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LOST ON PURPOSE

by

Matthew McCain Martin

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

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Lost on Purpose. Kristen Iversen.

In nine linked nonfiction essays and eight codas, the author seeks to understand the meaning of being lost and the importance of not knowing in an era of instantaneous and ubiquitous information. Through extensive interviews, research, and memoir, the author seeks out those who choose to live lost in order to understand his own penchant for escape. Framed by the mystery of antique maps, these essays find the author in several different locations, from Tasmania to Siberia to Utah. In each, the author meets and spends time with an ambassador of each place before finally attempting to become lost himself.

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PROLOGUE: MAPPA MUNDI AND THE FOREIGN PAST

Oslo, Norway

I walk through Oslo's wending streets in late March of 2005. I'm lost as usual. I stop every few steps, chew my cheeks, and fuss over where I am now and how I got here. My map, *Bykart Oslo!*, is useless, its folds crinkled white from overfolding. The map reveals only a circuitboard eyesore of popular destinations and convolution, the streets and avenues listed as *gates*, *veis*, and *stubbens*. I may be on Seilduksgate or Grunerstubben. I ask the map where the hell I am, rotating it in my hands, but it divines nothing. I give the map a backhand. I tell it no.

The map outlines suggested routes in vivid greens and yellows, and when I see these colors I stop. I remind myself I'm not supposed to know where I am, ever, and my lapse of panic turns into an opportunity for discovery—not oh no, I'm lost, but oh boy, I'm lost. I fold the map's smug instruction in on itself, tired of its answers and quantifications. I float it to the nearest garbage bin and walk off in a direction.

Not long after, I see an antique store selling, among other things, maps. Next to ships-in-bottles as big as hogsheads, rural woodcarvings of satyrs and saints, and shelves of dust-blached books that can only be called tomes, lie rolls and rolls of antique maps, sectioned by continent, country, and city. I unroll a few of these maps and fall in love.

Looking through the maps I reacquaint myself with Italy, Scotland, and Portugal. I come across the most rudimentary concepts of Africa, India, and America. I find an aged city plan of Copenhagen, chockablock with every standing building at the time, each one labeled with crossed-through *Os* and haloed *As*. A map of South America shows a tiny

Brazil dwarfed by its western neighbor PERUVIANA. I find the strangest interpretation of Australia I've ever seen, drawn as an exploded egg, a rendering so fantastic I doubt the cartographer believed in the place. Each map reveals wildly different conceptions of the world, their illustrations antipodal to the atlases of today, which never lie, which expose universal Earth down to her last cubit, her fascinations stratified by cartographers and confirmed by satellites. I smile, smitten by the romance of these early maps, their imaginative anywheres and subjective geographies. I'm gone in them, giddy and lightheaded.

The shop owner smiles, understanding my fascination, having seen it before. Had I seen an antique map before now—whether glossed over in a grade-school textbook or wherever—I don't remember it. I set down my day bag and take off my jacket, settling in for a while. "Anywhere you want to find, you find it," the shop owner says. "Not difficult." I thank him and scan more maps.

Three days after leaving Oslo, I discover more maps in Stockholm, and that summer, more yet in Coeur D'Alene, Idaho. I entertain the thought that I'm like the early explorers making and using the maps: the more I look, the more I find. The maps engage me fully, more so than other apocrypha, for they carry a modern relevance, and not just an aesthetic one. As I sift through their khaki parchments, my wanderlust enflames. I long to be a deckhand for Polo or Pizarro on his next expedition, searching, finding, knowing the entire time the best happiness of not knowing. Each map I find ignites this desire, revealing the past's infinite enigma, showing me the breadth of ignorance and its necessary counterpart, imagination.

Like all romances, though, reality tests mine with damning counterpoints, forcing me to question my love of maps. Five issues spring to mind:

1. The antique maps were the first steps in attaining the knowledge we have and rely on in our maps today, knowledge moving forward always with impossible speed and inexorable desire.
2. Exploration is innately self-destructive, a sport that ruins the mystery that fuels it. What's known cannot be unknown.
3. Early explorers were often left stranded to their dooms by the misinformation and mystery I'm so taken with. While I can enjoy errors in old maps because I know better, errors in early maps cost men their lives, and mystery equated fear.
4. Those deckhands of Polo and Pizarro lived difficult lives, fraught with starvation and scurvy, deficiency and distrust. They arrived at each new island with knives in their teeth.
5. And most importantly, many of the early explorers hated nature, seeing it as not just indifferent but spiteful to life. These men were less discoverers than conquerors.

I handle these doubts the same way I handle doubts lobbed by parents and friends at any unreasonable relationship: I flap my hand at them. I claim others misunderstand me and decide to own my irrationality. I buffer myself from naysayers with shopworn sophistry. I remain naïve, knowing I have to be to keep from being deadened. Some joys must survive, some hopes left uncrushed, some cynicisms ignored. When I think of these doubts, I think of the present.

In the present, I have mystery-free Rand McNallies, meticulous city grids, and bloodless 7.5-minute backcountry charts. The maps of today are too much like an animator's chase-scene cheat, the background image looped, the straight lines of interstates passing through the same cities again and again, with their identikit megachains, ugly suburbs, and redundant blight. Looking at a current map, I can know everything, and knowing everything, discover nothing. Antique maps are a simple, superior alternative, showing more than maps today could ever hope to.

And while I'm thinking of the present, I also think of Mother Nature, who, like all interesting characters, is most interesting in her duality: When she's at her most ominous, she's also at her most enticing. Early explorers saw unknowns unimaginably wild, forests spectacular and terrible, their every step a new frontier. Even if they hated wild nature, they still must have been in awe of her deadly beauty. These explorers just as quickly wandered as they did worry, eager to see what horrors befell them next. And unlike the nomadism many of us know today, in which we're hustling *from*, the earliest gyrovagues were hurrying *to*.

Their spirits remain in antique maps, as charming as a grandfather's best tall tale, just as impractical and engaging. The maps recall a time when *Ss* looked like *Fs* and all *Us* were *Vs*, when place names were written in Edwardian Unkempt with Latin suffixes, when fierce sea beasts policed the outer waters. Cartographers drew the maps with the panache of their ignorance, showing not what the world was, but what the world could be. Antique maps feature lavish compass roses, extensive border illustration, and ornate crests, all works of art in themselves. Antique maps' mountain ranges look like mountain ranges. Locations, written in ancient all-caps, invite visits by name alone: One may not

know what or where BUTHVANIAPRO, VĪDELICIE PAR, or OQVENI are, but it takes a stubborn homebody not to want to know. Many times, locations are written more vertically than horizontally:

GALL
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A,

and this too is endearing, the sign of a cartographer pressed for space and doing what he can. Gerard Mercator's antique maps are comically unreadable, stuffed with the names of every village in the land.

Mapmaking has no one point of origin. The oldest map, found in Kirkuk, Iraq, dates to 2400-2200 B.C., showing on a stone tablet XXXXs of mountain ranges and scars of rivers. In North America, Eskimos carved topographies in wood, stone, sand, and bone. On the other side of the world, Marshall Islanders built gridlike maps of the ocean from palm tree fibers, placing seashells on top to indicate islands. Ancient Mexicans painted maps of their frontiers on quilts, maps that impressed Cortés when he invaded. These earliest maps were largely guesswork, the efforts of elders recalling pilgrimages scavenged from journals and memory. Some ancient maps included illustrations of Paradise and the Last Judgment, and centered the world in Jerusalem. Many early cartographers marked cities with black and red dots—infidel and Christian cities, respectively.

During the thirteenth century, covetous governments demanded accurate portolans, or sea charts, for their nations' sailing itineraries. On these, trellis patterns of intersecting rhumb lines show ships' progress across ocean waters. The Greeks used Herodotus' maps for navigation in their frequent attacks and less frequent trades, their ships blown about by the four winds Boreas, Notus, Eurus, and Zephyrus. Many portolans are stippled harum-scarum with islands, many of which never existed. The Maluku Islands in Indonesia, on the ancient Catalan Atlas, look like volcanic smithereens, with 7,548 of them drawn.

No one was as influential as Claudius Ptolemaeus of Alexandria—Ptolemy—who charted the integral *Geography*, which included twenty-six regional maps and the first real world map, *Mappa mundi*. It expanded largely on the previously existing world map, a Roman relic from Saint Isidore of Seville in 1482, which shows the world as a T dividing an O into Asia, Europa, and Africa. The O is the Mare Oceanum—all waters beyond. Majorcan cartographers in Catalonia (present-day Spain), helped by Marco Polo, first plotted the scope of Asia across a map contained on eight wall-sized sheets. Polo also collaborated with the Venetian monk Fra Mauro, extending cartography farther into the Pacific and showing a tiny “Isola de Zimpagu,” or what today is Japan.

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, mapmaking took off. Nations hurried to outdo each other in representing newer discoveries. Marketers began selling to explorers and collectors alike. Cartographers drew their homelands in more and more pompous ways: a 1630 map of the Netherlands is charted on the flanks of a giant lion. A top seller was Peter Apian's 1530 map that shaped the world as a plump heart, lined with rock gardens of mountain ranges blown on all sides by windy nymphs, lorded over by

puffy-shirted gnomes whose presence isn't totally clear. False islands freckle Apian's Indian Ocean, Indonesia curls back towards Africa, and the Americas are blurred unrecognizably along the edges of the general ORIENS, but Africa and Eurasia are remarkably correct, with the Caspian and Black Seas, Lakes Victoria and Tanganyika, and the Nile clearly represented.

As early explorers sought out new lands, they shared any information they acquired, Columbus lending notes from his explorations of Bermuda, Magellan from his of South America. Explorers contributed extensive descriptions of coastlines and seaways, but had only vague ideas of these new places' interiors, leaving them to the imaginations of the cartographers, who filled the empty space with phantasmagoria and legend: In early representations of India, the Devil helps a widow perform a suttee, the Philippines curve on their edges as sharp-edged bat wings, and spice islanders leer and grimace like cannibals. A 1648 map of Africa by Willem Janszoon Blaeu, while outstanding in its geographic precision, is more intriguing for its border vignettes showing close-ups of tribal members displayed in the style of 1893's World's Columbian Exposition, looming like fugitives from an eerie otherworld.

South America, the least frequently mapped continent aside from Antarctica, looks in its earliest impressions like a fattened version of its current form. On it, every bay, cove, inlet, and riverhead scores the outer coastlines, while across the empty interior stride a Sphinx, warring natives, bizarre birds, and what look like long-legged Basset hounds. The Andes march northward like a line of ants, while the Amazon is designated by a few cosses of trees. Peru represents over two-thirds of the map, swallowing up a tiny Chile and a marginalized Brazil. Tierra del Fuego sits just off the coast of Cape Horn.

Illustrations abound: Froufrou cartouches occupy areas of open ocean, so intricate they're hard on the eyes. In the upper left-hand corner, cherubs hold doves and olive branches, unaware the information accrued to make the map was taken from the journals of conquistadors.

For many early mapmakers, the vast unknowns of the world were transcribed as fears, the ocean a realm of darkness where sea beasts were, for lack of confuting evidence, very real. This was a time when Ponce de León was searching for The Fountain of Youth, when gods kept tabs on travelers' progress, punishing them with monsters or blessing them with immortality. Imagine: This was a time when two brother giants Gog and Magog patrolled the outer reaches of Siberia, more than ready to disembowel foolhardy trailblazers. The Kraken, a giant squid-like sea beast resurrected in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, climbed the masts of hapless adventurers' ships, hugging and crushing the ships until they capsized. Two Nile Rivers existed back then, as did a Garden of Eden in Baja California. King Solomon's Islands are so named for a reason—the original discoverers, plying a course on a Marco Polo rumor, delirious from days of Pacific monotony, thought that was what they had discovered.

Deep in upper floors of university libraries, midnight oil burning, I get lost in these maps. I barricade myself with books full of them, the pages never large enough. The book barricades topple and landslide and I find more books. I worry, for a second, that I may be killing my passion for the maps by exploring it, that I should let it retain some of its mystery to retain my interest, but I don't stop scanning. Like the outside world, there's too much to know. I waddle home with as many books as I can carry.

In antique maps I discover places I've visited or lived in and glimpse what they were like centuries ago, often finding them drawn with startling accuracy. An eighteenth-century map of my hometown in northeast Indiana parallels the present, surrounded by the same lakes I swim, although the land was then the Native American primeval.

I search online for the maps and find them priced reasonably outrageous, and buy reproductions instead. I draw a few of my own, imagining my hometown not as a series of dead ends, competitive churches, fast-food restaurants, and parking lots, but as a new place, woods still intact, cryptic beyond my property.

While online, I ignore what I can know, and the knowledge comes too easily. I can calculate the distance from my hometown of Syracuse to the next tiny town of North Webster, and know exactly when I'll arrive and what I'll see when I get there. I can go to the next town too, and the next after that, each an iteration of the first, sometimes larger or smaller, every one dotted on the atlas.

I can log on to Google Earth and find satellite photographs of these places, and can easily zoom in to my backyard as in to Addis Ababa or Ulan Bator or Montevideo. I'm tickled by this possibility but also turned off: It's too much. This knowledge, being instantly and infinitely available, grows degraded from its ease. When all is known, where can imagination hide?

I go back to the creases and curves of my antique maps, wondering what they'll reveal next. They show me more of what I want to see, and anyway, why would I need accuracy when I have mystery?

I find more each time. Each culture's early maps are as diverse as they are captivating. An early Turkish world map by Mahmud al-Kashgari shows the globe as an aerial plan of a city gardens, with rivers as walkways and flowerbeds as nations. Other maps look like homicide photographs, seas of spaghetti, or Ouija boards. Stylistic differences aside, they all burgeon with the joy of the infinite.

The first maps of Australia are delightfully inaccurate. Assembled from the sea-hazed fever dreams of a handful of Chinese navigators, they incorporate Tierra del Fuego, Antarctica, and New Zealand as part of one general *Continens australis*, Mercator's ambiguous third great landmass. Australia has gone through a retinue of titles in its discovery: Terra Australis Incognita, Company's New Netherlands (by the Dutch, of course), Land of the South, Land of Eendracht ("harmony" or "unity"), Land of Beach (which could be used today as a tourism slogan), Patalie Regio, Ulimaroa, and Carpentaria. In these maps, the shores are speculations and the Outback exists as mythological possibility—one map depicts an archer battling a griffin, while a chimera prowls around Melbourne, a snake towards Adelaide.

Many early maps of Britain are works of art despite themselves. John Speed's 1611 Map of Wiltshire tries with pedantic fussiness to catalog every village in the district, to the point where town names become part of the landscape, exploding in curvy furbelows. Speed is one of many cartographers who's present in his works, works identifiable not only by the place represented but also by the one representing it. By contrast, it's hard to see a USGS desk jockey as much of an artiste.

One of the earliest maps of America, printed by Lewis Evans in 1756 on one of Benjamin Franklin's personal printing presses, shows the eastern seaboard in all of

Thoreau's unhandselled majesty. Here the sylvan splendor of Appalachia takes over: the baroque fissures of rivers cut and curl into ever-smaller creeks, while the Appalachians—or the OUASIOTO MOUNTAINS—look like a series of parallel stitches sutured across the early ideas of Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Post-stamped in the left-hand corner sits Evans' best estimate of the western reaches, appended as "A *SKETCH of the Upper Parts of CANADA*." It's mostly white space, but you can still make out the mitten of Michigan (seen here as *Long Elevated Plains*), and the *Ouisconsin R.* and *ILLINOIS* are identifiable. Place names delineate what place names are present: British Fredericksburgs, Bedfords, and Northumberlands crowd the heart of New England, while the unknown Middle West showcases the land of Shawanese, Wawiachtas, and Piankeshaws. New England proper is illegible with details; in the northern corner, along the Connecticut River, one can find the dot of Dartmouth College.

Ptolemy's *Mappa mundi* now looks like an earthworm farm, the continents vague hunks of land, bodies of water jet black, Ethiopia more than a fourth of the globe. *Terra incognita* is marked as such, and the area above the 45th parallel is a total unknown. Twelve figureheads surround the map, each blowing their gusts. The map captures Galileo's sense of wonder and incites dreams of Gondwanaland.

But then, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sea monsters transformed into whales and then weren't drawn at all. Now, unfoldable Michelin maps clog my glovebox, and many of my friends won't drive without being harassed by their Garmin Navigators, ready to verify positions, check progress, and estimate arrivals. They know everything.

When my friends and I take road trips then, passing through the homogeneity of the interstates, speeding towards our facsimile frontiers, I try to block out the Garmin's robot voice of instruction and imagine the principals of the antique map superimposed on the maps of today: a great many-headed thing prowling eastern Nebraska, waiting menacingly off Exit 404 near Francine's Gas N Gulp; the Mississippi rips wide the Midwest; the Rockies arc like a spinal column.

Or, instead of that, I imagine setting off on a sixteenth-century journey with a chest full of maps, sailing through turbulent waters where the only points of reference are windblown galleons and prehistoric monsters. Longitudes and latitudes obsolete, all terra incognita, I rely on the wind, the gods, and gumption alone, navigating if at all by chance (some of the oldest maps lack even decorative orientation stars).

Or I imagine a seventeenth-century cartographer, in a sun-dusty attic, desk cluttered with compasses and gimbals, charting a vast map from the piecemeal accounts of sailors. He squints through a loupe to make sure the curve of a peninsula is just so, bending his calligrapher's pen to furrow the brow of a Scylla or complete the curve of an isthmus. After months of work, he sighs, looks over his work a last time, and then rolls up the map for inspection or sale, a job that in itself takes him a full hour to complete.

What I want from antique maps is what I want from the world. I want places to wink at me and vanish, maybe there, maybe not. I want to find what's only probably lost. I want to explore and discover what I can in the digital age I belong to, to see what I can in a world where frontiers have been erased by technology. The less information I know from whatever maps I have, the more exciting the exploration, the more meaningful the discoveries. What sterile geographical survey, all blockish boundary markers and contour

fingerprints, can compete with its olden counterpart? What city of today—gridlocked by Roman efficiency—can hold a candle to those olde hamlet plans? Where else can I go?

When I go out hiking and exploring now, I attempt to find the least-found places. I sometimes succeed and sometimes fail: The hardest places are often too easy to find. Every empty space I arrive at fills with those who want the same experience as me, and they and I smile and greet each other even as we know we're spoiling the other's purpose, sullyng the other's solitude. I can't blame them, though; I am them.

When I seek to be lost, I use antique maps before leaving. I pore over them like a robber over bank blueprints. They reteach me how to go and how to go on, and I take modern maps only as begrudging precautions, stowed in my bag below my compass. As in Oslo, sometimes I lapse and hold on to modern maps too tightly, plotting too hard my future and ending up only with tasks accomplished instead of experiences made. Usually I catch myself in time, tucking those maps in for emergency preparedness and leaving them be. And then I set off again, not wanting my itchy feet to become vestigial.

The atlas-makers would do themselves well to zoom out, to not show every last landmark, to deliberately leave some spaces blank. The more the scale of a map lessens (1:6,500,000? 1:65,000,000?), the more it's possible to lose reverence for nature by knowing her too well, to not realize that getting lost is being found.

In that shop in Oslo, I eventually, reluctantly put the maps back in their cases, wanting them all but not having a reliable way to ship them home, nor the *kroner* to pay for any one of them. I give my favorite maps some final glimpses, infusing them into my memory. I tell the shop owner thank you and head out. Back on the street, I pat my pockets for the city map I had earlier trashed, but then I remember, and so I go on.

From here, I'll travel back to the States and around the world. It is only when I get lost that I will find those who live and thrive lost, who know what it is to be removed and away. I will find them at the ends of backroads, in lost neighborhoods and abandoned towns, and they will help me understand being lost in both word and deed.

CHAPTER ONE: WHEN AT NIGHT, WHEN IT'S MUCH DIFFERENT

Navajo Nation, Arizona, U.S.A.

Upon the Mountain, Where One Can See

First I'm with Samson, and we're running. Samson's shorter than I am but much faster, and more used to the high desert of the Arizona-Utah border. He races through sagebrush and chaparral and I follow him. "No snakes!" he says, and I don't know if he means There are no snakes or Don't worry about the snakes. His dog, a scrappy terrier with tousled fur, follows him, kicking up sand.

Sam clammers up a sandstone dome twenty feet tall. He goes up on all fours, slapping the rock with his hands. The dome is pimply with nubs that provide fingerholds he doesn't use. Sam wears a dust-lacquered flannel shirt and weathered corduroys.

Holes pock the dome as myriad as night-sky stars. "From where I shoot at the crows," Sam says, enlarging a hole with his thumb. "They like to eat the corn." I notice Sam doesn't say *my* corn. In fact, I'll later realize he doesn't use the possessive at all—nothing is his; everything is shared.

I use the holes and nubs for leverage, following Sam up. On top of the dome, Sam looks north to Navajo Mountain. He points to a funneled crevasse cut into the mountain. "There," he says, "is where you go to get the green water: medicine. When you find it, you keep it. It is rare to find, but I know where it is."

Sam reaches into his shirt and pulls out a vial of green water attached to a necklace. He holds it like a totem. "With this, I'm safe."

Samson is a twenty-eight-year-old Navajo man who lives on a private ranch in the Navajo Reservation, sixty miles from the nearest town of Shonto, Arizona, which is an intersection. I find Sam's house by way of getting lost along desert backroads, generally heading towards Rainbow Bridge National Monument. Rainbow Bridge is the world's largest natural bridge, almost 300 feet tall and 275 feet wide. In photographs, the bridge shines crimson in the sunlight, and I'd like to see such colors in real life. Hopi, Paiute, Ute, and Navajo Native American tribes consider the bridge sacred.

I read my gazetteer, spread on the passenger seat of my Jeep, as I drive. Rainbow Bridge appears on the edge of one of Lake Powell's many tributaries. Lake Powell appears more a millipede of rivers than a lake. The trail to Rainbow Bridge, not shown on my map, follows an unmaintained fourteen miles within canyons, down mesas, and around valleys. The road I'm on is a dotted red line on the map; on the ground, it's a sandy washboard lane cutting between plateaus and valleys that rise and sink to the sides of my car. Around the red line little is designated, and it's here I've come to get lost.

I fled the Midwest after high school to escape into the plain West, venturing first into mountains and then into desert. I find the desert in its desolation, distance, and mystery facilitates the best escapes, and it's here I head to explore. Now is one of those trips.

From the main road I'm on, smaller, worser roads shoot off to the left and right as veins on a leaf. I try to surmise the right direction from the map, but I lose my place, and then I stop looking. I throw the map in the backseat and drive.

On my way, I pass a teen dressed in all black, walking alongside the road. As he walks, he holds up his pants, listening to convex headphones.

“Need a ride?” I ask him. He doesn’t stop. I pull the car closer and ask again. He turns toward me, frowning. He pulls one of his headphones from his head, then lets it slap back into place. He keeps walking.

I drive on for several more miles, not passing settlement nor well. The road forks once and then again, and after the second fork I pass a village that’s a cul-de-sac of mobile homes, houses holding yardsales across from one another. Two young Navajo men, wearing tanktops and jewelry, sit in a Cadillac at the entrance of the town, listening to hip hop.

Not long after, a black dog appears from the desert scrub and chases after my car. I speed up, letting loose a cloud of dust. When I look back, the dog is gone.

The road worsens, its ruts becoming deeper, its sand thicker. It forks again, and again, and again. I choose the forks arbitrarily, my Jeep lumbering on. Eskers rise on either side, making the road seem to sink into the earth. The road becomes two tiretracks, wide enough only for one car, making second guesses or retreats hazardous and sometimes impossible.

When the road ends I stop. Before I can get out, I see a Navajo man running towards my car. “You’re lost,” he says, smiling.

Within the Rez

The Navajo Nation extends across Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, and is known to Navajos as the *Diné Bikéyah*. At almost 27,000 square miles, it’s the largest Native American reservation. On maps, the Nation’s boundaries are polygonal, loosely arranged around the Four Sacred Mountains, which are now Mount Taylor, Blanca Peak, Hesperus

Mountain, and the San Francisco Peaks, a range near Flagstaff. Those who live in the Nation know it as the Rez.

On my way through the Rez, I drive through a mix of Native American and Wild West etymology: next to the town of Nazlini is Sawmill; next to Twin Falls is Teec Nos Pos; Bitahochee is next to Greasewood. Ganado is near Cornfields, Tuba City close to Ya Ha Tey. The Rez is a land easy to get lost in, veined with unmarked backroads off unmarked backroads. Towns often lie at the end of these backroads, like anthers at the end of stamens.

Cyclogenesis, or storm generation, defines the Rez's geography. Storms build, roil, and ultimately fall back upon themselves within the Rez, unable to scale the arena of mountains around it. Duststorms, thunderstorms, and windstorms rise and fall, gone as quickly as they come, unique to the Navajos. When there are storms, the Navajos stay inside, not wanting to interrupt Mother Earth and Father Sky in their quarrels.

Originally Apachean, the Navajos are many-historied. They traveled through three worlds to get to Earth. They began as insects, then became birds, and finally humans. When the Third World flooded, Spider Woman spun a rope they used to climb, with the help of the Hawk, through a tear in the sky. From there they emerged into the Fourth World, Earth, as Diné, Navajo people.

When at Night, When It's Much Different

“Park your car at my house, please,” Sam says, his eyes shining through his bangs. “It will get attacked otherwise.”

“By animals,” I say.

“By Navajos,” Sam says. “Yup. Gangs. They have nothing to do but steal and ruin. They can steal your gas and cut your tire. They can steal your engine, carburetor—all the parts.” I think of what this means to Sam, to be threatened most by his own people. I can think of no way to ask him this, so let him keep talking.

Sam has about fifteen cars, trucks, and vans. “They all work, except for the gas,” he says. I park my car between a minivan and a pickup.

Sam lives on his family’s property, which is something of a catchall. Besides the many vehicles, there’s a basketball hoop rusted to lace, a benchpress with a barbell made of a steel pole connecting two buckets of hardened cement, and three stationary bikes standing in a row. Sam has three sheds on his property, one for farming equipment, one for hubcaps and other carparts, the third a motley, with a broken rocking horse, an oxidized boxspring, ribbons of aluminum, empty red gasoline tanks, a doll with the face removed, firewood fagots, and animal bones. There are other items indistinguishable. Three burn barrels stand nearby, the ash of burnt garbage spilling out of their rustholes.

Sam’s house sits on the west side of the property, a silver trailer with a kitchen, a living room, and a bedroom. Sam has bolted pieces of corrugated steel to the sides of his house. The trailer has one large window facing east, towards his cars, away from the sunset.

Once, Sam’s entire family lived here, his brother and two sisters and his parents, but now it’s only him and his animals.

Sam’s backyard is trodden to hardpan; he prefers to spend his days outside. He spreads his arms to the direct sunlight for moments at a time, not wanting “too much

blessing,” because it “takes advantage of what you get offered to you.” Pride can be expressed even as overacceptance.

Sam relaxes on his sitting bench in the shade of his trailer. He moves this bench from the west of his trailer to the east throughout the day, staying in the shade. He offers me iced tea, drinking Coca-Cola.

He sips and says, “It’s good to drink. Yup. It’s good to be in the shade, in the day.”

Dogs lie underneath many of the trucks and vans, panting and napping. Sam waves his hands expansively, at the surrounding piñon, juniper, and sagebrush. “The dogs are there, too,” he says. “Wherever they want to be.”

He lifts up a hubcap to show five kittens underneath. “Hello, cattens,” he says. He picks one up and shows off its lack of tail. He splays its paw in his hand: oversized paws with six toes apiece.

“How’d they get like that?” I ask.

“Their mother meet with a bobcat, I think,” Sam says. “They will be big. That’s what I need, the big size. And many.”

Sam’s animals are not his pets. They roam his property and beyond, living with him when they choose to. Sam doesn’t own them, nor does he know how many there are. “I feed them, but if they want to leave, they leave,” he says.

“But it’s nicer when they’re around?” I ask.

“Of course. They’re good to have at night especially. When it’s much different.”

The catten Sam’s holding mews and licks one of its six-toed paws. “Oh,” Sam says. “You see? This is a sign. Visitors are coming.”

Because All That Remains Is Kept, One Knows to Keep What Is Freely Offered

Agriculture is difficult on the Rez, and Sam farms here. He walks out to his garden, a half-mile from his house. The garden is as compact as a living room, hemmed in by a low fence. Sam grows corn and peppers, mostly.

Being near Navajo Mountain helps Sam: Navajo Mountain, a 10,388-foot laccolith, gets far more precipitation—sixteen inches a year—than its surrounding canyonlands, its slopes lifting the warm desert air up into precipitation like a supplication. Yet the soil quality of the Rainbow Plateau, where Sam lives, is rated by the United States Department of Agriculture as being “less than 25% irrigable” or even “Not Irrigable: Rock Land, Badlands, Rough Broken Land.” The land is low on biomass—from 150 to 400 percent—having been overgrazed by wandering ranch cattle.

Sam’s corn and pepper plants still grow, if tentatively, tethered with twine to wooden stakes. The corn leaves stand spiky from the heat; the pepper plants barely poke above the soil. More than irrigability, Sam worries about gangs and animals.

“They come, they steal anything, the Navajo gangsters,” he says. “When they can’t have your car or your tires, they steal your food. They don’t even eat it!”

Sam picks up a handful of sand and rubs it into his forearm. He looks at the sand on his skin and shrugs. He turns his palm up, as if to catch imminent rain.

The water in the Navajo Nation is scarce and hard, rated by the U.S. Public Health Service as “very non-potable.” A water’s soft- or hardness is determined by how many milligrams of dissolved matter per liter it has. Hard water is defined as water that has over 180 milligrams of dissolved matter per liter; the best water in the Navajo Nation has just under 500. Hard water is very difficult to bathe or clean with, and has been correlated

to cardiovascular disease in men. Its high mineral concentration can also cause damage to pipes, water heaters, toilets, and dishes. On the USPHS's map of the Navajo Nation, the Rainbow Plateau is unmapped because the wells used to carry out the survey didn't yield enough water to study.

Sam picks up a hoe and drags it through the dirt, more a habit than a task. "Our Mother helps you when you bless her," he says. "It may not sound like sense, but it's simple. Yup."

While hoeing, Sam spots a sandstone dome. He nods at it. "Do you want to go up it?" he asks. Before I can answer, he runs towards it.

Sam

I listen to Sam and watch him. I'm impressed with him for making success of so little, for finding life in aridity and dearth, for not ceding his traditions.

I grow silent around him, quiet in my ignorance of what Sam knows. I remember only a few statistics gleaned from my gazetteer, while Sam knows this land in full. I trust his interpretation of it and mostly, I listen. Sam remains with and within the land, his family's grown talisman, an ambassador of his people's land, protecting it, apparently, from his people. I think of him as his eponym Samson: strong, a victor.

But then I don't know. I can see Sam may want to leave too. On top of the dome Sam points to the southeast, generally at civilization. "About once a month I get to go out. Get something to drink, see some women. It's fun." He squints southeast as if to conjure the place to him. "Yup," he says.

To earn some extra money, Sam gives hikers tours of the region, often staying with them at night. “I like to help,” he says. “And it’s easy, and I know it, the land, and it’s not a problem for me to tell anyone about it, and I like it. Anyone can know how beautiful it is.” He says he’s been to Rainbow Bridge more times than he knows, that he’s been there when Lake Powell was much higher, before the postmillennial drought lowered its levels thirty feet.

“Sometimes,” Sam says, “I feel lonely.”

I like Sam and pity him and want him to succeed. Am I right to pity him? I don’t know. His happiness seems deeper, easier, more recklessly given. His enthusiasm seems that of a man born into the wrong era, a naturalist eking out his existence in a postindustrial age. Sam does love his nowhere, stopping frequently to fondle a low shrub or watch the play of sunlight along a distant spire.

But I realize he may be reacting from the necessity of being abandoned here, loving this place because he has to. Did Sam volunteer to stay here or was he relegated to do so by his status as the youngest brother? Would he prefer a life of getting drinks and seeing women to the dusty beauty of these unsouled canyonlands? If he did leave, would he hurry back, chastened or burned by the world beyond his? I scold myself for wanting him to be a fixture, for not letting him leave as easily as I do—as easily as I left to find him here.

Still, Sam seems eager to have a friend, and I’m eager to be befriended by him, especially in this place. I don’t know exactly why he accepts me so readily, but I know I reciprocate, glad to have found him. I receive Sam’s hospitality as freely and sincerely as

he offers it, both of us caught out in our lonelinesses, finding a kindred peace in our chance meeting.

As Dusk Sets, Changes Arrive

After we come down off the dome, Sam gathers his farming tools and locks them with a deadbolt in his farming shed. The sky purples with dusk. Sam says, “Sun is going down. This is not good. Do you like movies?”

Sam walks to his front door backwards, looking out across his family’s land. In a pickup truck near his front door lies a shotgun. He reaches for it, then taps his hand on the truck’s side. He reaches under the truck and picks up one of the cattens instead. “It’s getting dark,” he says.

To Speak of the Dead Is

After sunset, I move my car up to Sam’s front door. He connects the car battery to his television using adapted jumper cables. I turn on my car, and Sam’s television and VCR turn on with a sibilant zap from the living room.

We go into his house. Sam makes soup in the kitchen; I sit on one of his two feeble, cozy couches. Plaques and trophies from high school stand cluttered on a nearby desk. On the wall is a picture of Sam and his older brother Simon. “He’s in Phoenix now,” Sam says. “All of the family goes to Phoenix. I have been, and it’s good for having a job to go there. But no way could I live in there.”

I’ve read of this, of the drift of young Navajos away from the Rez to Phoenix, Santa Fe, and other cities. They prefer the job availability and economic stability of cities;

often, when they leave, they stay gone. On the Rez, they work for miners, tourists, or no one. I look at Sam. Knowing these two lifestyles are available to him, he seems content here.

There's one lamp in the living room, which paints the room wan, its corners hidden in shadow. Stuffed toy dogs lie on the floor, bruised and torn by their live counterparts. There's a large VHS video library in one corner, filled mostly with war films.

"Skinnywalkers," Sam says, handing me a bowl of onion soup. "Do you know them?"

"No," I say.

"They are the dead," he says. "They come back again. They inhabit the bodies of dead animals and make evil. They live at night, every night." Sam picks up the catten he brought inside, cradling it in his arms. "That's why you have animals. They know more than we do."

Sam talks about the mischief and evil of skinwalkers, how they use their posthumous powers not for hunting, as the dead are supposed to, but for scaring. He says skinwalkers are as old as tradition. They deviled Union and Confederate troops when the Civil War came west, harassing whichever side attempted to exploit the Navajos. Skinwalkers helped Navajos during the Long Walk too, when in 1864 the U.S. government, acting on Andrew Jackson's 1830 Indian Removal Act, forcefully evacuated 9,000 Navajos from their homes and moved them 300 miles to Fort Sumner. Those Navajos who refused to surrender to U.S. troops during the Long Walk scattered to the Grand Canyon, Utah, and Navajo Mountain.

"Once," Sam says, "I woke up from a nightmare. The dogs were all barking, crazy-like. I looked out my window here and saw a skinnywalker in the dark. He was looking

through the window.” As he talks, Sam sets down his soup and squeezes his vial of green water.

“The green water gives me a—a shield,” he says. “Another person around me. For protection. If the skinnywalkers come when I drink the water, they fall and move like...”

Sam imitates a seizure.

The catten jumps on the couch and licks at Sam’s soup. Sam smiles.

“But you are safe,” he says to me. “Yup. They only attack white men if you make them angry.”

In the dim of Sam’s cabin I believe him, and feel safe. The catten turns its eyes up, at the darkness outside.

For They Who Will Bait You Wait

Skinwalkers do not exist, technically, but nights on the Rez are so dark.

The skinwalkers of the Navajo Nation are not vampires. They are canyon travelers and soul-eaters, and they hide in cholla and yucca plants along highways and trails. At night, they approach the houses and hogans of Diné and non-Diné alike. They are identityless, simultaneously super- and subhuman.

Skinwalkers are not shapeshifters. They are the medicine men, the witches, the *brujos*, those who have jumped over the fire backwards, engaged in coitus with a corpse, and eaten the flesh of the dead. They hunt and lurch and gather, creating bone powders and dark-magic fires. They paint their skin and wear the hides of beasts—they carry always the raw scent of fresh meat and congealed blood, prowling the night with red eyes. They prey on souls.

They are not werewolves. They embody the habits of their chosen animal but they do not physically transform. They become the spirit of the wolf, or the mountain lion, or the tricky coyote, but underneath their dripping skins they retain their human shape—they remain human. The skinwalkers of the Rez move like reanimated cats, feline and bestial, awkward and jerking. They've been said to keep up with cars traveling sixty miles per hour.

Skinwalkers are not known only to Navajo. The Mohawks call their skinwalkers *limikkin*, the Hopi perform the Ya Ya Ceremony to become animals after death, and the Norse wear bearskins to embody the bear's spirit. It is the Diné *yee naaldlooshii* who are dangerous, though; it is "he who goes on all fours" who haunts the Rez.

Skinwalkers are accompanied by familiars, usually a black dog or coyote that prowls in the daylight hours. The familiars are harbingers and searchers. They will hunt and find you, lying in wait until the day finishes.

At night, the skinwalker will bait you. It will thump on your door, knock on your roof, and scratch at your windows. If you go outside, it will have you. Skinwalkers can see your soul, and will eat it.

Constellation

I choose *Six Days Seven Nights* from Sam's VHS library, and we watch it for thirty minutes at a time, before I have to restart my car to warm up the battery again.

During one of the breaks, we go outside. The stars are magnificent, no town visible in any direction.

“Once,” Sam says, “all the animals were sitting around, each holding their own stars. They didn’t know how to put them in the sky, what the best design would be for arrangement, you know? So Coyote came, and Coyote is very bad, a very mischievous animal. He asked the other animals, ‘What is all this gibberish? Why are you wasting your time? Just get them up there.’ He grabbed all the stars from the other animals—he picked the brightest star for himself, the Morning Star—and threw the rest of them into the sky, up! So, there they are now, in a mess. But it looks nice, huh? Yup.”

We look from the sky to the ground, beyond the small square of light from Sam’s living room window. It’s invisibly black. Sam shudders; he’s not the only one.

“Come on,” he says. “Let’s go back inside.”

That night, no skinwalkers come scratching at Sam’s window. I wake up twice in the night, looking out the window. Outside it, I can just make out the shapes of desert plants. Mostly, the world is black.

I think of the black dog I saw earlier that day, the one who followed me and then was gone. I think about being an outsider on the Rez, an interloper and a tourist. I wonder if I’ve done anything to anger the skinwalkers; I vow that as long as I’m on the Rez I’ll try not to. I don’t sleep well.

What Is Careful, What Is Hard to See

Sam and I wake early in the morning. I plan to hike to Rainbow Bridge, camp under it, and hike out the next day. Sam and I sit on our couches in the predawn, yawning. “No good sleep, huh?” he says. “And a long day, too, ahead. Come on.”

Sam rises and walks out of the trailer. I follow him to a handpump 200 feet from his house. He starts pumping, and for two or three minutes nothing happens, the methodical creak of the handpump lever the only sound in the still desert morning. Even as the sun rises, the day grows hot. Eventually, water coughs and then gushes out, bursting quickly before dribbling and stopping. Sam holds a bucket of water under the bursts, filling it. Sam scoops two large glasses into the bucket of water, handing me one.

We go back to the house and he fills the dogs' and cats' water bowls, saving some water for himself and his crops.

I grab my backpack and tie up my boots, already uncertain of camping outside at night, under the Bridge. I'm not sure I want to be outside and alone here.

Sam draws a map in the dirt with his foot, making three *Us* to show the three canyons at the start of the hike. He draws a long diagonal line, saying, "This is Hamburger Hill. You go down and down." He draws a *Y*. "*This* is the tricky section," he says, "where the trail goes into two canyons. If you go in the left canyon, you will be walking for years!" He laughs and stamps his foot.

Sam tells me the Navajo name for the Rainbow Bridge is *nonnoshoshi*, meaning "rainbow turned to stone." He tells me the bridge is sacred, that I should not walk under it.

"Sacred meaning safe?" I ask him. "From skinnywalkers?"

Sam looks at me guardedly. "No," he says. "No place is really safe." He kicks at the desert sand. "I'm sorry. I can't tell you. There are some things not meant for certain ears to hear."

I shift my backpack, adjusting its straps. Sam perks up suddenly.

“You must watch out for the brown spiders,” he says. “They are careful, hard to see. Once one bit me and I stayed still for two weeks. I had to have the bite cut out, huh? Surgery. Yup.”

He kicks sand over his map. He picks up and finishes his entire glass of water in one drink. When he’s finished, he holds the glass, considering it, then wipes his mouth and says, “Be careful tonight.”

I turn and set off. As soon as I do, Sam says, “Wait!” He hands me a small vial. “This is from the corn, the pollen. It’s protection. Put it on the tops of your hands and feet. Only in the morning, though.” The vial is beaded in dark green, with red, orange, and yellow chevrons.

“So, now?” I ask.

“Yeah, you can now,” Sam says.

I take off my boots and open the vial carefully. I shake the tiniest amount of pollen out and dab it on. “Uh-huh. Like this. You can put more,” Sam says.

I thank Sam and head out. He pulls his sitting bench around to the west side of his house, back into the morning’s shade.

Jornada

I go down into and out of the first three canyons. The trail dips into shale and streambeds then rises over steep escarpments and traces soft-shouldered buttes. On the Rez, the lithosphere—the Earth’s crust—is crushed and folded upon itself like a textile rug.

The Rez lays its geology bare: tectonics and drainage patterns, Triassic, Jurassic, and Cretaceous strata. The land rises out of volcanoes and falls to steady wind and infrequent rains. Quaternary stones crumble underfoot; sand mocks the life that uses it. Everywhere the land falls away, carved in alluvial millennia. The land appears genesisic and apocalyptic: the beginning and end of the world.

I go down and down Hamburger Hill, arriving in a deep canyon, the trail zigzagging to either side. I go faster than I'd planned. I wipe the sweat from my face with my shirt and deny my exhaustion.

I come to the fork of canyons Sam warned me about and take the right one. Sometimes the trail is clear, sometimes it's marked only by cairns, sometimes it's not marked at all. In these cases, the only option is to keep going forward.

As I hike, I watch the arc of the sun overhead, thinking it's moving too quickly, thinking about the dark approaching. Even in the heat and brightness of daylight I feel a foreboding. The isolation of the hike, of its being in nowhere, becomes not a welcome escape, a place to find peace, but a harbinger. The isolation and the specificity of my place in it seems to certify Sam's deep belief in skinwalkers. He lives here and knows them; he's seen them at night. I don't want to see them at night. Here, in his place, I trust nothing I know.

I have all the gear ready to camp, my sleeping bag, tent, food, and water on my back. The camping gear weighs against me but I keep going, determined to get to the bridge and back. What was going to be a difficult fourteen-mile hike doubles to twenty-eight. But I don't want to be stuck in the canyons at night, stuck wandering into dark and red eyes waiting. I don't want to walk into the left canyon and walk forever.

All I imagine is the inevitability of night approaching in all its shifting shadows, competing darknesses, and hidden secrets. I think of its brown recluses hiding in the redoubts of rocks. The visceral gutpunch of anxiety these images stir in me, amplified by Sam's sober descriptions, silences my skepticism. Rainbow Bridge becomes a foolish goal, an endpoint and a turnaround. I watch the sun and feel the urge to turn back now, but just as this urge arises so does its opposite, and I want to tempt my not knowing. I keep going.

The trail lessens to nothing. The trail winds through a large canyon. I skirt along the left or right wall of the canyon, whichever side isn't flooded.

At one point I feel dizzy and lie down underneath a piñon pine. Dark shapes appear on the edge of my vision. I drink water and rest. When the shapes vanish, I rise and walk again.

Two-thirds of the way to the bridge, I jettison my bag underneath a large rock and run to Rainbow Bridge, which looks more like warm muscle than a prism. I look at it for five minutes. There are other campers under the Bridge, drying out their woolsocks on the warm sandstone, dropping iodine tablets into their water bottles and shaking them. Their presence makes me feel no safer about the approaching dark. The other campers wave at me, and I wave back. Then I turn back to get to Sam's.

I hike back faster than I'd come—I run through the canyon. My shirt, sodden with sweat, clings to my body. At one corner, I meet another hiker, who sees me and says, "This isn't a racecourse. You could actually enjoy it instead."

"I have to get back," I say. I point up at the sun.

The hiker looks up and says, "The sky? What's that got to do with anything?"

I shake my head and continue on. I retrieve my backpack and watch the sun's cruel descent. Going up Hamburger Hill, I count steps out loud, doing 250 at a time, stopping to heave breaths, bent over double. The top of the hill seems to stretch farther away the higher I climb. I count to 2,000, then three, then four.

At the top of the hill, I watch the sky bruise. I still have to cross the three canyons. I lose the trail and sit for a moment. I wait, but hate to. For the time being, I don't want to be lost, and if I keep going, I could become very lost.

I listen, hoping to hear nothing, and the twilight is silent, completely, for some time. Then there are sounds, rustlings and movements. Maybe there are. There's nothing to see to confirm or deny the sounds. They stop and start again. Maybe, in the distance, a coyote howls.

No matter whether I'm a white man or not, no matter whether I have the pollen on my hands and feet or not, I don't feel safe—I feel vulnerable, inviting trouble upon myself, setting myself up as an easy target for a skinwalker I'd been too foolish to not believe in, whose anger I invite by not believing in it. I'm scared of seeing a skinwalker not because of what it might do to me but because I might see it. Anything can exist out here. Nowhere obeys none of the laws of mapped land. The black dog has seen me already.

I wait through the night wide awake. The hours pass somehow. I think, Just because nothing happens, that doesn't prove nothing could have happened. I have proved nothing wrong. I don't think Sam's beliefs are imaginative myths. My inner skeptic remains quiet, having been made irrelevant.

When dawn first brightens the far horizon, I stand and walk. As the sky fully lights I reach Sam's handpump and pump it till it gushes, then lay under it.

I walk to Sam's trailer. One of his vans is idling by the front door. I knock. He shines a flashlight out at me, holding up a catten. I wave feebly. He opens the door and hustles me inside. He's either already up or still up. He's watching *Showdown in Little Tokyo* with Dolph Lundgren. He locks the door and settles back into his couch, cuddling the catten, asking me how the hike was. I chuff like a horse. "You shouldn't have done it this fast," he says.

"Yeah," I say. "I know."

I sink into the couch. Sam offers me a beer. Dolph Lundgren pulverizes Japanese businessmen on the television. The window reflects the image of the television screen in the window. It still being dark outside, the window acts not as a looking glass but a mirror, disallowing me to see out. What's on the other side of the window is unknown, and this is a relief. I wait for the sun to come, to burn through the image of the film and let the outside in.

I drink the beer and lay down on my couch. One of the cattens mews and hops onto my stomach. It lies down and purrs. I hold it there.

Last Request

I leave Samson's house later that day. I thank him for his hospitality and wish him luck, hoping that others will find him here. I want to give him something; I'm ready to do any favor for this man. I offer him money for the instructions on the hike, for the stories, for the room and board. "No, no," he says.

"Is there anything else you need?" I ask. I look in my back seat for anything.

"Maybe some gasoline?" he asks.

I tell Sam of course and we siphon gasoline from my Jeep into his favorite van. The gas will be enough to get him to civilization and back when he wants to use it.

“When are you leaving?” I ask him.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Not soon. It would be fun, but. Not soon.”

“Why not soon?”

“I just—I don’t know. Not soon. No. Sometime.” He looks to the southeast, at everything and nothing.

I thank Sam again.

“Okay,” he says. “Sure. But now it’s work time.” He smiles and goes to his farming shed to retrieve his tools.

Later, a Shepherd

North of Samson’s house, past Navajo Mountain, the road crosses the Arizona border into Utah and disperses, cleaving upon itself again and again, too many roads for any map to keep track of. I drive along a venous tributary of Lake Powell, which spreads where it may. To the east are the Piute and Nakai Mesas.

My car jostles over rocks and through washouts. Over one hill, there’s a hogan with goats lying around it. A hogan is a domed enclosure made of thatched sticks and mud with six sides and a chimney. The hogan is a Blessingway, where the Diné go to pray for health, fertility, and agricultural success. The hogan is also where Navajos go to sweat away their scents to prepare for hunts. The doorway of the hogan always opens to the east, to welcome the sun.

The road past the hogan leads down, eventually to Lake Powell and the Kaiparowits Plateau, where I'll end up later in different straits. Along the road appears to be a garden of giants, boulders huge and menacing. Everywhere around I see flat earth and monolith, cave and mesa, everywhere a hiding spot.

I spend that day exploring the land in car and on foot, taking whatever roads I see, ignoring others for the sheer number of them. Nowhere do I see movement.

I drive back past the hogan. The goats' shepherd has arrived, and she fills their hardwood trough with water. She has long black hair, a multicolored shawl, and a ramshackle pickup truck. The pickup truck looks wrong—otherwise, there's no mark of time whatsoever. The shepherd seems not anachronous but time-less, existing without reference to the world at large, safe here in her not-when. As I pass her, I don't wave for fear of disrupting something sacred. She gives me one glance, raising her chin and squinting, and then she turns back to her goats.

I keep driving because night is, as ever, approaching.

CHAPTER ONE CODA: UNIT FIVE

One year later, on another trip to desert anywhere, I drive the same dusty roads to revisit Sam. I buy and fill a ten-gallon tub of gasoline and put it in the backseat of my Jeep, giving him enough fuel to go farther this time.

When I arrive at his house, he's not there, and I don't see his van among the cars outside his house. I knock on the door and an older man and woman step cautiously out. I introduce myself and tell them how I knew Sam.

"Oh. Sam," the man says. "Poor Sam." He fills two Mason jars with water and sits with me in the shade of the house. The man is Sam's father Russell. Russell tells me Sam is now in the Phoenix State Prison, that he crashed his van while driving drunk, returning home after a night out. "So, now we are here," he says. "Someone must be."

I talk with Russell and his wife Virginia for some time about their land and Navajo legends. I mention how Sam told me the constellation myth, and about skinwalkers.

"Skinwalkers?" Russell bristles. "Sam told you this?"

"Yeah, yeah. At night," I say. "I stayed with him—Sam—at night. He said that's when the—they come out."

Neither Russell nor Virginia will discuss the topic. "If you want to know about them, go to the Ramah," Russell says. The Ramah (RAY·muh) Reservation is an offshoot of the main Rez, a smaller and more distant tribe. "Here they are quieter. They are around, yes, but," he pauses, "not as loud. I don't know how to explain it. In the Ramah, man, they scream."

I thank Russell and Virginia and give them the gasoline. In exchange they give me a vial of crushed forbs. “Hang this in your car if you want to look for the walkers,” Russell says.

I drive to the Ramah Navajo Reservation, marked by a tiny sign dwarfed by three larger signs. The first sign argues against childhood sexual abuse; the second says, “Stay healthy...stay fit! Diabetes is *not* our tradition!” The third says, “Please don’t forget us.”

I drive around Ramah’s backroads, looking for I don’t know what. I see rows of mobile homes along dirt tracks without street signs, the residents sitting under eaves made from corrugated siding. I find a gas station and a small school, its children chasing each other in the blazing sun.

I drive back to the Reservation boundary and walk into the Tribal Government Center, a one-room metal square. I ask the secretary inside if I may talk to someone, and she directs me to Anthony. Anthony is round and conspiratorial; he wears a rancher’s ten-gallon hat and a mustache that fidgets when he smiles.

I sit in Anthony’s office. When I tell him I’ve been driving around, he says, “You drive around out here and tell no one? You’re lucky no one shot you! People will think you’re here to steal their goats!”

I ask him about the Ramah Reservation. He says, “This place is a place for us. We’re a different type of Navajo—it’s not worth getting into how and why and all that—but here we are.” He points at a map of the Reservation, which looks like half a parallelogram.

“The Ramah Reservation is divided into five units,” Anthony says. “We are here, in One. Two and Three, those have the houses and the school. Four is for farming and such.

And Five, Five is...well, the school's bus drivers call Unit Five 'The End of the World.' Of course, that's where the really weird things happen. Out there last week, they caught two teenage kids wearing animal guts all over themselves, stalking around scaring people. When they found them, they just sent them back to the main Rez. To avoid it being a big newspaper story and all, getting people stirred up by some kids' horseplay."

The Ramah Reservation's five units are divided by borders that seem hesitant or unsure somehow. Where the world ends, I think, is where skinwalkers hunt and lurch and gather, creating bone powders and dark-magic fires. I know this is where I'll go, the temptation having risen again.

Anthony writes OK on a note and appends a piece of Scotch tape to it. "For your windshield," he says. "We have a market full of good food if you want to look." I thank him.

I drive around Ramah that day. Most of the land is farm and ranch land. The few houses stand in two neighborhoods, but otherwise curling barbed-wire fences delineate emptiness.

At the market I talk to a schoolteacher, an older white man named John. When I ask him about skinwalkers, he says, "The kids believe in them, but it's not a scary ghost story thing. They're not bogeymen; the kids learn about them and then learn ways to avoid them. Their parents are as scared as anyone. They consider them very, very real."

"The kids won't discuss them with me," he adds. "But they write about them in class, in their journals. They hear noises outside their windows, see eyes in the night. Their dogs and cats panic. When they talk about it, they whisper."

I go to yard sales and tell their merchants I'm interested in "Navajo mythology" to learn more about skinwalkers. Many laugh me away. "You want to learn?" one man asks. "No you don't. You don't want to know this." One woman will talk to me next month. I don't know if this is a joke or an honest offer, but I can't take it regardless.

I wait for darkness and then start out into Unit Five, my Jeep's bright headlights on. My heart hammers. I drive fifteen miles an hour, then ten. My headlights chase ghosts out of the sagebrush; the lights illuminate shapes in the dark tethered to their shadows. The road, bumpy and ill-used, hides what lies to the left and right of it. The stars above shine like diamonds but here on the ground the world is jetblack and impressionistic. Looking through my windshield, I don't know what I see. No houses appear, just disused driveways that stretch back and back.

I get out of the car and look for any lights or anything, listen for rustling in the chaparral. The night smells as cool as deep water and I stand in it, seeing little. My heart beats hard still, and I squint into the darkness, trying to will something into existence. The mystery of skinwalkers still harbors itself in my imagination, but I know more now and am even more reverent, less ready to linger outside amongst the supernumeraries of night.

I don't stand outside long. I feel chilled and phobic, certain I need to leave now. A year before I may have waited through the Reservation night, but now I'm not prepared to do any such thing. I had to be caught in such a situation to live it; I won't engineer the same situation for myself now.

As I drive I think civilization is killing our ghosts. If I venture far enough away they can still exist, hidden in their wilds, not needing exposure or acknowledgement. Out here,

the certainties of cities seem foolish and irrelevant. If the residents who live here know the skinwalkers are here, the skinwalkers are here. The deeper I venture into Unit Five, the more skinwalkers become the certainty.

I do a three-point turn to exit Unit Five. I look in my rearview but it gives me no answers, and so I drive on, onto the macadam of Unit One and then away from the Ramah.

CHAPTER TWO: *DAVAI, DAVAI*: IN NIZH, IT'S VERY BETTER NOW

Nizhnevartovsk, Siberia, Russia

In the western Siberian city of Nizhnevartovsk (nij·nev·AR·tovsk), *teloptrassy* emerge from the earth like silver worms, running alongside most sidewalks. Teloptrassy are foot-wide heating pipes that rise five feet off the ground. They tower over intersections like bridges. Russian children climb the teloptrassy and jump off them into snowdrifts. Damaged sections are patched with carpet and decaying insulation fiber. The teloptrassy are warm to the touch, and hum with a low, flat baritone.

My friend Sergey Sarazha doesn't notice the teloptrassy. Sergey (SARE-gay) is a twenty-seven-year-old oil engineer who works in the immensely rich Samotlor oilfield north of Nizhnevartovsk, deep in the swamp-bog of the vast Siberian plain. Sergey is also one of my best students; currently, I'm teaching English in Nizh.

I've come here after seeing a job advertising the remoteness of the city. I was considering teaching jobs in Athens and Warsaw when I saw the opportunity to go to Nizh. I looked at roadmaps, seeing Nizh at the end of one of them, its dot meager in the midst of so much Siberian blank. It was waiting to be discovered, and so I decided to head there.

As Sergey walks alongside the teloptrassy, he slouches and squints into the cold. It's negative twenty-four degrees Fahrenheit today, an uncommonly warm February day in Nizh, and the snow drifts lightly down. Sergey wears a small red hat and a lime green Schöffel coat with black cotton pants over patent leather oxfords, all of which are frosted in snow. He walks with a smile tickling his mouth, as if he's thinking up limericks. To

the left and right of the sidewalk are slate-gray apartment complexes, their twelve-story buildings arranged squarely like dominoes around a snowed-under central parking lot and playground. Many of the buildings are still under construction.

Sergey's father Ruslan moved from the Ukraine to Nizh at the start of the city's oil boom in the 1970s, and Sergey lives and works here now as a pipeline technician, electrician, derrick maintenance man, and instructor to new engineers. As I stop to touch a teloptrassy, Sergey says, "Mettchew, is too hot. Why you want touch? *Davai!* Let's go."

Sergey and I are walking to a supermarket to gather food for a party at his family's dacha, their summer cottage. We pass a Land Rover with a license plate of 555.

"If you have money, you can get numbers," Sergey says. "Three numbers. One-one-one. Five-five-five. All of this. It spend 10,000 rubles to make, but you can have." Sergey shakes his head. "Is rich! If I have the money, I don't pay for this things. Why stupid?"

"Where can I get one?" I ask. A friend of mine collects license plates.

"A car sign? Like this? No. Is not possible. You cannot have."

"What if I went to the *balagan*?" The outdoor market. "Where do all the old license plates go?"

"No, Mettchew. You can't! The *militsia* keep them."

"Well, what if I asked the police for one then?"

Sergey shakes his head. "Is not possible," he repeats. He gives me his favorite smile. He loves telling me about some new Russian futility. In Russia, Russians say, when you can't do something, you can't do it. Some things can't be done, because that's the way it is. It always is the way it always is, and so can't now is can't never.

Sergey lingers, ogling the Land Rover's headlights, tires, and grille. He loves it, but he concedes it's just too big. He wants a faster, flashier car. He loves sports cars.

"In one day!" he says. "I will have sport car. In *the* one day? *On the* one day? Mettchew, which? Tell me."

"Someday," I tell him.

"Someday, yes," he says, feeling the word with his mouth.

We arrive at the supermarket shortly after. The supermarket is small, white, and blank, without any sign to indicate it's a supermarket or store or anything. Snowdrifts pile against its sides, making it look like some woebegone big top. In the supermarket, we buy sausage, cheese, garlic cloves, dark bread, vodka, cognac, and beer, and take it all out to Sergey's small blue station wagon. The cheese comes in a rope, smaller strands of cheese threaded together to form a thick, delicious fiber.

"*Davai!*" Sergey says. We run through the snow to his car. He starts it and we head off to his dacha.

Nizhnevartovsk is a young Russian city, and a New Russian city. Though it was founded in 1909, it was at that point only a series of birchbark shanties, another of innumerable and indeterminate outposts scattered across the thousands of square miles between the Ural Mountains in the west and the Yenisey River Valley in the east. Much of Siberia is marshland, which spends most of the year frozen, melting into thick bogs in the summer.

In the language of the indigenous Khanty Siberians who founded it, "Nizhnevartovskaya" means "in the outfall and bend." The Khanty built the town along a sharp bend in the Ob River that now outlines the city's southern edge. The town began as

a waypoint for steamers to put in, a place for merchants to gather wood on their trips to and from the Arctic. When the Khanty founded it, Nizhnevartovsk had a population of eleven.

Nizhnevartovsk remained a tiny port town until the 1960s, when prospectors discovered oil under Samotlor Lake. Deep and black, Samotlor looks like an inkstain amoeba curling around the surrounding peninsulas of taiga forest. When the first prospectors found oil at Samotlor, they compared the field to a bun opening up. More prospectors flew into the area in helicopters in 1965, ready to build wellpads in the forests around Samotlor. The chief of the original prospecting expedition radioed back to nearby city Tyumen that Samotlor's "visual debit exceeds 300 cubic meters per day." In other words, Samotlor was gushing with oil.

Suddenly, everyone wanted to be in Nizh, but city-building was stymied by the extensive swamplands surrounding the oilfield. For much of the year, there was no firm ground to build on. Road-building vehicles mired themselves in deep water and had to be rescued by other, larger vehicles, which also mired. The builders were troubled by the seasons too: If they built in winter, they faced horrendous cold; if they built in summer, they had to deal with deep bogs. Worse, much of the work done in the winter would be undone by annual spring floods. The heaviest equipment was transported in winter only. The workers had a precious, vicious window of time to build.

They used ships. As oil was transported out of the town by ship, more and more workers were transported in, as was mail, building equipment, and food. But the Ob River only flows for five months a year. The workers either had to make sure they were on the last ship out of town or be stuck there for a long and cold seven months. Those

who were stuck, either accidentally or purposefully, established the town. They laid down sand and logs to build roads. It took them four years, but eventually they built wellpads around the Samotlor, and drilling began in 1969. Nizhnevartovsk was granted official town status in 1972. Workers christened the town's main street, which follows the curve of the Ob, Pioneerskaya.

Nizhnevartovskians drilled more wells then, installing transmission lines, oil derricks, and pipelines. In 1974, Samotlor produced almost 500 million barrels of oil; in 1979, the oilfield produced 1.2 billion barrels. During the 1970s the population of Nizh quintupled. On January 6th, 1980, the first train arrived in town, the end of its line. In 1976, Sergey's father Ruslan arrived from Kiev, Ukraine at the age of twenty-five, signing up to work on the pipelines.

Ruslan lived with many other oilfield workers in a village of dachas, or wooden cottages, outside of Nizh proper, called Starivartovsk ("Old" Vartovsk, versus Nizhni, meaning "New" Vartovsk). Four men stayed in each two-room dacha, cooking and sleeping there at night. A large bus picked up the men to go back to the oilfields each morning to begin work. Sometimes the men got to ride in helicopters to farther shores of Lake Samotlor, to install new oil wells. They'd stay in the dacha for weeks at a time, only earning time off in the coldest and warmest months. On one of these breaks, Ruslan met Anastasia, the daughter of a contractor. Shortly after they met, Ruslan and Anastasia married, and she gave birth to two boys, Sergey and Yury. While Ruslan was at the oilfields, Anastasia raised Sergey and his brother Yury.

Throughout the 1970s and early '80s, Samotlor was the most important oilfield in the Soviet Union. Engineers and builders became rich, as did the airmen who transported them and the doctors who treated them. During the oilfield's heyday, engineers extracted over 16 billion barrels of oil from Samotlor. The oil left Samotlor by ships and semitrucks, which used the frozen rivers as roads.

But the Samotlor Oil Field witnessed a decline in the late 1980s. Soviet engineers had been using the technique of hydraulic fracturing, or pumping water into the oilfield to make the crude petroleum come out more quickly. The method soon backfired, and the oil extracted came mixed with water. Production at Samotlor plummeted around the time of the breakup of the Soviet states in 1989. During the '90s, as New Russia struggled through one financial crisis after another, Samotlor produced less and less oil—in 1999, it exported only 150 million barrels. At the turn of the millennium, the oilfield was considered to be almost depleted.

But boomtowns boom and bust repeatedly, sometimes simultaneously: While Samotlor was failing, Nizhnevartovsk was growing. Throughout the 1980s and '90s, constructors built two-story wooden houses along Pioneerskaya. They built supermarkets, schools, gyms, casinos, and danceclubs.

Ruslan worked at Samotlor during these years, doing what work was available to do. Years on the oilfield had worn him down; he'd seen many of his friends' fingers lopped off, toes freeze off, or die. The physical demands and extreme temperatures of the work made it best done by younger, stronger workers, and Ruslan and many of the other Samotlor pioneers found other jobs in Nizh doing handyman work. Ruslan's older son Sergey began working on the oilfield in the year 2000.

In 2000, Simon Kukes, an American Amoco executive, came to Samotlor to revive the oilfield using three-dimensional seismic surveying techniques. Kukes found more pockets of oil to extract from than the Russian engineers had thought. Samotlor was “not optimized economically,” Kukes said. “Those were the days of go-go Soviet-style economics. There were some positive aspects to it, but overall, it was not done very well.” Based on Kukes’ new estimates of Samotlor’s potential, oil company TNK-BP gave Kukes \$1.5 billion to develop the site further. TNK-BP teamed up with service companies Schlumberger and Halliburton and began drilling new wells. With the new money, oilfield workers built better roads, allowing themselves to live in Nizh and commute to the fields daily. Starivartovsk—the original oilfield dacha village—became a village of summer cottages where Nizh residents could go for weekends to have cookouts and celebrate. Mostly, Starivartovsk declined, having been abandoned by its residents for the new city.

By 2007, the wells at Samotlor were producing 250 million barrels annually, with projections to produce close to 300 million in the coming years. Sergey feels blessed to have his job, and to live in Nizhnevartovsk.

Today, Nizh is known as “the biggest pearl of the oil necklace,” and is one of the richest Russian cities. The town lies in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area, which produces sixty percent of Russia’s natural gas. Gas from Nizhnevartovsk is transported mostly westward from the city, to Saint Petersburg, Moscow, and then through an extensive network of pipelines in Ukraine to Europe.

On January 1st, 2009, Russia cut off gas to eighteen European countries. Many European countries rely heavily on Russia for their gas: eighty percent of the Czech Republic's natural gas comes from Russia, while Slovakia and Bosnia rely totally on Russia. Even economic powerhouses like France and Germany rely on Russia for twenty-four and forty-two percent of their natural gas, respectively.

Most Russian oil arrives in Europe via pipelines in Ukraine. When Russia cut off gas to Ukraine, it cut off gas to much of Europe. Russia and Ukraine have long had gas disputes: After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia gave Ukraine gas at a discount—until Ukraine entered the European Union. Russian gas monopoly Gazprom asserted that if Ukraine wanted to be part of the European Union, it could pay European prices. Officials from the company accused Ukraine of stealing gas, of not paying a \$2.2 billion gas debt. Ukrainian officials reasoned that since Gazprom's pipelines cross Ukraine, the gas used to power the transportation of the gas shouldn't be charged.

On January 18th, Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin reached a tenuous deal to keep the gas flowing.

The gas in dispute—much of it—begins in Nizhnevartovsk, pumped out of the Samotlor oilfield, filling trucks and ships and setting out of town on its way West.

As Sergey and I drive out of Nizh, the sunset lights the city's skyline, silhouetting its many construction cranes. We drive down Mira Street, a main boulevard through the center of town. Block apartment buildings rise to either side, most of them under construction. The population of Nizh, according to a 2002 census, was approximately 240,000. Since then, the population has almost doubled.

Despite its windfalls, the town remains at the end of the its train line, and roads beyond town disintegrate into the undrivable. First arriving in Nizh at around six a.m. on Valentine's Day of 2009, I remember seeing the town's lights a meager beacon in a sea of black, not one sign of civilization anywhere else—no highways, suburbs, or satellite cities visible.

“Beautiful,” says Sergey. “New buildings. All new. Is nice.” He points to a new television antenna, a big metal torment of wires and spokes. “I guess only I think this looks nice,” he says. “Not you, right, Mettchew?”

“Not me,” I say. “It's *oozhas*.” A deliciously onomatopoeic word meaning ugly, terrible, or horrible.

“But is new. Perhaps you can see?”

“Just because something is new doesn't make it beautiful. Old things can be beautiful too.” I think of maps.

“Not here, Mettchew! Not in Russia. Here, what's new is best.”

I think of Russia's post-1989 designation as New Russia, contrasted against the pre-'89 Old Russia of ethnic purges, exile in gulags, state censorship, Jewish diaspora, arbitrary ukases, the kakistocracies of Lenin and Stalin, the violence and want, the shortages and despair, the riots and the marches, the twenty-seven million killed in World War II, the difficulties of building a town in ice and bog—I think of these things and decide not to argue with Sergey.

We stop at an intersection where a group of children are crossing. Mothers push the children in sleds or prams. They bundle up their children so that only the children's eyes show. The children stare at the world wide-eyed, as if recently startled. There are

numerous city parks in Nizh, with ice slides and ice sculptures of bears, foxes, and wolves, all translucent and blocky. Around Christmastime, ten-foot sculptures of Father and Mother Frost loom in the town square.

Children make up twenty-five percent of Nizh's population. The town has fifty-six preschools and thirty-nine elementary schools. The mayor of Nizh, Boris Khokhryakov, gives every newborn baby a gift, such as a decorated wooden spoon or a stuffed toy bear.

We turn right onto Pioneerskaya Street. The two-story houses along the riverside have fallen into disrepair. At a stoplight, we see a woman leaning out of one of the houses' windows, adjusting her headscarf and scowling across the street at the apartment being built there. She says "Ksss, ksss!" at the building, a sound imitating a cat's hiss. The sounds of new construction rattle and clang, drowning her out. Cement dust comes through the windows, smelling heavy and gray. Sergey rolls down his windows and turns up his radio, which is playing "Moscow Never Sleeps," a song by Russian artist DJ Smash. Sergey sings, "Nizhni never sleeps!"

The new buildings in town are colorful and complex, painted in polygons of blue, yellow, orange, and red. One youth gym we pass has cantilevers off cantilevers, like a stairway in reverse; the town's "Palace of Culture" is a bright yellow pyramid, and Club Mirage looks like the Jetsons' house. We circle around the statue of forty-foot-tall Alyosha, the Conqueror of Samotlor, who stands gilded in bronze, a pick slung over his shoulder, holding a torch with a live flame perpetually lit. We head north out of town, towards Samotlor, passing by the main Halliburton refinery. On the other side of the street is the casino Millionaire. Many new businesses in Nizh name themselves in Cyrillic approximations of English: Phoenix, Dialogue, Citrus, Hit Club, and Five Star.

“To win or to lose,” Sergey says, smiling at Millionaire. “You like, Mettchew? No. We don’t need this.” We drive on, the city in the rearview, heading to Sergey’s family’s dacha. As soon as we leave the new city, the pavement fades and the potholes appear. Sergey dodges them expertly or, feeling more mischievous, slams through them.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“Oh, this is. Mettchew, you see. Hmm. *Kak satt?*” How can I say? “We go to nowhere.”

“Nowhere?”

“Yes, yes. Nowhere. Nothere. Everywhere. Everythere. You see Russia!”

Outside, we pass onto the relentless taiga, fields of birch trees extending in every direction for thousands of miles. If I got out of the car now, it seems, I could walk forever.

I teach English at the Cambridge Education and Training Academy. I teach adults in the evenings, many of whom work for TNK-BP and Halliburton. Sergey is a pre-intermediate student but an avid learner. In class, Sergey answers questions before anyone else can, and I often have to tell him to give others a chance.

“Who knows about the first conditional?” I asked his class one day. “The ‘if conditional?” Most of the class looked down at their workbooks, flipping a page back and forth.

“Mettchew, here,” Sergey said, raising his hand. I pointed to him. “The ‘if conditional,” he said, not looking at his book, “mean if you do one thing, present simple tense, then you *will* do another, *future simple* tense.”

“Well, that’s correct,” I said.

“First conditional, second conditional, third conditional, zero conditional,” Sergey said. He held up his workbook. “Mettechew, I sleep with this book!”

On the way to Sergey’s dacha, he takes me to one of the derricks he has to maintain. It’s red and white, a series of pipes and valves housed in wire cages, their surfaces waxed with frozen oil. The derrick stands about twenty feet tall, and doesn’t move. One of the derrick’s pipes has valves stippled on it like mushrooms on a treestump. I reach out to grab one.

“No!” Sergey says. “It is dangerous.” He nods at the derrick. “What is it, English?”

“Oil well?” I say.

“*Da*, yes. Oil will. *Will. Wheel.*” Sergey shakes his head and opens a nearby electricity shed, which he tiptoes into. The doors of the electricity shed are covered in warnings against electrocution. Sergey adjusts levers and reads dials with his left hand, holding his right up in a stop position so that I don’t try to follow him in. Outside the wind howls off the Siberian plain and stings my face. I turn my back to it. Other oil derricks stand on the horizon, barely visible in the white haze.

I look out over the vast white all surrounding me and I think this is unfair, that those who ruin nature get to spend the most time in it. Engineers, miners, lumberjacks, all of these Luddites and purists defending the rights of laissez-faire industrialists. These men working in the wild do actively destroy that wild as quickly as they work, but they’re also more engaged in wild areas than park rangers citing campsite infractions or Sierra Club telemarketers canvassing donators. I think the ability to exist within nature—to actually,

really live within it, and not treat it like an amusement park to enjoy at one's convenience—engenders an animosity towards nature, and a desire to conquer her. Or maybe it's the other way round: The anti-nature animosity seethes inherent, ready to unleash itself upon the waiting wilds. The Siberian wind whips viciously, everstrong and unrelenting.

Nizhnevartovsk gets temperatures below negative fifty-eight degrees Fahrenheit, but usually stays between negative four and negative thirty in the winter. When the temperature drops to thirty-one below, schools close their doors but classes aren't canceled. Instead, schools broadcast their lessons via radio, with each school given a different channel. The schools in Nizh are numbered, and the radio stations correlate to each school's number. When the temperature sinks below negative forty, gasoline freezes in cars.

When Sergey sees me shivering, he tells me we should go to the dacha and start a fire. "This is cold, yes," he says. "But it was worser. When I was child, it was *so* cold! This is too warm now."

When the city warms up in summer, Sergey says, it warms up quickly, and during the middle of July temperatures can rise close to 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The bogs around the city flood, attracting mosquitoes, which are mutant-large and travel in swarms. When the summer comes, days are sweated through and endured, the cold evoked with every mosquito bite.

Sergey and I leave the derrick and get back in his car. The road we're driving traces the outer edge of the Samotlor oilfield. Black, white, and silver pipes burrow out of the snow amidst bare birch trees; derricks pump in their cycles or remain still. The pipes are

ubiquitous, creating an interconnected web thrumming with oil. Thick powerlines run overhead, alongside the road, in a palimpsest of energy with the pipelines below.

“Oil,” Sergey says, tapping his windowpane with his knuckle. “It is good for us. It gives money, help, good life. We can eat, live well, have family. It...” He rubs his temples. “Ah, *kak satt?* Mettchew, it’s difficult to explain in English.”

“I understand,” I say.

“Tonight, we will show,” Sergey says. “We can live in good way!”

We drive through a forest glorious with snow: The snow bends boughs; distant trees crack and fall under the weight of ice. We emerge in a village, houses on either side wooden and decrepit. These quaint country cottages are tiny compared to the new apartment blocks of Nizh. Sergey turns on the road into the village, the houses passing by on either side. Most of the houses sit in their stillnesses, their yards buried under several feet of snow.

The road we’re on hasn’t been plowed recently, so we barrel right through the snow. Oftentimes the road disintegrates into puddled craters, which Sergey accelerates through. “Only I can drive this road,” he says, laughing. His car trembles and quakes. He’s driving hard to get us somewhere unreachable.

We arrive at Sergey’s dacha. Smoke rises from the chimney. “Here is very nice to come to but not always,” Sergey says. “My father lived here for too long. Now I don’t have to live like him. I can have my new house in Nizh.”

His father Ruslan is at the dacha already, shoveling the walkway. A tall, serious man, Ruslan crushes my hand in his pig-iron grip and greets me in Ukrainian. His face looks as

beaten as leather, as handsome as a Western film star. He asks me a question in Ukrainian and Sergey answers him *Da, Papa, konyechna*. Yes, Papa, of course. “Seriyoza,” Ruslan says, the diminutive form of “Sergey.” He hands Sergey the snowshovel.

Sergey’s family’s dacha has a bedroom and kitchen across from an outhouse, firepit, and a banya. We posthole through the snow and set our bags of food and alcohol by the barbeque pit. Ruslan opens the door to the dacha and pulls a thick khaki trenchcoat off a hook. “*Dilya tayb-ya,*” he says. For you. I put the coat on. It’s heavy and very warm, and smells of old creosote. “He used to wear them on the oil wells,” Sergey says, rolling his eyes, embarrassed at his father for imposing such a relic on me. But I take the jacket and it’s much warmer than the synthetic coat I’d been wearing.

Ruslan shows me inside the dacha: on the wall of the kitchen hang red and gold banners of Lenin, as well as pictures of ducks, roosters, and kittens. Dusty china and filmed glassware clutter an armoire in the corner. In the bedroom—the other room of the dacha—a potbellied fireplace crackles with dry firewood. The bed’s boxspring sags, covered with a thin mattress and thick wool blanket.

Sergey’s friend and classmate Alexey arrives outside, having just finished work. Alexey is a thirty-three-year-old surgeon with a round face and blond hair, half-Russian, half-German. As soon as he arrives, Alexey goes to the firepit and lights a fire. He’s brought a large silver pot full of shashlik, meat to be skewered on long poles and held over the fire. I go outside to greet him.

“It soaks in the onions all day,” Alexey says as he pulls the meat out of the pot. He wields a shashlik pole like a fencing rapier. “Do you want to try, teacher?” he asks.

Alexey and I arrange the skewers over the fire, then he opens the vodka. He takes out the dark bread and a small white brick he brought.

“*Salo*,” Ruslan says. *Salo* is fat, and Alexey cuts off a slice and puts it on a piece of dark bread. He hands the bread to me. “While we wait, we toast,” he says. He pours shots of vodka for Ruslan, Sergey, himself, and me. He toasts to new friendship, and we drink. I hate vodka, but I drink this and every following toast down and hide my grimaces. I refuse to show any cultural discourtesy by not accepting a toast and so I wince in silence, feeling I’d be a terrible ingrate to do anything else. Sergey hands me the shovel. “Your turn.” He laughs and I begin shoveling the sidewalk.

Ruslan spells me shortly after, and I warm myself with Alexey and Sergey by the barbeque pit as night falls. “Several years ago,” Alexey says, “Nizh was a gangster city. Private gangs all wanted to be the number one.” At one point, Alexey says, there were nine mafias in town, each trying to get the monopoly of the oil money. The mafias fought one another; alliances formed and then they were broken.

“I cut them open, *bandits* (bon·DEETS),” Alexey says. “I took out the bullets. From the guns. Every day. At least one. Bang bang. Was sad.”

He eats a slice of frozen fish he brought along. “It was big thing to do, being bandit, being gangster,” he says. “But now, is not so popular. No one wants to be in these gang. Now, they want to work for company, for state. They want something more, mm, stable. It’s better now.” Alexey turns to Ruslan and asks him a question in Russian. Ruslan answers. “He says it’s very better now,” Alexey says.

Later, Sergey catches me wandering to the edge of his dacha and looking out beyond Starivartovsk. “What you look at?” he asks.

“Just out there,” I say. “How far can you get out there?”

“You don’t want to go out there. Not without gun and luck. Out there is only *bichyo* and *shatuny*.” Shatuny are hungry bears that failed to eat enough to hibernate, and so wander the winter woods looking for humans to eat. Bichyo are more or less hillbillies, formerly cultured persons who have rejected the charms of modernity and remain hidden and unaccounted for. “Out there,” Sergey says, “you only live with self. It makes crazy. Out there is too much dangerous. You will die. Yes.”

“Well,” I say, “maybe.”

“No, is yes. *Ladna*, *Metichew*. *Davai!* Come! Let’s eat!”

Soon the shashlik sizzles brown on the grill. It stinks the night air with its onion broth and I salivate. We gather the meat and walk inside and feast. We eat the shashlik right off the metal poles holding it. We eat garlic bulbs, sausage, and cheese rope. Alexey has brought salad and caviar and we eat that. For desert we eat meringue cakes. We drink beer, and make endless toasts with vodka and cognac. I can’t stand cognac either, so I wash every vodka or cognac toast with beer until I’m lightheaded.

During dinner, Sergey attempts to explain *smekalka*. Smekalka literally means “mother wit,” or “keenness of wit,” but has no direct English translation. It’s probably closest to “resourcefulness,” and could be called “MacGuyvering”: It means solving problems by hook, crook, or otherwise, fixing things with anything at hand. During Sergey’s years growing up, everyone practiced smekalka, because doing things the “correct,” or legal way was often too difficult, too expensive, too time-consuming, or too bureaucratic.

“My father, he wants to earn governmental approval for his...*kak satt?*”—he holds up his finger, bringing out his electronic translator—“trak-torr so it can work again. He needs small wheels for it, little parts. If you will wait for government, you wait weeks! Months!”

“Longer,” Alexey says.

“Yes, longer. All the time you wait. So, instead, he say me, ‘Seriyoza, find this, this, and this. Okay. I find. We fix the tractor, *harasho*, we work the next day.’”

Sergey toasts to smekalka. And because he toasted, we all have to toast. Vodka glasses are filled again and Alexey toasts to our health. Ruslan toasts to Nizh’s progress, and the future. The toasts go around in a circle until I have to give one.

“Metchev,” Sergey says. “What will you toast to?”

I think about it. I think about saying “oil,” but I’m not sure how much these men really love oil, having been put through such trouble for its extraction. I think they might feel very ambivalent about oil. I think of toasting to Starivartovsk, the old village we’re now using as a refuge from the city, but am not sure the Russians will take this well either. I imagine Starivartovsk will soon be flattened or removed to make way for the expansion of its newer counterpart, having no value but nostalgia, and with very few cries of dissent or regret.

So I think of the idea of possibility, of wealth and prosperity, and I can only think of the vastness around them, of all that remains left to be taken out, extracted still—all that can still be used. Siberia is so big; it has just so much. I think of Russians’ advantage of infinity, of having more wilds and more oil than they will ever foreseeably need, enough

oil to secure themselves within their futures. I think of Nizhnevartovsk then, and realize it will be the end of the line only for so long. Soon enough, the line will be extended farther, to greater unknowns, to other bounties unfound. Russia will always be able to make its Wests wilder, its lands more intractable. So I raise my glass and toast to *Sibirske*.

The Russians chuckle. We clink glasses and drink. “*Mozhet beet*,” Alexey says to me. Maybe.

“It’s always better, though,” Sergey says, “when someone is drinking for us. When someone is drinking for us, it should as well be us!”

We slouch sated in our seats, having eaten and drunk too much, glad in our indulgence. Ruslan goes outside to chop firewood and stoke the fire. “*Mettchew*,” Sergey says, “would you like to build—*kak satt*, snowboy? Snowbody?”

“A snowman.”

“Yes. Exactly! *Davai!*” Sergey goes outside and I follow him.

As soon as I’m outside, I get hit with a snowball in the face. I crouch down and start packing snow, throwing it at Sergey. Alexey comes out and takes up a position behind a snowbank. Alliances are formed and broken; we each become sole targets bombarded by the other two. A truce is called and we start building a snowman in earnest, which is given a snow tam-o’-shanter, snow eyes, and stick arms. As I’m finishing the snowman, I get hit with another snowball. I turn around and look at Alexey. “*Mettchew*,” he says. “Where are you?”

Sergey and I wish Alexey and Ruslan a good night and drive back into the city at around midnight, the oilfields alight, derricks churning in the distance, larger wellheads peering above birch-tree forests like dinosaurs. The oilfield sounds like a far-off churning, a buckling and a compression, the sound of distant oceans. The snow in the oilfields lights the world in a dusky glow, the oil rising out of deep subterranean veins, continuing and continuing to come forth.

We arrive back in town, the streets busy with traffic. "*Davai, davai,*" Sergey tells slower traffic, repeating his refrain of "let's go, let's go," wanting the world faster all the time. We pass by more apartment complexes under construction. Bright halogen lights shine from upper floors as cranes hoist up building supplies. Workers look down, their bodies wrapped in thick black coats, fur hats tamped down on their heads. They're building for new families coming tomorrow and the next day.

Soon Nizhnevartovsk will be known, and known too well, and will exhaust its resources until the exhausters find the next outpost somewhere out there. For now, though, it's still hidden enough, far enough away to avoid detection, an outpost afar. And what secrets it doesn't give away hide in its backwater brother of Starivartovsk, which we leave dark and alone, a shadow place best kept apart. For now, only Ruslan waits there, remembering how it was, keeping his secrets to himself.

CHAPTER TWO CODA: IZLUCHINSK

On one frigid weekend in March in Nizhnevartovsk, about a month after my outing at Sergey's dacha, English coworkers Susie, John, and I decide to go to Izluchinsk, a tiny village accessible only by a daily rattletrap bus. Susie is excitable and effervescent, and always wears shawls; John is slight and bookish, with a permanent cynic's grin.

Our secretary Tanya frowns at our plan, saying, "Well. Izluchinsk. Nnnn. They have colorful buildings there. But you should really go...*anywhere* else. Why you want there?"

We don't know what to tell her. "It's different," Susie says. "It's new. To us."

"New to you!" Tanya laughs. "You will see what new to you is!"

We venture to the bus station. Since none of us knows Russian very well, we just repeat the word "Izluchinsk" at uniformed clerks. This method works, and we take our bus there. It costs eighteen rubles, or eighty cents, one way.

Izluchinsk appears less a village than a smaller collection of tower blocks than Nizhnevartovsk. The "colorful buildings" is one building with a multicolored wave pattern.

We see no motion or people in Izluchinsk, just stillness and cold. We look for a café, restaurant, or canteen that might give us anything edible. After thirty minutes looking, we find none. We walk in five-minute bursts, huddling in doorways to resume circulation. The winds outside blow at negative forty degrees Fahrenheit.

We find a foyer-sized market called MEGA MARKET! and assorted butcheries, pharmacies, and liquor stores. The pharmacies specialize in bodywash, aisles and aisles

of it. Walking down one of these aisles, John asks, “How clean do these people need to be?” Clerks stare us out of every place we enter.

We find the statue of Mr. Izluchinsk, a small wooden carving of a terrified, overly bearded man holding court over a tiny playground. A pack of mangy mixed-breeds sniffs through the playground, finding no scraps.

Mr. Izluchinsk’s left hand points to the Bridge of Love. The Bridge of Love is less attractive than most employees-only hydroelectric causeways, certain to break the hearts of any lovers who’d dare traverse it. We stand on The Bridge of Love for fifteen seconds—with the wind coming in off the Siberian wilderness, unblocked by giant Soviet buildings, the Bridge of Love is the Coldest Place on Earth.

We look again for restaurants. We venture inside one store where two teenage girls sprawl in ennui across linoleum tables. We ask, “*Restoran?*” but they shake their heads.

Having cased Izluchinsk, we walk back to the bus station to wait on the departure bus back to Nizhnevartovsk. Right across from the bus station, we discover a small café. Inside, two gruff bear-men sit and stand, one a customer and one a clerk. We sit at a central table and wait, either for service or to be told to leave. The two Russians stare at us without expression. After three silent minutes, we stand to return to the bus station, but Susie says no and approaches the clerk. She asks for three shashliks. He grunts the order to a woman in the kitchen. The transaction complete, the man stares Susie back down into her seat.

Shortly thereafter, the woman serves us shashlik and tea. She smiles a millisecond smile before vanishing. We eat; the sounds of silverware on porcelain and wet digestion

are the only sounds in the restaurant. Then the Russian customer comes over and sits down at our table.

His name is Anatoli and he lives in Izluchinsk. Jolly, eager, and indeterrable, Anatoli talks at us in rapid-fire Russian. He's shaped like a barrel, densely muscular, and has the most happily dead eyes I've seen. We hold up our palms at him and use the few Russian expressions we know, most of them expressing how we don't know Russian.

"Izvenitya," we tell him. We're sorry.

"No probe-lim," Anatoli says. He kisses Susie's hand. *"Sprechen Sie Deutsch?"* he asks.

"Ja, wir sprechen Deutsch," Susie and I answer.

"Bitten Sie, Herr Mann!" Anatoli says. It means "Excuse me, Mister Man!" He continues in Russian.

We catch only a few words. Anatoli mentions something about Berlin and rips his shirtcollar to show us a shoulder tattoo that says Berlin 1982-1984. Apparently he was in the Olympics then. We ask what competition he'd won, using gestures (wrestling? weight-lifting? arm-wrestling?), but he waves off our questions. Instead, he says, we think, that he has a son in Germany and that one time when he was visiting his son someone called him a swine. To us Anatoli says, "I am not a swine" in German. "The man who said, I do." He draws his thumb across his throat.

Anatoli would be more threatening were he not so affable, so clearly happy to be part of our company, even though all we can tell him is, "Hm!," "Uh huh," and "We don't understand." He talks on, unstoppable. Eventually, he invites us back to his flat, but we decline and hasten to leave. As we stand, Anatoli gives us all bear hugs. After he hugs

me, he takes his mobile phone out of his coatpocket and hands it to me. I laugh and give him back his phone. He says “Nyet!” and shoves the phone into my pocket. He tells me, I think, that if anyone gives me any trouble, from here to Moscow, to call him and he’ll come crush them. He shakes his fist. I sneak the phone back down onto the table as we leave.

We run back to the bus station. Anatoli follows us, holding the phone over his head. This time, I just accept this man’s phone. He asks us, “To Nizhnevartovsk?” We tell him yes. “*Davai*,” he says, and motions for us to follow him to his car. We hesitate a moment, then go.

The sky darkens as we leave Izluchinsk in Anatoli’s Lada. We can’t tell where we’re going, the road dark and without streetlights. No houses appear, or at least no houses with lights. The snow is the only light in the world, casting ghastly and pale the birch forests to either side of the road. Then we arrive somewhere.

It looks like an abandoned carnival, this place. It has no sign or name. Four buildings stand lit by halogen lights over a parking lot rutted with wet tiretracks. Anatoli fights the mud, slaloming into a parking space. Outside, my foot squishes shin deep in the mud.

Everything is too dark, but we can see silhouettes everywhere, the lit ends of their cigarettes most visible, frontlighting their faces only slightly. They stand in groups like lighthouses on a bay, with their pinpoint beacons in the darkness all around. Anatoli leads us into one of the buildings, squat and indeterminate. John and I give each other a look. It says, This is foolish but there is no escape now.

Inside, we sit in a brown booth lit overhead by a hanging lantern. More of these booths line the left side of the building like a noir photostill. Along the right wall closed

red doors hide their rooms. A Tatar man comes to our booth and flips open a small notebook. "*Davai*," he says.

John and I order beers, Susie a tea. I think that's risky, and the Tatar man mentally confirms something with himself before writing her order down. Anatoli orders for two minutes, the Tatar man nodding the entire time.

Ten minutes later the Tatar man brings us all a broth of lambmeat and soaked garlic with our drinks. The Tatar man gives Anatoli an entire bottle of vodka. We tuck in to our lamb, the meat moist and elastic. Anatoli toasts to various things and we drink to them, not understanding a thing. At this point he's given up on our possible understanding, and talks as he wishes. I try to look to the back of the restaurant, or whatever this place is, but I only see shadows and suggestions. The Tatar man meets my eyes and narrows his.

As soon as John and I are done eating, Anatoli asks us, "*Hochetye devoshki?*" Do you want girls? He nods at the Tatar man and tells us he has daughters, four daughters. Anatoli points at the doors, "*Adin, dva, tri, chetiri.*" One, two, three, four. He takes a large bite of lamb and winks.

John says "*Nyet, nyet,*" but Anatoli waves over the Tatar father. Anatoli asks him to show us one of the girls. The father goes to the second door and opens it. He beckons the girl inside and she walks out, all of fifteen. She wears torn stockings, black heels, and wrinkled maroon lingerie, one shoulderstrap flopping. Her hair is tousled and oily. She looks more bored than anything.

Anatoli says, "*Pyatsat.*" 500 rubles. Eighteen dollars. We tell him no again, more forcefully. The young woman shrugs and walks back inside. Her father looks neither hurt nor relieved.

Anatoli frowns at us. We don't want to incur his wrath, but we also don't want this prostitute. I feel trapped. I want to tell him, "You go for it then," but I probably wouldn't even if I knew the words. I consider leaving, but I'd have to use Anatoli's phone to do so. Neither John nor Susie have one.

"*Davai!*" Anatoli says. He leads us outside and we plod through the mud. Scattered outside the buildings stand more silhouettes, smoking and talking low. Anatoli takes us to one of the buildings, where a band is playing what sounds like polka. Inside, the people are dancing, twisting around under the building's lights.

We see a couple taxis outside this dancehall. We look at each other and head for one. My spine tingles: I'm scared of the wall of silhouettes, scared that I'll be trapped here, scared that I'll inevitably anger Anatoli, not knowing how to talk to him. I don't know where we are or how we got here, and this is too much. I don't like giving in to these kneejerk paranoias but I can't talk to or trust anyone around. John and Susie seem to feel the same thing, judging by their eyes. Despite Anatoli's camaraderie, everything here seems less an Authentic Cultural Experience than a mistake. So we get in the taxi, all of us in the backseat.

The taxi floor is full of frozen meat. We tell the driver, "*Nizhni, nizhni!*" and he nods and starts the car.

Anatoli opens the passenger door and asks, "You go?" We say we're tired and we're lost, talking too quickly for Anatoli to follow us. He holds up his hand. "*Ladna,*" he says. Okay. "You go."

The taxi driver gutters through the mud, seiching his way out of there.

Later, when we see the lights of the city appear in the distance, John asks, “Does anyone know where we where?”

Susie and I shake our heads. We don’t speak again until we arrive back in Nizhnevartovsk.

CHAPTER THREE: THE LAKE MORE TRAVELED

Lake Titicaca, Peru

Stace and I balance ourselves in the boat. It sways in the reeds as our host Julio tells us how to correctly pronounce “Titicaca.”

“Tee tee, okay? *Hkka hkka*. Okay? No *caca*. No no, my friends. Ha ha. Okay?”

We all try it then, taking our turns coughing out the Dutch consonants of *hkka hkka*. Julio congratulates each of us in turn. My *hkka hkka* is especially hoarse.

There are about fifteen of us in the boat, from Finland, Germany, Wales, Turkey, Spain. Stacey and I are the only Americans present, and we keep mum about that.

We’re taking the Usual Lake Titicaca Tour, having been talked into it by a wheedling Peruvian opportunist named James. He spotted us as soon as we arrived in Puno, gateway to Titicaca. He asked us an impossible string of Spanish questions, and we told him yes because in Peru, as gringos, we learned to say yes. Trying to book a tour ourselves, we reasoned, we would have been hustled. As we’d seen in Lima and Cusco, being white and first-world in a second-world country put us at the mercy of all merchants, who energetically charged us quadruple the going rate. Any attempts at bartering were met with faster and faster Spanish.

We arrive in Puno after a seven-hour bus ride from Cusco. The bus ride had forced television entertainment. The television didn’t work, but was left on anyway, and spewed out a stream of underwater static and robot screeches. The rest of the riders were transfixed, trying to suss out a meaning from so much fuzz. Every couple of feet, the bus stopped to let on bread and corn merchants, while several other opportunists tried to sneak on for the free ride. At the bus stops, the locals outside would sit rocking at

produce stands glaring in, while their kids threw rocks at the bus. One child urinated on the bus as it passed. At one point, the bus stopped and a young male caroler came on and caroled until we paid him to stop.

Along the road, toneless brown foothills undulated over one another, breaking only in fields of ichi grass being eaten by llamas. The roadsides were rivers of trash. We were away from the Andes' influence now, in the altiplano between mountain and jungle.

Puno is Peru's third largest city, a brown, brown, brown town. A phalanx of adobe houses built into a giant dirt mountain, the city sits in monochrome ugliness. An enormous outdoor marketplace takes over the town square, where sellers offer everything from cheap toys to shawls to sweetbread to fruit. I buy four pineapples for *un sole*, or thirty-three cents. Jerry-built rickshaws glide by on every street, their drivers weaving in and out of the market's foot traffic.

Stacey and I are the only white people we see; when we pass by the sellers' stands, the merchants either stop barking their prices or yell even more fervently, advertising their goods for three and four times as much. Even multiplied, the prices are more than reasonable.

I buy some sweetbread, which comes in dinner plate-sized discs. I practice saying "I am not a tourist" in Spanish before I bargain with the sweet bread saleslady, and she smiles and gives me the reduced rate.

We're in Puno to see the islands of Titicaca. We think we're doing something unique, and so do the crowds of others on the docks that day. We force smiles at each other as we take our seats in the boat and let Julio instruct us on Titicaca's lake depth, the record-setting size of its frogs, Jacques Cousteau's adventures here, and Peru-Bolivia

border disputes—we're to stay on the western, Peruvian, side of the lake, if we value our lives.

We first stop to see the Uros people, a formerly Incan ethnic group who live entirely on islands of reeds. As we make our way out to the islands, we learn that "*kami saraki*" means "hello," but we're too bashful to actually use it to greet them. We smile at each other instead.

The Uros natives show us a painted map of the lake. They regard us with detached amusement, like here's another opportunity they're lowering themselves to, but they'll lower themselves if it means hoodwinking tourists.

Julio tells us how important the reed is to the Urosians. Urosians use reeds for everything—for housing, boats, crafts, food, and the islands themselves, which are spongy trampolines made of reeds two meters deep. He tells us that Urosian disagreements are settled by physically cleaving islands in two and letting them drift apart; some Urosian communities consist of only a few members. Julio tells us that their boats have to be replaced every two months, as they sink, and so are built continually. The Urosian people, he admits as an afterthought, are quite poor, and rely on the kindness of visitors to sustain themselves. He makes sure we all meet his eyes as he says this.

Lecture finished, we're free to gawk about the main island. As soon as Julio finishes, the Urosian moms display their newest quilts, dolls, and stockings, coaxing us to support their culture, *gracias, gracias*. They are expectant, pleading, and resigned to this exchange. They can't disguise their happiness at a sale, however, what they may see as a cunning victory over their intruding visitors. The Urosians and the tourists look at each

other as aliens would, pitying each other for what each doesn't know. Most of our group buys items out of pity. Some buy items so they can give the best gift next Christmas.

I don't really know what I'm doing here, and am desperate not to be seen as a tourist. Is buying from these natives necessary support or exploitation? I can't decide and so walk away, towards the Urosian village, where I discover solar power conductors at the back of reed huts, and find Coca Cola bottles used in the frame supports of unfinished boats. Cormorants waddle around eating the *chuños*—dehydrated potatoes—discarded by the islanders. In a life of eating nothing but reed roots, *chuños* are a delicacy.

Otherwise, there isn't much to do without spending soles. Reed huts can be walked around in, for a price. Photographs of island children can be taken, for a price. The island children see even the most furtive camera shutter focusing and race over to make a sale. Before long, Julio whisks us away as the next group arrives with their cameras and wallets ready.

We're off next to Isle Taquilé, the largest and most treaded island of Lake Titicaca, where we can do some more gawking. Already I'm tired of this boatripe and this cattle mentality, Julio's meticulous efforts to let us see what all others have seen before us. Conversation on the boat stays buoyant, no one admitting their place as a tourist. The boatriders compare themselves to their grounded relatives back home. I watch the lake through the window and remember a Lake Titicaca sea-kayaking flyer I'd seen on the side of a building in Puno, and curse not taking it. I think about biking across the Bolivian border, testing my luck, doing anything else.

We're the umpteenth boat at Taquilé's docks. We unload right on the backs of other visitors. Julio instructs us to march single-file into Taquilé's one unnamed town, as

Taquilean children walk beside us, proffering bead bracelets for ridiculous prices they know they can get away with. Some of the other visitors collapse in exhaustion from the thirty-minute hike, gasping into oxygen tanks supplied to them by tour operators. We walk in lockstep, even our pace mandated. I focus on Titicaca all around. The lake itself is gorgeous—a deep cobalt shore stretching out in brighter and brighter azures, the sun glittering like photons on its surface. Far away, distant Andes rise like green sawteeth, completing the picture.

In the village square, visitors splay themselves out in fatigue. Julio gathers us all, letting us in on Taquilean customs. He speaks in a conspiratorial whisper, as if he doesn't give the speech daily.

The Taquileans are an intriguing culture, he tells us, with entirely unique sexual rules. Taquileans only breed with themselves, but their method of selection is as complex as it is titillating. Male Taquileans are required to wear identification caps: A red-and-white cap signals a single man, while a fully red hat means a married man. The cornerstone of Taquilean life is knitting—from age four on, boys are taught how to knit and begin knitting their red-and-white hats, which becomes their life's work. When they feel ready to reproduce, they present their cap to the female of their choice, who takes the cap down to the Titicaca shore and tests its durability by using it as a sand sieve: If the cap holds the sand, the man is ready; if the cap splits its stitching, the man is left shamed and has to begin knitting a new hat. The trouble is, married men wear red-and-white hats, and wives are unfaithful as well. Julio tells us the Taquilean women have a special mint-like plant they use as birth control. Several from our group ask where they can get that plant.

Julio also tells that Taquilean men weave belts with their wives' hair to stabilize the heavy loads they carry on their backs. For the wives, Julio says, the knitting of the husband's belt marks the first time they cut their hair, an event more significant than the loss of virginity.

He offers us to stay and eat the island special, *orestias*—Titicaca fish—but I take Stacey's hand and we flee from the group, having made our sweetbreads into giant peanut butter sandwiches, wanting to do at least one thing unique.

We sit on the roof of the Taquilean parliament building and watch a group of schoolchildren play soccer, those not playing cheering excitedly from the sidelines. Below us, Taquilean grandmothers hump along their body weight in crops; the beady brown eyes of farmers look up at us, their skin leathered by the sun. When they make eye contact with me I look away. I realize I can't know this culture. Even if I lived here for some time, even if I treated the people as more than cultural commodity, even if I learned Quechuan, I would be just as harassed by the flood of daily tourists I'm now part of. We would be forever out of place, and for that, unwelcome. I look out at the resplendent majesty of Lake Titicaca in silence.

Then I look at my watch. Stacey and I have thirty minutes left until the boat leaves. The rest of the group is still eating their *orestias*. We race down from the town and off into the nearby hills, off the suggested trail and up into the foothills. We go as high as we can, up and up the hillside's agricultural tiers. We try to get lost as quickly as we're able—we try to get lost faster. I think of the route Julio took us around Taquilé as a suggested route written in bright colors, just like the one in Oslo, and I imagine us tearing

off it. It's a facile, arrogant thought, but it's what we can do now, and anyway my legs are moving me away and away.

We have to be back at the boat soon, and then sooner. In the time we have, we linger, lingering five minutes past our departure time, then five minutes past that. We stretch our fugitive moments. We look out across the lake, glimpsing the tiniest of its complexity in the truant time we have—islands dot the peripheries, the sun turning the lake into a shimmering mirage. We take a few photos, scour the surrounding islands, and eventually, reluctantly, start to head down.

At the boat dock, Julio waits with his hands akimbo. He tilts his head as we arrive, raises his hands to his sides. The boat needs to leave so that others may dock and board their passengers, he says. We give him a quick, insincere apology. Our fellow travelers frown at us as we hop aboard. We smile at them.

On the ride back to Puno, we watch Titicaca glimmer in the sunset. We listen to the boat drivers—Puno residents—discuss the wild nights they've had and will continue to have. They giggle at the travelers they cargo around, and I tell myself they aren't talking about me. I look back and see the line of boats coming into harbor for the evening, all of them filled with people probably telling themselves the same thing.

I look at Stace and know that whatever tiny victory we've achieved will have to do for today. The Isle of Taquilé fades into blue haze, its secrets glimpsed and gone.

CHAPTER THREE CODA: HOW EASY

Not long after arriving back in Puno, we travel to Lima and I meet an Alaskan who crossed the border into Bolivia on a rented bike, biked to the nearest mountaintop overlooking Lake Titicaca, and enjoyed the view for four minutes until he was spotted by Bolivian soldiers and chased away, barreling down back across the Peruvian border.

There are two ways to take this story: awe and delight at his adventure, reveling in the story of a fellow adventurer and kindred spirit stealing moments off beaten paths, or sour resentment at my having been one-upped so soundly, along with a definite skepticism that this story has been embellished or manufactured from the whole cloth. How easy it is to be bested, I think. How easy it is to do anything.

I tell him, “Wow.” I tell him, “Cool.” I don’t tell him about my time on Titicaca. The conversation turns elsewhere.

CHAPTER FOUR: LOPING RESTLESSLY

Zeehan, Tasmania, Australia

Hitchhiking through northwestern Tasmania, I end up one day in the town of Zeehan, so I stop. Zeehan's one of the smallest dots on the map; in reality, it's a town of sleep-small square houses with yards dusty and grassless. On an antique map of Tasmania I have (titled "Van Diemen's Island"), Zeehan is a large dot, back then a mining town booming strong. Now, the town's few stores stand dark and disused. I walk to what looks like the town center and see a man painting his roof.

"How are you?" he calls. He descends his ladder, wipes his hands on his overalls, and walks over to me. "Where from?" he asks.

"The U.S." I've learned through traveling not to say "America."

"America, well! Name?"

I tell him.

"Well, my name's Ray Keating, but everyone else calls me Shorty, so that's what I call me, I guess."

Shorty stands five feet four inches tall and has hands as craggy as dried magma, a few of his fingers missing their tips. He smells of camphor. He smiles by pushing his lower lip up and narrowing his eyes. The wind dishevels his thinning hair. "How you going?" he says.

"Good," I tell him. I look filthy from spending several days on the road after a long hike.

"You been in the bush round here?" Shorty asks.

“Not around here.”

“All right. Let’s go then.” Shorty sets off to the edge of town.

Where the town ends, the bush begins. Shorty walks right in. The bush, verdant with dripping silver ferns above and a carpet of neon-green moss below, is bright and dense. So full with life, I struggle to traverse it, to keep up with Shorty. The bush’s litany of trees—celery-top pine, King William pine, myrtle, blackwood, scrub timber, and Minocca—hide whatever lives within them. The trees fall over each other and are eaten by moss and grass. I step over and duck under the trees. The ground below is spongy and smells of fresh water.

“It can take you a whole day to cover a kilometer in here,” Shorty says. The bush is a world-sized jungle gym. I don’t go through it so much as trundle and crawl and duck and stumble. Fern fronds slap against my face; hidden stickers poke from nowhere.

Disused mines honeycomb the bush around Zeehan, Shorty tells me, so few people wander around out here for fear of falling into hidden holes. Shorty, a former miner, knows the territory well, and spends many days with a canteen and a Vegemite sandwich fossicking for minerals, abandoned mining tools, and other ephemera. “Careful there,” he says now, pointing out a minehole to my left or right. “Most of these holes aren’t any good at all. You have to dig a lot of bad holes before you find a good one to dig.” I’m reminded suddenly of Sam, and trust Shorty just as much. Here I am now in his land. I’m a visitor and an apprentice learning from a teacher whose scholarship is all experiential.

Shorty stops and sits on a log. We’ve walked ten minutes and I feel totally lost. I visualize the bush as a big green monster, with me pushing my way down its gullet. My shirt sticks to my body, my hair wilts, and sweat runs down my temples from the

humidity and *closeness* of all the life around. “Out here’s where I find my things,” Shorty says. “Now, do you want to see what things?”

I tell him I do.

“Back to the shop then.” He slaps his knees and heads back to his house. We wrestle our way back out to Zeehan. Well, I wrestle—Shorty moves with such nimble ease it’s difficult to picture him as comfortable anywhere else. This makes me trust him all the more.

Shorty runs Shorty’s Private Collection, a trove of “Mining, Minerals, and Bushcraft Oddities” out of an addition built onto his house. Shorty found his oddities in the bush around Zeehan. He hesitates to call his collection a museum—“It’s just some things I’ve picked up over the years.” Admission to Shorty’s costs “a gold coin,” either a one- or two-dollar coin, Australian.

Buckets and lifts and cannons and things sit in Shorty’s yard, salvaged and displayed like the unwitting art it is. Inside, he has even more motley: dropboxes, taps, drillbits, cookie tins, old kitchenware, hats, and American license plates. “I’ve got mancages,” he says, “and kibbles [buckets to bring ore up in], and a headframe, and handheld machines, and drivewheels from the trolleys, and a sluice gun for hydraulic solution.”

Shorty also has two vignettes in his museum: a recreated miner’s hutch descending into a “mineshaft”—a square hole in his hardwood floor—and a recreated jailcell for the original Tasmanian penal residents, complete with homemade skeleton. “The miner’s hutch has a little guy in there, just to show how cramped it could be.” The little guy is made of three pillows stuffed with straw, wearing one of Shorty’s old mining outfits. The hutch stands five feet tall exactly, four inches shorter than Shorty.

Shorty also carves wood. He finds gnarled treelimb in the bush and alters them to reveal their true shapes. Mostly he's revealed a lot of snakes and eels out of the limbs, which he's attached taxidermic eyes to, but he also has a trident, a convincing dragon, bike handles, some cudgels, a Medusa head, and a couple little green men. In two locked cabinets marked "R"-RATED! he has his naughtier carvings—found phalluses and vaginas. One figure shows a nude woman singing, mouth open wide; Shorty's labeled this Tina Tuna. Shorty taps a knuckle against an overendowed male figure next to Tina: "Here's one with an extra, *extra* leg. The wood makes naughty shapes because the land around here is all rainforest," he says. "It struggles to get up to the light, so we get plenty of distorted timber."

In the next room, Shorty has over thirty varieties of mineral—"I worked the mines twenty-two years," he says. Shorty's most proud of his crocoite, a mineral found only in Tasmania. Crocoite "is the main Tasmanian mineral emblem. Russia and the Philippines had *some* crocoite, but it was very pooer. Very pooer. We had the most, and the best quality."

The crocoite glimmers dirty orange and crystalline. "The beauty of this place," he says, "comes out from under the earth."

In another room Shorty shows me a small brown nugget of something. "This is a replica," he says. "Of tiger scat."

"Thylacine scat?" I ask.

"The very same."

"The tigers are still out there—out here?"

“I picked up that scat myself. It was definitely crap from a tiger. Some rangers tried to tell me it was devil crap. I’ve seen some devil crap in my time, and that was no devil crap.”

Shorty sent the scat to scientists in Hobart, the capital of Tasmania, to have it analyzed.

“They sent me back a question mark. I just had a bit of a laugh. They fobbed me off! And now they’ve kept it. We know they have it; I have photographs of it. It couldn’t be anything else. Now all I have’s this replica, but at least it’s a replica, to remember.

“There were no cattle, no dogs in the area at the time; it had to be something wild. The scat was 17.3 centimeters long and over a quarter of a mil thick! It was full of hair and crushed bones. Dogs don’t have crushed bones in their stool. The devil may, because the devils consume everythin. They eat the whole lot. They’ll eat the soles of your shoes while you’re not looking. But it was too small for them.”

“The tigers are out there, though?”

“Sure. Of course. No one sees them because no one ever goes out there to look. Except me, more or less. But I know the tigers are in good nick. They’re just biding their time.”

“What’s the best way to find a thylacine?”

“Just get down low to the ground. There are so many spots that haven’t been fully looked through! There’re still areas no person has seen! It’d be like the culture in the Amazon that just got discovered. But here, with the tigers, it’s always a situation of ‘Oh, it looked like it could have been,’ but not. You see them when you’re driving at night, just for an instant. It’s just no one’s been able to capture one yet.”

We've arrived at the end of Shorty's tour. Shorty gives me a small laminated business card. He says, "You just go out there and look."

The Australian state of Tasmania is a sparsely populated island slightly larger than West Virginia. Almost forty-five percent of the island belongs to its twenty national parks, UNESCO-designated World Heritage Areas, and marine reserves. Sleepy sheepfarms and harbortowns comprise the rest of the island; only 210,000 live in capital Hobart. The cleanest air on the planet exists off the tip of Tasmania's northwest corner at Cape Grim. Native Tasmanian and author Peter Conrad calls Tasmania "the world's final full stop," and I've come down here to explore it.

Tasmania has two icons—the possibly extinct Tasmanian tiger, or thylacine, and the currently endangered Tasmanian devil. Both are nocturnal, and seen rarely in the wild.

The thylacine appears to be a composite creature, like a griffin or a minotaur, a crypto-zoological oddity made of equal parts tiger, wolf, and kangaroo—the female of the species has a small, rear-opening pouch for young. The thylacine is the size of a German shepherd and weighs between thirty and sixty pounds. It whines, growls, barks, and yaps. It eats kangaroos, wallabies, rodents, and birds, and can open its jaw over 120 degrees. Short stripes run across its back and rump. It is or was a marsupial.

The thylacine lurks on the label of Boag's beer, Tasmania's most popular draught, and decorates sports uniforms and license plates. The state's tourism seal shows a tiger emerging from the bush with the caption "Discover your natural state."

The thylacine is a clumsy hunter, though, who runs slowly, who relies on stamina to catch its prey, knowing that in the act of hunting, space equals time, and that waiting can be a predator's best strategy.

The thylacine is extinct, officially, but many still believe in it, and many more want to.

Before visiting Shorty, I had been hiking throughout Tasmania. I hiked the South Coast Track, a trail tracing the southwest coastline of Tasmania, set deep in a roadless wilderness. I was airdropped there and hiked back eighty miles to civilization over the next five days. During my time on the South Coast Track, I saw four other hikers and dozens of animals. The Track was barely there, a line in the bush being retaken by those wilds every day. Snakes slithered off the trail into the bush at my approach. Each night on the Track, the bush sang with the noises of animals everywhere all at once. One night, a quoll raided my bag and stole a large carrot.

After talking to Shorty, I wander back in the bush around Zeehan and find the same thing: Nature grown so profuse so as to be unknowable. There's nothing to be seen here because the seeing is so difficult. Without pathways and surveillance, getting lost is an immediate inevitability. Each square foot of space seems fuller of itself, somehow, as if in its growth and density it's consuming more, making each square mile fuller. Tasmania has 5,300 square miles of such wilderness.

The fullness suggests proof to Shorty's ideas, much more than his scat replica does. Here, I can see, he lives and knows. Like Samson on the Rez, like Sergey in the oilfields, Shorty possesses the knowledge of a man who knows a place by living in it, far more than any skeptical rangers who'd occasionally visit before turning back to Hobart.

So I believe in Shorty; I believe in the thylacine. I have to: The bush is too full and too big to let such an enigma just die off—instead, true to its own character, it has to protect and withhold the thylacine, letting it run its patterns through that green deep, letting it hunt secretly and slowly.

On mainland Australia, the dingo competed with and killed many thylacines. Though the thylacine has a stronger jaw than the dingo, thylacines were lonely hunters often marauded by dingo packs. When Tasmania separated from mainland Australia in the creation of the Bass Strait 10,000 years ago, the dingoes didn't come with.

Europeans arrived in Tasmania in 1803. They quickly turned many of the island's sylvan ecosystems into lineated farmland. Across the face of the island squares of agriculture emerged, as did pockmarks of mine sites. Farmers raised sheep; the thylacines attacked those sheep; farmers attacked the thylacines. In 1830, Van Diemen's Land Company, Tasmania's first governing body, introduced a bounty on thylacines. Farmers shot, trapped, and poisoned tigers; by the twentieth century over 2,000 had been killed.

When the government realized its tigers were dying out, it eliminated bounties, but the thylacines still kept dying, possibly due to a disease outbreak. Scientists were unable to study the animal before it either died off or disappeared.

Farmer Wilf Batty captured the last recorded Tasmanian tiger in 1933 and sold it to the Hobart Zoo. The zoo named the tiger "Benjamin," misidentifying her gender.

Benjamin died three years later. Two years after she died, in 1938, the species received full legal protection. The Tasmanian tiger is now officially extinct.

At the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart, a silent forty-second video loop of Benjamin plays. She lopes restlessly in her pen like Kafka's hunger artist, yawning and pacing, napping fitfully, scratching her striped haunches, picking at meatbones, looking lost in her tiny cage.

I watched the video before I visited Zeehan, before I set off onto the South Coast Track or into Tasmania. In the city, the video seemed ample enough proof, a reasonable documentary of a lost animal. In the museum, it seemed natural that the thylacine was gone because there were no more tigers to find, not because there were no more tigers that happened to be found.

But even then I wondered, and more than wondered, hoped: hoped that something so lost could still exist, could avoid the surveillance and machinations of destructive colonialism and the cocksure certainty of zoologists and wildlife officials. I thought of what they couldn't find even with their best technologies; I hoped that there were things that could be lost and still there, that being lost wasn't a damnation but a chosen condition, that it didn't mean extinction but life hidden. Who is more naïve, I thought, the one who is certain of his knowledge or the one who allows the unlikely?

As I watched, the video stopped, and then it began again.

Hunters, hikers, and ranchers in Tasmania regularly claim to see thylacines. YouTube abounds with amateur video of supposed thylacines caught in action. In 2005, German tourist Klaus Emmerichs posted a video on YouTube showing what he claimed to be a

thylacine moving through the bush. The video is a grainy twelve seconds, but it does show what appear to be the tiger's unique stripes in a fern glade. Veteran Tasmanian biologist Nick Mooney declared the video a hoax, saying, "The digital forensics examiner told me the observers were evasive and 'forgot' where it happened. I do not rank it highly." Many explorers' evidence meets similar dismissal.

In 1983, Ted Turner offered one million dollars to anyone who could capture a thylacine, though he later revoked the offer after a landslide of questionable evidence. In 2005, Australian magazine *The Bulletin* offered 1.25 million dollars to anyone who could capture a live, uninjured thylacine. "Like many others living in a world where mystery is an increasingly rare thing, we wanted to believe," said Garry Linnell, *The Bulletin's* editor in chief. "Perhaps deep in the pristine Tasmanian wilderness, something magical was waiting."

The Bulletin received hundreds of thylacine proofs, including photos of dogs painted with stripes and pictures of unidentifiable footprints. One German man claimed he had been having dreams of tigers and would be able to find a tiger based on his visions, were he given enough money to get to Tasmania. "We fully agreed with him," said Linnell. "He was definitely dreaming."

In addition to the grainy videos and blurred photographs *The Bulletin* received, many people wrote in asking whether finding the thylacine was in the best interest of the thylacine—would locating such a mystical creature help or hurt its chances of survival?

What's at stake for the thylacine is the necessity of mystery in a world of surveillance. No matter where we are, we can use Google Earth to be anywhere we want, including outer space. That the thylacine be seen is mandatory—the creature needs to

exist to certify a level of mystery a technophilic and borderless world has rendered obsolete; that the thylacine needs to be captured, however, may not be the case. The thylacine, remaining a mystery, retains its searchers' sense of wonder, letting them keep the hope that there's still something in this world that's unknown. Like Sherpas certain they've seen yetis, or far northern backwoodsmen claiming to have seen Bigfoot, mystery is often preserved and experienced by those who have the wherewithal to go and look for it. The difference is that the thylacine, at one time, definitely existed.

John Flinn, a journalist at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, writes, "Considering that biologists in Australia occasionally stumble upon insects, ferns, and even large trees thought to have vanished from the earth over 100 million years ago, it hardly beggars the imagination to suppose that a dog-sized marsupial might have escaped detection for seven decades."

The Australian Museum of New South Wales announced plans in 2002 to clone the thylacine using DNA from the preserved tissue of a baby tiger captured in 1866. After several years of research, scientists declared the DNA in the tissue too damaged to use. "I call that clowning, not cloning," biologist Nick Mooney said. "What are they going to do? Spend eighty million dollars cloning a thylacine and then turn it loose in the wild?" Plans to clone thylacines have since been tabled indefinitely.

I don't really want to talk to biologist Nick Mooney, but I know I have to. Mooney, in addition to being a biologist, is a writer, ranger, conservationist, inventor, wildlife expert, and outdoor educator. He's worked for Tasmania's Wildlife Management Branch for twenty-nine years. Mooney ventures out into the bush every day, oftentimes to set traps

for tigers: he pours wet sand onto dirt to capture footprints, sets photographic trip-lines, questions farmers and hunters, and examines many scats.

Mooney knows more about thylacines than Shorty or I or any other believer or skeptic, probably. He's the expert most often interviewed about the tiger, and I know I have to interview him as well. I have to test my skepticism against his bush-bred knowledge.

I call Mooney on the phone. "Is the Tasmanian government organizing any programs to catch or find tigers?" I ask.

"The government hasn't run a budget for many years on this," Mooney says. He has a lackadaisical voice, both calming and cool. He speaks with the easy cadence of someone who's fielded these questions scores before, who's ready for what's next. "Nowadays all we do is help review what people suggest is evidence they've found and keep contact with those of the many private searchers out there who will deal with us—many will not because they see a conspiracy by us to hide the existence of the species to protect Forestry or whatever." Many amateur hunters accuse Mooney of lying and cover-up.

"What do you actually do out in the bush?"

"Most of the year," he says, "I do a few days in response to particularly interesting reported incidents, but my work is mostly about making suggestions to enthusiasts about using what we actually know of the species' biology to find the right place to search. Now that modern digital trail cameras are easy to get, searches have taken on a new, more sensible life. I know of four people with five to ten cameras each and I bet there are as many again. Just occasionally I'll even come across one."

“Are these the only things you’re using to search? Are any biologists or rangers doing on-site searching for tigers?”

“One basic problem with that is that the reliability of conventional searching collapses once an animal reaches a certain rarity and luck takes over, probability only then affected by persistence. That’s the glass ceiling few people understand—we’ve all seen far too many slick docos and watched too much *CSI*. And there are as many ‘good’ reports from mainland Australia as Tasmania.”

“So why do you continue to pursue it? Why’s it worth caring about if it’s just some myth?”

“I suppose I’m a bit more interested in the biological possibilities—whether the tigers could be there—considering where people, meaning observers, are. I trawl precedents rather than pound around the bush these days. I simply don’t have the time, and the *incredible* amount of time dozens have put into this has produced a big, fat zero.”
Mooney’s department stopped officially looking for tigers twenty-three years ago.

“In which direction do you lean, unofficially, towards the tiger’s existence or nonexistence?”

“Wildlife will pretty much run themselves; I see no reason to make a call beyond saying it is remotely possible but improbable and acknowledge that every year there’s a report or two such that the person or persons are right or lying, and it’s very hard to eliminate the latter if someone has a form of illusion because they may well believe they saw one.

“If you did a survey and asked people to give a percent of probability of existence you’d get a few zero percents and a few 100 percents, but mostly you’d get lots of 0.1

percents and 99.9 percents. You'd almost get a double-edged normal curve, if such a thing exists."

"So why are there so many reports coming in from all kinds of people all the time?"

"Some people just need to believe in the thylacine. It's not so different from religion. People bankrupt themselves and ruin relationships over it. I don't know of any suicides, but I know a number of people who've flipped. It's an obsession for some."

"If Tasmania is so wild and unexplored, why couldn't the tigers just be hiding out there somewhere? Where people aren't?"

"Most of the places thylacines liked—like *dh!*—such as dry forest and coasts with good fertility—those were full of people. The less people the less fertile the land. We, humans, like good land too. But if they've managed to survive all these years without being found through some trick of nature, I think the best thing we could do is just leave them alone."

I agree with him on that point. I thank him for the information and hang up.

After I call Nick, I visit Shorty again. I tell him about my call. "Yes, that man," Shorty says. "That man will say some things."

We take another walk to the bush. "How far back in here have you been?" I ask him.

"Well, as far as I can get back in the time I have. Normally I like to be home for dinner, but sometimes I'll venture out for a couple days. That's not to say I get very far."

"Where did you find the tiger scat?"

"Oh, I couldn't tell you that now. The land in here moves around, so it seems."

"Have you ever tried to bait a tiger?"

“Well, of course. But fat chance with that. The devils and dogs get to it first, always.”

“Does the Forestry service ever come by here and look around?”

“Forestry doesn’t go anywhere hardly. They have their set areas they snoop around in once or twice a year, and they leave the rest alone.”

“And that’s a lot to leave alone.”

“That is a lot.”

“That’s good for the tigers.”

“It could be,” Shorty says. “Even if the buggers don’t show their faces, at least they’re getting on peacefully, wherever they think they are. Now—there!”

Shorty points to a marking on the ground, which looks to me like nothing at all.

“You see the way these leaves are scattered here?” he asks. “That could be a sign. You always have to be looking.”

The leaves seem to be scattered in no particular way. “I see that,” I lie. I wonder if what Shorty is seeing comes from an intimate knowledge of the bush or is naked, ugly hope. He says, “You see? There it is, all right in front of us.” He stands and we continue moving through the bush slowly.

It’s difficult to tell if Tasmania can retain its tiger, and whether it can prevent its mortality. Another breakaway island rich with biodiversity, Madagascar, has the worst extinction record in recorded history, due largely to deforestation and unregulated hunting. In the wild, for the hunter, a lack of space equals a lack of time: the ruthlessness of human invasion into the natural world proceeds at a far faster pace than evolution, and many threatened species don’t have the time to genetically encode new survival instincts

before they're wiped out. The speed of evolution is measured in generations, the pace of foreign encroachment into the wild in years, months, weeks, and days.

Many other "extinct" animals have returned from the dead, though, including the giant panda and the Siberian leopard. The coelacanth, a deep-sea fish, was believed to have been extinct for seventy-five million years before it was discovered near the Comoros Islands off Africa's east coast in 1938. The golden lemur was rediscovered on Madagascar in 1980 after over ten million years of being away. The Angolan giant sable antelope, thought to have been killed in the crossfire of that country's thirty-year civil war, returned in 2004. Many Australian marsupials and birds have been declared extinct only to be found again: The golden scrub bird, last seen in 1800, was rediscovered in 1961. Other returnees include the bridled nail-tailed wallaby, the sandhill dunnart, and the mountain pygmy possum. In all cases, rediscovery was a matter of patience, an obsolete animal returned.

And long before the thylacine went extinct in Tasmania, there was another extinction in the genocide of Aborigines there, who either died or fled when the colonists landed. Tasmania now has not one full-blooded Aborigine, only their tools and ruins, their potsherds and relics buried deep in the bush. They survive elsewhere, on mainland Australia and beyond, earning their rights long after white men attempted to deny them.

It may be time for the thylacine, lurking in the bush, to wait. The tiger's stripes vanish before they're seen as it moves with delicate menace through Tasmania's inscrutable bush. It outlasts, and, now here, now gone, reveals itself to those who are willing to seek and to believe.

CHAPTER FOUR CODA: ON THE HUNT

After I leave Zeehan, I look for the thylacine in the bush of northwestern Tasmania, an almost untouched land best traversed by white water raft. I look for the thylacine in the saltbush and spinifex, in the dust and ranges, in the dry creeks and flooded channels, in the mallee scrub and brigalow and mitchella grass downs. I look near Mount Jerusalem, near Frenchmans Cap, in the wilds around the Strathgordon Dam. Everywhere is empty save for lonely hikers and lumber trucks. I look around Port Arthur, one of the largest penal colonies in Tasmania, where they used to string out mad dogs to stop escapees, where 1700 convicts died. I look on Eagle Hawk Neck and Fortescue Bay. I look in the mountains on the Overland Track, and deep in the ferns and eucalyptuses and gum trees with their bark sloughing and spiraling off—the banksia trees with their lichen hanging like dreadlocks.

I find snakes, the tiger snake, the lowlands copperhead, and the white-lipped snake, all of which are poisonous. I find quolls and possum and an echidna, which rolls into a spiny ball as he sees me coming. I see pademelons and potoroos that hop and hiss if I approach them. I don't see any thylacines. This proves nothing, either way.

My hiking pace slows as I look, as I detour off established paths to find sign: footprints, scat, a patch of hair pulled from a flank during a retreat. Again, there's nothing. The bush is so thick everywhere, so abundant with life. The bush gives life as bounty, food available everywhere, but it also hurts, thorns pulling, holes falling into themselves underfoot, poison in the leaves and in the fangs of unseen snakes. I imagine this wilderness as black infinite space and myself a comet trying to find some forgotten

star. How could anyone find anything? How could anyone establish anything? The rangers from the Tasmanian Forestry Service could put infrared cameras and tripboxes in every square foot here and catch nothing. The only reliable encounter would be one of chance.

I rent a Volvo and drive at night, a dangerous prospect as all the Tasmanian fauna comes racing out towards my headlights. I dodge kangaroos, bandicoots, and even a devil, but I see no thylacine. In the morning, the roads are littered with roadkill. I slow by the carcasses, but find no tigers. Again, this proves nothing.

When I return home from Tasmania, I scroll messageboards online devoted to thylacine sightings, most of the respondents giving long, detailed descriptions of where they were and what their thylacine looked like, straining words to make the animal real through poeticism: mandy44 writes, “The tiger carried its stripes like welcome battle-scars, its flanks a flag of come and get me. The tiger’s eyes prismatic as they taunted us, the tiger as ethereal as it was ephemeral. Color the very umbra of the light of a still-born fire, of sunspots distant enough to be only imagined.”

Regardless of whether they’re imaginations or illusions, these impressions stand in for a hope to see what can still exist. I see the messages and their believers not as evidence but as hope, and join them in the thought of loving the thylacine and leaving it alone. And maybe that’s as strategic or surefire as anything: The best way to find something is to lose it. The messageboard posts scroll down and down, pages and pages of them.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE NEW POLYGAMISTS

Centennial Park, Utah, U.S.A.

Sometimes those who lose themselves lose themselves to hide from the world at large. Intrigued by the fundamentalist Mormon frontier towns of Colorado City and Hildale as exposed in Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven*, I drove to see for myself who these people were. They shared my love of place, living on the Arizona-Utah border in timeless desert freedom. The polygamists Krakauer exposed were to me the idea of outmoded outlaws, and I was more interested in them for this than any religious creed they adhered to. Mostly, though, I recognized that they liked to spend their time in the places I kept returning to: They were miles down the road from Samson, just over the border of the Kaiparowits Plateau.

But when I went to Colorado City, no one would talk to me. Children ran inside their shuttered mansions when I drove by, and black SUVs followed me wherever I went. I found nothing, and so I drove away.

I didn't drive three miles up the road when I discovered the town of Centennial Park, a blossoming, affluent community of polygamists entirely modern—polygamists who drank, smoked, swore, used cell phones, wore Hawaiian T-shirts, watched TV, and were unknown to the world at large.

The first thing I learn about Centennial Park is that its residents are quick to distance themselves from Warren Jeffs, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS) leader (or prophet) of Colorado City/Hildale. In Jeffs' wake, the two

communities under his rule have been left with little to do but wait for his judgment at the hands of the U.S. Government, an entity they've been avoiding for years, claiming no need for the law of man when they have God's. Their frontier theocracy, protected for so long, is now open to the investigation and scrutiny of secular law.

Centennial Park was founded in 1986 as an offshoot of Colorado City/Hildale in the wake of a political disagreement town founders had with Rulon Jeffs, Warren Jeffs' late father. The Centennial Park founders considered any Jeffs' rule kakistocratic, defiantly against Mormon and human values. An elder Centennial Park woman, having been exiled from Colorado City, tells me Jeffs is "haywire. He's brainwashed that whole town."

"I call his behavior antichrist," says another woman. "The Savior would no more turn someone away than fly to the moon. But he turns people away left and right. He organizes religion like you organize crime. He's ruining families; they're playing musical houses over there." Another woman curses Jeffs for being a "sissy" with "woman tits."

With Jeffs' arrest, many Centennial Park residents are at a crossroads: While they wish for Jeffs' quick prosecution, they also have family ties to his followers within Colorado City and Hildale—most Centennial Park residents have brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins "across the road." But Jeffs' iron hand has kept Colorado City and Hildale reclusive; to Centennial Park residents, sympathy, brotherhood, or even contact with their estranged families is difficult, if not impossible.

"My brother and my two sisters, they don't talk," says Susie Timpson, a member of the Centennial Park Action Committee. "They don't talk to me, or anyone. It's tough. We have family and friends over there, but they don't talk to us. They can't! They don't have permission. I have to get permission to talk to my mother.

“The only time they do talk to us is to yell ‘apostate!’” she says. “The kids are very mean-spirited; they throw rocks and things. They’ve been told that we don’t have anything they should even look at. I’m not one to try to tell them different, because no one will listen. Ignorance is bliss in their estimation.”

To Centennial Park residents, this behavior is seen not only as problem-causing but ungodly. Resident Matthew Timpson, related to Susie Timpson through Colorado City patriarchy, adds, “Like the Savior said, a light on the hill cannot be hid. If you’re trying to hide, you’re obviously not a light.”

To a casual observer, the two groups might be too similar to be different, which is why they argue so hard for their uniqueness. They share the same handful of surnames, and like their estranged brethren in Colorado City/Hildale, residents of Centennial Park call themselves FLDS (as do many, many scattered polygamist sects in the desert backcountry). And of course Centennial Park residents use the same arguments for polygamy, or “celestial marriage,” citing the Book of Mormon’s Doctrine & Covenants, Section 132, in which God, speaking to Joseph Smith, demands polygamy as a requisite for entering Heaven: “for no one can reject this covenant and be permitted to enter into my glory.” But there are also many differences between the two groups.

Poking up out of the arid savannah of the Arizona Strip, Centennial Park is a young community actively developing. Whereas Colorado City and Hildale are fast becoming ghost towns, being vacated or fled, Centennial Park is bustling with activity, busy with the clamor of progress: Most of the houses in Centennial Park are in states of mid-construction. Around them stand none of the towering brick fences or litany of warnings

one sees in Colorado City and Hildale: KEEP OUT, NO TRESPASSING, or PRIVATE PROPERTY, nor are their houses shuttered and withholding. The Centennial Park houses are open and large, built by and for large families. (As with most exurban settlements, the houses seem to be in a silent competition with each other for superiority.)

Centennial Park residents are also eager to disassociate themselves from any negative media images of polygamists. They use and enjoy many media banned by Jeffs: Cell phones, wireless Internet connections, newspapers, and televisions are fixtures of most homes. Several residents love the HBO series *Big Love*, which they watch to mock.

Though a dress code remains in place, Centennial Park residents often flout it, dressing in clothes more appropriate for desert heat than religious doctrine. Residents wear khaki shorts, Hawaiian shirts, tanktops, and skirts. Their daily lives are not the stuff of seedy tabloid, but ho-hum normalcy—Anywhere, U.S.A. Here, one finds tradition reconciled with modernity, not frozen in nineteenth-century fundamentalism.

Nor are the residents cold or frightened by my presence. As I walk around town, residents either wave, say hi, or simply keep walking, comfortably ignoring me. It's this that sets them apart and makes me want to know more about them. In many ways, Centennial Park residents seem to be the young and upwardly mobile FLDS.

It's when I'm walking around town, being waved at or ignored, trying to figure out what's going on in Centennial Park, that I meet Matthew Timpson at his house. Matthew is not yet a polygamist *per se*, but he is a father of four and believer in the Centennial Park FLDS. At first skeptical, but then warmly convivial, Timpson shares with me a

number of stories, inviting me into his kitchen, providing me with home-grown peaches and a tomato sandwich.

Fortunately for me, I'm not Mormon. This helps Matthew and other Centennial Park residents open up to me. FLDS members here consider the mainstream Mormon church, so close to the FLDS but so distant, to be their main enemy. Being an outsider, I'm a non-threat and potential convert.

Matthew offers an extended sermon on his various religious tenets. He is well-versed in what he deems to be the fall of the mainstream Mormon church, and discusses his difficulties with its inconsistencies. Matthew has every volume of the subversive (at least during the 1930s and among Mormons, subversive) magazine *The Truth*, which argues that the Mormon Church has become too pandering, too diplomatic, and too much influenced by secular outsiders to be considered true to its faith. Matthew perceives the official Latter Day Saints' excommunication of FLDS members as saying, "If you're not part of me, I've taken your manhood."

He states, "The LDS church is embarrassed of us because we're that part of their heritage that won't go away. But we're honored to be labeled 'polygs' or whatever, especially in the light the people out there and what they don't have.

"We didn't come out here on this Earth to be created to just go up to Heaven and play harps. We believe that we are absolutely, literally, the children of God. In the big picture of why we live this way, we come here on this Earth to experience parenthood and creation temporally. Based on how we do here, we have the opportunity to create worlds in the hereafter. The reason we believe in and live plural marriage is because we believe it's the marriage system of Heaven, and it has shown me nothing but beauty."

As Matthew talks, his two daughters run and shriek in the backyard, their dresses billowing.

“It’s not about exploiting women,” he says. “I mean, there’re a lot cheaper ways to have sex. Even if you paid a whore 20,000 dollars, that’s still cheaper than bringing a child into this world and raising him. [Polygamy is] an opportunity for people who want to love each other to come together and bless each other’s lives. We believe that marriage is the union between two individuals and God, so we take it up with Him.”

A crucial difference between the two FLDS groups lies in the selection of women to be plural wives. For young men and women in Colorado City and Hildale, plural marriage is a foregone conclusion, one they either obey or attempt to escape, and the accounts of those women who’ve escaped have themselves become renown. In Centennial Park, polygamy is not enforced. Marriages are a mutual decision, with women free to choose their husband. “Women in our community have a lot of freedom,” says Mallory Timpson, Matthew’s wife. “Believe me, I left monogamy for freedom—*for* freedom! Women absolutely have choice. If [this community] is not their cup of tea, they’re free to leave at any time.”

“It’s more a matter of prayer than, you know, that person turns me on,” adds Matthew. “We ask: Is this person a person who I should have family with and enter into an eternal relationship with? That’s basically the bottom line. The stigma we have is that our women are oppressed and restricted. No, I think it’s essential that a woman chooses because she gives herself to the relationship. If a marriage doesn’t absolutely bless a woman’s life, then she shouldn’t be in it.” As Matthew talks, Mallory stands taller and

straighter, nodding, then goes to gather her daughters, one of which has fallen and is about to cry.

I ask Matthew about all the construction I saw in town, all the new houses being built. He tells me Centennial Park residents are industrious and proud of it, quoting the Centennial Park town charter in recalling the “tremendous energy and sheer will” of the town founders in initially “making the desert blossom.” I think, Who can quote their town charter?

“I feel sanctity in working hard,” Matthew says. “The sun comes up and God says, ‘Get to work!’ I was the twenty-third of sixty-six children, and everybody in my family worked. We didn’t use welfare, and we had rich, full lives. We didn’t have all the toys and everything—I had to buy my own teddy bear when I was a senior in high school because I’d never had one and because I’d wanted that experience. And we didn’t have all the fatherly personal attention, but we had family and we had friends; we always had a mother. The goal in life is not a level of ease.”

He openly admits he’s “living in la la land,” uneducated on modern affairs and fairly apathetic to them in any case. “Whatever,” he says. “The Lord’ll take care of it.” He laughs as he thinks of an analogy. “It’s like somebody asked Einstein who the twenty-seventh president was, and he said, ‘I don’t waste my time with common knowledge.’ I’ll let somebody else worry about it.” The fact that Albert Einstein was never attributed to this quote seems secondary to its core truth.

Matthew is well-versed in the history of polygamy too. In an extended anecdote filled with dramatic pauses and a visit from the Savior, who takes a secondary role to Joseph Smith, he concludes that polygamy is “an eternal law” stronger than time and certainly

superior to the antics of the U.S. government. Polygamists are “governed by God’s law,” he says.

Other forms of self-justification come off as little more than groping. “This way of life is absolutely natural. Man has enough sperm to father the human race and women are capable of having how many kids?” he asks. He quotes vague statistics (first attributed to *Time*, and then to a “radio show I heard somewhere”) that females outnumber males four to one, a statistic disproven by the most rudimentary gender survey. He finally proposes that “two thirds of the world’s culture is polygamist. Monogamy was introduced by the Romans, and the civilized Western world adopted it. But monogamy is absolutely the minority.” This seems his most desperate point, especially considering his stance of apathy towards outsider opinion.

But Matthew doesn’t get into the seriously cockeyed conspiracies of the Colorado City/Hildale FLDS, that mainstream Mormons own Las Vegas or run the CIA. “We’re such a small issue,” he says. “There’re other fathers living like alley cats—you could say they’re polygamists—they have fifteen kids with five different women, and [the kids] don’t know who their dad is.

“The unjust have no voice to govern the just. Who are they? The LDS people say, ‘Well, look at the law.’ I say, ‘Whose law?’ The men who make laws against plural marriage need to look at their lives. How many of them are faithful to their wives? These are the people that are legislating against us. Who am I gonna face when I die? The Savior, or Bill Clinton? I hope not Bill Clinton, because I’ll be in a damn hot place!” He laughs.

Through his speeches, I notice Matthew's talking is either too stilted or too nervous. He speaks arguments too thoroughly and convincingly for them to be anything but other people's, and when he ad libs he finds himself tongue-tied and groping for justification. Through it all, he seems to be defending himself before an absent jury, and the sense I get the most from him is the desire to be left alone—that impulse that spurred his Mormon ancestors to come to the Great Salt Lake Desert over 100 years ago. It is in this, in his urge to find peace in a hidden spot in an empty place, that I can relate most to, and above his religion and history, this is what I hear him say most clearly.

Walking back into town, the sun low in the sky, I meet Loren Zitting, another Centennial Park father. When I meet him, he's busy installing a sewage pipe in his backyard. His four boys hold the pipe as he measures the depth of the ditch. Loren's three daughters are inside with his wife preparing dinner. Loren has a cowboy hat and a paunch, and speedwalks like a New York contractor. Before I ask him anything, he says, "You here to see the great big spectacle of us? Well, here it is." He waves his arm at the empty desert surrounding. "Pretty exciting, isn't it?"

As he installs the pipe, he volunteers justification. "We have our beliefs," he says, "and we want to be able to live them. We don't want to hide them. If we as consenting adults want to live a certain way, then we want the freedom to do that." Loren, like Matthew Timpson, believes in the doctrine of plural marriage but chooses not to live it. "I don't know how anybody could handle more than one mother-in-law!" he says.

"The public views us from everywhere that we're okay, industrious hard workers, to child molesters, the dregs of society," Loren says. "The perspective is that whole

spectrum. They find the worst situations and blow them out of proportion. There's probably in excess of 50,000 polygamists in the Utah area. So just the numbers alone will tell you that there're some bad people, and some sick things happen. Part of our ambition is to get involved with the law enforcement and everything and say, 'Hey, no no no no. It's not like that. Not here.'"

Loren says he's tired of seeing his community made out to look like "a bunch of dumbies," misrepresented by negative stereotypes. "We don't force people to stay," he says. "People who become disenchanted, they just leave. If they're interested in being here, then it's in our interest to help them come to God. We try to bring our kids up well enough that they'll make better decisions than we see most of our society making at their age. Our society in general is pretty scary."

Loren relates his community's reputation to polygamists' portrayal on *Big Love*: "It's Hollywood's or whatever's perspective on polygamy. It's funny to watch! We wouldn't want to teach our kids the doctrines of plural marriage through that media, of course, but we don't mind to watch it, to see what the world's perspective of us is."

"I like the women they have on there," he adds. "They're cute."

His sons don't seem to be disenchanted, or in any hurry to leave. Laying in sewage pipes where their father tells them to, they talk about how much they enjoy Centennial Park and the surrounding desert. "We go wakeboarding down at Lake Powell," says Mike Zitting, who's twelve, the oldest of Loren's children. "We take trips up to the mountains [of northern Utah] to go biking. Um, we go Jeeping, four-by-fouring, dune bugging—we ramp dune buggies off everything in the [nearby] hills. Have you ever ramped dune buggies before? It's so forking awesome." If these activities constitute their childhood, I

can't help but feel a little envious. I think of my own childhood compared to ramping dune buggies and find it wanting. I look at Loren and see him proud of his son, his expression saying he couldn't express it better himself, his love of being out here so far.

I go to the Centennial Park Town Council, which is in an elderly man's house, unmarked. There I meet two town councilmen, who are both eager to conduct an interview, so long as they remain anonymous.

He tells me Centennial Park is not only doing fine, but is on the verge of a major population influx. He believes the residents of Colorado City and Hildale, now without a leader, will soon join them. "Jeffs has systemically eliminated anyone who had ambitions to power," he says. "He's just like Hitler or any dictator, or even go back to the kings in Persia. He doesn't kill his enemies—he doesn't have the power a despot would have, because this is America—but he eliminates them by kicking them out of the community."

Quoting Scripture, he says, "The sins of the fathers will be visited upon the children of the third and fourth generations, that's what it says in Isaiah. And I never understood that until all this happened. The prejudice and hate that was created by the fathers [of Colorado City/Hildale] against our community is going to last until the third or fourth generation. Then, if they have any sentiment about the Mormon religion, and study it and find out what it's really about, they will come here, because they will understand that the authority established is here. So far that hasn't happened because of the corruption of [Jeffs'] administration, which is manifestly against any Christian religion, as well as Mormonism. They still hold their prejudice against this community because they've been branded to think as much; we're still apostates and weirdoes to them."

Now that Warren Jeffs has been arrested, an exodus seems likelier than ever. “It’ll happen on a personal basis,” says the councilman. “If they look in their hearts and find out the truth, they’ll come.”

These words are surprising, so caught up in the language of inherent superiority and enemies’ impending acquiescence—it sounds like the very language Jeffs might have used on his flock. I think of the councilman wanting anonymity but bringing cause for scrutiny on himself with his extremist ideas. I wonder if the councilman is just mad with local power, or whether this community is on the same track as Jeffs’. I respect more the words of Matthew and Loren, who didn’t hide invective behind their identities, but spoke forthrightly as who they were. I tell the councilmen thank you and leave their chamber.

Centennial Park residents are ostensibly living in a privatized sect, true—a more iconoclastic resident may ask, “What’s beyond Pleasantville?”—but they also don’t seem to be living above the law, just away from it. Residents resent being told they live lawlessly: With zero discernable crime in a community full of children reared on stern obedience, they hold that they couldn’t be more law-abiding. They seem to be not just polygamists, but also polygamists.

Residents deny that they’ve been shunned into living in Centennial Park: “I wasn’t excommunicated here, I just found a better way to live,” says one woman.

“That’s my brother and that’s my brother and that’s my brother,” says another man. “Everybody here is family and relatives. Landscape’s beautiful, weather’s beautiful; it’s a great place to live.”

Along the streets in Centennial Park groups of kids ride bikes and walk dogs, mothers pull kids in Radio Flyers, and fathers hammer away at new fences. This is simply backyard America, complete with neighborly grins and smoking grills. Medical concerns are taken care of by community doctors, and in-town midwives deliver babies. The community assists each other, eagerly offering help and goodwill to any in need. Doors are left unlocked, underscoring a level of amity seen few other places. Centennial Park actively challenges the 1892 anti-polygamy legislation with the solid evidence of a community thriving, where sought-after values aren't merely hoped for, but attained through industriousness and hard work.

For the residents, being just another community is fine with them. They strive above all else to be left alone and at peace. Surrounded by controversy, they only want anonymity, another community among many, alike and unharmed. They want, in a way I might put it, to be lost.

CHAPTER FIVE CODA: OTHER OPINIONS

As I leave town, I meet a man building a brick fence. He's not from the community, but is here working because "work ain't all that easy to come by, as you might reckon." He's not mainstream or fundamentalist Mormon, but "just a man, now." He used to be part of both churches.

"This town," he says. "You'll see. They talk real nice in there, but they're going to turn out just like Jeffs' place. They even got their own Jeffs; I don't imagine they let you talk to him. But he's in there, in the biggest house with the biggest fence, just getting ready to turn into a tyrant like the last one. You watch in four or five years. The FBI will clear this place out and the next one will move another two miles down the road."

The man works with a resident of Hildale, a teenaged boy who frowns as the man talks. "This place is different," the boy says. "The Prophet isn't like these folks. They will fail, but they won't be targeted like Mr. Jeffs. They'll bring it on themselves." He slaps a brick into place.

"Well, you see the party line they got them talking," the first man says to me. "You see how this kind of attitude basically breeds itself. Which is why I got out of there when I could. These places are just round and round, a closed damn loop."

"This one is," the teenager says.

For my part, I leave the Centennial Park residents be, eager to see what their future holds. They're maintaining such a convincing facsimile of innocence it might as well be taken for truth, in that the falsehood accomplishes the same end of harmlessness the sincerity would too. What's left to see now is whether Centennial Park becomes the next

media-spotlit government crackdown or remains an unknown, unincorporated town unpublished on any official map.

CHAPTER SIX: WAITING AND KNOWING WHAT'S HIDDEN

White Pine, Michigan, U.S.A.

I.

I'm in a warehouse near the former mining town of White Pine, in the Upper Peninsula (U.P.) of Michigan. I'm looking around. I may be trespassing on private property, but I'm more interested in looking around than worrying about being caught. I'm prepared to act very confused should anyone see me here. I will fully use my status as Out-of-Towner and say, "Oh, I thought. Sorry. I mean. I didn't realize. Sorry. I'll leave. Sorry." It's an act I'm familiar with playing, having been curious before.

The warehouse used to belong to the White Pine Mining Company. It now belongs to SubTerra LLC, a biopharmaceutical company that grows medicinal plants in the mine's underground chambers. This I learned while talking to morose locals in a bar in nearby Ontonagon. I was in Ontonagon having just returned from the End of the World, or the area past Copper Harbor on the fingerlike Keweenaw Peninsula that reaches into the stormy gales of Lake Superior. The End of the World was a disappointment: a metal sign in the grass on the shore of a lake. Initials, hearts, and penises had been drawn on it.

One local at the Ontonagon bar, who had white stubble, rheumy eyes, and the complexion of barnacles, sat slouched over a pint of beer. A chaotic, bristly moustache draped over his lip. I approached him. He thrust his chin up when he talked to me.

I badmouthed the End of the World. "What else is there to find here?" I asked him.

"Not much," he said, massaging his lips. "Some marijuana mine place. Not much, though."

“Marijuana mine place?”

“Yeah, yeah. In White Pine. Little town, near. Near here. It’s a little town not too far from here, ’s what I mean.”

“Who grows the marijuana?”

“They do, of course.”

“They?”

“You know. They the scientists. They the Canadians.”

“Are they’re just growing marijuana? Like to export back to Canada?”

“I don’t know that! They’re growing the dope, yes. Go find out about it yourself if you’re so keen, y’ h’idyit.”

“Well, it’s just interesting is all.”

“Yeah, sure it is. Bankruptcy. Debt. Economic failure. Drugs. Could have had the best copper mine in the world there at White Pine. And now they’re using it to grow dope for the Caynucks. You go check it out, though. You go do just that.”

“Where is it?”

“Under White Pine. About out there as far in the middle of nowhere’s you can get. Lucky to find a soul wandering around that town nowadays.”

So I drove to White Pine.

The warehouse I’m in now is abandoned but for its debris. Behemoths of mining machines rest rusting in steel menace, seeming like they could come to life at any moment. Sunlight from a high window glints the trucks’ edges, their bodies hidden. Along one wall is a set of lockers, each door open, each inside empty. A collection of lamps, workbelts, and hardhats—one cleaved neatly down its middle—lies in a corner,

filmed with white dust. The air is as cool and stale as an ancient oilcan, the smell of a harbinger.

My footsteps echo. I look around to make sure no one has seen me. The warehouse appears abandoned. One wall slopes down into the earth, a sign above the slope warning WHEN FLASHING LIGHT IS ON, MINE EVACUATION IS IN PROCESS—DO NOT ENTER MINE! A large steel door, lit by a single fritzing light, is—locked.

I knock on the door. I call inside the mine. I'm not sure if I expect them (the Canadians?) to answer or not.

I'll later learn that this door is the entrance to a mine, or was. The mine was formerly the very productive White Pine copper mine, an underground room-and-pillar mine* ten square miles large where subterranean engineers mined copper from the late 1800s up to 1995, when the mine was abandoned due to lost business. The mine was capped and sealed, its open pits filled with water, the land around it paved over and revegetated.

But I don't know any of this yet, so I keep snooping. I go into the employees' breakroom. Workbelts, hardhats, mudboots, facemasks, and cat-sized flashlights lie in organized piles. I pick up a workbelt and try it on, testing its heft. I attach a flashlight to the workbelt and don a hardhat. The equipment is all very heavy, but it's fun to wear. The weight feels good, like I'm about to do some work instead of lurk around in a warehouse. It feels like I'm about to go underground.

I take off the equipment. I walk out of the warehouse and into SubTerra's nearby satellite office. Inside, it's Office Anywhere: gray Berber carpeting, white laminated

* "This is where, basically, you'd have a Roman grid system underground. If you looked at it from the top without, you know, the ground there, the pillars would be the city blocks, with the rooms being the streets. We had to have the pillars there or the whole place would fall right on down."

—Clem Skobiak, White Pine miner

tables with ergonomic desk chairs, and even a water cooler that burps as I walk in. A rock inscribed with “Grow Damnit” leans against one of the office plants. Elsewhere, photographs of SubTerra’s greenhouse lie in a stack, captioned with lines like “The mine’s electrical system was retained to provide the light needed to nourish the plants” and “Tobacco seeds (in the pods) hold unique biopharmaceutical (properties) to fight bone marrow cancer.” A geophysical map of the mine’s total acreage hangs in the conference room.

There’s no one in the office. I say a tentative hello and get nothing. I pick up a placard and put it back down, trying to lean it at the same angle. Just as I get outside, a car pulls up, and I think I’ve set off some tripwire or secret laser detection system. I put on my out-of-town face: All I know is what’s been told me by a crab at a bar in Ontonagon.

The door of the truck opens and a bald, lanky man with a sandy, full mustache steps out. He squints at me guarded but affable. He says, “You, uh. You here?”

“Are you part of the SubTerra?” I ask him. “Are you a Canadian?”

“I’m not Canadian,” he says. “I’m Mark.”

“Is this the marijuana mine?”

“First thing first, that’s wrong. It’s no marijuana mine. You been snooping around in the warehouse?”

“No.”

“Uh-huh. What do you want to know?”

“Just what you do underground.”

Mark looks at me and twists his lips, taking a step forward and then one back. “All right,” he says. “Let’s go.”

“To the mine?”

“What? No. God no. The office. You a coffee man?”

I take a look at the warehouse and the mine entrance, a concrete cylinder sinking into the earth, and I follow Mark inside.

Mark and I sit at the office’s conference table with our coffees. Mark is the manager of SubTerra. I learn from Mark that in 2001, Prairie Plant Systems, Incorporated (PPS) bought 3,000 square feet of mine space here. PPS is a Canadian company specializing in underground greenhouses, or growth chambers (UGCs). PPS worked with White Pine residents to establish SubTerra. As he talks, Mark twists his lips, not wanting his information to be misconstrued.

Mark volunteers SubTerra’s benefits. “We have no cross-pollination problem,” he says. “The wind blows, the world sucks, right? Nobody’s going to have cross-pollination when the plants are growing 200 feet in bedrock.”

“200 feet down?” I ask. “You go down that far?”

“There are only four people who can go in that mine: the four who work here. That’s just liability from the drug companies. We get inspected and we’re in compliance. The four are all locals, and we have a hundred-percent safety record. If a cop wants to go under, I’ll let him, right away, but otherwise: uh-uh.”

“So what do you guys do down there?” I ask.

“All right. We’re doing two things. We’re creating our plant-based platform, one. We have a mechanically maintained system; we’re always planting, transplanting, and harvesting. We have three growing cycles. We grow all the time, and the plants seem to grow faster when there’s no downtime. Try to imagine the perfect environment for a plant, and you have us.

“We have a dry mine—meaning it’s not like on TV when Rambo’s underneath and it’s all dripping and shit. Our height-to-back is huge and allows plenty of growroom. You can drive in and out. We don’t have to use a hoist for soil; all we need is a pickup truck. The temperature is seventy-eight to eighty degrees all the time. No wind, no bugs, no pesticides. When it gets over eighty, the fan turns on to cool it to seventy-eight, then when it gets down below seventy-eight, the high-tech system says turn the fans off. The growlights in the chamber are always on. We use geocooling the way you’d heat and cool a traditional greenhouse. Pretty simple. And then we have this big old powerplant across the road, White Pine Electric Power, and we need indefinite energy. It works for us. So.”

I’m thinking of what height-to-back means. I’m thinking of massive trucks driving in and out of the mine, taking and leaving, extracting from the earth. I’m thinking of mechanical temperature regulation in a rocky underground tunnel. My notes are scattered with question marks. I’m also thinking of the SubTerra workers moving under the earth in unknown chambers. I want to explore down there, to search the hidden spaces with the hardhats and flashlights.

“Is it safe to grow down there?” I ask.

“The plants are treated with the security of a crime lab. We use hardhats, lamps, self-rescuers for fire—to keep you breathing! Down there, the smoke is what gets you. But

it's not so much a matter of safer as more cost-effective. And *simpler*. You have to get maybe over 100 permits to grow plants outside—we have to get zero. It's about the ultimate in containment of the plant. Containment is key. Containment is biosecurity. You make a drug, somebody gets a reaction to it because a lack of containment—you know, outside forces, all the influences of the external world—then you get in big trouble. The pharmaceutical companies get sued enough as it is. That's why they come to us.”

“Do you have any competition?”

“Not like you'd think. There are some ecoterrorist organizations—and I hate to use the word ‘terrorists’—but they combat any GM [genetically modified] plants. Probably two-thirds of the produce you see in the grocery is GM. But we're not really known, and we're perfectly happy being low profile. I don't want someone to read what you've written here and say, ‘Oh shit! Let's go bomb 'em!’ Someone may not understand what we do and it only takes one.

“How do environmental groups react to your growing in a mine? What about gases and that?”

“Any organization that wants to keep the environment pristine should be supporting us. Environmentally, White Pine is a great story. The mining company did a great job of closing its plant scientifically and cleanly. They used interesting and innovative stuff. Listen: environmental compliance can be costly—the reason you close up anything is just grade-school economics. They'd still be mining if the cost was such that they didn't have to close. But all mines die in the end. It's just, What's the straw that breaks the camel's back? And it can be anything, anytime.”

“How has the community reacted to SubTerra?”

“We’ve gotten a very positive reaction in White Pine. There’s definitely a unity of direction for redevelopment now. This is one of the key industries in the western U.P. We’re hoping to go to a commercial scale and revitalize the community. But we’re young. We’re acting as fast as we can. The company was created in January 2000, and we had our first growth chamber running by March. We had our first contract with Health Canada. Their quasi-socialized medicine, you know.”

“And how do you modify the plants?”

“Well, you have to tell the plant to express this trait protein into the stems. We want to put a protein in a plant, then have that plant manufacture that protein. We only have to know how to grow plants—we don’t need to know anything else. We’ve grown just about every garden vegetable, to see how the UGC worked. Just figuring out proof of concept. Now we specialize in just a few plants.

“Listen, the clients know the pharmaceutical market; to go commercial for a pharmaceutical company is not a one-step process. It takes ten years to get any product through R and D and the FDA to the marketplace. It’s just like mining: there are sixteen steps—you have to extract, store, and refine. We’re only two parts of a large process.”

“What’s it like to be down in the mine?” I ask.

“It’s big. I don’t go spelunking very much. It’s not terrifying, it’s just vast.”

“Do you have trouble with cave-ins?”

“Not really. We foam the rocks to keep them from crumbling. We’ve heavily reinforced the ceilings.

“There was a threat to flood the mine, just as we were buying the space for the greenhouse. We had one year to prove conditions at the greenhouse would be okay so the mine wouldn’t be filled with water before we had a chance to operate. They still filled it, but not up to where we are. We have to de-water the mine at times; water comes in through old drillholes and fills us up.”

“And so do you grow medicinal marijuana in the mines?”

“We’re definitely not growing pot. The Canadian model of provincial medical marijuana is where they can grow it as a controlled substance, in labs; they can keep track of every ounce of cannabis. In the United States, people grow it in closets, they don’t have consistent doses, it’s not clean—Canada puts it through thirteen to sixteen lab tests. But I have better things to do than campaign that hot potato.”

“But there’s no going down there? That’s the final verdict?”

“Yes, yes. Sheesh! Give it up, man. It’s just big and dark. And you never know when one of those rocks’ll come down at you. Be like going through some damn hell.”

“Who was down there before SubTerra?” I ask.

“All the miners. All those guys.”

“Are they all gone?”

“No they are not. They’re all hanging out over at the Konteka or Antonio’s in White Pine, just kind of waiting.”

I thank Mark. “Good luck,” he says. “Whatever it is you’re doing here.”

II.

I drive to the Konteka Black Bear Resort in White Pine. I pass one shuttered gas station and an H-shaped minimall that looks like an abandoned military PX. Someone's painted CLOSED on its doors.

White Pine lies moribund along a stretch of disused state highway. The town's single gas station was recently shuttered and moved to the next town south, Bergland. Only the federal outposts, the library and the post office, remain open, staffed by a single employee each.

I walk in the Konteka, where there are two other visitors filling out postcards. The waitresses at Konteka clean their fingernails with meticulous care. Gentle adult contemporary plays as they flirt with the bartenders under the liquid hum of the fountain drink dispenser. I eat a Reuben and watch a lazy black bear eat some scraps in the Konteka's backyard. The waitress tells me the black bear's name is Joey, and that he stops by daily for his scraps. There are no miners at the Konteka.

I go across a parking lot to Antonio's Restaurant and find two waitresses there rubbing linoleum tables down to their compositions. I see no miners here either.

"Where are the miners?" I ask.

"They're here," one waitress say. "They hang around. They go between the Legion and home."

She gives me the address of Clem Skobiak and tells me he loves talking about mines. She calls Clem and makes sure he's home.

When I pull up to Clem Skobiak's house, he's tooling around on his Ford Mustang. He has a buckled gait, a wrenching handshake, and a two-tone moustache.

Clem is a fourth-generation miner struggling to convince his son to stay in the business.

“How was it down it the mine?” I ask him.

He smiles. “For me, working in the mine was a good life. Good wages; the benefits were good. It was kind of risky, but I still have all my fingers and toes.” He shows me his hands, back and front. “I’d go back there to this day.”

“Why aren’t you down there now?” I ask.

“Oh, because the envies [environmentalists] dredged up all these horror stories about White Pine, most of which happened in the 1880s. White Pine didn’t have the money or the clout to fight back against them all, so we lost our jobs, our livelihoods, everything.

“Me, I go both ways: I believe you can have your environment and you can have jobs too; you can mine *and* have good ecology. I don’t think environmentalists are realists. They like to use their computers, but they don’t like how it was made? I think they’d think differently if they didn’t have all their modern conveniences.

“White Pine has been fighting Indians and Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth. But we were always very environmentally conscious. The smokestack had precipitators—they tried to do good. But there are things you can’t control. They did their best to be good stewards.”

I disagree with Clem here, but bite my tongue because I don’t know what he knows and hasn’t seen what he’s seen. I’m reminded that those who know the Earth best are often those who ruin her, and, though I’ve given to the Sierra Club and consider the damage mines cause to Earth obviously horrible, here I have to remain mum for the fact

that these miners know this land—and what’s beneath it—far better than I do. I think of Shorty in Zeehan, and his museum of mine equipment and minerals.

Previously, when I’ve read about miners or oil engineers or lumberjacks losing their jobs to protect an ecosystem, I thought, Well, get a different, better job. Do something less destructive to the world and to yourself. Do anything else. But now I start to see similarities, and see kinships I share with these men: their love of exploration and danger, their need to challenge themselves, to flirt with fatality. Furthermore, I can see myself as these men, and I momentarily damn them this diplomacy for graying my ideals. Really, I know nothing of what Clem or any of the miners knows; I only know what I’ve read from the envies. I don’t undergo a paradigm shift, but for now I do listen.

Clem also mentions the troubles of increasing globalization in mining. “Down there in Chile, they can knock the top off a mountain and scoop the copper out of the Earth. They have fewer environmental concerns, and much lower prices. They get away with a lot more. Chile, and Brazil too. We can’t compete with that kind of market.”

The world’s copper reserves are mostly concentrated in four locations: the Western United States, Central Canada, the Peruvian and Chilean Andes, and Zambia. Clem’s not exaggerating: Modern copper mining involves open-pit mines, wherein the tops of mountains are detonated and then dug into, scooped out by huge digging machines, loaded into dumptrucks, and taken up a series of switchback terraces to refineries. This copper is much closer to the surface, and therefore much easier and cheaper to get at.

“What did you guys do while you were down there in the mines?” I ask. “How did you get the copper out?”

“Shoot, it wasn’t easy. We had to find it, drill it, blast it, muck it out, put it on the conveyor belt, and then crush it, mill it, float it, concentrate it, smelt it, *and then* refine it. And we did all this *cleanly*. The unrefined copper was cake copper, about 99.5 percent pure. The refined was 99.9 percent pure.”

The processes Clem’s describing include smelting, fire refining, and electrorefining. Smelting burns away the impurities (or the base rock) from the concentrated ore, which is thereafter called blister copper. Fire refining and electrorefining superheat and then electrolyze the blister copper to its final 99.9-percent purity. During electrorefining, a copper cathode plate is submerged in a tank of solution, which copper ions are attracted to. Several rare metals, such as gold and silver, are sometimes found by happenstance through this process.

“You did all this underground?” I ask.

“Largely. I know I did my part under there.”

“What’s it like being down there?”

“Oh, I’ll tell you! Sometimes at lunch, my buddy and I would eat real quick and then we’d go underground and find a backdrift, turn off our lamps, and have a catnap. But we never slept well! It always seems like the rock is talking—groaning, dripping. And down there, without a lamp, it’s total absolute dark. You’d go mad down there if you were abandoned. Your mind starts asking, ‘Jeez. I wonder if there’re giant rats down here.’ You know?”

I write down “giant rats.” I think the lower the mine, the larger the rat. There might as well be giant rats, inhabiting the spaces as tangibly as each miner’s deep fear.

“Down there, you saw what nobody but God had ever seen,” Clem says. “When you saw pure copper, it was crystalline. Guys would take it out secretly and sell it. It’s never good to tempt the mine, though. Guys were in pieces when we found them, sometimes. Crushed. Buried. Smashed. Guys were killed by a failed brake on a scoop tram. Some got electrocuted. If you could think of a way to die, you could do it.”

“And you didn’t ever want to leave?”

“No. Heck no. I loved that job. It was a very talented group. There was nobody bird-dogging you. White Pine could hold up the whole western end of the U.P., financially.”

“What about SubTerra, now?”

“That place? I don’t know. We’ll see.”

“And you’d go back down again?”

“I wish I could. I wish it were still there. Well, I mean, it is. It’s always there. But I wish it were able to get at. There was more life down there than in this, you know”—he gestures at his property—“house.”

I’ll later learn that the fight with the envies Clem talked about took place in 1992, when the National Wildlife Federation filed suit against Copper Range Company, citing air-quality violations. The smelter, installed in 1954, never met pollution-control standards, and it bled toxic mercury into nearby watersheds. Other environmental groups joined the fray, and ultimately courts fined Copper Range 4.8 million dollars in civil penalties. The mine owners didn’t have the money to invest in the aging smelter, so they closed both the mine and smelter. The mine’s labor costs for reaching copper so far underground didn’t justify further expansion—the U.P.’s deep, glaciated soil hides the copper well, and

extracting it became unprofitable. The land's secrets were well-hidden and well-protected.

When mine engineers suggested using acid to extract copper from the mine's remaining rock pillars—a process called leaching—the Bad River Indians of Wisconsin objected to shipments of acid over their land, worried that the acid would find its way into nearby Lake Superior. The miners lost the argument and, not long after, their jobs. The mine shut down operations on September 30th, 1995, and lost eighty percent of its workforce in the next four months.

This was not the first of White Pine's busts, but its fifth, each one preceded by a boom. Boomtowns are cyclical things, with no single boom or bust but a cycle of them over time; White Pine has been booming and busting for 150 years.

White Pine's first copper boom occurred in 1843 when prospector Henry P. Schoolcraft reported seeing a copper boulder deep in the wilds of the then-roadless U.P. The sighting attracted the attention of Dr. Douglass Houghton (HOTE·un), Michigan's first state geologist and former mayor of Detroit, who visited the area and claimed that though the land was rich in copper, extracting it wouldn't be worth the trouble.

His words went unheeded. The mere existence of a giant copper *boulder* touched off a copper rush, with prospectors hitching rides aboard commercial seacarriers and freight barges, and when spaces filled there, in the bateaux of fur traders. Some prospectors even came to the region on horse or on foot, a long journey they often took on snowshoe around Lake Michigan. The copper rushers traveled without good maps, only colonial sketches most illustrative of waterways and lakeshores, the wild interior of the U.P. a

ghosted spot guessed at and missed. Many prospectors never actually found the copper, but got lost in the dense woods, and either died or went home empty-handed.

Not that that stopped them. One enterprising fellow, Julius Eldred, claimed the copper boulder for himself, and nearly bankrupted and physically destroyed himself transporting it back to Detroit, confirming Houghton's claims in spite of Houghton's caveat. Another early miner, Ransom Shelden, disputed Houghton outright, saying the area was a "veritable Ophir of deliquescent, metalliferous treasure." Shelden's made-up words were poetry to prospectors' ears, and the boom was on.

But the boomers didn't really know what they were in for. In his book *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State*, historian Willis F. Dunbar writes, "Hardly a one of these [prospectors] knew anything at all about mining, or even about copper. They utterly failed to understand that, although it was a useful metal, it was not nearly so valuable as they innocently supposed." It was not, for example, the gold of the Wild West: "Gold was paid for in dollars, by the ounce; copper, in pennies, by the pound," writes Dunbar.

Most of the copper, too, was not found by simple panning, but had to be separated from the pure rock it congealed with. The early prospectors didn't have the equipment for serious extraction, and so relied on the Old Copper Native American methods of hammering rocks against other rocks: slow, painful work not given to immediate riches.

The prospectors' troubles had just begun, though: Once they extracted the copper, they had to transport it back to civilization, and transporting copper anywhere civilized was a Pyrrhic task. The western U.P., which had ceased to be Indian country only a year prior, was unsurveyed and almost without roads. Just as many died on the way to copper, so did they die on the way from it: To carry a profitable load of copper, the miners had to

bushwhack for dozens of miles with their pockets full to bursting with unrefined copper. What's more, U.P. winters are bitter-frigid, Nature not only unsympathetic but outright hostile—many of the first prospectors, heady with the enthusiasm of quick riches, died penniless and alone deep in the U.P. woods, and several were killed and eaten by bears. If they did make it to a ship with their copper and didn't have to pay off the ship captains, they had a long trip back to Detroit, the only decent-sized city anywhere nearby. This get-rich-slow drudgery discouraged most miners: so much trouble for so little payoff.

But there was some employment. The bit of viably extractable copper in the region lay at the end of the end of the Keweenaw Peninsula, in the army town of Copper Harbor, established in 1844. The town attracted disillusioned miners from the White Pine area, who gradually left the area until it folded back into itself, its first boom a bust, the land becoming great green mystery again. As White Pine's dirt roads grassed back, Copper Harbor grew into a rambunctious mining town, full of bawdy houses and saloon brawls. After Copper Harbor was settled, prospectors established the outposts of Ontonagon and Eagle River, which were also on Lake Superior. Not long after, satellite towns of Houghton, Killmaster, Podunk, Nonesuch, Seewhy, Whore's Corner, and Gay popped up. In short order, the area flourished; from 1845 to 1895, the Keweenaw Peninsula produced seventy-five percent of U.S. copper; during the Civil War, ninety.

White Pine's next boom happened in the mid-1900s. During World War II and the Korean War, the U.S. had a shortage of weapons-making materials, particularly artillery-shell casings, which are made from copper. In the years following these wars, the federal

government launched a Reconstruction Finance Corporation which started two new copper projects, one in Arizona, the other in White Pine.

The White Pine mine, owned then by the Copper Range Company, was given a 66.3 million-dollar federal loan to begin production. Ten years after Copper Range received the loan they repaid it, twenty years ahead of schedule.

In 1952, 1400 mostly new residents built a mine, mill, smelter, powerplant, shops, offices, and even a tailings basin, or a reservoir for the pollutive refinery byproducts, called gangue. The mine's 504-foot smokestack rose seven and a half feet a day. As of 1950, White Pine's population stood at thirty; by 1970, 1800.

In the 1950s, White Pine city planners laid out the town to be an epitome of American paradise, a suburbia in the woods thriving from copper sales. The town had a portable Lutheran church, curved streets to discourage speeding, and the H-shaped minimall. In an article by Larry Chabot, a native Yooper, he describes the conditions during White Pine's Stepford-like inception:

“Electricity was limited to five hours a day....Mail was delivered to hundreds of mailboxes nailed to a wooden fence....The mine company built a hospital, schools, a shopping center, employee dormitories, a motel, apartments, and 175 houses in three designs and five colors. Copper Range also showed free movies, awarded scholarships and plowed driveways. Water was free and fluoridated.”

On March 31st, 1953, the first Copper Range ore surfaced; over the next two years, ore steadily emerged until there was enough to refine and ship. The first shipment was sent in 1955 via the Atlantic Railroad to a fabricating plant in Pittsburgh. Over the next twelve years, White Pine produced over one billion pounds of copper. Workers flooded

the already burgeoning area, causing job shortages in surrounding townships. By the mid-'60s, the number of employees at the mine stood at 2,700.

A condition called Copper Love occurred during this era. The miners grew possessive of the copper in its extraction and refinement, forging a strange attachment to it, not wanting to have it taken from them as soon as they'd found it. They felt cheated to have to lose what they'd worked so hard to gain, all the more so that the copper was then shipped to faraway industrial hellholes like Detroit, Gary, and Pittsburgh.

The mine produced steadily through the end of the '60s and into the early '70s, the number of employees peaking at 3,200, but then there was a bust: The buying price of copper plunged in 1976, leading to massive layoffs at White Pine. The Louisiana Land and Exploration Company bought the mine and thoroughly mismanaged it, leading to a whirlwind cycle of hirings and layoffs, some workers fired and rehired six times in as many years.

A major recession in 1982, closed most of the operation. After the closing, Keweenaw County's unemployment rate spiked to forty-three percent. By early '85, the mine was down to thirty-four workers, and the mine's powerplant was shuttered, the buildings without heat, their desks covered in ice.

But then there was a boom: Copper Range rebought the company, working with state, federal, and private loans, and the support of then-governor James Blanchard. A union formed, the employees sharing stock in the company, and the mine thrived.

But just as soon as the mine started booming again, a cave-in closed two main tunnels, cutting production by eighty percent. The miners took on the slogan Drill or Die! and resumed work. They built new tunnels and finished the 1980s strong, bringing in new

workers from Scandinavia, Saudi Arabia, Scotland, Bolivia, Portugal, Israel, England, Cameroon, and all over the United States.

Then the last of the busts happened in 1992, with lawsuits from the National Wildlife Federation and then the Bad River Indians. Court fines bankrupted Copper Range, and the mines have been closed ever since, the smelter's workforce shrunken and departed, the few hangers-on hanging on to recollection and fable.

The miners' lives were hard and practical, expressed in purity percentiles, but they were explorers, hardscrabble and optimistic; they had a sadomasochistic relationship with the land. The very beauty and solitude offered by the deep north woods also assures its danger: This is a nature that hurts and ruins the miners, giving them beauty and peace, while reciprocating affection never, the men appreciating their inscrutable lover at risk to their health and lives.

The miners, much like conquering pioneers, are drawn to these great golden distances, the enterprising doms ready to exploit the promises implicit in terra incognita, but are also wary of that terra, respectful as kowtowing subs. They receive the damage of beauty, its sparse bounties and easy death, and when it's the men's turn to dominate, they attack the land back: They dredge, extract, penetrate, dig into, and mine the land, leaving it hollowed and scarred like a crimson whipmark, holes vast and gaping. Meanwhile, the miners, looking at their work and smiling, age fast and die young, brought under by the windblown turn of their lover's humor. And so it goes, this cycle repeating itself. Of course, love and pain, far from being mutually exclusive, are closer to codependent

symbiosis; these men and their land exact their cruel mercies on one other, each with the clemency of sadism. Uniformly, they were sad to see the mine go.

Now, as I talk to the miners, I imagine them deep within the earth. They have the wherewithal and privilege to see what only God had ever seen, unwitting explorers of hidden spaces that are now lost and capped over, impossible to access. They were where I wanted to be. I want now to go into the greenhouse and beyond, to where the walls drip and where night is permanent—where the world can cave in at any moment or make real any phobia.

III.

I go to the White Pine mine. Maybe twenty pickup trucks sit in the parking lot, huddled near the entrance. I have to check in at the White Pine Security Trailer to be able to visit the mine, so I do.

I meet Dennis Nevins there. Dennis is a round man with a gray buzzcut and a steel wool voice. He reclines in a wheeled chair until he's almost parallel to the floor.

Dennis is now a security guard at the White Pine refinery, but as all miners I'll meet do, Dennis defines himself by his work underground.

"I worked on a scoop," he says, "scraping the ceiling to prevent the loose rock pieces from squarshing the workers while they were mining.

"We used a boring machine to cut fifteen-foot drifts into the rock like a worm through an apple. It was the same machine they used to make New York's subway system, but we used a harder bit. The drifts we got are eight feet high and twenty-two feet wide, wide enough so that two ore cars full of rock can pass side by side."

“How far did you guys go back in there then?” I ask.

“To make a new tunnel,” Dennis says, “they had bolters with resin supports drilled in the ceiling to make sure it didn’t cave in when you exploded it. Then they drilled holes into the rock wall with Jumbo Drills. They sunk fifty-six or fifty-eight holes twelve feet in. Scoopmang like I used to be, I got all the loose off beforehand. I was a Kamatsu driver. I hit those rocks, bum-bum-bum-bum-bum.

“Anyway, then the detonator stuck the caps in the face of the rock and he wired it all up. He took the wires out, and made sure everyone was out of there. He’d holler, ‘Fire in the hole!’ We’d all be standing around the truck with the detonation box, and someone’d say, ‘Three, two, one!’ And then you’d hear this just, ‘Bome! Bome! Bome!’ You could feel the truck vibrate. It was the most exciting part of the day.”

“Sounds like a party under there.”

“It was scary, though. We could hear pop!, crack!—we could hear stuff falling, boom!, bang! Sometimes you’d look up at the roof and you could see it start saygin.

“Some guys would steal the silver under there, keep it in piles they could take away later. I saw a big pile of silver one time; I could have taken it out but I saw that roof saygin and I got out of there. That night, she caved in—she came down. Squished a few guys too. Damn, man.”

“Did you ever get close to getting squished?”

“One time I was scraping and I threw that scoop in reverse real quick, to get a big old ornery rock out. When I did, I heard this sound—*Bo!*—and I knew it was coming. That big rock came *right* down—it was about the size of a vehicle, as thick as you can get. It hit my scoop, and the engine went right in the air. Pieces of rock broke my levers, got my

knobs, took out my wiring, all my hydraulics, absolutely killed the scoop. It was runed! They had to tow it out. Luckily, I had curled up, brought my hands into my body like a baby—usually I have my hand on the levers at all times. But curled up I saved my arm from being—*kwtt!*—cut right off. I was shaking for a week. When you walked through the mines, you always stayed in the center; you didn't know when those big rocks were gonna come get you.”

“Is there only the one way into the mine? Through SubTerra?”

“Yeah. The other way's all capped up.”

“Are there secret entrances?”

“There are sinkholes in the land from time to time, but they fill those in real quick. Dangerous.”

“So there's no way of getting under?”

“What you want to go down there for, man? You wanna get squished?”

“You've seen it, though. I haven't. And probably, no one will again.”

“Yeah, I guess we're all real—what's it? Exclusive.”

“Maybe you are.”

“Bullshit, man, but good try! Anyway, if you're just here at the mine for talking, you know, you can't really go in. But everyone will talk to you outside. What else are we going to do? We just wait around for something.”

A truck driver enters the security trailer and waves his hand upward in greeting, as if scolding a horsefly.

“Fifty-three oh two,” the driver says.

“In what?” Dennis asks.

“Tubes.”

“Tubes? You’re gonna be here awhile!”

The driver laughs. “Yeah, I don’t care.” He scrutinizes the hardhats like a dowager shopping for shawls, running his hand over the colored hats and settling on orange. Dennis reclines back in his chair, turning it left and right. I have no idea what anyone’s talking about.

The driver, polishing the orange hardhat with his hands, sits, then stands, and says, “Today. Today. Today. Eh? Today.”

“You want me to call?” Dennis asks. “Think that’ll speed things up?”

“I’m gonna miss eem.”

“He’s probably over there getting weighed.”

“Ayuh.”

“Ayuh.”

Dennis dials a number, gives the driver a thumbs-up, and the driver leaves.

“There’s a good man,” Dennis says. “Impatient, sure, but hardworking. And no envy, no way! The mine’s had a lot of trouble with the Friends of the Porkies.” The Porkies are the Porcupine Mountains, a nearby mountain range.

“Envies are good,” Dennis says, “but a lot of times they go overboard. They just don’t understand the way things are.”

“Did the envies go after the mine?”

“Shit yes they did. Of course. They runed us.”

Before I leave, Dennis suggests I visit another miner, Edward Pragacz.

Edward Pragacz (PREY·gits) worked at the White Pine mine from 1949 to 1988. He's now a self-employed mechanic who processes coal from Hudson Bay and remedies diesel rigs from a satellite garage south of the White Pine Industrial Complex. I find him there. Outside his shop a large metal sign from the U.S. Department of Commerce, endorsed by George W. Bush, lies dented in a disused Dumpster, covered in dirt.

As Ed greets me, a train goes by not ten feet from his shop. "When you see those traincars go by," he says, "you can tell which ones have coal and which ones don't. The shiny ones have coal; the ones with open doors have none."

Ed extends his hand, veiny and firm. Ed's a slender man with perpetually raised eyebrows, an oil-splattered cap, and a thick moustache. "I'm Polish," he says, winking at me. "You know what that means." I do not know what that means.

During the White Pine mine's heyday, Ed worked as a locomotive engineer, multi-engine mechanic, and furnaceman. "That furnace would get up to 2,160 degrees, by God. It was a flaming inferno. Yahp!" He slaps his desk and massages it in a circle.

"What was it like to work in the mine?" I ask.

"What do you want, advice?" Ed asks. "Here's a golden rule: Everybody is a whore. To a certain extent, that is. You're a smart man. Pay attention to life, or otherwise, you're gonna lose."

Ed leans back happily in his chair. He gives a contented nod in preparation of an anecdote. "It's like this," he says. He reaches to his windowsill and pulls from it a homemade voodoo doll of a railroad conductor who unloads ore nearby, often incompetently. The doll has button eyes, plastic-straw arms, and nipples drawn in Sharpie. Pushpins have been stuck in the doll's eyes and arms.

“He’s got a railroad car stuck up his potato,” Ed says. “Ha! Boy, did he take offense to it. To this day he wants this doll. Well, he ain’t getting it.”

Ed gestures at the mine’s smokestack, visible through his shop’s northern window. He tells how he wasn’t allowed to join in on the Nam, but did build the copper linings for tank turrets. “There’s one of them tanks right over front of the Legion to this very day,” he says. “You could drive it off the lot with just a hair of tinkering.” As he remembers putting together the copper turrets, he smiles. “My brother Mike was allowed to go to war, but not me. But making those turrets, by me! That was *like* going, in a way. God, I wanted to go. Dittn’ I?”

Ed looks out his window, wanting the train conductor to come by so he can taunt him with the doll. “He’s a young man, that one,” Ed says, “and he does the worst job you’ve ever seen done. Kids today, they don’t want to work. They don’t want to do anything at all. They fucking live not to work.”

Ed holds up his palm. He says, “Pardon my language; I didn’t mean that.” I tell him it’s okay and that breaks down a private dam in Edward Pragacz, his sentences suddenly saturated with enough curses to humble a stevedore.

“This one bastard!” he says, leaning forward. “He tried to fucking take me up a fucking trick line, to show me a fucking trick leg! He was working the fucking worm gear! You know?” Again, I do not know.

He settles back down and takes a fulsome pull of Miller High Life. “My wife passed on,” he says. “And then they lost the mine. Those two were tough. Man got to have wife. Anyway, I’ve got this girlfriend, now, but—bah! Tonight’s the night with her! It’s over!”

“How long have you been going with her?”

“Three years minimum, five years tops. We used to play a game, back in the mine days, you know, sort of a game. It was called Mine or Wife.”

“Like, what lifestyle would you choose, a good job or a good woman?”

“No. God no! What it meant was, you’d see a photograph and have to identify it: Is it a mine or is it a wife?”

“Did anyone ever lose Mine or Wife?”

“All the time!” Ed laughs into a coughing fit. “All! The! Time!”

He sighs then, takes a drink, and becomes somber. “It’s tough for everyone, though,” he says. “Because in this economy. Nowadays.” He waggles his head once, then again. “Aw. Starvation. Aw.” He bats the bill of his hat in anger. “Life is a son of a bitch. You’re a smart man.”

The White Pine miners wait in their town, in its American Legion, in its two bars, in their own frontyards. They sit and wait for the next boom, for the next chance to be taken under.

Even in their retirement, they have many small businesses and projects going—the end of industry for them is a personal affront. They understand well that particularly Northern wisdom, that comfort is as subject to the rules of supply and demand as anything—the more you have, the less its value. These are men happiest in extremes: living at the extremes of latitude in the continental United States, with its extremes of seasonal change, going to work each day to a job where they could die as quickly as a matchstick strike, in a wrinkle of steel or a shrug of earthdirt. They work in places they’re

innately terrified of, place where they've witnessed friends and coworkers die violent deaths.

In an unconventional way, SubTerra could provide the currently bust White Pine with its next big boom. It's unlikely the town will find its wealth again through mining, which could make the bust permanent. And while a biopharmaceutical company holds little of the rough lore of an underground mine, the miners may have to embrace the change or abandon their home.

SubTerra also gives White Pine a specific, unique advantage: the surrounding land of the Keweenaw Peninsula is struggling harder than most areas in the U.S. right now. The former mining towns have mostly disappeared, their smelters covered in graffiti and sinking into lakes. Machinery rusts near piles of copper ore that have been picked over by scavengers selling to scrapyards. Abandoned mineshafts are now home to hundreds of thousands of bats. Aside from a slight lumber industry, the Keweenaw (and the Upper Peninsula at large), is going bust, its flagship industry outmoded and unwanted.

But the ones who last last: Those who stay in White Pine stay to wait for the next boom, hoping for and relying on it, storing their potential energy, threatening kinesis.

I give each miner I meet my phone number. I hate not knowing what they know, and not being able to see what they've seen and experienced, their life fatal, coarse, and uniquely known. I tell them to let me know when they go back down.

CHAPTER SIX CODA: ABOVE WHITE PINE

Travel with me for a moment up and away, away from Shop Pragacz and all of White Pine, over the nearby forest and the Porcupine Mountains. You can see what's below, and there's too much forest, just a vast menagerie of trees grown so profuse as to render themselves no longer individual units but parts of indistinguishable tapestry. There's a loss in this beauty, in that no one ponders the individual tree because no one can make out the individual tree from this great height, and so are forced to see only the verdant blur below, the modest undulations of the Porkies, the Lake of the Clouds a jewel held in the mountain's palm. If you could see the trees as parts or pieces, you could see the birchbark folded back like parchment sheaves, each tree standing like an exhausted knight sloughing its armor, happy for the Great Beyond. Elsewhere, that same scroll-end treebark is hirsute with moss, as waterbearing as sphagnum. You hear the metronome tock of the woodpecker, redhooded and blankeyed, sensing grubs within. On the ground below are slugs, small, wet, and neon green; one of them has been splattered by careless hoofprint; other slugs flock to the corpse, eating their fallen comrade. Deeper yet and there's grass and there's dirt until you reach clay and rock, separate particles of which remain too infinitesimal to catalog, much like the tiny crystals making up each copper particle, and so they are grouped, and so they become part of the ground and low scrub and interlocking branches and then, zooming back more, trees, out, out, and eventually forest, all of it simply life abundant, beauty given and not giving one careborne damn. Were you to crash over the forest, beauty would not hear it, but would remain, static,

cyclical, and entropic all, waiting to eat you into itself, until you too become lost to the tapestry of all that remains natural.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE SANTA CLAUS OF MOTUEKA

Motueka, New Zealand

Santa Claus is telling his visitors he's a Muslim. This isn't true—he's spiteful and distrusting of all religion really, but he adopts some aspects of each faith. "I don't sit on the floor; I'm a Muslim," he says. He winks at me. His other guests nod. This is their first night at Santa Claus's house, but my second, so I know better.

The truth is, Santa won't sit on the floor because he's a germophobe. He recoils at anything dropped or placed on the floor, and trashes it posthaste. The floor is his enemy, and he sets nothing on it. "Do you know how *dirty* floors are?" he asks. "Do you know how many germs are all over them? I—I can't deal with that."

We're in Motueka, a smalltown on New Zealand's South Island. The Santa Claus of Motueka rarely gives his real name, but if pressed he'll admit Mick. He prefers Santa, and he prefers only Santa.

Mick does look like Santa Claus: He wears red wool pants, red-and-green striped socks, and black boots, with a thick white go-ahead-and-tug-it beard. Santa is the world's most prolific hitchhiker, having clocked in over "a million and a half miles" of free travel from kind strangers in his many years. He says. He's hitchhiked the world over, from the Deep South of the United States through Western and Eastern Europe, even in Afghanistan. He's hitched in the busiest and remotest sections of the world; he hitched through New Zealand in the '70s, when it was "pure and unique." Santa claims he's learned more from hitchhiking than from anything else.

While the Guinness World Records doesn't recognize him, his lexicon of stories gives him authority, and he's amassed more stories than he can keep track of. If nothing else, he's hiked more than German Stephan Schlei, who holds the record for miles hitchhiked at 621,371, a record that a veteran like Santa scoffs at.

I met Santa through hitchhiking. I began in Christchurch, New Zealand, hitching rides with a blithe electrician, a curt school teacher, and three students with a moving van who were on a supply run back to their house in Burnie. There wasn't any room in their cab, so I had to ride in the back, lying in total darkness on an old mattress that scooted from side to side as they roared around curves. "If you're okay with it, we're okay with it," they said. They were drunk and effusive, and stopped frequently to piss, opening up the door so I could see where we were. As soon as I did, they shut me back in and continued. It was a hilarious, nauseating trip.

I hitched next with an enormous Maori who'd just come from a wild pig hunt. He was gleeful despite not having caught one pig. "Look at this!" he said. He showed me his horrible cleaver with the excitement and insistence of a child. When he let me off, he was on his way to visit another tribe's area for the first time in his life, lands that had been forbidden to him for ages. A frail divorcée picked me up next. The entire time I rode with her, she told me, "You're probably a serial killer. You probably are. I should stop." She laughed a beleaguered laugh. She cursed mountain roads for their curviness.

From there, I hitched a long ride with two young travelers living the bygone hippie dream: an American girl and Scottish boy, having met in a hostel and rented a Volkswagen bus, were hitting the road. They asked, "You're just hitching around? That's

so cool. Have you heard Bob Marley?" They were headed to Motueka as well. When they dropped me off, I met Santa.

Santa's Eleven Rules of Successful Hitchhiking

1. Smile. Always smile. No matter if you're having the most miserable day in the world, smile from ear to ear, beatifically, giving the world your best. And wave. Wave at every driver as he passes. Even if the driver heckles you or flips you off for hitchhiking, wave at him.
2. Move. Never, never sit and try not to stand still. If you have to stop, always remain standing, and leave your bag on your shoulders. The lazier you look, the less likely drivers will pick you up. The more effort you show, the more drivers will see you as a hitchhiker in earnest, not one doing it as a freeloading lark.
3. Consider the driver. Even the most charitable driver can't pick you up if you don't give him ample pullover space. If you find a good spot, especially one with wide shoulders, stand by it. Remain standing and smile. Intersections are recommended.
4. Make eye contact with every driver you see. Oftentimes this means you'll have to walk backwards, and as such, walk backwards. Run backwards. Letting the drivers see your eyes incurs last-second pangs of conscience and humanity that otherwise might be second-guessed or dismissed. Never, ever wear sunglasses.
5. Do not flip off drivers as they pass you, no matter how strong the urge.
6. Never give up. Whether you have to wait ten minutes or ten hours, you will find a ride.

7. Use the elements to your advantage. If it's raining torrentially, don't hang out inside waiting for the weather to clear. Get out there. You're likely to win the sympathy of the first driver you see for braving such conditions.
8. Ask. If you come across gas stations or other waypoints of civilization, ask drivers if they might be able to take you up the road. This small act forces generosity by denying drivers the privilege of anonymity. Drivers have far fewer excuses for not picking up hitchhikers when standing face to face with one.
9. Avoid cities. There is a ten-kilometer rule for hitchhiking in major metropolitan areas: Within that distance you don't have the faintest chance of being picked up. In the city, there are bus services, taxicabs, and trams. In the city, hearts are colder.
10. Upon being picked up, greet the driver and tell him your name, looking him directly in the eyes. Shake hands with the driver. If a driver refuses such nicety, refuse the ride.
11. If you stay with the driver for a while, offer to buy him food and drinks, and if need be, offer to take the wheel for a spell. Great and lasting friendships can be formed through hitchhiking.

When I first meet him, Santa is selling postcards of himself to make money. He works from the sidewalk in front of a sandwich shop. He catches my attention by identifying my nationality at a glance: "Hey there, American."

“Okay,” I say. “Go ahead. What’s your gimmick?”

“You like to argue. Of course you’re an American.”

“All right. Do someone else then.”

He points at passersby. “You see him?” he asks. “He’s an American too. She’s Italian. Him—he’s German. And he’s definitely a Swede.” He says this loudly, so the ones he’s talking about can hear him.

There are two reactions to having your nationality identified: sudden anger and merry disbelief. The American and the Swede move on, sneering. The German says, “Yes, it’s true!” and smiles. The Italian says, “Okay, here I am. How do you know this?”

“Why don’t you buy a postcard?” Santa asks. Santa’s postcards all feature images of the Motuekan surrounds, with Santa in Abel Tasman National Park, picking apples in a nearby orchard, and strolling down the town streets. There’s one of him with UFOs (titled “Aliens in Motueka??!”). The postcards are poorly Photoshopped, all featuring the same photo of Santa with a new background. Their simplicity is the point: they’re meant to be unique souvenirs in return for charity, endearing for being homemade. Santa keeps a vertical tally of the cards he’s sold. On a good day, he’ll sell thirty cards.

The Italian girl buys one of the cards. “I’m hosting a big dinner tonight,” Santa tells her. “Why don’t you come by?”

“Sounds fun,” she says. Then, “Okay. Nice card. See you!”

Santa’s selling the postcards so he can buy a plane ticket to go back to Maryland for medical care. He describes his symptoms vaguely, which are bronchial and long-established. He fears cancer, and knows he can’t ignore its possibility any longer. He knows he needs surgical care.

I ask him, “Surely going to the nearest doctor is cheaper than buying a plane ticket?” But Santa dismisses the question with a grunt; the truth is he’s not just going to the Maryland for surgery, but because Maryland is, in a life entirely built upon transience and temporality, a life of making himself cyclically lost, his first home.

Santa was born one of fourteen children in a strict Catholic household in rural Maryland. His parents raised him on hard work and hard love; he lived an austere lifestyle in the woods, every action influenced by Biblical mores. “It was hard, but it was the best way to live,” he says.

He now lives in a tiny apartment duplex he shares with a family of Koreans, who all work at an adjoining Thai food restaurant.

“They’re nice, but ohh, they’re noisy,” he says. “You can hear them down there every morning at four a.m. banging around, just going right at it.”

“What, sex?” I ask.

“No! No: cooking. They cook like crazy.”

The first night I stay with him, Santa has five guests, including two Germans, another American, and a Frenchman. Everyone gets along well, eating fish sticks and vegetable medleys, reveling in the international banter of funny mispronunciation. Santa gets out his atlas and everyone identifies their hometown. In every case, Santa’s been there, of course.

When Santa has guests, he is host, chef, and entertainer. He tells guests his house is theirs. He discusses the nature of spontaneity and tells fart jokes in equal measure. He calls people “mofo” and “sir,” depending on his mood.

Santa's house has three main rooms: a kitchen, a living room, and a rooftop patio. In the kitchen are articles about him from local newspapers, pictures of him entertaining children in full Kris Kringle regalia, and stories of his legendary hitchhiking. Maps hang everywhere, antique and otherwise.

Hodgepodge dominates the living room. Arabesque lampshades, small chests full of buttons, and what look like tractor parts lean against one another in the cramped space. Santa's bed lies in the corner of the room, a foam mattress with a rumpled red-and-green sheet over it.

Santa's relaxes and watches the sunset daily from his rooftop patio. Inspired into a speech by today's after-dinner sunset, Santa tells us, "Do everything you want to do when you want to do it, because if you wait, it's gone—you doom yourself. Do! It! Right! Now! If I know one thing in this life, it's that."

The guests murmur assent. He may think we're acolytes. I'm not sure I am. I decide to play Devil's advocate anyway. "Sounds self-destructive, maybe," I say. "Selfish. If everyone took that approach, you know, what a mess."

"There's quality of experience and quantity of experience," he says. "You get one through the other."

He's full of these slogans, having built a life on them. That he lives his slogans makes it more difficult to dismiss them.

"For you," I say. The other guests shoot me worried looks, as if I'm tempting Santa's wrath.

He laughs. "For me, for you, for all *Homo sapiens*." He pauses. "Anyway, self-destruction is having too much. Me, I don't eat sugar or salt and I don't drink milk.

That's one of the worst things you can touch. And I never drink. Alone." He raises his glass and we all join him.

Santa tests himself often, working hard every day for as long as his weathered body is able. When he hitchhikes, he often sleeps outside on the ground. "I wait until I'm too cold to stand it any longer, until I'm shivering," he says, "and then and only then do I use my sleeping bag. And even then! I only use it as a blanket put on top of me."

"Why make everything so hard?" I ask.

"The harder you make it for yourself, the more you feel it," he says. "You can choose to feel everything or you can choose not to."

His only vice may be eating. When Santa eats he feasts, eager at the chance to entertain as many houseguests as he can. Having a feast helps him recall his days growing up in a household full of domestic bustle. The nostalgia of that past glazes his eyes at times; he relives his old life—that of communal beginnings instead of stoic autonomy—during his meals.

And he eats. On his fridge is a picture of a hippopotamus with mouth wide open. Next to it, one of his guests has written "Santa, don't eat so much! 😊"

Santa has been Santa Claus. Once, he was down in Invercargill, the southernmost of New Zealand's cities, in the middle of winter. (In New Zealand Christmas is celebrated twice, once on the formal date and once in the middle of July, when the world is snowbound.) He was picked up by a man who turned out to be the principal of a local school. The principal saw him as a gift from God—their school's Santa Claus had gone missing at the

last minute and there was no one to fill his boots. The school's children would be going without a promised Santa Claus visit that year. Then, caught in the principal's headlights with his thumb out in a blizzard, stood Santa. The principal was ecstatic.

“He asked me if I would like to be their school's Santa Claus. They'd give me a lot of money, he said. They were pretty desperate. I told him I didn't need any money, but that I would gladly do it. I had my full Santa get-up with me at the time, which made him even happier. He told me it was such luck to find someone who could play Santa Claus. Yadda yadda.

“And I told him, ‘Well, I *am* Santa Claus.’ He laughed a little bit, said of course, of course, then asked me my real name. I said, ‘No, I'm Santa Claus. I'm him. The real deal.’

“He was a little more worried at this point. We got to the school and I saw him go over and talk to some of the other teachers, like, ‘Hey, I found this Santa Claus guy who thinks he's actually Santa Claus, and he doesn't even want to be paid.’ I could tell they were debating whether it was safe to leave me with the kids or not.

“Well, I just marched right into the school and started saying ‘Ho ho ho!’ It didn't take long; the kids basically stampeded me. I went through my whole routine. The principal and the others watched by the sidelines.

“They all gave me big thank yous when I finished. The principal said, ‘I don't know who you are, but thank you for saving our Christmas.’ I kind of winked at him and carried on.”

“The kids love this,” Santa says now, in Motueka, spotting a child nearing his postcard display. As the child approaches Santa, he’s gleeful with disbelief, not sure if he’s really seeing *the* Santa Claus. The kid tries to hide behind his mother’s leg. Santa beckons the child to come on out of there. He talks to the child as any Santa might, in the friendly, up-and-down cadence of a seasoned caregiver. Santa asks the child his name, and his mother says “Bradley.” Santa asks Bradley if he wants a toy, and Bradley nods, pressing his lips together. Santa pulls a small stuffed penguin from under the card table and offers it to Bradley. Bradley smiles and darts out his hand to receive his new gift. He’s unable to hide his joy. Bradley’s mother asks him, “What do we say now?,” and deposits a two-dollar coin in Santa’s jar. Bradley mouths an inaudible thank you, transfixed by the new toy. For Bradley, this is as good as it gets: Months past Christmas, here’s Santa giving him one last missed gift.

Santa’s face looks like a relief map of the Pyrenees, written of a hardscrabble life of conflict and constant movement. He’s a big, trundling man, with a tumbledown beard and an Einstein head of hair.

He has dreadlocks, but he doesn’t like them, and shakes them frequently. During daytime business, he conceals the dreadlocks behind his dendritic hair. After work, he lets his dreadlocks free, still hating “the damn hippie things.”

Santa has dreadlocks due to an accident not long ago. Santa had been out hitchhiking, on a miniature sightseeing trip, and before long a car pulled over. “The

driver—I could tell there was something not quite right about him right away,” Santa says.

“Turns out he was going to commit suicide and he took me along for the ride. He was going to drive his car right over a cliff; he didn’t care. Of course, I didn’t know any of this until we were headed for the cliff.”

He pauses and shakes his head, scratching his dreadlocks. “I split my head wide open and got into lots of trouble,” he says. “He didn’t get a scratch.”

The attempted suicide left Santa healing in the hospital for over a month, where he gained the dreadlocks.

I wait for more. Santa scratches at his beard and yawns. “Is that it?” I ask. I want to know more, more about the driver, more about the feeling of getting into a car with a visibly unstable man. But Santa says, “Yeah, that’s it,” so that’s it. Santa doesn’t want to think any more about it. He shakes his dreadlocks again, as if to free them from his head.

Two Techniques for Exiting a Car If Picked Up by an Untrustworthy Driver

If you suspect a driver is psychologically unstable or otherwise dangerous, there are two surefire ways to avoid having to ride with him.

First, claim to have forgotten your wallet. Thank the driver for the ride, but throw up your hands and curse yourself for your oversight. Remember to keep your wallet hidden during this pretense, not embossed in your back pocket, a rookie’s mistake any seasoned traveler shouldn’t be making anyway. Wait for the driver to pull away, out of sight, then continue on your way.

If the driver insists he can take you back to get your wallet, or is otherwise unnerving, claim you have diarrhea. Really play up the moaning and groaning, too, as if you're truly suffering. "It doesn't matter how crazy they are," says Santa, "no one wants to have shit in their car."

If neither of these techniques works, your best bet is to just open the door and jump out.

Santa's done just that. At one point Santa says, eating a country breakfast, "My life is the definition of pain." Then he cackles.

How couldn't he have lived his life and ended up addled, crazed, and eccentric? How could he live his life without being so to begin with? I don't say these things, not wanting to sidetrack him. I see him thinking of new stories.

"But pain is the best," he continues. "Only pain makes life worthwhile. Without pain, what's the point?" He goes back to his eggs and sausage, digging in. I think of the miners, them knowing that comfort is the opposite of happiness. I think of my own experiential knowledge that joy may only be achieved through difficulty and pain.

Not long after, he tells two stories in quick succession.

"Here: When I was hitchhiking through Afghanistan, camped out on some dead-end barracks bunk, I was attacked in the middle of the night—I awoke to the sight of a gun pointed right at my head." He points his fingers right between his eyes. "There was a guy on top of me, screaming at me for being an infidel. It's pretty shocking, you know, to wake up to that.

“Anyway, I wasn’t going to lie there listening to that. I kneed that kid right in the business, beat him up a little bit, and got the hell out of there.

“Not that I didn’t sympathize with him. Back in those times, if you *didn’t* capture ‘infidels,’ you could have had your dick cut off and sewn in your mouth as you sat there bleeding to death. That was the way they did it over there, during those times.”

Santa shrugs, deadened to the scope of human cruelty. The shrug ends the story. He eats some eggs and starts another.

“Another time,” he says, “I was on the eastern seaboard. This liquor salesman picked me up, and I could smell he was drunk. I needed the ride too much to deny him, and he seemed able to drive good enough. Until he swerved a few times. After that I promised myself I would get out at the next stop.

“But this guy didn’t stop. He just kept driving. I kept telling him I want to get off here, here, and here.

“So this guy asked me, ‘You like to get off?’” Santa raises his eyebrows. “He gave me this big smile, and right there I thought, uh-oh. So then just like that, while he’s driving—*while he’s driving*—he reaches over and grabs my dick. Well, I didn’t know he was like that, and I didn’t appreciate the attention, so I had to elbow and kick him to get him off me.

“As I was fighting him, he had completely leaned over onto my side of the car, so it was veering into the other lane, and of course, here comes this great big massive semi blaring its horn at us. So I had to jerk the car over to the shoulder and slam the brakes, as well as I could, crawling over his body to do so. I didn’t know if he was unconscious or what. We just barely escaped smashing into that damn semi. I saved that bastard’s life.

“As soon as we were stopped, though, I got out and I mean I *ran*. I looked back once to see how my drunken paramour was doing, and he was kind of just rolling around on the ground. He tried to chase me a little bit at first, but forget it—he was too far gone. I didn’t care either way; I was out of there.”

Santa shakes his head and laughs. “On the road, it’s like that all the time.”

I don’t know how many of his stories are true. There may have been a crazed young Afghani or Santa may have read that story in a newspaper. The liquor salesman may have been imagined, or a friend’s story embellished by time and retelling. It may have been an action film made personal. I don’t interrupt him, though, because like any story, the thrill of the tale is too important to interrupt with doubt. If he’s lying, he’s lying well enough that it doesn’t matter.

His stories are fables, better fact than fiction. Hearing his stories, I can see myself in them, see the possibility the road brings, and this is exciting. If his stories are true, the man is as much a legend as he boasts. If they’re not, he’s a lonely old man who dresses like a myth, who’s too stubborn to be with his family, and who’s still a wonderful storyteller.

I both envy him and worry for him. He’s built a life of being lost, of knowing so many places, of being difficult to trace, of making opportunity, of chasing passions, of not compromising, or he’s at least attempted to, and these are traits I hold dear to me as well. But by making himself so difficult to find, he’s denied himself the privilege of lasting friendship or experience. His deadlines renew themselves and he’s stuck with temporary connections, a tourist in and out of people’s lives.

Once Santa says, “I had a business in Florida that made me more or less an instant millionaire, but I had to get out of it because it was ruining me.”

“How do you mean, though?” I ask.

He grunts and lowers his eyebrows. He says, “It doesn’t matter how. That’s boring. It goes up and down. It comes back all the time.”

Another time, he says he only hitches at night, as “that’s the safest.” He leaves this logic unexplained. I let it go, ready for more stories.

My experiences hitchhiking have been much tamer than Santa’s, some of them too polite to tell. I suspect Santa’s built a similar filter, that he’s selecting the worst stories from a lifetime of good ones. I ask him, “What about good times on the road?”

He says, “They’re absolutely in the majority. And they’re absolutely uninteresting.” I can’t agree with him more here. Stories that go too well aren’t stories at all, just occurrences to forget. Disasters form the narrative of a life. He says, “What’s interesting—what I’m going to write *my* book about—is hitchhiking as a way for people to explore their hidden sexual desires. It happens all the time, married men and women doing things on the road they’d get looked down on for back home.”

I wait for the location of this story, thinking it’s going to be Tasmania, Finland, Tierra del Fuego. It’s Texas.

“I had one guy pick me up in West Texas, out in all that nothing—I was going to El Paso for some reason—and he looked like a respectable guy, business suit and all that. This was in the late ’50s. He seemed all right, perfectly normal, upstanding citizen, whatever. We made small talk for awhile, then he went silent. He seemed to be struggling

to put into words what he wanted to say, so I just asked him, ‘What?,’ you know. ‘What do you want?’

“And then he asked me, just as a business proposition, you understand, could he watch me masturbate. He didn’t want to do anything, didn’t want to touch me or anything, he just wanted to watch. He said he’d give me fifty dollars. Back then, that was a major amount. But I couldn’t do it. It was...no, it was just too weird.”

I’m ready to doubt him, but I don’t. I’m less suspicious of his story than I am of my own suspicion. The story’s unlikely enough that it’s probably the unvarnished truth.

“Then he told me he’d give me a hundred. I thought about it and I mean, I could really use that money. I was down to two or three dollars to my name, so I reconsidered and figured, all right, whatever, it’s not *my* problem here.”

I think of where facts might be skewed, how Santa might have obliged the man the first time the man asked, how he might have been reluctant to do so only in retrospect. How he might not have paid at all.

“So he had me stand in front of his headlights while he masturbated to me masturbating. It felt too strange to describe. After I did it, he let me back in the car, real professional, gave me the money, and dropped me off at my stop. Didn’t touch me once. All business.

“But back in those days, on the road, that was the only place you could do something like that, explore those desires. Where else were you going to find that in the ’50s? Now people do it all the time.”

I think of him sitting on the sidewalk in Motueka, selling postcards, plotting, planning these stories. But I trust him more than my skepticism. I know that life grows stranger the more you engage it.

“After he dropped me off, I went farther down the road, and that was something else, what I found.” He stops talking.

“What did you find?” I ask.

“That’s about exactly what I found.”

“What?”

He smiles. His stories have these conspicuous gaps, these riddle endings. I don’t know how much of the truth he’s telling, though it’s just as difficult to know why he’d fabricate so extensively. Something tells me this story is true. It’s a rare sort found selling postcards in a smalltown in a foreign country, rarer yet a headstrong and entrepreneurial man unafraid of all strangers, who houses anyone who’ll take him up on it. If he’s fooling, he’s fooled everyone. Or if he’s fooling, I’d rather be fooled. I’d rather believe this level of experience is possible if one has the gumption to attempt it.

Also, if I express any doubt, the stories stop, and that’s the last thing I want to happen.

Five Reactions from Drivers while Hitchhiking

There are five primary reactions from drivers when hitchhiking.

1. The driver suddenly observes something on the side of the road directly opposite you, something that intrigues the driver until he’s just beyond you, having evaded eye contact and thus guilt.

2. The driver grimaces at you in angry disbelief, letting you know he would never, ever let you in his car under any circumstance.
3. The driver frowns elaborately, raises his hands, gestures at a car full of relatives or boxes, and sometimes even brakes before ultimately driving on, letting you know *he would if he could*. This reaction is my favorite.
4. The driver gives a simple, almost criminally casual shake of the head: *No*.
5. The driver stops.

Santa is not without his detractors. From his career as being Santa Claus, he's used to garnering two reactions from people.

"People either really, really love me or really, really hate me," he says. "For some reason, I have the instant ability to bring out extremes of personality in people. Who knows?"

Santa's used to having trouble with policemen who take him for a peddler or religious civilians who think he's a public nuisance and an eyesore, and he often has to deal with the formal complaints of upset residents.

Policemen first tried to stop Santa by telling him he needed a license to vend. When he asked for one, he was told he'd have to wait a week for the license form to be delivered, another week for it to be processed by the city council of nearby Nelson, then a third week for the approved license to be delivered back to him. Instead of losing three weeks' business, Santa hit the road, hitchhiking down to Nelson, obtaining the proper

license form, filling it out, and having it signed then and there. Xeroxing a copy for himself, he hitchhiked back to Motueka the same day, where he set up shop, his license to vend brandished.

Months later, I run into a traveler in Te Anau, New Zealand, who remembers running into “that big fat crazy guy in Motueka.” The traveler, Cody, an Oregonian apple-picking his way through the country, tells me he went to one of Santa’s dinners one evening and was invited to stay the night. Not one to turn down free room, he opted to sleep on the couch, thinking it’d be nicer than the apple-farm tent he’d been residing in. Santa wasn’t happy with him sleeping on the couch, though.

“He kept asking me wouldn’t I like to just come sleep down on the floor,” Cody says, “where he had some nasty old mattresses laid out. I told him no thanks about five times before he finally let me be. Then at about two a.m., he gets up and has this like hoagie as a late-night snack, eating the whole thing before going back to lay down on his ‘bed.’ As soon as he was back down, I decided I was out of there. I gathered my stuff as quietly as I could and tiptoed away.

“I tell you what, there was no feeling greater than running down the empty streets of Motueka at two-thirty in the morning, just running away from that place. I was so happy to get back to my tent at the apple farm. The farther I got from that place, the cleaner I felt.

“He was always giving everyone these damn hugs,” Cody continues. “I mean, I know his real name—I saw it on one of his newspaper article things—so if he would have tried anything...”

Cody shudders at the memory, then orders another beer. What else can I say but, “Yeah, he is kind of strange.” I don’t argue with Cody. It’s not worth it. Cody didn’t wait long enough to understand.

Santa and I go out on the third night to buy food for guests. He’s in a good mood: he sold his 3,000th postcard today, and is that much closer to a plane ticket back to Maryland, that much closer to a hospital, and, though he doesn’t say it, that much closer to his family. By 4,000 postcards, Santa thinks he’ll have enough money to fly back home. He wishes he could sell 5,000, but his license to vend expires in two weeks. He’s hoping every guest he asked to will show up tonight—he’ll feed and house them all.

On the way to the grocery, Santa stops at the liquor store to pick up a bottle of Jack Daniels. He takes it to the clerk.

“Sixteen,” the clerk says.

“Sixteen!” Santa says. “I was going to give you ten!”

“Ten! You’re killing me.” The clerk shakes his head and accepts the ten.

Santa knows he can get deals all around Motueka. One morning he gives me a dollar coin and tells me to get him a fresh bakery roll. “Tell them it’s for Santa.” I go to the bakery and order the roll, eager to see if this works. The order comes out to just under three dollars. “Oh, it’s for Santa,” I say, holding up his dollar coin. The clerk smiles, recognizing not the first of Santa’s errand boys. “That’ll do then,” she says.

It's a short walk from the liquor store to the grocery, but on the way Santa is handed small bills from several passersby. He thanks them; they mumble clandestine welcomes and shuffle away. Like so many things of his life, he doesn't explain these gestures any more than, "Oh yeah, that's Ron."

Santa asks his way into deals in the grocery too. "Where are the carrot packages for a dollar?" he asks, and a clerk digs around in the back and finds him one. Santa speaks to everyone he can in the grocery, telling a frustrated man on a cellphone to look at the sunset, asking the cashiers how their days are going. We look for hidden deals, both of us holding a basket in each hand. Santa doesn't use shopping carts because "kids wear their shit-covered shoes riding in those carts. Come on."

As we cross the street back to Santa's house, cars slow down or stop, waving at and greeting him as he ambles by. For what it's worth, he may well be Saint Nick, guardian and keeper of Motueka.

On the fourth day, my last, Santa says, "It's too bad you're leaving. Two really nice-looking Swedish girls said they were definitely coming by for dinner. But if you're going to be gone..."

"That offer might have come earlier," I say.

"But you've got to hit the road. And when you've got to hit the road, all the Swedish girls in the world can't stop you."

I guess this is a plea for more company. For all of Santa's constant motion and spontaneity, I can tell he also likes to be in one place for more than a moment, that he's

getting too old to be on the run all the time, that he misses the simple comforts and lasting friendships of being grounded, a word he'd outwardly disown.

I consider staying, knowing it's not bad here. I've already upset my itinerary by stopping to visit Santa, and I feel rushed when I look at how much farther I have yet to go, how many places I have yet to see. But staying on would be nice, more welcome than exchanging the same list of biographical facts with a new driver, a new acquaintance, a new stranger. The more time I spend with Santa, the more he reveals himself, letting me see more the longer I stay.

But I have to go. I know I'm missing more goldmines of stories, but my days have gotten too small, arranged around tiny errands, their possibility more and more limited. I want to be back on the road. I need to be lost again. If Santa's inspired me at all, it's to go, to not wait. If I were him, I'd already be on my way, my feet moving, my thumb out.

When I leave, Santa gives me a bear hug. He tells me he loves me, and he means it.

CHAPTER SEVEN CODA: AFTERWARDS

After I leave Santa's house, I thumb my way out of Motueka, down to Nelson and then farther. On my way out of Nelson, another hitchhiker arrives on the same road and I get territorial. I wonder how Santa deals with other hitchhikers. Luckily for me, this guy gets it all wrong: he sits down on his pack and thrusts his thumb out like a challenge, wearing sunglasses and looking at anything but approaching cars.

Later, when we're both back home, I try to locate Santa, calling everyone in Maryland with the last name the Motueka city council gave me. I want more stories, more tips, more interaction. I figure with thirteen siblings and who knows how many grandchildren, surely someone will have at least heard of a very strange uncle or grandfather. No one knows, though, and many are offended to be asked. "He calls himself the 'world champion hitchhiker'?" one man asks, laughing. "No, I don't know him, but he sounds like an *idiot!*" The Motueka Chamber of Commerce has no official records of him either, just his name, which may be fake.

He's nowhere to be found, escaped back into anonymity, likely now hiding in the care of his family. This is appropriate in the best way: Even the world's greatest hitchhiker is anchored, eventually, drawn back to the ones he knew first and best from a lifetime of relationships instantaneous and forgotten.

I'm sure he left Motueka with a small bag only, too experienced to bring anything more than just enough, camping along roadside forests, letting his thumb take him to the airport however quickly it would, only really holding on to his postcard money, only

really needing that airplane ticket. When he arrived home then, back in Maryland after so long gone, I'll bet he stayed.

CHAPTER EIGHT: KAIPAROWITS

Grand Staircase National Monument, Escalante, Utah, U.S.A.

The Kaiparowits Plateau rises out of the low desert of southern central Utah like a dreadnought. The land here is rent and beveled, sere and entropic. It's covered in juniper, sage, piñon, and cacti. Whole fields of slickrock flow with tidal grace through arroyos, washes, and canyons. From the high plateau down, cliffs plummet white, bistre, and green. Anasazi ruins hide in caves amongst these heights and distances, and wild horses sprint across it unknown.

In aerial view Kaiparowits looks like a leaf vein, or a fractal or a millipede. It stretches sixty miles long and stands 7,584 feet tall, 4,000 feet higher than the Lake Powell basin below it. Home to the Loneliest Point in America, the plateau can be seen for hundreds of miles on all sides, but no one ever goes there. When I learned that, I had to go.

The land around Kaiparowits has been designated and abandoned, a mixture of the hopefulness of Mormon homesteaders and the morbid realities of the ranchers who settled and stayed. Cut through the plateau are Tibbet Canyon, Clints Canyon, Wesses Canyon, Sarah Ann Canyon, and Drip Tank Canyon, as well as Whities, Needle Eye, and Paradise Canyons. There's Nipple Creek, Wiggler Creek, Wahweap Creek, Canaan Peak, and Surprise Valley. There's also Carcass Canyon, Trap Canyon, Deadhorse Canyon, No Mans Mesa, and Deadman Ridge.

The Kaiparowits Plateau, or the Grand Staircase, or Fiftymile Mountain, stands ten miles north of Navajo Mountain and Sam's homestead on the Utah-Arizona border,

separated by Lake Powell. The plateau's southern terminus at Harveys Fear Cliff points at Sam's house like an omen. Kaiparowits isn't part of the Navajo Nation, though the Nation's spirits may still roam here, wandering beyond arbitrary reservation boundaries in the chaos of night.

Native Americans revered the plateau and used it as a fortress against first cowboys and then Mormons. The cowboys came and went, having no use for such ruined land, but the Mormons stayed on. The hardest among them used the plateau for ranching, until they too grew tired of the land and left. Their cattle grew wild and live there today, like all things on the plateau unmaintained by all but weather, tectonics, and god.

I plan to hike the plateau in a week. I've never done anything like it. My parents hate my plan, and rent a satellite phone for me. I don't want it but I take it. Gumption and the wild joy of discovery, of trying to find a frontier in a too-known world, drives my plan. My plans focus more on the spectacular than the practical—I read and care more about Anasazi legends than wilderness backpacking skills. I've camped before, hiked distances, and figure the way to do something is to do it, this being no exception: Either I'll go and explore the place or be scared of it from afar and never set foot on it. To delay my plans is to endanger them forever. Later, I'll recognize this thought process as overeager hubris, but a necessary hubris, one borne of the privilege of youth to fail and fail well. As polemical as the slogan remains, and as Santa told me, there is not a better time to go than now and there never will be, and this will remain true no matter how much hindsight I gain.

So I study topographical maps, laying them one over the other in university libraries, trying to see what mysteries they can reveal. The maps lie dead on the table, their

information cold and inapplicable, the reality of the place far deeper and more unchartable than they show. The maps might as well be art, and they are, but beyond that I feel I'm on my own; the maps resemble antiques already, their information acquired in the '70s and probably outdated by nature. I'm prepared for the few tracks the maps show to be already reclaimed by the wilds on top. The maps show little but the concentric curves of elevation gain and loss, with no land otherwise marked.

I pack my rucksack with gallons of water and textbooks and hike around campus after dark with it. It weighs close to eighty pounds, and I have to stop every 500 feet to catch my breath. I adjust straps and bend over, panting and gasping, adding another gallon.

When I'm not out walking, I learn more: Kaiparowits is geographically and paleontologically important. Dinosaur hunters have found a Triceratops skull and Gryposaurus skeleton here, as well as Cretaceous bones, teeth, eggshells, and footprints. The dinosaur hunters claim further secrets remain.

In 1965, oil engineers attempted to drill in the area, but faced opposition from environmental groups and, more importantly, the rock itself. Miners built roads across the plateau and installed huge drills on top of it, but had to blast through too much rock for too little payoff. Stymied, they abandoned the drilling in 1975.

In 1996, Bill Clinton designated Kaiparowits a national historical preserve, calling it the Grand Staircase National Monument, protecting the land from any further oil drilling. In response to the designation, residents of nearby town Escalante burned an effigy of Clinton in the middle of their main street.

I drive to Escalante in the middle of March, the Southern Utah desert still holding on to winter. Escalante is named after explorer and friar Silvestre Vélez de Escalante. Most residents pronounce their town “Es-kuh-lahnt.”

Escalante is a small, sudden town with a general store, gas station, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) office, Circle D Motel, Cowboy Blues restaurant, and outdoor supplier. The area around Escalante abounds with desert recreation: visitors can wind their way through slot canyons, rumble along merciless four-by-four roads, or bike to the ghost town of Egypt.

Kaiparowits looms huge over Escalante, still snowdusted this early in the year. I get a room at the Circle D and head to the BLM office. I tell the rangers my plan.

“How many people go up on the plateau?” I ask.

One ranger says, “Not many. Not many at all.”

The other says, “You ask that, you’re talking a matter of years, not days or seasons. Three went up this year, two went up that year. As often as not it’s zero.”

I smile.

The first says, “Course, most go up to the top, camp out, and come on down. You’re doing what, five or six days or summat?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Twelve miles a day, five days; ten miles a day, six days.”

The rangers share a skeptical look. The second says, “You should take notes while you’re up. Any flora you see. To be honest, we don’t know much of a good damn about anything up there.”

The first asks, “You have a sat phone with you? GPS? Maps?”

“Yes,” I say.

The second asks, “You have ropes? Rappelling gear? Climbing stuff?”

I pause. “Yeah,” I lie. I didn’t know I’d need climbing equipment—didn’t see any cliffs on the maps I’d studied—but I also don’t want to be stopped here in the BLM office. If there’s a problem up top, I reason, I’ll get around it or turn back. Rangers are obliged to be overcautious at all times. They don’t have fun, they enforce rules.

“Looks good then,” the first ranger says. “You ain’t going up there alone, are you?”

The day before I go up, I drive Smokey Mountain Road, a four-by-four road across the western side of the plateau. Smokey Mountain Road is fifty-eight miles and five hours long. Before I drive it, I talk to two mechanics in Big Water, south of Escalante. Big Water is a town of 417 people, a polygamous community with a Libertarian mayor.

“You’re not likely to see horses up there,” one of the mechanics says. “The government airlifted them using cargo planes from the War. But hell, on the other hand, you may still. You may see horses, cattle, hares, wolves, lions.”

“Lions?” I ask.

“Mountain lions,” his friend says. “And others. You’re likely to find anything up ’ere. But we don’t want to give away all the fun. You go on and have fun. And good luck, you idiot.”

“He means that in the nicest way,” says the first. They both laugh.

I tell people I'm an only child, which is a selective truth, not meaning that I'm my parents' only child but that my siblings have passed.

As I plan this trip, I keep thinking I'm the last of three. My sister died of SIDS at three months, my brother of a brain tumor at twenty-seven years. I am the youngest, the one left.

"This trip—why don't you wait for another time?" my mom asks.

"There are only so many places left," I say. "There's only so much time."

"If you can find someone to go with you, you can go."

"If I can go, I can go."

I see my plan as one of being out in a place primevally wild. She sees it as one of being away from home, endangered and alone.

I grew up mostly alone, training myself to be independent, learning how to entertain myself in the absence of siblings. Alone after school, I invented, and invented, and invented, any ideas I could think of, ideas for new video games, ideas for comic books, ideas for drawings, songs, paintings, and eventually stories. I jotted these ideas down and put them in a drawer, which became two and three drawers and then a cabinet to itself.

And I walked. Walking catalyzed my mind, bred new ideas and clarified others, and so I walked more. In Indiana, my home state, I walked through cornfields and woods, along lakeshores and backroads. I explored the woods near my house every day with my sheepdog Bart or later, Labrador Shadow. I walked at daytime and night. When I moved to Chicago, I rode the subway for 15 or 20 stops, got out, and walked home. When I moved to Colorado at nineteen to attend college, I walked along streambeds and up mountains. I couldn't imagine doing these walks with anyone else—I saw company as a

burden, slowing me down, keeping me from any worthwhile experience. Having grown up to distrust the permanence of friendships or relationships, I learned how to be alone well, until all I wanted was to be alone, and so I was.

For my mom's sake, I ask classmates and acquaintances if they want to go on the trip. No one does. I post flyers around campus and at the school's Wilderness Center. Three separate people show interest before ultimately backing out, one the day before departure. I get fed up with them all and so I just go.

In Escalante, I meet adventure tour guide Drew Cozby, who agrees to give me a ride to the southeastern end of Kaiparowits, from where I'll begin my hike.

I tell Drew, "I'm going to start at the bottom and hike up, southeast to northwest. When I get to the north end I'll come down and hitchhike my way back into town."

"Just come down off the cliffs?" he says. "Sounds easy!" He laughs a hyena's laugh. My plan is half-baked and ambitious, and has a miserably slim margin of error. I know this, but ignore it. "Jesus, I hope you're prepared for all this," Drew says. "But I know, I know, sometimes you have to do things like this. I've been there."

We leave early on a Monday morning. I plan to finish by Saturday. Drew drives me to the southern end of the plateau along Hole-in-the-Rock Road.

"If this doesn't work out," he says, "there are some really cool canyons nearby, all around here."

"Don't most people go to the canyons, though?" I ask.

Drew moved to Escalante five years ago from Moab, which he claims is now overcommercialized. Drew's spent the last two decades this way, traveling from area to area, taking people on adventure tours, skipping town when town gets overcommercialized. "Escalante will probably be too busy for me soon enough," he says.

The juddering washboard Drew drives over clips his words; he sounds like he's talking through a fan. He's used to it: Hole-in-the-Rock Road is sixty miles of washboard and worse, the only access road to Kaiparowits or any of the area's attractions. Drew eases his truck through ditches and out of the way of boulders. Tumbleweeds blow across the road, and he drives right through them.

Hole-in-the-Rock Road was built by Mormon pioneers as a thoroughfare to the Four Corners, where they could raise crops. The hole in the rock was a narrow wedge through two massive boulders. The hole plummeted down, granting passage but barely. In 1879, Silas S. Smith and almost 200 other men, women, and children set out to create the road in six weeks. The pioneers cut into the rock below the wedge, making a trail for their wagons. The men hung from ropes to drill and blast through solid cliffrock. They built wooden trackways over boulderfields. They lowered their wagons with ropes. They goaded their horses down the trail and nine of the horses fell to their deaths. When the men ran out of dynamite to blast the trail, they drilled stakes into the rock and built a ledge with woodbrush and boulders. Each wagon they sent down the trail threatened an avalanche of stone. They did all this in full business suits.

At night they danced on the slickrock, skipping over water pockets and cavities, their shoes loud in the desert night, the constellations above magnificent. Expedition member Samuel Cox was a fiddler who played nightly. Those who weren't dancing sang.

The pioneers' journey didn't take six weeks but six months. No one died and two children were born. When they arrived at the Four Corners and told of their route, they were called liars.

After the Mormons built the road, it fell into disuse, blocked and crushed by fallen boulders, eventually eroding into nothing. Today it's impassable, a dead end.

We pass a roadmarker and Drew slows down. The roadmarker says BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT 33. Drew points at it and laughs.

"Nobody owns this land, really," he says. "The BLM originally put those signs up as milemarkers. The residents didn't like that, so someone from town came by and ripped each one out of the ground and dumped them all on the steps of the BLM office. The BLM took the signs and put them back up, only this time as kilometer markers. Ornery sons of bitches." I'm not sure if he means the BLM or the residents as the ornery sons of bitches, or both.

As we approach the trailhead, I look through my gear. I have insufficient food, lousy maps photocopied from gazetteers, and far too much water. My pack weighs over sixty pounds. I don't have a stove, instead relying on granola bars, trail mix, chocolate bars, and blocks of ramen. I have too many shirts and too little first aid. I'm a posterboy of amateur mistakes. I can't wait to start.

Drew drives me up to the Fiftymile Bench, the second step of the Grand Staircase. The third step is Fiftymile Mountain, the top of Kaiparowits. The road on Fiftymile Bench is no road but two tire tracks through low juniper brush, which hisses as it scrapes

the bottom of Drew's chassis. The road is godawful. I bounce in my seat and Drew laughs.

At the end of the road, Drew stops to let me out. "Be careful," he says. "If you decide to quit, quit. There are better things to do around here than this big dumb mountain. Call me on the sat phone. There's no shame in it."

"Thank you," I say, and begin hiking straight up.

Snow still lies feet-deep on the mountain, right from the beginning. I'm too early in the season to hike, but this is the time I have to hike, so this is the time I hike. I won't let months of planning and anticipation be so easily discouraged.

An old Mormon cattle trail ascends up to the top. I find and lose it in snowbanks and rockslides. Towards the top of the plateau the trail vanishes completely, swallowed in snow.

I make it onto the plateau in an hour, sweat-drenched and ecstatic. Two enormous cairns stand on top, and I add my stone to each. The cattle trail disappears into nothing on top. I ignore it and follow the plateau edge. I can see over a hundred miles of honeycombed canyonlands. The deeper canyons cut purple through the indefatigable desert. The Henry Mountains rise in the distance, past Canyonlands and Capitol Reef National Parks. In the haziest distance is Colorado. Except for the tan ribbon of Hole-in-the-Rock Road, I see no signs of civilization.

I walk through snow along the edge. My boots get soaked. I stop frequently to shed my pack and wring out my socks. My map tells me the cattle trail continues along the top of the plateau, but I never again see it.

I'm exhausted immediately. I stop at least every half hour. I eat granola bars for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I eat big handfuls of M&Ms. I curse myself for being too stubborn to use a cookstove, wanting to make it hard on myself. I walk through the day, keeping along the rim, enjoying the hundred-mile views outward and beyond.

That night I stop underneath a tree and pitch a tent. I call my parents.

"The views are incredible," I tell them. "It's an amazing place." I focus on the positive. I don't mention my exhaustion, my lack of food, my too-heavy pack, my soaked feet.

They ask, "Where are you, though? Do you know where you are?"

I say, "I have the GPS."

They say, "Be careful. Be more careful."

I say goodbye. I crawl in my tent and sleep for twelve hours.

When I was four or five, I ran to the edge of a cliff on Lake Michigan. So I'm told—I don't actually remember this, or know where the cliff was. All I know is that I began running towards the cliff, heedless of anything.

I made it to the edge, stopped, and looked over. I pointed down to the water far below. I looked back at my parents and giggled. They ran to get me. They were scared to death.

When the Kaiparowits story is told, this story is always told as well.

Tuesday, the second day, I wake up to find my boots and socks frozen. I beat the socks on the ground and twist them in my hands but eventually just put them on and start moving.

As soon as I start moving, I get lost. I aim my compass for northwest and walk that way, regardless of terrain. I walk straight through piñon pines, which scratch my arms in crosshatch. The trees here are survivors, having outlasted heat and drought. They cut if touched. Cholla cactus buds stick to my shoelaces, and also my arms and legs. I walk to avoid snow, but the snow cannot be avoided.

I find an ancient cattlepen, tiny and derelict. Its fence is made of piñon branches. The branches droop and fall about. The pen's wooden posts lean groundward. Cattle, if there are any, could walk right through this stinky little pen, and I walk through it too.

I don't meet anyone else on top of Kaiparowits, of course. From the top, I can see a car or two driving along Hole-in-the-Rock daily, far, far below. An overwhelming sense of stillness, solitude, and space pervades every movement. It's perfect.

The air is clear and dry. The afternoons grow hot. I tuck my shirt under the straps of my pack to keep my shoulderblades from rubbing into blisters. I sweat from heat and exertion, body hot from the sun, feet cold from the snow.

My pack is so heavy with all its damn water. If I'd have known there was snow everywhere, I would have brought a single bottle, filled it with snow, let it melt, purified it, and drunk. But I didn't know about the snow, so I keep walking.

Deep river canyons scar the edges of the plateau, ancient tributaries of Lake Powell. I come to the edge of one and it plummets several hundred feet. My map tells me this is Blackburn Canyon. On the opposite side of Blackburn Canyon, just under the rim, I see an Anasazi cave, the kind they hid artifacts in. Relics and potshards likely reside in that cave, but I can't get to them. I think of the rangers' warning of needing climbing ropes. The entrance to the cave consists of a climb down the vertical rock of an opposing cliff face.

I try to find an alternate way around Blackburn. The plateau narrows here so its east and west sides are less than a mile apart.

I find a copse of aspens. I walk tightrope across fallen trees through it. The aspens lead me to the bottom of a creekbed, which is still iced over. When I try to cross the creekbed I break through. I curse at the ice. Thick snow covers the opposite creekbank. I crawl up it and warm my feet by holding them under my arms, one at a time. I scour my map and don't know where I am.

I'm getting tired of granola bars. I set up for the night under a gnarled pine tree. I eat the granola bars, trail mix, and dry noodles, because I'm very hungry. I wish I'd brought a cookstove, wish I could be bothered to use one. I call my parents. They answer immediately.

"Still here," I say, trying to hide the beginnings of despair.

"How are you?" my mom asks. "Are you done yet?"

"I'm fine," I say. "Cold. Tired. Fine."

"Are you eating enough?" my dad asks.

“I had some,” I say. I hear them on the other end of the line, on the other side of the country, breathing. “This is getting pretty expensive,” I say. Satellite phone calls cost four dollars a minute.

“We love you,” they say. The words pull me back to them, remind me of them saying it as they tucked me in when I was younger, when they would check in on me between shifts to visit my brother in the hospital. The words are an induction: “Come home.”

“Yes,” I say.

I hang up. The night sky above shines spectacular, the best I’ve seen, the clearest and brightest and most stunning. There are reasons for being here, I think. The Milky Way arcs overhead. The sheer number of stars makes constellations indistinguishable.

I’m too tired and cold to look at the sky for long, though, so I crawl back in my tent. I sleep poorly.

“Call him adventurous boy.”

–Wallace Stegner, *Mormon Country*, regarding Everett Ruess

“I supposed it was passable because it was there.”

–Everett Ruess, diary entry, 1932

In the research I do into the lore of Kaiparowits, I keep coming back to the name Everett Ruess. Ruess was a vagabond who spent days and weeks in the deserts of southeastern

Utah in the early 1930s, who went where others told him he couldn't possibly go. I find similarities between myself and Ruess, and start seeing him as a hero figure. Ruess was restless and reckless and foolish and young and angry and lonely and deeply happy alone. He worried sick any who cared about him. He fell off a cliff on Kaiparowits when he was twenty years old and vanished. No one saw or heard of Ruess again until 2009, when his bones were discovered just east of the plateau.

I read Ruess' wilderness journals, two volumes of which have been collected by W.L. Rusho. Ruess understood the will to vanish, and to do so willingly. Nowheres weren't exciting because they were hiding places from the world, but because they were new places to explore, because they were—actually, truly—full of wonder. Ruess took only burros, hard tack, his journals, and his wood-block carvings with him on his journeys. He couldn't stop writing and creating, and I like this about him too.

Everett Ruess died in the desert. He often fell while scaling cliffs, having scratched his signature Nemo, meaning no one, in the sandstone above. After he vanished, his burros were found in Davis Gulch, at the base of Fiftymile Mountain, where Drew had dropped me off.

The third day, Wednesday, is the last day. I spend the morning walking around in an enormous circle. I somehow walk due north and due south at the same time. I check my compass against my GPS against the sun. The sun circles around in the sky. I force

myself to walk exactly straight regardless of terrain and I go in all four cardinal directions. I feel like I'm being hoodwinked by geography or gods. I'm lost again.

When I realize I've walked for four hours in a circle, I tell Kaiparowits, "All right. I surrender already." I retreat. I retrace my steps back to the eastern straight cliffs, then walk along the ridge, all the way back. The ground rises and dives. I walk over slickrock and through fields of juniper. I don't stop once. I grow delirious with exertion. My mind flits elsewhere.

I look for the enormous cairn signaling the way down, ready to go down down down down, ready to get back to Hole-in-the-Rock. I'll hitchhike or walk back, whatever. I just want off.

I find a cairn. It's not the right cairn, but in my state I don't know this. I start down. The path down grows steeper than the one I took up. I don't retreat. I crabwalk down it, and slide. The sun sets. I stop thinking clearly. I grow excited to be going down, however recklessly.

The trail ends at a cliffedge. I try to get back up but I can't. I scramble up the snow, feeling it sliding loose underneath me. The snow hides the topography beneath it; I can't tell what I can grab onto, what I can hold. What rocks I grab crumble in sandstone inadequacy; any distance I climb I slide back down immediately. It's the most maddening feeling in the world. I look down over the cliff and realize that's the way. Fear begins.

I feel like a failure. I feel choiceless—small thrills aren't thrilling and big thrills are impossible and here I am in reality on this rock outcrop.

I call my parents. "The cairn was a lie," I say. "I might possibly need some help."

My mom makes a wounded sound. My dad says, “Where are you?”

I give them my GPS coordinates. “I can’t get up or down,” I say.

“We’ll call Drew,” my dad says. “Whatever you do, stay put. Do not move.” They hang up.

I move. I try not to, I try to sleep on the ledge, but the ledge tilts downward, into an abyss. I imagine having a falling dream: I’d wake up to find myself actually falling. I can’t sleep here. The dark is arriving. My heart hammers. I feel rushed.

I take the most necessary items out of my pack. I tie my pack up and jettison it to the earth below, where I hope I’ll end up. This plan is a stupid plan but I feel stymied by every option. I can’t stay, I can’t go up. I can only go down. I have to go down, now, right now. I duck-walk the cliffside, looking for any way down. Everett would have loved this, but I hate it. I’m ready to be off the plateau and done.

Without my pack I feel like an acrobat, suddenly agile, unburdened. I see a way down and take it, going ledge to ledge. I hang and reach; I jump and hope. I move too quickly to second-guess myself. I make it down to one ledge, then another. I feel good. I’m going to get down to my pack and then be off this plateau, away from here, as far as I can get, back home if necessary.

Trying to get to the third ledge down I fall. I’m holding onto juniper, trying to position myself into a chute to spiderwalk down. I only vaguely know the technique, and my boots were wet. The chute is wider than it appears. I fall.

Fear strikes immediately, feeling like an inevitability arriving. I feel two blows to my head, blunt and warm. I don’t know where I am, can’t see anything or won’t look.

I land on another cliffedge. A burst of blood hits my face and I realize it's from my head. It brings me back to reality. I take off my pullover and press it against my head, where there's a rift. I scoot to the cliffedge. Night falls. I begin to shiver. I wait.



This wasn't my only disaster. Not even one year earlier, I descended Snowmass Mountain at night, having summited after sundown, descending until sunrise. I fell down hundreds and thousands of times that night, crossing a boulderfield that never seemed to end. If I have an idea of Hell, it's crossing a never-ending boulderfield at night.

Two years after the fall on Kaiparowits, my friend Adam and I had some trouble too. We'd been driving on washed-out desert backroads northeast of Kaiparowits, around Factory Butte near Henryville. Driving deep in a canyon, having lost any resemblance of a road, my Jeep got stuck in quicksand. Quicksand looks like any other sand. We tried to shovel the wheels out with our hands, but the Jeep only sank farther. We sighed and hiked back through the desert, retreating the way we had come. It was late afternoon when we started. We hiked through evening and then the long cold night, resting by lying face down on the ground. Gladly, "quick" sand works very slowly, so we had time.

In the middle of the night we saw a light hovering overhead. We assumed it was a satellite. We watched it moving and then it stopped moving. It stayed high overhead, stationary, for a few minutes. Then it zipped to the left, then to the right, then took off straight at unimaginable speed. Nothing manmade could have moved that fast. We both looked at each other.

I said, “You saw that, right?”

He nodded, then shrugged. He said, “Well, why couldn’t it be a UFO? Why couldn’t it be alien teenagers out for a joyride? They can have fun too.” We kept walking.

We hiked until daylight, thirty miles or so, until we rejoined the main road. We hitched a ride into nearby Caineville, which had a single motel and nothing else. We asked the manager of the Caineville Cove Inn for a room. He was reluctant to answer the door—he later told us two young men had just robbed a bank nearby, and were on the loose. We got a room and slept through the day.

The next day the manager’s friend rode back to the Jeep with us and towed it out of the quicksand. This was Adam’s trip to the West and I was his tour guide. I couldn’t help feeling cursed, or like a curse, having enough bad luck for the two of us.

On the cliffedge, I can’t see above or below. I can make out shapes, but they look awful. To the right appears to be a giant slide, to the left crumbling rocks, and both drop straight down. The world is caliginous, an optical trick. I look at the rock below me, hard and real, with thousands of tiny pocks.

I think about my mother, about her picture of my sister Julia, taken a week before she died. I think about my mother taking me home from school the day my brother Roger died. I think about living my life for myself instead of for my parents, and feel guilty and selfish. I see for a moment the cost of my stubborn autonomy. I’ve risked too much too often. For the first time, pure gumption had not gotten me through.

The moment lasts until I begin shivering, and I remember to begin shivering again, pure survival taking over. I concentrate on shivering to keep warm. If I stay still, I shiver involuntarily, which is worse.

I think of being visited by ghosts, by Anasazi ghosts or Navajo skinwalkers. I call out “Everett?,” then “Roger?” because why not. I say out loud, to no one, “Hello?”

I run through my list of angry maxims. I say to myself, “I’d rather die living than live dead.” I say, “There’s a difference between living and existing.” I say, “I believe in death after life.”

The slogans all sound childish, petty, and stupid. I decide that if I do get off the cliff, I’ll leave the slogans there.

I don’t think about God. I don’t think about luck, though I was lucky, and could have ended there. The next day, the EMTs will marvel at my luck, clucking in the ambulance.

On the cliffedge, motor functions are limited. I stand, walk four steps, urinate, walk four steps back, and sit down again. The process takes twenty minutes.

I lost my glasses in the fall, so can’t see much, but I do, in the night, see seven blurry blue lights circling around. They hover and move in arbitrary patterns, sometimes stopping altogether. I count them; there are seven. One of them stops directly overhead.

I knew they aren’t hallucination—my body can barely move but my mind is lucid. Later, my dad will tell me the lights could have been guardian angels. “They could have been guardian angels like they could have been secret Air Force aircraft,” I’ll tell him. “They could have been, but they weren’t.”

I can't sleep for the cold. I begin counting, going through the hundreds and then the thousands. I count eventually to 20,000. I lose track and repeat numbers. I half-sing the numbers. I turn my shivering into a miserable dance. The counting grows tiresome. I switch to multiplication tables and the Declaration of Independence. In the distance, the light of a factory smokestack pulses regularly. The desert lies otherwise invisible.

I know I'm not the only one staying up all night, waiting to see what tomorrow brings. I know my parents are doing the same, thousands of miles away. My mother's fear has to be greater than my own.

The coldest part of the day isn't the dead of night, but the morning twilight. As the sun appears, lighting the sky hours before it breaks the horizon, I shiver harder than ever, shaking and shimmying on that cliff, rubbing out a patch in the sand. I'm excited: I see the sun and I'm excited.

“Yesterday I did some miraculous climbing on a nearly vertical cliff, and escaped unscathed.... One way and another, I have been flirting pretty heavily with Death, the old clown.”

—Everett Ruess, in a letter to his brother, 1934, a month before vanishing

In the morning, the helicopter comes. I hear it before I see it. Its fast staccato signals pure relief. I worry, though. I fear I'll have to climb a flimsy ladder into the cockpit. I don't

think I'll be able to do that. I think of falling from the ladder as the helicopter sweeps over the desert.

The pilot lands the helicopter on my perch and pulls me in. He seems both bemused and put out.

“How you doing?” he asks.

I nod. I guess I have blood all over my face.

“You look a mess. But you're all right. You're young.” He smiles. He can't stop smiling, like a child with a secret. “You trying to find the hardest spot to get picked up?”

We fly over what would have been my route, and this feels like cheating. The plateau becomes worse and worse the farther north we fly, more rent by further canyons. From the helicopter EMTs transfer me into an ambulance. The ambulance drives me to a hospital in Kanab eighty miles away. In the hospital, I take a long shower, watching bits of skin and blood get sucked down the drain. In another room they staple my head and put bandages on my body. The bandages feel alive, like snails. I pick at them. One of the nurses tells me to stop it. They release me the same day and send me back to Escalante. They give me a rainbow-striped shirt, which is my only shirt then, the rest of them in my pack, my pack still on Fiftymile Bench. I walk out of the hospital slowly, taking tiny steps.

An Escalante police officer named John gives me a ride home. “I used to do all kinds of dangerous things my own self,” he says. “I mined, I logged, I worked the oil rigs. I was always trying to outdo myself with something more miserable.” He laughs. “Of course, that was back when I was a pup. No way I could do that shit now.”

John drops me off at the Circle D. As soon as I get to my room, the phone rings. I pick it up, expecting my parents. Instead, a reporter from the *Salt Lake Tribune* asks me what I was thinking. I answer as well as I can. He scolds me for hubris, which I resent at the time, thinking he didn't have the courage to do what I'd done. I tell him so and he says, "That's a weird way to say 'courage.'"

"Fuck off," I tell him. He's right and I'm right. I hang up and go to see Drew Cozby, the tour guide, to thank him.

Drew says, "Glad to see you off that thing. Here." He offers me spare ribs. I try but can't eat much. I've lost twelve pounds in three days and have no appetite.

"Do you want any fruit?" he asks. "Do you still have your sat?"

"Dropped it," I say.

"Had it when you needed it, though," he says. "If you're still up for it I'll show you some canyons sometime. Very short, very fun, nothing epic."

"I think I'm going to sleep for a few days," I tell him.

"Good plan. Now call your parents." I go back to the motel and do so. I tell them I'm all right, that I'm just going to take it easy for a few days.

The next night, my appetite back, I treat myself to a big steak at Escalante restaurant Cowboy Blues. I read about myself in the newspaper. I sit straight up in my chair, rustle the newspaper, and look around to see if anyone recognizes me. No one seems to. I eat alone.

The day after, I go back to the plateau to look for my pack. Up on the bench looking at the straight cliffs, I get too spooked and leave before I find it. I don't care. I let the

plateau fade in my rearview and cheer as it goes and goes, not admitting then that it was I
who was the one fleeing.

CHAPTER EIGHT CODA: GOING BACK

Going back to Kaiparowits two years later, alone, I try to find the cliff again. There are thousands of cliffs along the edge of the plateau, and they all looked the same: dun, cockscombed, endless. The cliff face is continually bisected. I drive past the GPS coordinates of my fall several times but can't identify the particular spot. I feel like I'm looking for a ghost of myself. I can't look for long. I feel like a survivor, somehow, of both my siblings and my own recklessness.

I pack a daybag and climb back up the plateau, along the cattle trail. I immediately get lost again. I have a compass and GPS navigation tracker and 7.5-minute map and topographical area map and more experience and much less gear, and I get lost right away. The sun circles around in the sky and I wonder what's wrong with this place. The cattle trail diminishes and disappears. I head south instead of north, to Harveys Fear Cliff, which is three miles away, not sixty. I don't make it there either. The second I get lost I feel antsy, and know I immediately have to be off the plateau and down again. I almost run through the brush, through the juniper and cacti. I go down, back down, all the way down.

I get into my car and call my parents, tearing off along the four-by-four road, the juniper scraping my chassis.