

Ashes of AULD

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Abstract

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Ashes of Auld is a novella that examines the implications of belonging to, and having belonged to, a university fraternity. The work investigates agency of the individual, and agency of the individual within a collective; how it can be enhanced by affiliation, but also how it can be effaced by it. The intersection of college buffoonery, accountability, and redemption is deconstructed as members of The Brotherhood contend, five years after, with the residual culpability of a tragic incident.

PART I: WALDO

A thick snow was falling on the Auld University Campus as Professor Remington delivered an address on the intersections of artistry and delinquency. Sitting at the back of the lecture-hall, head resting heavy in one hand, Ezra D'Arcy gazed out the window. Intermittently scratching notes from the lecture on a borrowed piece of loose-leaf, but mostly just sketching abstract figures in the margins, the fourth year English major's truest attention was on containing a merciless hangover.

Last night had been the commencement of the infamous War Dog Beat; a three day initiation ritual to validate the induction of young men into the Brotherhood, a fraternity that was established sometime during the late nineteen-forties. Ezra, or Waldo, as he was known by members of the secret-society, was the university chapter's president.

The inaugural night, like the other nights, had consisted of the three pledges drinking too much beer and liquor, and performing humiliating assignments because humility, men of the fraternity agreed, was fundamental to the development of righteous character. If and when a pledge refused, or was incapable of drinking his assigned quantity, an older member of the organization demonstrated what he considered to be gentlemanly etiquette by finishing the youngling's spirit and reciting to him the old Brotherhood refrain.

If you can't drink your drink, you can't think your think, and if you can't think your think they'll think you're thick, and if they think you're thick, you're a solitary dick, a lick a dick a lick a dick, I think I think you're not one of us if you can't drink your drink.

As chapter president, Waldo had volunteered to flush down multiple servings.

On the opposite side of the classroom, Carter, one of the pledges, sat somewhere between slumber and sickness. He'd vomited last night, and he'd cried, and was sent home barefoot, covered in permanent marker, the remnants of which were still visible, wearing only a dirty once-was-white bathrobe—a fraternity heirloom having once belonged to a German escort, and commandeered by a Canadian soldier at the end of the war. Or so the story went.

In his periphery, Waldo could see Carter attempting to make eye contact with him. He saw the recruit's head revolving in his direction once, twice, thrice. And it continued like this for some time, at irregular intervals. He assumed that the rookie probably wanted no more than a sympathetic look, a look that said, "I get it, hang in there." However, wanting to remain completely dissociated from the pledge's affairs, there was only grave exasperation and not sympathy on Waldo's face. When finally he flashed a look at Carter, it was accompanied by the middle-finger. Carter bowed his head.

"Mr. D'Arcy," Professor Remington called out, "see me after class."

Carter's face paled. Waldo simply nodded, and continued to look out the window.

Outside, it had stopped snowing.

Before Professor Remington dismissed the seminar, Carter, whose paranoid and hungover delusions conjured up a senior fraternity member ambush outside after class, excused himself from the lecture-hall early, and in the process knocked over another student's materials. The development drew Waldo's attention away from the window to Carter who completed his departure in a snap.

A piece of paper had been making its way from an untraceable somewhere at the front of the class, all the way to Waldo's station at the back. When it arrived at its intended destination, the chapter president unfolded the missive to find on it nothing but the word *asshole* written in the elegant calligraphy normally attributed to feminine penmanship. When he looked up and swept the room for some indication of who might've drafted the note, Waldo saw nothing but the hair, hats, and necks of cowards.

Among members of the Brotherhood, it was understood that belonging to the society was not something that promoted popularity. In fact, the consensus on campus was that the men belonging to the collective were violent, had a penchant for indulging in drugs and alcohol, and maintained a general disregard for the academic enterprise. And like most reputations, that of the Brotherhood was not entirely fabricated. Over the years, its members had been incarcerated, hospitalized, institutionalized, suspended, and expelled. Although some of the behaviours could be assigned directly to Brotherhood involvement and fraternity-related activities, it was not always so. Such had not been the case with Waldo's hospitalization during his freshman year.

“Submit your reflections before the end of the week. Mr. D’Arcy, my office.”

Waldo folded the scrap of paper carefully, pocketed it, and followed Professor Remington to her office. As tenured faculty, her personal quarters were imposing in both measurement and aesthetic. A library of literature old and new was shelved along the entirety of one wall. On another, original and authenticated film placards were framed and disposed with symmetrical exactitude. The antique hardwood floor creaked beneath Waldo's feet as he shadowed Professor Remington.

“Please, have a seat, Ezra.”

Waldo sat and found that the leather chair was quite cool. He looked around at the film placards attentively. In his first year, he’d joined the university’s undergraduate film society. He received funding to produce a short piece after his script had been selected by the society committee, the overseeing professor of which was, and remained, Professor Remington. His production was interrupted by that year’s Beat proceedings, and his newfound brothers had suggested that Waldo divorce himself from the “fucking movie nerds—losers, and you’re one of us now. You don’t need that shit.”

“Mr. D’Arcy, tell me, why are you here?”

“I’m sorry, Professor. Carter is a friend. I apologize for the inappropriate gesture.”

“I study delinquent behaviors, Mr. D’Arcy, a few birds will not ruffle my feathers.”

Waldo remained silent, and an expression of ignorance overcame his face.

“You are here because I have a proposition for you.”

“Er-I-It’s just that, you see, um—”

“Mr. D’Arcy, might I communicate with you my proposal before you begin hiccupping?”

“Yes, of course. Pardon me.”

“I am organizing a department symposium to feature the works of select undergraduate students who have demonstrated promise during their time at Auld. During your tenure here, your work has attracted the attention of myself and other members of the

faculty. My proposition is this—that you assist me in coordinating with freshman students who also demonstrate academic promise. Is this something that you might be interested in?”

“Er-I-It’s just that, you see, um—”

“I would advise that you take the proposition under more consideration.”

“Okay. Thank you, Professor Remington.”

Waldo detached himself from the cool of the leather chair, and before completing his departure from the office, he turned to look at the professor, who had started to speak again. “And Mr. D’Arcy, be careful this week. Make proactive decisions. It is easier to resent others, and to let others resent you, than it is for you to resent yourself.”

The sentence reverberated in Waldo’s mind like a cry as he left the office, the building it was in, and the campus it was on. On College Street, where Auld University was located, the trees were heavy with snowfall, soft and relaxed, as nature did to them what it did to many a living thing during winter. On a regular day, the walk from campus to Waldo’s home required no more than fifteen minutes, but today, it took him forty-five minutes to close the familiar distance.

Auld was located in the minor English borough of Parkdale, which was part of the larger Francophone city of Belmont. The borough population was seasonal. It fluctuated with the academic semesters, and its demographic shifted by approximately three-thousand residents with the arrivals and departures of students. Parkdale represented only a fraction of Belmont’s demographic. It was a place where people knew your name, your face, and, at least by their convictions, knew you.

The streets were few. Queen Street was perpendicular to College Street, and the cross they made was the unavoidable channel where students and locals floated quite publicly. For the majority of the student community, Parkdale was a temporary stopover—a scholarly getaway, and always they'd return to Ontario, to the Maritimes, to the Prairies, or to the Western provinces after they'd completed their academic requirements. Such was not the case for Waldo who'd been raised, schooled, and fed in a small agricultural village that required about as much time to get to, provided that one was driving, as it took Waldo to walk home from Professor Remington's Office that day.

Home in Parkdale for Waldo was a century old real-estate inhabited by himself and four other members of the Brotherhood. As was tradition, the unofficial requirement for any tenant rotating through Mass House, as it was called, decreed that he must be at least a sophomore member of the fraternity.

“Ladies and men-more-than-gentle, please welcome mister I-read-booksthatarenot-assigned, mister I-go-to-class-and-actually-achieve, the one and only, our brother, my successor and chapter president, Waldo!” Bill, short for billiard, proclaimed theatrically in the manner that a circus ringmaster might introduce a freak.

“Boys,” Waldo offered simply and tiredly.

“Word has it Remington gave you a spanking about giving a fish the ol' middle finger hook. But the question is, did you spank her back?” The boys howled, and Waldo's face did something like smile. “Well, did you?”

“No,” he said. The boys looked at him, mute, and seemingly disappointed. “Well, not yet. To spank a tank you must first diffuse its gun!” and at that, they were satisfied, and the choir harmonized.

If you can't drink your drink, you can't think your think...

“Beer, Waldo?” Before he could reply, Waldo intercepted a barley projectile.

And so began the second night of the War Dog Beat.

As was customary, the twelve active members of the Brotherhood gathered an hour before the arrival of the three pledges. The old beat-up clock on the wall indicated eleven. Momentarily, the rookies would alight at Mass House, together, as they'd been instructed during the briefing that preceded last night's happenings. Solidarity was a fundamental constituent of War Dog ideology. On the single-copy statement that was distributed to the younger men last night, it featured atop the catalog which read so:

War Dog Beat Manifesto

Welcome to the Beat, gentlemen. You are, as of this moment, officially recognized as prospective members of our fraternity, but you are not yet War Dogs. This week, you will endure unparalleled hardship, you will dream with the devil, dance in the deluge, you will despair, desire, and perhaps, if you're lucky, flirt with Lady Death. A man's resolution must be verified, and the Beat will put your quality through its paces, flip it upside-down, and spank it newborn. Gentlemen, you are unaccompanied, yet together. The directives below must, without exception, be observed at all times. Think.

- i) You are one. Never walk alone.
- ii) You are to be utterly transparent. If you are detected by an older brother in conditions beyond our summons, your collective will be corrected.
- iii) You mustn't, under any circumstance, discuss the goings-on of our operations. Failure to oblige will result in immediate dismissal. Our affairs are personal. In time, you will understand why we are who we are.
- iv) If you should be intercepted, arrested, or investigated by any variety of authority, you must disclaim all affiliation with the Brotherhood. Should an incident arise, your brothers will be afoot to remedy the situation immediately, and you will be looked after. Quietly, underground.
- v) This is, perhaps, the most important decree. Be—Absolutely. Fucking. Extraordinary. Remember, you were chosen. Already, you have demonstrated something considerable that has resulted in your being here. Allow yourselves to be immense. Trust that you are capable of monumental undertakings. Do not stop. Proceed. Onward always. Fight.

This document must not be reproduced or misplaced.
Carry on your persons at all times.

Convene at Mass House on Monday at midnight.

Godspeed, Babies.

BH.

It was two minutes after midnight when the pledges arrived. Gingerly, they filtered into the common area of Mass House. The perimeter of the space was occupied by decrepit, non-matching couches: an acrylic sectional with flowered upholstery, a gray, two place track-arm separated the shorter piece of the sectional from an ancient camel-back with colors so pale and worn that their chromatic affiliation couldn't quite be designated. On the other side of the sectional, on a shamrock-green chesterfield of artificial leather, sat the chapter president whose quietude was replicated by the eleven others at the arrival of the would-be War Dogs.

A prolonged stillness and then the young men: Carter, Dooley, and River, stood, surrounded by the other men, like inanimate centerpieces, flesh-decorations in the middle of the room. Minutes passed before Bill, who sat beside Waldo on the chesterfield, interrupted the silence.

“You're standing above us,” he said.

Carter, Dooley, and River said nothing. The twelve, also, said nothing. A palpable restlessness filled the air. The three looked at one another, and without having exchanged a word, it was Carter who sat first, cross-legged, on the floor. Shortly thereafter, Dooley and River also introduced their asses to the hardwood.

“Better,” said Bill as he handed Waldo a timepiece.

Waldo started. “Gentlemen. Welcome to the second night of the Beat. I trust that you've recovered from last night's handshake with the other side. The three of you arrived together, and that, I must commend. Tomorrow's appearance will be more difficult yet and if your togetherness now might seem superfluous, trust me, a time will come when two of

you might have to carry the third member of your party in. Hell, there may come a time when one of you might have to carry the second and third members of your party in, huh Reel!” joked Waldo, referring to a Beat incident that happened two years ago during Reel’s induction. The twelve hollered and hooted. The three started to holler and hoot until Reel roared at them, “Shut the fuck up!”.

“Thank you, Reel,” said Waldo. “Now, like I said, you are here, and you are together. However, it has come to my attention,” he held up the timepiece that Bill had just provided him, “that your arrival isn’t quite copacetic with the instructions. Two minutes.”

At that, Slip, one of the eleven, rose up off the track-arm and disappeared from the room and into the kitchen. The three exchanged looks that suggested they were not quite certain of two things: the meaning of copacetic, and whether they were being admonished or applauded. The derisive commentaries that followed rapidly clarified that uncertainty.

“Two minutes, absolutely fucking pathetic.”

“I can build a bomb in two minutes!”

“A government can be elected in two minutes.”

“I can fuck his mom in two minutes.”

“I could fuck all three of their moms in two minutes!”

When Slip returned, he was playfully handling two mickeys of whiskey.

“Well, fishes, each of these is a minute, and each drop is a second. You owe us time, and War Dogs aren’t partial to outstanding debts. So I invite you to compel some time into your fragile little fucking gullets and to inhale some reimbursement. You have two minutes,

and I'm sure you can deduce what happens if you haven't made disappear this generous offering before time expires," said Waldo who pointed to Slip who, from his manifold pockets, produced six more bottles.

If you can't drink your drink, you can't think your think...

In less than one minute Carter, Dooley, and River had drunk the twenty-six ounces, but Waldo claimed that he had, accidentally of course, neglected to start the clock, and that the results couldn't be verified. Slip supplied the three with an untouched couple of bottles, and the ritual recommenced. When that liquor disappeared, it did so after, quite some time after, the allotted two minutes expired, and another set of whiskey canteens was distributed. That would be enough, Waldo said when Bill suggested a fourth, and Slip and Reel were already discussing a fifth.

The night went on like that and before long, the pledges were incoherent and any manner of self-possession with which they might've entered the house was fading rapidly. Carter, who was Waldo's draftee, and with whom he'd spoken about the Beat during the night before, about its implications and its purposes, approached the president.

"I thought you said tonight would be different," he said to Waldo.

"I said you might be different. This will always remain the same," Waldo replied.

For the remainder of that night—for the remainder of their livelihoods, in certain situations—the twelve danced, barked, drank cans and cans and cans of beer and when an aluminum receptacle became hollow, it was flung forcefully at one of the three kennels wherein the three pledgees were locked and would spend the balance of the night.

Undergraduate students from what seemed like every one of Canada's longitudinal coordinates arrived at Auld on move-in day. It was as though the University gathered one or two would-be-scholars from various communities during its academic harvest, and by lottery, the one or two were entitled to what was a rather well regarded education. The Maritime Provinces sent fiddlers, whiskey drinkers and Alistair MacLeod partisans; Ontario sent scholarship-athletes and micro-brewery hipsters who wished to learn *Le Français*— but never did because Auld is in Parkdale, and Parkdale is an isolated English speaking bubble in the larger French speaking city of Belmont, thus rendering secondlanguage acquisition unnecessary, the entire phenomenon comparable to ordering a double-cheeseburger at a franchised-hotel during a cultural immersion program in Asia—the Prairies sent stereotypical grain-fed farmers and tap-dancing, beer-drinking country shooters who'd seen more highway unfurl than Buffy Sainte-Marie's tour bus during the good years; the Territories dispatched outdoorsy characters, whiter, but with personalities far toastier than its wintry wastelands; the Western Provinces released its entitled, affluent, elitist youth and its dreadlocked unwashed vegan islanders; and the small agricultural farmtown of Baldwin Mills, Quebec, sent Ezra D'Arcy.

As part of the activities and campus happenings organized by Auld's welcoming party, was Club Crash. Every available union, league, society, association, circle, and band installed its festooned kiosk in the Quad, distributed pamphlets, and sought to recruit newcomers into their particular body. Different solicitation techniques were employed by different groups. The Investment Club was tux-clad, accessorized with sunglasses, and distributed five-hundred-dollar monopoly notes bearing their coordinates on the back. The

Sustainable Development Club distributed, as part of an agricultural pilot project, small Styrofoam containers with seedlings surrounded by soil and pet-shit. The cheerleaders, well—some stereotypes are uninfluenced by the passage of time. The Ecological Cuisine was serving bijou portions of quinoa and bean salad. And the Film Society was screening short works produced by its members from the preceding year. However, it was not the films nor the elaborate decor that arrested Ezra D’Arcy’s attention at Club Crash, it was a girl.

“Morning,” he said quietly.

She did not notice him, nor did she field his salutation. To avoid seeming insistent, Ezra committed his attention to the film, entitled *Dust for December*, being projected onto a makeshift screen that consisted of a taut white bedsheet nailed clumsily to the wall.

In it, a young woman stands atop a mountain, and she’s digging into the soil raptly with her bare hands, at the foot of an imposingly large and decaying metallic cross. From the dirt, she excavates a notebook enfolded in worn fabric, and in the notebook are instructions and diagrams. In accelerated frames, the passage of time follows the woman who is transported from one charted sector of the wilderness to another where she, always consulting the notebook, makes discoveries, camps, eats, and encounters her own wilderness. When finally she is ready to abandon the mountain and return home, she—

“Hello,” said the girl who’d approached Ezra without his noticing.

“Uh, yes-I-hi,” he fumbled.

“You like?” she asked.

“Yes, quite.” The credits were rolling and Ezra saw the writer and director’s name for the first time. “But this Mackenzie Mayflower could use some assistance with cinematic composition, though.”

“Oh, is that right?” she asked.

“Not to take anything away from the narrative. That part is beautifully executed. But personally, I’d recommend some subject framing diversity. The majority of the piece is shot mid-range. I think distance could replicate her internal state, and close-ups could promote viewership empathy.” Ezra was getting carried away.

“What’s your name, critic?”

“Sorry. I’m Ezra D’Arcy, and you are?”

“Mackenzie Mayflower.”

Following a fumbled apology and a wonky reassertion of his critique—“The midrange shots are really quite wonderful, though, as mid-range shots go, they’re not middling, at all, I-I mean they’re really quite, quite wonderful”—Ezra registered into the Film Society.

Members met monthly, on six occasions. Throughout two bi-weekly gatherings, they screened films that were selected, in succession, by the Club’s affiliates, and during the other four assemblies, they discussed those films, their personal projects, and the film cosmos in general: its directorial constellations, universes of performance, independent planets, and the interstellar industry of movie-making.

Because six monthly installments did not satisfy Ezra, he made arrangements to see Mackenzie beyond the society's organized get-togethers. Reluctant at first, but eventually capitulating to Ezra's determination—determination, it should be noted, that the War Dogs would also recognize—Mackenzie agreed to accompany him to Mugs, Parkdale's local coffee shop.

"I haven't seen it, no. Should I really... I mean, it's a cartoon, isn't it?" asked Mackenzie.

"Oh my divinity, yes, you should see it. Hayao Miyazaki is a genius, and *Spirited Away*, by my reckoning, is his absolute finest work," Ezra said, "and no, it is not a *cartoon*," he spoke that last word derisively, "it's anime."

"Oh potato pot-anime."

"Just watch it with an open heart."

Quietly, she looked at him for a moment. "They're your playground, aren't they?"

"What's that?" Ezra asked, puzzled.

"Words. You like to manipulate them. I can tell you like to verify their elasticity."

He looked at her for a moment, quietly, before resuming.

"I just think we don't give words quite enough credit."

"How do you mean?"

“I suppose I mean that we don’t really exploit their potential. There’s over a million words in the English language, and the average person only uses a fraction of a fraction of that. I’d just like to be acquainted with more of them.”

“Why then look at you, Ezra D’Arcy, spokesman for the unspoken word.” Ezra laughed.

“Let us talk then,” Mackenzie continued, “using words,” she said, pausing before that last and speaking in hushed tones, whilst painting the phrase, “using words” into the air before her.

“I want to hear about *Dust for December*, the unspoken of it.”

And like that, Mackenzie and Ezra exchanged that most underrated of currencies, words. Every day, more than either had since that age when as children they assumed that the entire world was listening, they spoke. Without practicality, theatrically, melodiously, mindlessly, hopelessly, to save the world, to save the flies, for nothing, for everything, empathetically, ridiculously, silently, vociferously, they spoke; they spoke like they’d discovered the practice themselves, like he or she who first learnt fire, they set the world ablaze with conversation, and burnt, burnt, burnt. But nothing, not even the purest and most resilient embers of talk authentic as Mackenzie and Ezra’s, burns eternal. To ashes, we are committed.

Auld University had achieved coast-to-coast notoriety for its celebratory climate. And its reputation, like most reputations, was not entirely fabricated. Because of the student population's provenance, individuals took advantage of being removed from their families and native communities. They bore Auld like a disguise, and behind the anonymity it provided, many refashioned themselves into temporary, alternate personas and partook in practices that wouldn't normally be acceptable or sustainable for their original selves. The drinking was incessant; so much so that breakfast-beers on the Sabbath were commonplace. Had he been at Auld, even Jesus would have sipped on some morning mulled-wine in the name of the father, the son, and the holy-moly-being-a-sinner-goes-down-easy on Sunday morning. Aleatory sex was normalized, so much so that breakfast sex on the Sabbath was commonplace. Not one Marie here— and there were many—was a virgin. Drugs: for concentration, for psychological affliction, for recreation, for re-creation, for improvement of performance academic and coital, for rectifying of the eventuality resulting from unprotected coital plenitude, a standing ovation of a clap being the most circulated infection—could be acquired easily between the local pharmacy, and at the streetdispensary known as Mass House.

Even if they were adamant in their belief that elevation of the spirit was primordial, and that by their dialogical practices they were knocking at enlightenment's heavy door, Ezra and Mackenzie were not impervious to the vice and temptation of Auld's underworld.

Mackenzie's preferred substance was ecstasy. "It makes me feel weightless, and sometimes, I guess in the way that you explained it, it makes me give more credit to undervalued things, like words," she felt compelled to explain to Ezra after a particularly chemical weekend. Ezra appreciated the unsolicited justification, but understood that it would have been hypocritical to expect it since his own weekends, near-all, were flooded by enough booze to drown ambitions or to float a model of Noah's Ark. Hallelu-yeah! It was during one of those downpour weekends, when the perimeters that separated merriment from malady were being delineated, that Ezra became Waldo.

If an infrastructure had a pulse, and if the sustainability of that pulse was dependent upon the actual human heartbeats within, it might explain why Mass House's cardiac frequency had subsisted so damn long. Every weekend, the house was replete with bodies amassing for hoorahs and revelry that assembled as many as one-hundred partygoers at a time, and that regularly endured, aided by the house apothecary, beyond the interjection of the morning sun.

"You're Ezra D'Arcy, huh?"

"I am he. Where does that leave us?" Ezra responded.

"What's that?"

"I mean—who are you?"

"Name's Bill, short for billiard," he said, extending hop and hand.

Beer in one hand, Bill's right in the other, Ezra met that year's War Dog fraternity president.

“And Billiard is your Christian name?”

“I’m Catholic.”

“I mean—is it the name your mama gave ya?”

“It ain’t, but that don’t matter.”

“So what does then?”

“What that?”

“Matter.”

“Huh?”

“Thank for the pop, Bill. Swell meeting a fellow Catholic,” Ezra said as he turned.

“Hey,” Bill’s apish hand closed on Ezra’s shoulder, “some people are looking for you. Come with me, there’s some boys I’d like you to meet.” The one followed the other up a flight of architecturally dubious stairs and through a door that came ajar after Ezra’s most recent acquaintance rocked it thrice and hollered his name.

Above the front door of Mass House, a signboard stated the following:

Mass House Rules

Dudes, don’t be dicks. Mama, do drama.

Do not touch the music, DJ Dipshit

Stay the fuck out of resident’s rooms

When he’d eventually take up residency in Mass House, Waldo would make a few amendments to the signboard, mostly rendering its decrees more articulate; but at the

present moment, as he entered a tenant's private domain, Ezra remembered the third rule, and wondered if he'd unwittingly acted like a dick. Certainly, he couldn't be accused of *drama-mama* misconduct, and he hadn't, despite certain compulsions, interfered with the night's musicality either.

The door registered as simple plywood and did not suggest a gateway to such a volume of territory. Inside the room a dozen men were sitting on couches, chairs, beds, yes, plural beds, and circulating book-sized mirrors and handling miniature plastic bags of cocaine.

“Gentlemen, this fine young boy here is Ezra D’Arcy.”

The men saluted Ezra, and Bill presented him with a beer. Not oblivious to etiquette, and still ambivalent about the general circumstances of his presence in the room, Ezra uncapped the tall bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon, and took a generous swallow. When he lowered the jug, and adjusted his sight, he realized that they were surveying him, silently, and with what Ezra nervously perceived as austerity in their countenance. Unsure, he hoisted the beer to his mouth again, and when he did, the dumb crowd clapped thrice. Still uncertain, but somewhat amused, Ezra took another and again, thrice, hands clapped. At that, he took up what remained of the bottle with purpose, sinking body and mind.

The voices returned, in song, and Ezra drank drink drunk drank drink.

If you can't drink your drink, you can't think your think...

“Do you know who we are, Ezra?” Bill asked with an air of secrecy.

Ezra knew. Only War Dogs inhabited Mass House. And he knew, because in Parkdale, even a secret society's secrets cannot be kept so. He also knew that only second year brothers were permitted citizenship in the old crooked house.

“Uh, no. I-I'm not entirely sure. I mean, you're Bill,” Ezra answered.

“Sure. I'm Bill. But together,” his big hand gestured over the fellows present, “we're War Dogs, and members of the Brotherhood.”

Ezra reacted with a nod that was more interrogative than affirmative.

“Pleased to meet ya'll, but it's getting *bark*, and I best be getting home,” he joked.

Okay, not a pun-crowd, thought Ezra. But before he could speak again, another voice resonated.

“Bill, this fucker strikes me as a soft piece of shit. He ain't no brother. He's still got mama's milk on his lips. The only thing about him that looks tough is that thrift-store denim he's wearing. I'm telling you Bill, he ain't it.”

“Slip, I get it. But we've talked about it already. This guy,” Bill proclaimed, motioning his hands up and down, salesman-like, in Ezra's direction, “he's fucking okay. He can drink. He can scrap. Reel says he's a thinker, and that he's got some real intellectual property about him, ain't it so, Reel?”

“I mean,” started Reel, “he's always talking in class like what he's saying was written down before. He uses big words, and Remington's always nodding when he spits his smart stuff. So sure, he's got school-brains.”

“But what about balls, Bill, and what about brotherhood?” Slip continued resisting.

“He’s a rugby cat, could probably fly if his balls weren’t so heavy.”

“Fine, what about brotherhood? He can’t know—he looks like he’s all about himself.”

Ezra, who’d been immobile, yet attentive all the while, spoke then.

“I know who you are,” he said. And a hush befell the men. “Collectively, I know.”

“You’re a fraternity. You’re somewhat underground because of chaos caused by your predecessors in the eighties. You throw parties at one-hundred miles per hour. You’re brothers—not by blood, but by choice. Sure, I’m here on scholarship; half is academic, and half is athletic. That much, you seem to know about me. But on the subject of brotherhood, you haven’t met me. I understand the implications of fraternity. I know what it’s like when somebody breaks a bone, and you can feel it as they do. I know what it’s like to ache for something that somebody else wants. I’ve felt the breaks and the aches of my brother, and what’s more, I’ve never let somebody ache or break alone. I don’t think you know me, and it’s reasonable, hell it’s foreseeable even, that your speculations might be incorrect, but I sure as the wrinkles on the cunt of this fucking guy’s mother,” Ezra pointed a determined finger at Slip, “won’t stand here and let you tell me that I ain’t familiar with the composition of brotherhood.”

A hush befell the hush that befell the men before Ezra began his monologue. For an indefinite duration, the room was a picture: arrested, suspended. If someone had looked into one of the mirrors on any one of the laps in the room, they would have seen open

mouths and wide-eyes. Looking into the mirror on Slip's lap, they'd have seen a face populated with equal parts bewilderment and fury.

Ezra's knuckles tightened as Slip moved towards him—*Twelve to one*, he thought, *well, Bukowski bet on worse ponies and cashed out a winner, and if those odds are good enough for that asshole, they're good enough for me*—and said something like a prayer, but before he felt force, he felt favor. Slip's arm wrapped around Ezra's shoulders.

"Brains." He pointed to a finger to Ezra's head. "Balls." He grabbed his own, "and brotherhood." He made a fist and smacked it against the ribs over his heart. "You're alright, Ezra. But all that's decent about you ain't so easy to see. You're hiding that shit, like some real life Waldo!"

"Waldo," Bill repeated.

"Waldo," other scattered voices echoed.

"Waldo," the scattered voices amalgamated. "Waldo, Waldo, Waldo!"

With unanimous approval, Ezra was tendered the War Dog Beat Manifesto. ***

"You're better than them, Ezra. No one has a decent thing to say about the Brotherhood. They're dense and their ideas are too simple. It's unlike you. You're better than that. I don't understand why you're doing it. The Beat is dangerous. People get hurt.

One year, a kid fell off the bridge and broke his fucking leg! He could've drowned."

"Hearsay."

"Why are you doing it?"

“Because.”

“That’s bullshit! Talk to me. C’mon, just this once, fucking convince me!”

“I don’t need to do that.”

“You don’t need to?”

“I don’t want to.”

Mackenzie chewed the inside of her lower lip and her eyes began to water. Where had that boy from Baldwin Mills who joined the Auld Film Society gone? She watched as Ezra took a pipe from the bedside drawer of his disordered room and in it placed marijuana he’d just ground. He remained voiceless, that sweet boy to whom she had formerly listened as he talked of anything and everything for hours and hours. She wistfully recalled their hopeful conversations at sunrise, and looked at him now, hollow, dulled by dope and rendered amorphous by the Brotherhood.

Because he was conflicted and so much of him still belonged to the boy she’d known, it had been a difficult thing to behold at first. But gradually, he’d faded. She was with him now only to dissuade him from partaking in the Beat initiation ritual. She sat on Waldo’s bed, and tried to resonate with Ezra.

“You’re better than this, Ezra.”

“You don’t get it.”

“Then explain, please!”

“You can’t get it.”

“Okay, Ezra. Okay. Please be safe,” were the last words she spoke to him.

“Whatever,” was the last word he spoke to her.

Hiya Brother Mine,

I’ll start, as I start always, by saying this: I miss you dearly. But, don’t be too flattered. These are only the ramifications of time and distance, a circumstantial sentiment, if you will. However— and this, I suppose, only days and days and days can demonstrate— distance, in fact, does not make the heart grow fonder. At first, perhaps, in regular situations, there’s something charming about separation, a sort of yearning for reunification that causes one to bubble at the edges with anticipation, but this ain’t that, as you and I know.

I apologize for not writing of late. The truth is, there isn’t much cause for my epistolary negligence. My fairer mind has been like a dog that I once knew, and whilst playing with her some time ago, I threw a stick further than I should have, in anger. When she went looking for it, I relocated. Today, we’re still looking for one another; I’ll confess, though, that I certainly hope she is seeking me out more diligently than I her.

I write today because I'm frightened. The Beat begins next week, and the brothers are discussing some disquieting adjustments they'd like to see imposed onto the original model. What's they're proposing is irrelevant; just dangerous upscaling. They want more nights, more alcohol, and more pledges; Reel even suggested, and most thought it'd be a wonderful addition, that we secretly administer hallucinogens. Basically, they're deviating altogether from the traditions we inherited. I'm frightened because of this deviance. And I'm frightened, also, because I don't know how to stop it. I'm tired, Jett. I'm just so goddam tired, I feel like I can't speak my presidential piece anymore. Not that there was ever very much authority vested in your big brother, but now, I'm thin and diluted. It's safer to acquiesce.

It'll be a year since I've spoken with Mackenzie; the oddity of which is compounded by the fact that I see her near every damn day on those days when I actually attend class—fucking Parkdale. I get it now. I made the wrong decision. But you know how I've always approached ultimatums, not electing the option that'll benefit me most, but rather, the option that'll most piss off the person who told me I only had two choices. And now that it all feels like a giant irreversible wreckage, I'm at a loss. Even if I wanted reparation, which, actually, I do, she wouldn't recognize me. I'm telling you, I feel like someone took me apart, and left out the good parts when they put me back together.

But hey—sorry I'm being so fatalistic. Tis' the season.

Write me back one of these days.

Love you as ever,

Ezra

Ezra, naked but for an old dirty bathrobe, walked into the freeze, and out of sight behind Mass House, once more, as he'd done so many times before, put flame to paper and watched the smoke from his letter lifted up to his brother. To ashes, we are committed.

PART II: CARTER

“Mr. Gant, you demonstrate aptitude that isn't normally achieved by freshmen students.”

“Thank you, Professor. You can call me Carter,” I said, unsure about what exactly Remington was referring to or what she might be implying. Insofar as I understood, her only exposure to my *aptitude* was a midterm essay—not formidable or innovative, I had

determined upon its completion—drafted and submitted at the beginning of the preceding week.

In high school, my academic record had not been remarkable. Without ever having risked miserable failure, it was altogether undistinguished. As a junior, I diagnosed myself with numerical dyslexia, a widespread affliction. Numbers, with their metrical precision and objective finality, terrified me. The entire scientific, left-brained enterprise of interpreting and deciphering: integers, cofactors, exponents, functions, matrixes, symmetries, and the rest of the mathematical operation, was vertigo-inducing. When confronted with a distressing situation, receiving an email with a subject line that read—*I'm sorry*—from a girlfriend or boyfriend, for example, one might have palpitations, perspire, or even suffer temporary-paralysis. Such are my physiological symptoms when I am looking into the dark and deep pupil of a theorem.

One subject that did not completely elude me during teenagehood, however, was English. Without necessarily being exceptionally well versed in canonical literatures, or possessing an innate ability to discuss linguistic rudiments, I was always capable of writing “pleasantly,” as my grade twelve teacher to my folks, in a manner that was “unorthodox and original.”

Reared in the agricultural backcountry of rural Ontario, distractions were few. And having a traditional, churchgoing pa and ma only emphasized my detachment from the popular technological diversions of that time. My entertainment was far more oldfashioned and pastoral than that of my current acquaintances. Countless inspired imaginings, expeditions that became soft fugues, discoveries of fantastic dangers, wonderings and

wanderings, the withdrawn yet satisfying writings, and the grandiose spectacles of storytelling, were it: they were altogether enough.

“I am organizing a department symposium to feature the works of select undergraduate students that demonstrate promise. I believe that your writing and interpretive abilities are of quality sufficient to endorse your participation.”

“Er-I-It’s just that, you see, um—”

“How interesting,” said Professor Remington.

“What’s that?”

“Déjà heard, that’s all.” What it was that she had *déjà heard*, I knew not. “I would advise that you take the proposition under consideration, and return to me before week’s end.”

“I will. Thank you for your consideration, Professor.”

The leather upholstery of the chair where my back rested was cool, and even through thick wool, I could feel that calming cool on my skin. When I removed myself from that chair, from that office, that building, campus, a discomforting heat repossessed my spine. Remington’s undergraduate symposium was not the only invitation I had been extended this week. I had also been approached, by a senior student known as Waldo, to partake in the War Dog Beat.

The Beat was an initiation ritual organized by members of The Brotherhood, a fraternity established by veterans who returned to Auld after World War II. Every year,

initiates were recruited into the society and required to complete, boozing all the while, a string of difficult assignments throughout a three day period.

The goings-on and activities of The Brotherhood were supposedly quite secretive, although everyone seemed conversant with the fraternity's doings. Scuttlebutt was rampant: of epidemic proportions, even, in a rumour incubator like Parkdale. If an investigative journalist drafting a piece about the old society asked around, he might catch any of the following particulars and accusations on the subject of those boys and their history: The fraternity had been founded by soldiers after they returned from Europe in the late nineteenforties. The story is that those boys who came home from the fight had been exposed to things so tormenting that they couldn't easily assimilate with the banality and ceremony of higher education, and so they founded a society that met weekly to discuss personal rehabilitative strategies—it was like a discussion circle without a leader. Naturally, a few of the original members had already resorted to the oldest remedy for the eradication of affliction, and soon it was commonplace for their gathering grounds to be littered with empty bottles of booze after a session. The members all did cocaine. It actually remained a requirement in belonging to the fraternity, to indulge in the cola. The profit from the enormous parties that they host, allegedly, are entirely reinvested in blow. On the subject of said parties, it is also rumoured that they're notorious for spiking the large cocktail canteen with ecstasy, and that since mostly women drink from it, they so make those women more defenceless and approachable. They're all branded. Each member can choose where on his body he'll have the letter BH emblazoned. But, to be completely certified, have the letters BH emblazoned on his being he must. Despite their reputation, they're actually quite decent individuals. There are multiple reported instances of members doing

some altruistic thing or another. For example, Colton Blackwell is said to have been seen transporting groceries for senior citizens throughout Parkdale on multiple occasions, although there's speculation that he's only doing it to attract favorable attention from women.

Then, there's the Beat. This is, perhaps, the most discussed of the Brotherhood practices. The general understanding is that the ritual is secret, but because certain individuals are "broken" by the Beat and refused admission, their cause for upholding that secrecy is minimal. Nevertheless, there is certainly no timetable or agenda of the Beat's program at the public's disposal. It's a seventy-two hour affair. Apparently, at the beginning of each night, the draftees being put through the Beat are made quite drunk so that they'll only have vague recollections of the events. They're also given hallucinogens. One year, a pledge named Ezra D'Arcy was unwittingly administered hallucinogenic mushrooms and he was found bloody and scarcely dressed in a heap of snow. He suffered a mild concussion that caused him to remain out of commission for an entire rugby season, and spent three days in the hospital receiving treatment for pneumonia. Each of the Beat's twenty-four hour quadrants is made to augment in difficulty and expectancy from the previous. Always, the rooks may be "hunted" by older members. That is, if they're caught, they must comply with their capture and willingly be escorted to headquarters at Mass House. Therein, a detainee will be made to drink until the other pledges retrieve him. In order to liberate a captured pledgee, the rest of his cohort must also drink a substantial amount. Avoiding detection is pivotal when going through the Beat. The breakdown of individual nights is ambiguous. The first night, rookies are dressed up as domestics and made to cook and serve a meal for their hosts. On the second night, they become dogs. And

on the third night, they're reborn into the Brotherhood by a blood sacrifice. Being a brother means no one in Parkdale fucks with you. Because a good number of brothers are lacrosse and rugby players, and can rapidly mobilize a complete squad of goons, not even the football team fucks with you. The Brotherhood boys are always in one another's company. Most of them live together, in Mass House, and the rest are always gathered at the house where they do what they have been doing for more than a half-century.

All of that anecdotal recounting was possible only by information having been cycled throughout the years from one source to the next. The stories have been adapted, bettered, and worsened, by different individuals for different reasons. Spiking the cocktail canteen is outright intolerable, and should I verify that this rumour is in fact truth, I suppose I'd have to act accordingly. As for the rest of the allegations, they remain, until they become otherwise, only that—the unfiltered whispers of a loud borough.

When Waldo approached me two days ago about partaking in the Beat and becoming a brother, his custom was most civil. His demeanour was charismatic. His gab was western-high-noon-revolver like, *bam-bam*: immediate and accurate. And what's more, our interaction was perhaps the most compelling conversation I'd had since my arrival at Auld. Something about the way he spoke suggested either rehearsal or instinctive fluidity of diction. He was, quite sincerely, the most fascinating individual I had met at the university, and one of the few reasons I considered participating in The Beat.

“You're Carter Gant, huh?”

“I am he. Where does that leave us?”

“At the beginning.”

“The beginning of what?”

“Of this conversation.”

“About what?”

“About beginnings.”

“What beginnings?”

“Well, for starters, the beginning of a ritual.”

“And what ritual might that be?”

“It’s called the War Dog Beat.”

“And I’ve never heard of it, correct?”

“Correct. You’re in Professor Remington’s class on artistry and delinquency.”

“I am. Remington is alright.”

“Professor Remington. So, which are you?”

“What’s that?”

“Delinquently artistic, or artistically delinquent?”

“What’s your name, huh?”

“I’m Waldo,” he’d said, extending a soft-skinned hand.

“I’m delinquently artistic,” I said, returning a strong but accommodating squeeze.

“Carter, you ought to be a War Dog.”

“I, uh-eh, um—”

“There’s something of a rarity about you. Your delinquent artistry is a rarity. You aren’t reluctant to engage, to disagree, or to deconstruct. Such is the manner of the mind of men that I’d like to see introduced into the fraternity. We’re at war, Carter. We’re at war with bliss, with complacency, with satisfaction. I would advise that you take the proposition under consideration, and return to me before week’s end,” he’d concluded, handing me a thick, ashen paper: War Dog Beat Summon.

It was flattering to be solicited so, even by a fraternity with a reputation as suspicious as the Brotherhood’s. On the social spectrum, Auld was reputable, and offered its incoming classes, as well as its active student populace, an assortment of social possibility. But since my arrival in late August, I’d been rather aloof.

Having come to Auld from the small rural town of Delta, Ontario where universities were commonly described as “big cocky buildings filled with little cocky people,” I received more criticism than commendation when it was announced during the Sunday service following my acceptance that I’d be relocating to Parkdale to pursue a bachelor’s degree in literature. “Well Gant, there goes ten-thousand dollars!” or “Hey Gant, you know how to read, correct? Yeah, well then why are you going to pay all that money for someone to tell you that the tree isn’t a tree but actually a symbol of life or some shit? Just get a library card, much cheaper,” or “Few Gants chose post-secondary education, and *they* all turned out fine! I guess some people try to fix it even if it ain’t, broken,” or “Did you know George Foreman didn’t even finish high school?” or “Hey, if it makes you happy, then do it, but remember that it’s an expensive hobby and that you’ll have to work one day. Your ma and pa can’t provide for you indefinitely. Frankly, I’m outright shocked that they’re

supporting your decision. You know they're not rich, right? Of course you know that. Now, I'm not saying what you're doing is selfish, but it's certainly not going to make things easy for them financially," were all variations of things I'd heard, my grandmother having spoken that last to me.

When I arrived at Auld on move-in day, I saw them. I saw the big cocky buildings and the little cocky people. I saw legions upon legions of students arrive without as much as a notebook. I heard things like, "The first week of school is optional." I heard of students attending only their final examinations and receiving passing grades. I heard that Auld was a party school, and had an infamous reputation for being Canada's STD capital. I heard that if you wanted to appreciate your experience here, you had to drink and go out. And I could hear then my grandmother admonishing me, "You see, Carter, it's as I explained, an expensive hobby. You sow and sow and sow and reap what, a sheet of paper that says you're an excellent reader of books? You already are an excellent reader of books, dear boy. Why don't you stay home and help your father? You might develop an alcohol problem over there, and I've heard that that crowd has AIDS."

As for my ma and pa, they were always sympathetic. It was actually after my English teacher said to my mother that I had the potential to pursue post-secondary education, and after she discussed it with my father, that I was sat down at breakfast one morning and that such a possibility was first entertained. Ma and pa were adamant. I should go, "Go and discover like when you were a boy. You've read just about everything at the local library. A mind like yours needs to be stimulated. You need a bigger library." And this is what they'd said to the folks at church, that I had a rare mind that ought to be cultivated, but even their declarations did not cause a single body to revise its position.

So when I arrived at Auld and beheld the attitudes, the disturbing debauchery, the indolent character of those masses, I withdrew into myself and committed my devotion to the academic semester and to my literary heroes. Around me, Auld was abuzz and everywhere I turned, I saw contentment. In the dormitory, a ceaseless racket of festivity prohibited decent slumber. I was swimming upriver and my body was becoming sore. Soon, I realized that such combative behaviour would not be sustainable. I was outnumbered. Never would the partygoers capitulate, and so I put on my proverbial bathing suit and let myself float downstream. But I needed a buoy.

Ezra D'Arcy's name was featured atop the English Department's honour roll list for three years, and his work had been published in the university's literary magazine. Because I wanted balance, because I needed familiarity, and because I thought Ezra might help me comprehend and navigate the complexities of Auld whilst preserving my personal integrity and achieving academically, I presented myself on the first night of the War Dog Beat.

"I'm River."

"I'm Dooley."

"I'm Carter."

"They said ten o'clock, didn't they?" Dooley asked.

“That’s the details I got,” River replied.

“Well, what time is it? I’m fucking freezing,” said Dooley.

“It’s half-past,” I said.

“Well, what do we do?” Dooley was agitated.

“We wait,” said River, and I agreed.

Dooley resided in Hamilton, the same dormitory that I had been placed in. On multiple occasions, I’d seen and heard him. He embodied the commotion of Auld, was the archetypal university goon, attended all the parties and never discretely. He was loud and vulgar and unapologetic and I could see why his candidacy would have been retained by certain members of the Brotherhood. His features, like his character, were bold and his head of dark hair was perpetually dishevelled. He wore light-wash Levis with rips all over, colorless hoodies, and heavy boots. He was taller than me by an inch or two, and an allstar recruit on the lacrosse team—a long pole and one of the few rookies to receive playing time, and make an impact at that, during his freshman season. His violent playing style on the field was directly related to his belligerent character off the field. The turbulent presence, the cocksure quality, and the sense of belonging, or making oneself belong were the things in Dooley that I considered both contemptible and admirable.

About River, I knew only what most people in Parkdale knew about most people in Parkdale—what I’d heard, and what I decided to believe. He was from the Maritimes: New Brunswick. The most noticeable thing about him was his musical virtuosity. He was pursuing his undergraduate studies in music and was proficient at a variety of instruments. I heard him play one night at Acoustic Tuesday. Unlike the majority of amateur entertainers

who borrowed the stage for momentary attention and affection, he did not play popular music; he played traditional English music, he played folk and Celtic ballads—he played stories. He wasn't part of an athletic team, but had maintained his physical appearance nevertheless. Although not as vigorous as Dooley's, River's constitution was healthier than most. His hair, only perceivable on rare occasions when he wasn't wearing a toque, was the short nondescript clip of someone who'd long ago been acquainted with an electric razor and was stylistically self-sufficient. He bore a plentiful beard. Black sneakers, black jeans, white long-sleeved thermal underwear, and a green military jacket was his common attire.

“Fuck this, I'm going to knock,” Dooley exclaimed and before completing that sentence, he'd already introduced his big hand to the door twice. In a moment, the door was ajar and Waldo's tired face looked at us disagreeably. “What?” he said.

“Can we come in, it's cold as an ice-cube in a whore's mouth!” Dooley said.

“Come in for what?”

“For the War Dog Beat, man! You said to be here at ten.” “Oh,

is that tonight?” Ezra asked.

Dooley looked at River and myself, then he looked at Ezra again. I looked at River who, like me, rolled his eyes, knowing that Ezra was simply toying with a cold and snappish Dooley. “Come in, and hurry, it's as cold as an ice-cube in the mouth of a professional sexworker out there,” said our bathrobe bearing host.

Inside, a large table was fixed and sitting around it were eleven of the twelve members of the Brotherhood. Ezra joined them and soon they all were quiet. On the other side of the large table, above a small shelf, hung three French-maid costumes with the

names of each of the pledges on them. On the small shelf, a single-copy of The War Dog Beat Manifesto waited. Irresolute and awaiting instruction, we remained motionless in the doorway.

“Alas! The help is here. I’m fucking starving.”

“The help needs help. It’s paralyzed.”

“Where do you find these dingle-berries?”

“Honestly, can we order pizza? These kids couldn’t even beat an egg!”

“Waldo, I’m one second from beating the shit out of the beanie boning guitarist.”

“I’ll take the loud laxer, teach him a lesson in shutting his fucking suck-hole.”

“I’ll take the church nerd.”

They started throwing empty cans of beer in our direction and still, we didn’t move. “Gentlemen, let’s indulge these boys for a second,” Ezra said, concluding the vitriolic onslaught. “Please, Carter, River, Dooley, put on the assigned uniforms and return to us.”

We retired to the kitchen where we removed our clothes and put on the getups. Soon, the twelve were beating cutlery onto the table and chanting for us to return. We were received with whoops, whistles and applause. Together, the diners discussed which of us they thought was most striking, and which of us they’d be most inclined to fuck.

“Alright, ladies. In the kitchen wherefrom you’ve just come, you’ll find the ingredients to make spaghetti. Now, the sauce is a special delivery from Slip’s mother, and it’s a family recipe, so if self-preservation means anything to you, do not fuck this up.”

It was simple enough, I reckoned, to cook pasta and into it put the spaghetti sauce. But there was disagreement among us concerning the appropriate procedure for preparing the spaghetti noodles. “Put it in right away and then bring it to a boil.” “No, bring it to a boil and then put the pasta in.” “Put salt in the water, it’ll boil faster.” “Use cold water. It’s something I saw on the telly one time.”

After about ten minutes of debate and deliberation, we decided that the water ought to be brought to a boil before the pasta was added into it. While we waited for the element to heat up, an older boy came into the kitchen carrying a case of fifteen beer and placed it on the countertop.

“Don’t serve us until you’ve served yourself,” he said.

Dooley immediately started on the beers, and in a minute, he’d drunk two like that was why he’d come, for the free booze. River and I were drinking our own without urgency until the older boy returned and slapped the beer out of River’s hand. “Were you enjoying that fucking beer?” he asked. River said that he was, and then that he wasn’t, and then that he didn’t know. “Go pick it up,” the old boy said sternly. River obliged. “Now pour what’s left on your dumbass head.” River didn’t, and the older boy, much bigger than River, seized him by his collar and spoke the following, spitting throughout, “If that bottle isn’t empty and its contents on your head in five seconds, I will break it over your fucking skull.” River obliged. “Thank you,” the older boy said smiling sardonically. “Now, I came to tell you that the boys and I were hungry, and to see how you were doing. So, finish those beers and don’t treat them like they’re mama’s tit, fucking drink them like you’re thirsty, and then feed us,” he said and left.

“Fucking idiots,” Dooley said, drinking his fourth beer.

After the older boy's intervention, it didn't take long for us to finish the beer that remained. And after that, it didn't take long for us to prepare the meal. With it, we returned to the dining room where they waited, drinking and passing around bottles of whiskey. In each plate, we distributed a serving of spaghetti and we were asked then to sit on three chairs adjacent to the table, to consult the manifesto, and to await further directives. A bottle of whiskey was placed in Dooley's hands by the older boy who'd shaken River and he said, "I think this one gets it. He's the better of the three." Dooley flashed a look of conceited gratification.

"Boys," said Waldo as he stood and lifted a bottle, "to the Beat." "To the Beat!" they boomed, and began eating.

"This is a fucking catastrophe," said one, spitting a mouthful on the floor behind him.

"I wouldn't feed it to a starving Italian!"

"How can someone fuck up pasta?"

"Slip, what do you think?"

Slip was masticating with grandiose affectation. He breathed in audibly, and looked at the ceiling. He left his chair and spoke skyward, "Oh mama I'm so sorry! Forgive these imbeciles, they don't know shit from shot. Oh mama, this travesty is unforgivable, this, this—" he picked up the plate and pointed to it, "—this waste of your recipe is a dishonor!" and he heaved the plate in our direction. It missed Dooley by an inch, but he received a generous helping of spaghetti in the face.

“Outrage!” Slip cried.

“Disgusting!” said another.

“Garbage!”

“Dog shit!”

“Junk!”

And in an instant, an airstrike of spaghetti descended upon us. An unrelenting barrage of pasta and sauce until we were blinded by it. The twelve were screaming obscenities and throwing handfuls, platefuls of the stuff. I covered my face for a second, but quickly my hands were neutralized behind my back and I was incapable of obstructing the offensive.

As the last of the artillery was discharged, the doorbell rang.

“That must be the pizza,” said Ezra, and it was.

The rest of the night wasn't unlike the spaghetti bombardment episode, a continuation of our disappointing the twelve, being petitioned to undertake some assignment and failing at it miserably. Each chapter of dissatisfaction was accompanied by a prescription for alcohol. One, two, three, four bottles and it was later and the world spun uncontrollably and I was at its center. Was this brotherhood? Surely, there was more to fraternity than humiliation for the entertainment of others. Surely, there was more to the War Dogs than this. But on that night, there was not. There was only further degradation, belittling, alcohol ingestion, and what seemed like insurmountable loathing from the twelve of them being projected onto the three of us. Most of these guys, this is what they're like.

Dooley is perfect for this. They'll knight him. But guys like myself, like Ezra, we're not like this crowd, are we? And yet, he's chapter president! He represents this crowd, he speaks for them. I was missing something, I had to be. If I was wrong, and this was in fact everything that the Brotherhood was and would be, I would not continue the Beat. So I accosted Ezra late in the night.

"This is fucking ridiculous. It's not for me, and I'm not coming back."

"Waldo, you got yourself a quitter?" said one of the other boys who'd heard me.

Waldo took me into another room and offered me a place to sit. He gave me a bottle of water and told me to take it easy for a second, to relax, because while I was reasonably irate, I was doing a disservice to myself by bearing those sentiments so outwardly.

"The Brotherhood is what it is and its members are who they are. And you, you can be who you want within that band. The boys will have you regardless. I shouldn't be divulging this because you're meant to find out by yourself, but it's not going to get easier. It's worth it though, in some ways."

"Even you don't seem convinced."

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"And I'm here."

"Come tomorrow. It will be different. It'll change you. You'll see, it's worth it, and I know you have what it takes. I told you, there's something of a rarity about you. It's this suspicion that you're harboring right now that distinguishes you. Dooley, he's a good kid and he'll make it, but he won't think about it. Men like him are many, but men like you,

men like me, are more scarce. You have to question things. Allow yourself to doubt, but never to quit. In your time here, you can be whoever you want to be, but you're a War Dog, I see it, and you should see it too. You should see yourself like—”

And I was listening him, and already, it was too late.

PART III: BILL

It was the surface of the old barroom in a dive off highway 10, where— after a weekend conference in Montreal— he'd stopped off for a beer, some food, some conversation, and a few more hours away from the regularities of what his life had become, that reminded Bill of his tenure at Auld University, and of that night.

He remembered the old hardwood floor in the living room at Mass House that might as well have been treated with a mop retrieved from a dumpster, and plunged in a bucket filled with Pabst Blue Ribbon. Underfoot, it clung like a desperate lover unwilling to move on despite a restraining order. The air was unapologetically heavy and humid, and into it, the aroma of the walking surface supplemented the scent of strong coffee, days old, microwaved in succession by the house's residents, four of which had already vacated the property so that they might arrive at class something like on time.

Mass House: designed by an architectural anarchist—with its questionable symmetry, perilous staircase that might've appeared straight to one who'd ingested enough

hallucinogens, its ridiculously unreachable shelving suggesting its original design may have been completed to accommodate a family of giants, its rooms so irregular in size that one could've been a poolroom while the next might've served as a minimalist monk's meditation chamber—was a Parkdale landmark. Inhabited exclusively by members of Auld University's Brotherhood, it was a place of loud mystery.

Down from that high and confused flight of stairs, and into the glorious perfume of day, one Colton Blackwell, known by his peers as Bill, descended with nothing on but bold briefs and an ancient dirty bathrobe that he wore around his husky shoulders like a medieval monarch might've worn a velvet cape. Bleary-eyed but well rested, Bill fixed himself a bowl of Lucky Charms and in turn, heated coffee in the microwave. Vapors from the coffee and smoke from his lungs comingled in the living room in a delicate haze.

This seasoned fifth year student, who knew better than to register for early classes on the morning following Acoustic Tuesdays at the local pub, commenced thus his hangover ritual of watching cartoons and transforming recreational plant into psychoactive exhaust.

“Hi,” said Abi, Bill's girlfriend, who'd come in without his noticing.

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” Bill replied with an acrobatic smile.

“Not a question, you big galoot. I mean hello.”

“Oh, sorry, I'm just really fucking hello right now,” he replied.

“Dummy. Move over.” Bill shifted, and Abi, petite and loose-limbed, settled restfully between one end of the couch and her lover's big body. She rested her head on his

shoulder, immediately below a hickey that she failed to discern as it was partially hidden underneath the bathrobe. Bill too, was oblivious to the mark on his neck.

A first year student was playing a set of country classics—Bill’s specialty—, at Acoustic Tuesday for the first time in her young post-secondary passage.

Your cheatin’ heart will make you weep, you’ll cry and cry, and try to sleep.

She had interpreted Hank Williams Senior with a twang so tasteful Bill decided he had to have a bite. Her ripped jeans and jet-black camisole revealed innocent, pale skin. Freckled-faced, blameless smile, and a head full of beautiful long hair—she’d sat crosslegged on a tall stool and plucked her guitar softly but accurately.

Bill was shooting pool in the den just like he always did, for a succession of hours, on Tuesday nights. If he relinquished possession of the table during that time, it was seldom because he’d been defeated. It was at that table, during his first year, that he’d first attracted the attention of the Brotherhood. Protocol suggested that one should, despite a string of winning, give up the table after a while. But Colton Blackwell was unconcerned by common protocol. “C’mon man, you’ve been shooting for an hour, let someone else have a go.” “Until one of you deadshits actually beats me, I think I’m going to stay put.” And stay put he would. With his build and assertive demeanour, Bill was accustomed to having

things not merely fall into place, but rather placing them in the spaces where he wanted to see them.

But after one night of having monopolized the table and telling one particular *deadshit* that he'd have to beat him to claim it, he met the Brotherhood. The man he'd provoked was a senior, graduating member of the fraternity and a resident of Mass House who everyone called Rib. When Rib took the pool cue from Bill, and stood before him, Bill didn't back down. Soon, there were five other members standing behind Rib, and still, Bill didn't back down.

"We'd like to talk to you about joining our organization, Bill," Rib said.

"My name is Colton."

"The way you play billiards, no. Your name is Bill."

But sleep won't come, the while night through, your cheatin' heart will tell on you.

After incarnating Denver and Cash, lady-country bagged her guitar, placed the instrument in a backroom, and made her way to the bar where Bill had deliberately positioned himself to await her imminent arrival.

"That was alright," he said to her, avoiding eye-contact.

"Alright's alright for a first-timer, I suppose," she replied.

"No way that was your first time!" he spoke, feigning incredulity.

"Guaranteed it was. I'm new here, and it took me weeks to gather the courage to get up there. I've played back home, you know for family at small gatherings, and for friends

too sometimes, but never for so many strangers.” “Well, the strangers liked you fine, if I do say so myself.” “Thank you,” she flashed a timid smile.

“Some strangers like you quite a lot.”

Her lips pressed together and she looked dreamily into the distance.

“I’m Bill. I’ll buy you a drink if you tell me your name.”

“Look, I appreciate the compliments, really. And it even feels sincere, but in those weeks that I was considering playing, I’ve come here, and I’ve seen you around. Lately, I’ve seen you with one girl, and I assumed she was your girlfriend. I’m not comfortable interfering like that.”

“Girlfriend?” he said, startled. “Have you learnt nothing in your short career at Auld?”

“What do you mean?”

“Folks here, darlin’, they don’t have girlfriends and boyfriends, they have fun. They have as much of that fucking pure concentrated fun as they can.” She was listening. She was not familiar with such ideology, and unsure if it was Auld’s contention, or Bill’s, but already, it was too late—she was listening. “And you, you’re fun.”

“How would you know? You’ve only just met me.”

“I have a good ear for fun. It’s in your voice. It’s in that way you smile when you’re strumming the non-singing bits. You get carried away, you disappear into those songs. It’s in the way you were looking at nothing a minute ago, the carelessness. There’s a magic

inside that pretty little head, a fun magic, and it'd be ridiculous to deprive each other of the supernatural for some irrational notion of monogamy.”

“You’ve got magic too?”

“Harry fucking Blackstone, baby.”

“Fine. Show me a trick then.”

“I intend to show you many a trick. But first, let me buy you a drink.”

“I’m Piper,” she said cooperatively, knowing too well what was going on beneath.

“What do you drink, Piper?”

“I’ll have what you’re having.”

“I don’t think freshmen are even allowed to drink what I drink.”

“I’m not most freshmen. Try me.”

“Your funeral.” Bill beckoned to the barkeep, “Two rusty tractors, if ye would, kind sir.”

The barkeep, Reel, was also a member of the Brotherhood and a tenant of Mass House. Having operated behind the bar at the Golden Lion Pub for three years, his position within the establishment was solidified so that he could easily manipulate the registers and distribute booze, free of charge, to select customers without the proprietor’s noticing. As then president of the Brotherhood, Bill was a select customer.

Piper observed attentively as the barkeep prepared a concoction of gin, tequila, and vodka, four servings of each, complemented with a splash of Tabasco hot sauce, waggled

into a shaker of ice, and poured into two old fashioned glasses. Into each serving of the copper liquid, Reel dropped a cocktail onion and a cornichon. “On the house,” he said, sliding the drinks towards Bill inconspicuously.

“On the house?” Piper inquired.

“The pope don’t pay for holy water,” Reel interjected, rehearsed, as many times before.

“The pope?” she continued her interrogation.

“President, actually, if we’re being specific,” Bill corrected.

“President of what?”

The questions and rusty tractors were inbound and unstoppable so, and any resolve that Piper might have had was softening. Bill, she thought, knew what he was doing. He said enough, but not too much. He provided a careful measure of attention that made her want more, but wasn’t so insignificant it might cause her to reconsider his attraction altogether. All of it seemed levelled, his approach studied, practiced, scripted. And this was not far from the factual. During his five year tenure at Auld, Bill had achieved more than just mastery of class-scheduling. Piper perceived his system, yet she was not resistant to its actualization. She was on the conveyer-belt that connected the pub to his dwelling. Should she have wanted to, she could have simply disembarked before the terminus. How, she wondered, could he make the whole thing appear so seamless, so natural; what did he possess and what possessed her that made all of it cause, not distress or culpability, but instead, gave the whole thing an atmosphere of predictability, of completion; what held her

hand and walked her into Mass House, undressed her, and made her feel special for a spell? Perhaps, she thought, this was indeed some variety of magic.

“You never told me.” She interrupted the silence and spoke into the cigarette twilight, lifting her head from his shoulder in the bed where they had, moments earlier, completed the flexible recital of flesh.

“Told you what?”

“What you’re the president of.”

“I cannot tell, darling girl, ‘tis classified. National security and all.”

“Oh bullshit. I think I know, actually.”

“I think you might.”

“The Brotherhood,” she said, her voice was hushed like she was speaking some unutterable and foul thing. This tone, Bill recognized as *latent remorse*, and although he was generally unaffected by it, he had become weary of its predictableness. It was Waldo, a Brotherhood member, who’d first mentioned the term *latent remorse*.

She plays along, Waldo would say during one of his alcohol induced diatribes, *until the odds are in, and when she’s seen what you’re holding, and when she’s played her game, and if it’s favorable for her, she cashes in, leaving you, quite literally, with your dick in your hand, looking on like some pervert, and that’s when she points a finger at the entire operation and calls it corrupt, calls your behaviour misogynistic misconduct.* By Bill’s reckoning, Waldo’s attitude was rather radical, and erred on the side of cynicism that was

foreign to him, or at least that he preferred to avoid. But still, there was something about the phrase *latent remorse* that captured the essence of these recurring instances.

“The Brotherhood,” he repeated.

“And this is Mass House, correct?”

“This is Mass House.”

“Only members live here.”

“Sophomores.”

“Sophomores?” she asked.

“Second years,” he replied sleepily, becoming bothered by her interrogation.

“I’ve heard things about the Brotherhood and about this house.”

“I’m certain that you have,” said Bill, attempting to suffocate the conversation.

“I heard you guys were assholes.”

“Maybe we are.”

“Ugh. This was a mistake. You’re an asshole.”

“Maybe I am.”

“I’m leaving!”

“Maybe you should.”

Violently and with haste, Piper collected her belongings. When she'd gathered the essentials, she turned to Bill and said angrily, "I pity your girlfriend!" "So do I," he said to himself, "But hey, this is Auld, and we are young." *Latent Remorse*.

"Billy-boy, you're going to be late for class," Abi whispered into his ear.

"That's likely. How about a good reason for it then?"

In the blink of a moment, Abi was inside the bathrobe and Bill was inside Abi. The couch became the scene of carnal commotion. The resonances emitted from Mass House on that Wednesday morning were primitive, base, and would've caused a pious door-to-door bible salesman to phone up Vatican headquarters and ask that they immediately dispatch an exorcist. Bill lived in that house, in that moment, in that girl, and the things of the world outside were insignificant to him. It was not that the moment was romantic or extraordinary. It was not a climactic scene of irrepressible desire from a film where two people made love in slow motion, a curated fuck shot at strategic angles, omitting the imperfections, the real bits. It was simply that this is where he found himself at present.

The philosophers of today speak in a facile manner of “being in the moment.” Colton Blackwell became the moment. Such were the thoughts of grandeur and magnificence that bounced around Bill’s inflated head while his body was on auto-pilot. So loud was the commotion, so pompous the parade within, that Abi’s volley of blows did not immediately register.

“What the fuck is that!” she screamed frantically, jumping off of him and landing inside her garments with the execution of a gymnast. “What the fuck Bill! What is that?” She forwent breathing. One question—are they really questions when one knows the answer?—was shadowed by another. “Is that a fucking hickey?” Rhetorical questions have a function, but in such a situation, anger forfeits function. “What the fuck is that on your neck.” *Slap, Slap, Slap.*

“Abi-baby.” Having neutralized her hands, he spoke softly now, utterly unaffected by her physical assault, but more remarkably, unaffected by what he was doing to her, “We never talked about this. We never said we were together like that.”

“Some things are implied, Bill! You fuck me in the ass! Do you think other people fuck me in the ass? Do you fuck other people in the ass?” Denial. But she had to ask, even if it was just to hear him say it.

“You can’t make assumptions, not with these things, not with me.” “Who the fuck gave you that thing on your neck?” she continued.

“We’re not discussing this—not until you’ve calmed down. You’re irrational.”

“I’m calm enough for this shit, asshole.”

“That’s unlikely. But fine, talk, if you must.” He lit a cigarette and readjusted his cape.

“We’re not exclusive?”

“Last night we were not. But before you started smacking me, we were.”

“What the fuck does that mean? A relationship is not a fucking pin you take on and off, Bill.”

“Actually it is a pin, Abi. Until you talk about it and decide that it’s something else, it’s a fucking pin. Things are what we make them, baby.” he said, “You make things one way, and I make things another way. Even if that thing is the same, you and I can make it as different as a barnyard dog and a piece of toast. This thing, this sex, well it’s the constant variable, if you will, and you and I, well we’re dependent variables, and—”

“Please Bill. Please, stop talking.”

Tongue-in-cheek, he did that exactly, knowing he’d exhausted her and that this would be enough to suspend the onslaught, at least momentarily. The most effective way to avoid a serious conversation, is to not be serious at all.

“You’re a fucking asshole, you know that?”

“Might’ve heard it before.”

“Ugh! You’re the absolute fucking worst. I hope you get what’s coming to you.” It was Abi now who collected her garments while Bill looked on.

“Fuck yourself, Colton Blackwell.”

“Farewell, Abi. And look, if it makes you feel better, I’m sort of sorry.”

“Jerkoff! I hope she was worth it.”

“So do I, but hey, this is Auld, and we—” he spoke to an empty house. ***

“Did she sing you a lullaby, you dog?” Reel asked.

Bill had not, as Abi had predicted, arrived late to his one o’clock seminar. In fact, he had not arrived at all. However, he was on campus thirty minutes before the beginning of his four o’clock, and in the queue at Tim Hortons, when barkeep Reel saw him and thus commenced the briefing.

“Actually, my boy, it’s me who carolled baby country to sleep.”

“She sing into your mic?” Reel said, already doubled up at his own jest.

“Brother, she must’ve hummed her entire repertoire. I’m raw.”

“How you can keep making it happen after all this time is beyond me.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, how do they not know about who you are and what you do?”

“Oh, they know.”

“Then I guess the question is this—how do *they* keep letting it happen?”

“Curiosity, I reckon, and quality. I give it to each like she’s the one.”

“Still, after all this time.”

“Birds still fly into windows, Reel.”

Supplied with caffeine and enough of a brain to fulfil Auld’s negligible academic requirements, Bill and Reel proceeded across campus in direction of Bishop Williams Hall wherein Professor Remington would deliver a lecture on the intersection of artistry and delinquency. Auld was occasionally referred to as “Oxford on the Massawippi,” and across that historical estate, with an agenda that was one measure securing undergraduate credentials and one measure partaking in the hedonist customs of the establishment, Bill and Reel gallivanted, eventually arriving in the quad where their baser nature was distracted by a gathering of undergraduate women involved in a communal yoga practice.

Bill missed Remington’s four o’clock, and Reel missed it with him. Instead, they rested, for the duration of the Zen ritual, on a wooden bench positioned at one extremity of the quad. The pair, accessorized with sunglasses, the voyeur’s disguise, passed a flask charged with liquor that Reel had pilfered from the Lion last night. “Are you sure this is a good idea?” Reel questioned Bill, “Both of your ladies are here.”

“It’s a phenomenal idea. A thing is what you make it, Reel, nothing more, nothing less,” Bill said, waving at the women.

Abi and Piper were both participating in the titillating demonstration of elasticity and tranquility. Abi did not know who Piper was, although she had an inkling since observing the pale-faced girl glance sporadically in her direction. Abi wondered if she was who'd been at her Bill's throat, but dismissed the assumption on the basis that the girl appeared far too innocent. Piper had seen and recognized Abi, but did not know that she and Bill's commitment had achieved sodomite altitudes. Moreover, Bill's reasoning about the polygamous principles of Auld, like her hangover, still resonated in her head. Because she had to believe it, or because she actually did, it whispered to her, while she was performing a sun-salutation, that she was all right, that she'd only done what had been done before. She walked a road that'd been travelled aplenty by her predecessors. She'd behaved, she thought, like a girl from Auld; but is that what she was, she wondered? Is that what she'd allowed herself to become? *Namaste*.

"Who was better?" Reel asked as he handed Bill the flask.

"They were different," Bill replied. "I guess it's difficult to compare, but if I take into consideration the fact that last night with the little one, Piper, was our first time, I'd have to say that the quality was better than the first time with Abi. Abi had already been here too long by the time I got to her."

"What does that mean?"

"It's the mystique of discovery, you know. Arriving first is everything. It's why the Russians and the Americans nearly bankrupted themselves to be number one to walk on the moon. It's how the mouthful sitting atop a full bowl of ice cream appears more appetizing than the mouthful at the bottom of the bowl, even if they're the same substance."

“You know, sometimes you say shit like that, and I hear Waldo.”

“Baby, Waldo and I are completely different specimens.”

“How so?”

“Well, firstly, he comes up with most of these theories, and secondly, he actually believes them.”

“And you don’t?”

“I do, but not so much so that things start and end with what I believe in. I’m more preoccupied with the in-between. Waldo is more concerned with the definitive, and that’ll do a man no good, since there ain’t much that’s one thing completely. Try too hard, I say, and you’ll only find yourself having to try harder.”

“What do you think of him these days? Doesn’t he seem off?”

“Waldo was never on. That boy is all heart and mind.”

“I’m telling you, you sound like him, Bill.”

“Be that as it may. We’ve got different constitutions—I’ll be alright.”

“Will he?”

“I’ll be alright.”

The tired sun was disappearing beyond the western façade of brick buildings surrounding the quad and around that moment, the flask had been flushed. After the yoga, which had been a welcome diversion for the boys whose brains weren’t functioning on a very academic plane, the ladies were dispersing. As if to promote Bill’s amusement, Piper

and Abi were advancing towards him. Reel, distressed, tapped Bill on the shoulder a few times, and said to him that trouble was inbound. *They're coming, they're coming!* What do we do? Composed and collected, the bigger boy lifted and placed one leg on the bench, positioning himself assertively before the girls, who soon realized that their destination was one and the same.

Bill's policy, unbeknownst even to him, was transparency. He was—not in the way of those who develop a moral code based on personal principles, but inherently and impulsively—straightforward. He would never deny his actions, but neither would he categorize them as wrongdoings. This was, perhaps, what infuriated the Abis and the Pipers most. In a snap, Bill acknowledged that he'd been with Piper and in so doing, he disarmed both girls. They were unenthusiastic about Bill's admission and how effortless it had seemed for him, but what could they say? What could either do after they'd heard his confession deferring resolution of the situation to them? They wanted to see him writhe, hurt, remorseful, and be uncomfortable with the itch of guilt, but such was not the way Colton Blackwell danced in the world.

Maybe it's a pin after all, Abi thought to herself. Maybe he's right about fun and magic, thought Piper. That went alright, thought Bill. What the fuck, thought Reel. And with that, the four returned from that momentary intersection to their own respective lives. Piper called home, Abi messaged a former boyfriend, and Bill and Reel prepared for the beginning of the War Dog Beat.

And looming over them was the ominous spectre of the incident that would forever change those boys.

“That was Auld, and we were young,” Bill now said to himself at the bar.

“Excuse me, sir?”

“It’s nothing, just memories. How ’bout a rusty tractor?”

“I’m not sure what that is.”

“Two parts gin, two parts tequila, and two parts vodka, with a splash of—” but the enumeration of the cocktail’s ingredients was interrupted by the faction of Bill’s mind that insisted on remembering what had happened, years ago when death was far from his mind. It had been five years since the accident. The accident. There was something about the term that revolted him. That’s what it had been described as by the authorities, by the courts, by

the families of each of the boys who'd been there that night, and even by the Gant family. The accident. Of course, they'd never intended anyone to die. The object of the Beat was perpetuity, tradition, and the graduation of boys into men, of strangers into brothers, was it not? It was innocuous, pleasantries elevated to the status of something sacred that they, and individuals like them, had adhered to for decades. It was buffoonery; they were hooligans, but decent enough characters, participating in the theatre of university, actors cast within a production.

It was me who locked that cage, Bill thought. He tried to get out. He knew something was wrong. He felt it. Obviously, he felt it, and he tried to open it. He fought with that cage. But why didn't he scream; or did he scream? Did he fucking scream and no one heard him! The other boys were immediately next to him. They would've heard him. Someone would've heard something. But oh, those boys were gone with the liquor, those boys wouldn't have recognized their own mother's voice if it spoke directly into their skull.

How could we leave them unattended like that; how fucking stupid was that? Children aren't so irresponsible. Someone should've been there. Why did I fuck Piper? I had absolutely no need. Abi was a good girl. She was alright with me. She accepted the mistakes I'd made, and what did I do with that tolerance? I sat on it, I sat on it and made it blue. I took that thing that'd been given to me, a decent girl who disregarded my transgressions, and I asked her to be better than she could allow herself to be so that I could be worse than I should've allowed myself to be. Did he fucking scream? Surely he screamed, and I didn't hear him. I was with Piper again that night. I couldn't be alone. I never could be alone then. Alone meant thinking. Alone was Waldo, that fucking sad clown. Had he heard the screams? Surely he hadn't. But why wasn't he more vigilant? He'd almost lost his baby brother in a

freak accident. If anyone should've been attuned to the fickle climate of danger it was him. Did he scream? Of course he had. Who dies quietly, locked in a cage? Not even an animal would go that gently. He fought. There are no fucking accidents. There's only what we did. There's only cause and consequence. There is only the abominable negligence. I killed—

“Sir, are you alright?” the barkeep asked, extending a hand with a tissue in it.

Bill returned with brimming eyes from that place in the past, a place that he visited only when his mind slipped and he fell into it.

“It's nothing, just memories.”

“Can I get you something to drink that isn't old broken machinery?”

“A beer, please.”

He sipped at the beer slowly as he too was fighting now to get out of his own cage.

But that beer didn't resolve anything. The beers that came before that one and on all those nights where the echoes were implacable, did not moderate Bill's sombre ruminations. It was to the thought of a bygone day, a thought so pervasive that it inhabited his present the way bygone days sometimes can, that he belonged now. It was a parasitic sensation that polluted the skies above and the ground below, and that made him disgusted by all that surrounded him, and by all that he was. It contaminated his skin, and it made him forget that some things were okay, that some things had continued to just be. When that disturbance rioted within, there was very little about the present that resonated with him. In five years, he'd arrived at a place where he could contend with the voices every now and then. But everywhere were reminders: names, people and places, a look of

uncertainty in the eye of a young boy, a heartrending turn in a cinematic narrative, a gray morning, the clamour of students in a café at the end of a semester, or the sticky floorboards of an old dive off highway 10.

Before beer, it had been the church. Before the church, it had been therapy, and before therapy, it had again been beer. That succession of absolution and numbness never eased Bill's sleep, or provided him with the reprieve for which he so desperately yearned. God was too forgiving. Therapy was too introspective, and the deeper he looked, all that remained was a tremendous sense of responsibility. *I didn't forcefully place him in there, and sure, in a way he might've volunteered, but what choice did he really have; what possible escape was there for a drunk boy who actually believed in the stories he'd been told about the captivatingly underground brotherhood. And I locked the cage.* That was where he remained, regardless of how long he held his breath and dove into alternative possibilities. So, it was beer that offered him a temporary ceasefire from the war that waged inside.

There had been no criminal indictment. Legally, all those boys involved hadn't been prosecuted. The Gants had attempted to affect some judicial reparation, but because of procedural complexities, they'd abandoned the case and begun mourning. "It was voluntary participation," Auld's legislative band proclaimed. "And there is the issue of his condition." "There was no demonstration of coercion, and no deprivation of the boy's will." "Indeed, it is a tragic accident—"

As for the Brotherhood, it was immediately and effectively disbanded. All members were reluctant to discuss their participation within the fraternity, but they were required to submit testimonies for the purposes of the school's defense. "We offered him and the other

two some liquor, and they drank it. Then we played some drinking games. Afterwards, we asked them if they'd sleep in the cages, and they did. They went in willingly, and that was that," was the substance of each deposition. The name Brotherhood became an unspeakable travesty, and whatever standing any of the boys had achieved by becoming members, was dissolved.

It had been rumoured, though, that just a few years after the incident, some Auld alumni and graduated members of the Brotherhood had visited the university and spoken with active students about resuscitating the faction. Apparently, the men had been uncles and fathers of current students in the lives of whom the legacy had served a pivotal role, and they'd convinced a handful of boys to participate in the revival of the Brotherhood. Of course, program adjustments and major modifications were enacted, but it was whispered that the fraternity, albeit even more clandestinely than it was during the time of its predecessors, was once again operational.

The majority of active brothers from that time had dropped out of school. They returned home and began their own variation of healing. Reel lost his job at the pub. Apparently, they'd been onto him for some time about lifting liquid from the store. Word was that he'd fallen into alcohol much harder than Bill, and that he'd bummed his way west where he lived, a delusional vagrant, in Stanley Park. Maybe that was as much respite as any one of them might achieve. Bill and Waldo had returned to Auld, after a hiatus, as advised by their respective therapists, and completed their final semester of study. Something about maintaining normality. "If you change everything, everything changes you," was what the therapist had offered. Bill obtained a degree in business with a concentration in marketing management, and Waldo completed his bachelor's degree in

English. Despite the court's acquittal, the two boys were institutionally punished by Auld and socially ostracized by all of Parkdale. But no measure of external reprimand compared to the self-imposed penance to which they were servants.

Bill and Waldo had kept in touch, and if therapy was any reparation, it was when they served as each other's counsellors, because, "Guilt misunderstood," Waldo said, "cannot be adequately put right. No one's been able to describe to me what it is exactly, that fucking concentration of shame or remorse or responsibility that disables me. I can't see a single decent thing for what it is. Any moment that's alright is transformed immediately by the consideration of what happened to that boy. Anything good is fleeting, and that's the hurt of it. I don't believe in anything good anymore. Neutral is what I aspire to feel—numb. Because that transition from neutral to shit is tolerable, but dropping from good to shit, that's when I feel the fucking ground below me opening up."

Years, beers, and tears, and no betterment on the horizon, had marooned Bill on a solitary landmass that was a studio apartment, a predictable pattern of employment as a private contractor in the forestry industry, and unpredictable fluctuations of sentiment. Peace was further from his mind now than death had been when he was at Auld. But how could he achieve it; what would do it, and could it even be done? Was there anything, anything at all that would be enough to eradicate the horrible feeling that he belonged to now? Had the boy screamed? Surely he screamed.

Bent over his pint in that bar, Bill recalled a bit of Old Testament scripture from his episode in God's dwelling. Maybe, yes. Maybe that could do it. Perhaps this might mitigate the indignity. But, there was the possibility that the scheme was absurd, and nothing more than a reparative figment conjured by his drunken fancy. Because in all the world, speaking

with Waldo was the only thing that seemed real enough, and because Waldo might actually be capable of distinguishing a good idea from a bad one, from the pub, at around midnight, Bill called to disclose his plan. He let the phone ring ring ring until eventually—

“Bill?”

“I have an idea.”

“I’m listening.”

“Waldo, I think—”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Right, sorry. Ezra, I think I might have an idea.”

“Yes, you said that.”

“I did?”

“You did. Are you drinking?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“The pub off forty-seven.”

“I’m coming.”

The current circumstances of Ezra’s livelihood were akin to Bill’s. After having received his credentials from Auld, he worked briefly in a teaching capacity at a juvenile detention center. The work was tolerable, but all those young people, and all those cages...

So, after a little over a year, he resigned and isolated himself. Having lived frugally during his employment, he'd saved an amount of money that allowed him to remain unemployed for another year. During that period of time, he read and he wrote. He regularly wrote letters to his brother. The last letter, drafted the day before, read:

Hiya Jett,

Sometimes, I think of where we grew up. Actually, I suppose it's more *how* we grew up that I think of. But, I reckon how and why do correlate. It was easy living, wasn't it? If I could, that's what I'd go back to. I'd return and sit at the table where for all those lost hours we played all manner of card games, the table where we gathered as a family on cold mornings and sipped hot drinks, quietly, in the incomparable safety of one another's company. The table where we were allowed, encouraged even, to speak of fear, doubt, and iniquity, without ever having to concern ourselves with feeling small or at fault. Oh, if today I could sit at that table, with my fears, my doubts, and my iniquities, it would be alright. But, that table is gone, isn't it? And with it, the possibility of touching the safety of such simple and undemanding company.

Love you as ever,

Ezra

He wrote letters to Carter, that dead boy. He wrote letters to Carter's family. He wrote letters to his own family, a family that waited for him to return. He read insatiably, and he wrote tendinitis into his hand. He never mailed a single missive. All of it, he set ablaze, and watched as the smoke floated skyward unto heaven.

To ashes, we are committed.

When his savings expired, he didn't seek an alternate income solution. He'd lain in bed for days, weeks—a month. After thirty days without news, his mother had gone to look for him. When she found Ezra, he was weak and, said she, slowly allowing himself to die. That was when his family made arrangements for him to receive treatment and therapy. For six months, and at considerable cost, he was visited at his apartment by a nurse and a psychiatrist who monitored his physical and psychological health. When he recovered a semblance of independence and fortitude, the help, as suggested by the psychiatrist—"It mustn't go on, he'll develop a dependence"—was lifted and he was impelled to repossess his autonomy.

He was not again capable of working in the company of others. Something about the way that things carried on perturbed him. Why hadn't the world stopped for a moment, and looked at him, scolded him, lapidated him; how could they let an animal like him carry on in their midst? So, he lived as a hermit in a small cabin in a small town on the south shore of Montreal.

Ezra's mother was Quebecois, and since his youth, he'd spoken French fluently. With that linguistic capability, he established a translation service to generate revenue. His aptitude with language made him proficient at the work, and most importantly, it was work that he could do without having to leave his home. So for nearly five years now, he translated all variety of documents and always contracts were incoming. Did they know who was doing this work for them, and would they allow it if they knew? Would they allow their documents to be sullied by the hands of someone so tainted, if only they knew?

Ezra sometimes saw his family, who had also received counselling and had, despite their resistance, complied to the recommendation that he should be given the time he needs to return completely, although all dreaded, especially him, that that might never happen. He saw Bill more than he saw his own family. He was ashamed of himself, and did not want his family to behold such a beast: but Bill, Bill and he were beasts alike.

So, when he picked up the phone at midnight, and heard the drunk Bill say something about having had an epiphany, a possible solution, he paused the work he was doing, got prepared, and went to meet him at the bar that was about a half-hour from his own residence. It wasn't that he was confident about Bill's idea, because actually he was not confident whatsoever, rather it was that on this night, he too could hear the screams. "Bill."

"Wal—Ezra. I'm happy you came."

"You're happy?"

"You know what I mean. Thanks for coming."

"A beer and a whiskey, please." Ezra asked the barkeep, "twice." "Thanks," Bill said.

"Oh, would you like a pair as well?" Ezra joked. "Fine, make it three."

Quietly and without ceremony, they drank their liquor and occasionally patted one another commiseratively on the shoulder. After about an hour and four pairs of drink apiece, Ezra looked at Bill in earnest and said, "Alright, old boy, let's hear it."

"There's been a revival of the Brotherhood," Bill began.

“I heard that too. But, they no longer call themselves that. They go by ‘The Legion’.”

“Yes, and they’ve altogether restructured. They ain’t affiliated with Auld. They get money from alumni who think it’s important that the program be maintained. Apparently, they intend to petition the University and try go legit with the whole thing.”

“I heard that. And, you want to stop it?”

“No. No, no, not at all. You can’t stop it.”

“What then?”

“I want to go back.”

“What?”

“I want to go back to Auld.”

“What the fuck for?”

“For the Beat.”

“I’m not following. You want to go to an initiation.”

“I want to go *through* an initiation.”

“Okay,” Ezra said to Bill’s surprise, “But surely it’s changed. It won’t be the same.”

“So we pay them.”

“You want to pay them for what exactly?”

“To put us through the Beat the way *he* would’ve gone through it.”

“You mean...”

“Yes, all of it.”

“When.”

“This weekend.”

“Okay.”

Bill and Ezra met, three days later, at the bar where the former had pitched his proposal for penitence. Both carried a rucksack and in them a couple of bottles of liquor, a change of clothes, and some cash. In Ezra’s bag, there was a pencil, paper, and a copy of a book by Philip Roth. In Bill’s bag, there was the boy’s obituary, a self-help book written by a Californian doctor, and eight feet of manila rope. It was agreed that they’d leave one car there and commute to Auld together. The distance that separated them from their alma mater was insignificant, and could be covered in a little over an hour, but it took them, from the time they met at eight on that cold morning, five hours to arrive at their intended destination.

The initial delay occurred at kilometer zero. Both exited their vehicle and approached one another. Bill was kicking at the hard snow with his lumberman boots and smoking a cigarette. Ezra asked him if he was still adamant about what it was that he’d suggested. Bill replied in the affirmative, but admitted that he could use a whiskey and a beer to ease into the undertaking. And so, for a little more than an hour, they sat at the bar where three nights before they’d agreed to go back to the place where they’d fallen.

The second of the drive's interruptions came about a half-hour into the drive when Bill proclaimed that he was out of cigarettes and couldn't do this shit without 'em. So they stopped, for what should've been a momentary mission, but became instead another shot and another beer in an establishment beside the *depanneur*.

"We don't have to go," Ezra said.

"We have," Bill disagreed.

They did.

The third and final intermission in transit came just before they drove into Parkdale. Ezra parked roadside for a final verification of intention. Again, but without attempting to dissuade him, he offered Bill an opportunity to renege, but Bill was steadfast and because they'd covered all that distance and all that time, he knew that it would be worse if they turned back. And with that resolve, in the idling car, Ezra retrieved his rucksack from the backseat and from it he pulled out a bottle of Jameson Irish Whiskey. When he did, Bill snickered and Ezra asked him what was funny about indulging in one last instalment of spirit. Instead of an answer, Bill produced a bottle of the same from his own rucksack. They spent the final hour of the commute on the shoulder of early Queen Street getting prepared, one sip at a time, to do what they had come to do.

"Can you drive?" Bill asked Ezra.

"It's just over yonder."

He put the car in gear and progressed into the province that he and his passenger hadn't visited since having completed their studies. Neither had attended his graduation or

convocation. They received their diplomas unceremoniously in the mail. Bill's was lost somewhere, and Ezra's was smoke.

Mass House, from the exterior, appeared identical. Its brick had faded somewhat, and there wasn't any indication of restoration or modification. The front yard and the porch that enfolded the front and side of the house was littered with beer cans, residue from what Ezra called, under his breath, "the same insanity that gets us all." There was no suggestion of movement or wakefulness within, and so Bill recommended that they go to the Lion for lunch and return after.

"We can't," Ezra protested.

"Why not?"

"They won't have us. Do you forget who we are and what we did?"

"I know. But it's part of why we came here. It's part of the solution."

"I don't know."

"Ezra, my boy," he hadn't called him *my boy* since their days at Auld, "let's go in there, order some burgers, drink some stout, and do what we came here to do on a full stomach. Do you want to go back to your fucking cabin now? We're close. There's something here for us, and I know that you feel it too."

Ezra gazed through the windshield at the thick falling snow. He knew that Bill wasn't wrong, but he was terrified of the words, "something here for us." He was afraid that maybe they wouldn't find it, and even more afraid that maybe they would, and that it

wouldn't be enough. But, not looking for it was unacceptable, so he simply nodded and drove to the pub, where they parked, smoked two cigarettes apiece, and went in.

Regulars of the local Parkdale citizenry were drinking coffee, pints of beer, and eating the tavern fare habitually the way they had for years. Through the wooden entryway they walked and finally into the open space where they were visible, where at last, they were exposed to the community, the sons of tragedy returned; the careless boys who had shaken Auld and Parkdale in the name of a foolish ritual.

From their tables, not one patron looked at them directly. They looked beyond them inquisitively, at the door wherefrom the cool wind had whistled its way inside the warmth of the old establishment, but not one pair of eyes befell them deliberately; not one pair of eyes acknowledged them. Unsure, they sat and ordered lunch.

“Nobody knows,” Ezra said.

“Nobody knows,” Bill repeated.

“Is that good?”

“I can't say.”

“I don't think it's good.”

Like fugitives, like pariahs, like first-timers, they ate lunch with their diffident brows bent over their plates. Sporadically, one would look up and survey the faces present for an indication of resentment, for something in the present that connected them to what had happened in the past. But such a sign was not perceived by one or the other. They might as well have been vagabonds from faraway, casually drifting through town. This caused

neither to recline easily in their chair. When the waitress rotated back to their table, they ordered two pitchers of stout, and just before she left, Bill asked for a rusty tractor.

“I don’t know what that is, sir.”

“Okay, good. Never mind.”

She came in while they were finishing their last pints. They weren’t drunk, because their respective tolerance for alcohol was disquietingly high, but they weren’t exactly sober, the tolerance for which was near near-none. She looked authoritative and self-possessed, beautiful and amiable, the way she always had. In her black jumpsuit complete with a beige suede blazer, Professor Remington took one look at Ezra and her expression changed.

Where he expected revulsion and abhorrence, he saw instead a countenance that held condolence and consolation. Excusing herself from her company, she made for his table and stood above him with her arms extended outward. He stood and slid into her arms timidly as if someone might see the embrace and call it inappropriate; he didn’t want her to be seen with him. But no one saw a thing, or rather, everyone saw a thing that no one cared about.

“I’m so sorry about your friend,” Remington spoke softly. But those words that were articulated to demonstrate empathy and understanding, instead, made Ezra’s spine so sore with shame that he replied, “He wasn’t my friend—”

As if hearing the words of a delusional character from one of those books she taught, she simply pursed her lips and nodded, saying with her expression that it was okay if he didn’t want to, posthumously, recognize the boy as his friend. It was a legitimate coping

mechanism, for the time being, to refuse Ezra's former companionship with the dearly departed. He could hear her teaching a segment of a class about *a promising student who once sat where you're sitting. He attended Auld, just like you, and he was a bright boy. When tragedy befell him and his friends, a conflict that altered the space wherein they operated, they were all transformed. Each resorted to his own arrangement of grief. For this boy I speak of, he elected to reimagine his relationship with the deceased in a reductive way. He moderated existing sentiment, and altogether diminished the past so that his present might be abated. It is a traditional yet formidably efficient method of managing loss.*

But really, they had not, by Ezra's reckoning, been friends. Surely, over time they might've become such. They would have developed camaraderie as authentic as camaraderie engineered within the context of the Brotherhood might allow. Possibly, they would still talk today and perhaps even be buddies, office pals, high-fiving and trading inside jokes at reunions. But no, insofar as their momentary acquaintance was regarded, Ezra could not consider that friendship.

"Thank you, Professor."

"Of course. And what brings you back to Parkdale?"

"Closure."

Eventually he returned to the place of the accident. He came back to Auld so that he might lay that tremendous heartache to rest. How exactly? Well, perhaps he did something as benign as watch the metaphorical sun of his grief set over that building out there. Perhaps he found himself in the pub and drank a pint or two, or eight— don't think I don't know

what goes on here on weekends (Student laughter). Regardless of how he did it, the boy found closure, and when he did, his life was realigned and onwards he carried. “Were you also a friend of his?” Remington asked, looking at Bill sadly. “Sure,”

he said. “I’m Bill. I took one of your seminars in my first year.” “I’m so sorry about your friend,” she repeated.

“Thank you,” he said.

And that was that. After squaring the bill and briefly debating whether they’d drive or walk—they would walk—they stepped outside. Bill lit two cigarettes, handed one to Ezra, and slowly they started for Mass House. Thick snow fell. Ezra was thinking about Remington and about anyone else who might’ve considered him a friend of the boy’s. Was that the consensus? Was his absence, according to them, due to bereavement?

“We haven’t talked about what we’re going to say,” Ezra reminded Bill.

“I’ve thought about it. Just let me talk, okay?”

“What are you going to say?”

“Very little.”

So it was agreed. Bill would negotiate with the Brotherhood affiliates. They stood before Mass House and suddenly, paralyzing hesitation befell Ezra. Surely, this couldn’t lighten the heavy darkness inside of him. It was ridiculous—was it not?— to surmise that replicating the past could have any consequence whatsoever on the present; that it could

transform, rectify, and even eliminate the thing that crawled within him. The more popular practices for reparation hadn't cut so much as a splinter from the tree of his disgrace and disgust. Years of therapy, relocating to another city, that time with holiness, that time with different *holinesses*—he'd bargained with different gods but not one of their policies sufficed—a year of wandering, but wherever he went, the shadow of that shame accompanied him. None of it had altered, even remotely, his ailment. So how could something as farfetched as a re-enactment relieve him and usher in soft sleep?

“Buddy,” Bill started, “get out of that head. We're doing this. We're here.”

They approached the door, Bill leading, and paused before it. Bill knocked. Inside, boys had only moments ago convened in the living room to sit on the couches where once the two individuals who now stood outside would've rested. In two of the beds, there were women. In both women resided the sentiment of fault that'd possessed Piper years ago. Mass House had remained.

One boy, bleary-eyed but with a robust constitution, wearing the dirty bathrobe, opened the door and said to Bill and Ezra that they didn't have to ask, they could just collect the cans and carry on. That's how the others did it. They never knocked and they never asked, they just came, albeit earlier than this, with their plastic bags and in them they put all of the refundable receptacles they could find. How fucking pathetic did they look, Ezra thought, that they could be mistaken for vagrants?

“We'd like to talk,” Bill said.

“We're students,” the boy replied, “We can't afford shit and don't deserve Jesus.”

“We’re not selling anything. As a matter of fact, I have a proposition from which you might benefit,” and as he said that, Bill retrieved five one-hundred dollar bills from the pocket of his overcoat. Before that happened, two other residents, attracted by the unusual spectacle, had approached the door and looked on curiously. Doubtful but intrigued, they discussed the matter briefly and in a minute the door was wide open.

“Come in,” the bathrobe-bearing boy said and gestured, escorting them in their old house.

Ezra followed Bill who followed the boys into the living room where the tenants sat and discussed what it might be that those two suspicious characters wanted. Underfoot, the floor was sticky as ever and in the air, the fragrance of microwaved coffee drifted uninterrupted. The boys served their visitors a cup of black and when Bill asked that a splash of liquor to be added to his, the boys laughed approvingly and satisfied his demand. Ezra too, extended his mug and in it, the whiskey was poured.

“So, what might we do for you gentlemen?” the bathrobe asked.

“We have a particular demand. But firstly, allow me to introduce myself. I’m Bill, and this is Ezra. We were students here a few years ago, and members of this fraternity. We lived in this house and sat on that couch. That thing you’re wearing,” Bill pointed at the bathrobe, “I used to live in that thing.”

“You’re old Brotherhood?” the boy asked.

“We are, and we’d like to ask something of you.”

“Okay, what?”

“We want to you to put us through the Beat.”

The boys in the room were incredulous. The minor skepticism they’d been harboring since the two men entered their domain was compounded by the peculiarity of what they’d just heard. They were murmuring accusations of irrationality and discussing that these men could even be, perhaps, agents of the school trying to infiltrate and collapse the organization that, as they knew, had been collapsed by the school once before. “Why?” “Why is irrelevant. We’ll pay you,” Bill said.

“How do we know for sure that you are who you say you are?”

“Who would falsify their identity to go through the fucking Beat?” Bill argued.

“Who pays to go through the fucking Beat!” the boy replied.

“We do. And why is irrelevant, and also personal—a thousand dollars each.”

The air was still as the boys in the room looked at one another, looked at Ezra and at Bill, who sat, drinking Irish coffee in the early afternoon and had just offered to pay fivethousand dollars to be humiliated, to drink and drink and drink, and for what?

“Who are you?” the boy asked.

“I’m Bill, and this is Ezra.”

“When did you come here?”

“Five years ago.”

The murmurs recommenced.

That's the year it happened. That's when it went to shit. That's when that kid died. That's when the Brotherhood was disbanded. They might've known him. Maybe that's why they were there. But why would they want to go through the Beat, and how was that even related? They wanted to dole out five-grand to go through this shit, let them. No, the whole thing was odd. Tell them to go home. Yeah, don't get involved. It's what happened that year that changed the organization. My dad said the members then were idiots. These guys are idiots, kick 'em out. Fucking kick 'em, period.

It was Ezra then, who rose to his feet and spoke.

“We were here when it happened, yes. We knew the boy who died, and we put him through the Beat. We fucked up, left him unsupervised, and because of a variety of factors, he lost his life. We're here because we want to put it to rest in our own way. We're prepared to pay you good money, right now, to put us through a variation of the Beat that we've designed ourselves. If you accept, we'll be gone in twenty-four hours, and with us, anything that happens during that time, will too be gone. It's just myself, Bill, and you guys. Five thousand dollars. Twenty-four hours. Just do what you do anyway, and let us have this.”

“Where's the money?”

If you can't drink your drink, you can't think your think...

“C’mon old man, drink it!”

“Yeah! C’mon, suck it down you ancient piece of shit!”

“Have you forgotten how to be a man?”

“Men? These aren’t men, these are pathetic pieces of shit.”

“Where does one put pieces of shit then?”

“Send ’em home!”

“To the John!” “To the John!” “To the John!”

Marshalled by boys they might’ve been once, Bill and Ezra were violently directed to the bathroom. There, they were picked up, in succession, flipped upside down, and their heads were plunged inside the yellowed water of the toilet. Ezra watched dispassionately as Bill was driven into the piss. He watched as one of the boys pulled out his cock and

started urinating onto Bill's face, into his ear, onto his neck, all over him. Ezra remembered the toilet tradition from his own Beat participation, but he couldn't recall ever witnessing one boy urinating onto an initiate whose brain was already bathing inside the ceramic. However, he didn't object. He watched, and waited his turn.

When Bill emerged, his hair, his skin, and his clothing soaked in piss, he gasped profoundly and spat a mouthful of juice into one of the boy's faces. "You fucking call that a toilet tribute! You boys are softer than your mama's pussies, you boys ain't shit, you're a waste of my fucking money, waste of space, a disgrace to your fathers, you—" His tirade was interrupted by a second, longer visit inside the loo. It seemed too long, Ezra thought, and Bill's feet started kicking. Through the water and the piss, and over the hollers and the hoots of the boys gathered, Ezra thought he heard Bill scream. Passive and faraway, Ezra simply eyed the scene and continued to wait impatiently.

When they removed Bill's face from the toilet for the second time, a much quieter person had arisen. His effrontery had faded and he was no more than a man, awash with piss, deeply drawing breath. They took his soft submissive body into the living room where he was shoved into a kennel. He did not resist. The door of the kennel was not large, but Bill's resolve to remain outside of it was smaller yet. It was no harder than passing a pillow through a window. Once confined inside that space, they passed him a bottle of liquor, locked the cage, and told him they'd let him sleep on a sheet in the basement if he washed down the fluid inside the hour that followed.

And now it was Ezra's turn to be bathed.

"Keep your mouth closed and breathe once through your nose, old boy!"

They spun his body and soon his head was looking directly into the toilet. He closed his eyes and prepared for the descent. The piss of two or three of the boys was falling onto his cheek, but before his head made contact with the water in the toilet, it collided with the circumference of the bowl causing a flash of white light to traverse his skull; it made his mouth open enough to swallow a serving of the liquid he was dropped into. He tried to draw a breath, thinking they'd pull him out in an instant on account of what happened to his head. "He's alright, just fucking hold him," he heard one of the boys say. Understanding he wouldn't be provided with a moment of respite, he tried to evacuate as much of the liquid from his mouth as he could, but when the air passed his teeth, his nose sucked in fluid and that's when he started to tell his feet to pass a message to the fuckers holding him like that.

This had all happened in what he assumed were about the first ten seconds of his appointment inside the toilet, and it occurred to him that they kept Bill in the stuff, despite his kicking, for what had seemed like at least one minute, so he told himself to hold on—fucking hold on.

When he was younger, he'd been baptized at the small non-denominational church of Baldwin Mills. It was non-denominational because any religious discrimination would have caused the numbers of separate congregations to be inconsequential and holding services not worthwhile. Therefore, Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, and Protestant churchgoers watched his young body fall into the holy water at the front of the church. As his young spirit had been made to understand, baptism represented rebirth, and subsequent admission into the Christian Church. He belonged, thereafter, to God and to that wooden parish where weekly they met. He'd been made to feel quite accomplished after having

undergone the ritual. He received gifts, kisses, and praise from his family and from the rest of the congregation. “Congratulations,” they’d say, “You’ve done a wonderful thing.” On that Sunday when he was baptized, Ezra was the church celebrity, and although he said this to no one, that had been the part of the baptism he most appreciated. Normally, his presence at mass went practically unnoticed. He sat carefully in a pew and took in what he could. He enjoyed worship well enough, but was temporarily deaf during sermons. It’s not that he was uninterested by what was going on inside the church, but more so that he couldn’t stop thinking of what was going on beyond the building. He imagined what his nonchurchgoing friends might be getting up to.

The baptism had been meant to draw him into the body of the church and closer to their lord and saviour, but all he’d felt was wet and one degree removed from his friends at school. “Ezra-boy’s joined a cult!” they’d say when he came to school the next day. “Oh Brother Ezra, please forgive my sins. I’ve been a bad boy and I have had impure thoughts of your sexy mother.” Ezra had wrestled with the kid who’d spoken salaciously of his mother and he’d been disciplined by the school administration. The rumour of his aggressive impulse also reached Reverend Matthews who had then sat with Ezra during service on the following Sunday.

“God says ‘turn the other cheek,’ Ezra. Do you remember your catechism lessons?”

“I remember.”

“So then why did you attack the boy at school?”

“Reverend Matthews, can I be honest?”

“Of course, Ezra.”

“I don’t think the baptism worked.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean... I still feel the same. I think about the same things, and I act the same way.”

Reverend Matthews chuckled and tapped Ezra’s knee lightly through his tunic.

“Dear boy,” he started, “the ritual of baptism is not a metamorphosis. You are not another by it. It does not transform you. It is a rite that publically demonstrates your commitment to our lord and saviour, Jesus-Christ.”

“I think that coming here every Sunday is commitment enough.”

“You’ve a good mind, Ezra. You’re going to do wonderful things. And remember that the light of Jesus-Christ is inside of you, always. When difficult things or unpleasant things take place, like what happened at school, just let that light show you the way.”

Fucking hold on. Piss was gurgling inside his tight throat.

“Rev, I think the light is out.”

“It’s good to see you Ezra. Speak to me.”

“I think I’m responsible for a boy dying.”

“Did you kill him, Ezra?”

“I might as well have.”

“Did you want him to die?”

“Of course not. But he died, and I was involved.”

“And is this why your head is inside that toilet right now?”

“Yes.”

“And do you think you’ll be pardoned when you come out?”

“No.”

“Why are you doing it then?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sure you do.”

“Rev, you ever think God is too easy?”

“Too good, perhaps, yes.”

“I do too. Can you ask him to punish me properly for what happened?”

“I’ll see what I can do. Meanwhile, save the light.”

“Thanks, Reverend Matthews.”

Ezra was prostrate and cold. Over him, the five faces of the Mass House tenants hovered angelically. “Do you think he’s alright?” “His fucking eye is bleeding pretty badly.” “Clean it up.” “If you assholes hurt him, I’ll fucking have you all! Get him help you idiots, call an ambulance, he’s not responsive!” “Shut up, old man, he’s fine,” said the bathrobe, then he threw a beer at the cage wherein Bill was locked and closed the door to the living room. “You fucking idiot children!”

When morning came, Bill and Ezra were awakened by one of the boys whose countenance was softer than that of the other's. He knelt outside of the cage and was talking to them quietly. "Alright old men, it's time you went home." He unlocked the cages and slowly, the weathered, haggard men stinking of piss, beer, and vomit, crawled out of it and into their clothes. He presented them with two thermoses filled with hot coffee, "not Irish this time," he joked. The boy helped them gather their belongings, and just before they left, he passed them an envelope containing his thousand dollars. "What you're looking for can't be bought, but it can be found. Keep looking."

"Thank you, kid," Bill said.

Walking back to the pub, Bill lit two cigarettes and passed one to Ezra.

Parkdale wasn't yet awake. The streets were deserted and a thick snow fell. Underfoot, the ground was forgiving and their feet moved easily upon it. Ezra looked up at the descending snow and into everything that his eye was allowed to see.

"Look," he said to Bill.

"What?"

"Can you see it?"

"See what?"

"We're still here."

"Yeah. I suppose we are."