but also awesome!”

I closed my eyes, made a noise, and opened them smiling, “Great name. Thumbs up.”

“Wait. What the fuck?” Franklin sat up straight, “Did you just agree to be a god father?”

I turned to him and winked.
About the author:
Robert Rowboat was born in Loveland, Colorado, (U.S.) in 1971 and continued eating and drinking thru most of the North American continent. Notably and in this order: 10 years in Colorado, 6 years in Alaska, 12 years in California, 8 years in Minnesota, the rest traveling.
In California he got married to his first lover at age 19 and a year later, after some sexual exploration, decided that the monogamous heterosexual life was not for him. Robert Rowboat, then enrolled in college and living in a car, working part time at a plastic factory, dropped out of everything to attend the school of hard knocks.

Robert Rowboat quickly adapted to a minimalist lifestyle including frequent visits to the library, eating out of the trash, sleeping in cars and closets, drinking and smoking a lot, wild sexual experiments, daily law breaking, revolution mongering, wretched mistake making, totally fucking up, and from the pit of low self esteem working towards amazing enlightenment and redemption. Robert Rowboat describes coming to the light at the end of the tunnel and stepping out, only to find another tunnel waiting ahead, and realized that life was a series of tunnels, some longer, some shorter. In a world full of wise teachers, Robert Rowboat learned how to see in the dark. Along this journey friends were made and lost, stick and poke tattoos were given and got. Robert Rowboat's childhood promise to himself to never have children was not successful (Love you!), but a vasectomy years later was. He spent many years cooking food for people,
learning to live with a body made unwell by a virus called herpes, joined a group of friends building and sailing shanty boats in the Mississippi Basin, foraging wild food, red hot rod t-top road trips to fantastic locations and with fabulous passengers, by whatever means available traveling to anarchist type queer friendly spaces in cities and woods, to urban gardens in economically collapsed cities, and to a leftist anarchist science fiction convention in Chicago.

Presently following a philosophy of healthy diet (food stamps), exercise (bicycle riding everywhere), and zen mindfulness (when he remembers to do that) Robert Rowboat in 38 years managed to achieve almost complete artistic obscurity. Opposed to bar codes, factories, corporate shit houses, common sense, and all the other nasty things of mass production in a capitalist system, this book is another triumph of hand made reproduction by the writer, an extension of the philosophy contained within.

To be ubiquitized and found on every book shelf the world over would be a Biblical failure.

This book, like many other Do It Yourself creations, will travel across the planet as a tiny seed in the fruit filled bowel of a bird, ultimately to be deposited on fertile ground where it may sprout and then be

204
crushed by the latest fascist boot heel. Then to sprout
seven more shoots from the indomitable roots of
shared human consciousness.

Robert Rowboat presently lives in the Gay Area
(East Gay) inside a home-made eight foot cube
surrounded by an excellent backyard garden of mainly
kale and collard greens, pestered by a vicious
infestation of gophers. They like the beets and the
beans. Kale and collard greens do not appeal to them.
If we were starving, we would eat the gophers. It's not
so bad. Gophers are good for the soil, they aerate it and
bring minerals up to the surface. We just have to take
all the soil out of the boxes, put chicken wire down,
then put all the soil back in. No problem, right? Then
one morning I see a big piece of kale sucked down into
a new hole in the middle of a raised bed, so I take the
garden hose and stick it down there, turn on the water
for five minutes. Mine. I eat that kale every day.
To be notified when other works are released
send an email to: robopearl@gmail.com

“Save the world, don’t leave your house.”
I have lots of links on my blog to people I think are
doing good things:
robnoxious.wordpress.com
Also on my blog I have posted the queer/sci-fi/smut
stories from my last zine, lots of non-fiction, and
photographs I have taken of boat punks, cats, dogs,
queers, myself, and our backyard garden. Yay.

Thanks to Siobhan for editing.
Zines Currently in print:

“You Fucked Up #1 by Robert Rowboat”
$6.00 postage included.

“Give Me A Dollar #1 by Robnoxious”
$4.50 postage paid.

“The Sex Workers of Planet San Taurus by Robot Earl”
$4.00 postage included.

“3: Collected Works by Robnoxious”
$5.00 postage included.
(Each cover is a unique collage of images & ink)
**Online Zine Distributors:**
Microcosm Publishing  
www.microcosmpublishing.com  
Starfiend Distro  
www.starfiend.com  
Active Distribution(UK)  
www.activedistribution.com

**Offline Zine Distributors:**
Tree Of Knowledge  
(c/oMary, P.O.Box 251766 Little Rock, AR 72225)

**Favorite Zine Stores in the Bay Area:**
Needles & Pens: 3253 16th St., San Francisco, CA 94103.  
www.needles-pens.com  
Modern Times Bookstore: 888 Valencia St., San Francisco, CA 94110.  
www.moderntimesbookstore.com  
Pegasus: 2349 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, CA 94618.  
www.pegasusbookstore.com  
Borderlands (Sci-Fi): 866 Valencia St., San Francisco, CA 94110.  
www.borderlands-books.com  
The Long Haul Infoshop: 3124 Shattuck Ave, Berkeley, CA 94705.  
www.thelonghaul.org