

Souvenirs of a Forgotten Highway

Celyn Harding-Jones

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts (English) at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

October 2010

© Celyn Harding-Jones, 2010

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Celyn Harding-Jones

Entitled: Souvenirs of a Forgotten Highway

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts (English)**

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

Kate Stern, Chair

Josip Novakovich, Examiner

Nicola Nixon, Examiner

Sina Queyras, Supervisor

Approved by Jill Didur  
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Brian Lewis  
Dean of Faculty

19 November 2010  
Date

## ABSTRACT

Souvenirs of a Forgotten Highway

Celyn Harding-Jones

*Souvenirs of a Forgotten Highway* contributes to the tradition of Western literature by depicting contemporary people struggling to find balance in the extreme desert landscape; they are beset by the consequences of the rise, fall and sustenance of the Cowboy myth. The novella is inspired from personal experiences living in the Sonoran desert, and encouraged by Jack Spicer's *Billy the Kid* and B.P. Nichol's *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid*. Just as William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* is haunted by the Old South, my characters are tormented by whispers of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* and Theodore Roosevelt's Frontier myth. Cormac McCarthy's modern take on the West's violent past in *Blood Meridian* cannot be escaped. Provoked by Michael Ondaatje's fragmented form in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, my thesis collects various storytelling techniques such as rumours, TV guide schedules, real crimes, and Native American tales mirroring the historical influence the West has had on literature, and the effect literature had on creating the Cowboy myth.

Set in a hamlet in rural Arizona, nine year-old Christina is trapped in wide-open spaces, and attempts a dangerous escape. Maria, her mother, is isolated, sun-beaten, and holed-up her trailer. Sam is perpetually overwhelmed with the long list of lives he must "fix". Lucy faces bringing a baby into a dysfunctional world. Jerome finds that he has run out of space to hide in, tormented by his urge to run and a troubled past. Even the rain is rejected by the desert, creating disaster for those who live in it.

I am forever indebted to the vision, kindness and honesty of Sina Queyras, to the support and teaching from Mikhail Iossel over the many years and to words of wisdom imparted to me by Padgett Powell. Thank you Nicola Nixon and Josip Novakovich for your time and insight. Of course, to every writer who came before me, and who will inevitably come after.

Always, with undying love, to my mam Gaynor: my editor and creator. To my dad Phil: my printer, mental and financial supporter. To my beautiful sister Carys: my inspiration and forever fan. And to Adam: my Jewish comedy writer, the best hugger and best friend.

To Arizona and its people.  
To uncover the beauty that lies beneath the rough terrain, the prickly people and  
relentless sun. To understand why people do what they do to survive.

**Souvenirs of a Forgotten Highway**  
**By Celyn Harding-Jones**

Epigraph.....1  
Epilogue.....2  
Part I.....3  
Part II.....91  
Works Consulted.....141

*“Arizona’s no place for amateurs.”*  
-- Owen Wister, *The Virginian*

*“A year that is hard for people  
is hard for scorpions too.  
It’s hard for everything.”*  
-- Byrd Baylor, *The Desert is Theirs*

*“His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world’s turning  
will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be  
shaped to a man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay.”*  
--Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

At first a whisper, the sound of rumbling hooves become thunderous, ringing in ears long after the riders are gone. A dozen Men on Horses gallop in from the East, dust rising, catching in their eyes. They've been riding for days and dirt is caked into their wrinkles and ears. Hoarse, Horses, snot dried to their noses. These Men wear Cowboy Hats and Leather Chaps, their faces covered in beards and dust. Their bodies, crusted in a reddish-brown layer of desert soil, are battered by the sun; the beads of sweat are trapped under layers of clothing, dirt, skin.

They arrive at a crumbling white stucco Church (there is always a Church), where a Mexican Woman in a brightly coloured dress awaits, with a red magnolia in her hair. She is the Conquest, the red Rose in the desert, the exotic, forbidden fruit. There are children begging in Spanish for food; they are starving.

After the Church, there will be Scalpings of Mexicans and Indians and there will be Free Land and Gold and Gun Fights. There will be Rivals and Enemies and Revenge and Duties and Moral Law, but the lines between Good and Bad are ugly, slipping into excuses of context and Legend. And these Men, they'll all die, never able to live up to their Rumours, spreading back East like locusts.



## **Part I**

Billy sat on a cooler at the Petrified Rocks stand in Flint, Arizona staring blankly at the dust twisting and rolling across the two-lane Navajo Trail Highway. He watched a truck speed down the all-but-forgotten Route 66. He lit a cigarette. The road was covered in a thick layer of shifting sand, and as he and the other vendors sat outside, they too were quickly covered in a film of grit. The dust turned a darker shade of brown in the creases of his hands as he sweat in the August morning heat. It was 8 a.m. and the sun was already scorching at 99 degrees. He wiped his eyes with his shirtsleeve in a futile attempt to see clearly.

As nine-year-old Christina sat on a fold-up chair beside him, singing softly to herself, Billy tried to keep his mind from traveling backwards. Rolling back into the dark recesses. He didn't want to revisit what he had left behind. Places like Tombstone, where the Best Western Hotel pool looked out onto Boothill Cemetery, full of fake, dead cowboys. Every building a façade. One dehydrated afternoon while sitting poolside, a woman with yellowed, chipped teeth smiled at him as she undressed and sat on the deck chair beside him wearing nothing but a fluorescent pink bikini. "You wanna party?" she had asked him. He shook his head, "Naw, I'm all dried out." Her façade dropped suddenly. She grabbed her clothes and stormed out of the pool area, bikini bottoms drooping, exposing a purpled bruise on her tailbone.

Then, there was Tucson. Billy checked in to a non-descript motel as Clint Weston, and checked out, completely out of his mind, paranoid that an undercover cop in a white van had been following him. He jumped into his orange 1966 Chevy pickup and sped to the nearest highway. Upon realizing he'd been driving north, Billy took the only exit

he could, to avoid Phoenix, and sped westward. He hit Yuma and hit rock bottom. His supply was empty. Yuma seemed to be infested with huge, green-clothed Immigration officers who looked and acted more like self-righteous pest control. His truck overheated and he'd had no money left to fix it.

After a week in Yuma, he held up a tanning salon, with a cigar tube hidden in his pocket, for a hundred dollars and some cents. He hitchhiked to Fort Defiance in a drug-induced romance with its name, but once he'd had one good look around, he stuck his thumb right back out. Billy got to Kingman and dropped acid in an airplane graveyard. So long as he wasn't in Phoenix.

Now he was in Flint, selling souvenirs at a very forgettable roadside market. Three tables under three rickety wooden shelters, with the grand name of "Friendly Indian Market". He had finally settled. But not because he had wanted to. Billy considered Flint a hideout, a place small enough that it didn't have a police station in town, but with enough people with their own lives that he could blend in. The things that used to give him a thrill, gave him acid stomach aches. The creaking in his bones hinted that he was getting too old for a fugitive lifestyle. He was through with pretending. He'd have to stick with Billy, stuck in Flint. Thinking about other places wasn't making his day any easier to get through.

Bianca and Pedro, other market vendors, bickered endlessly. Billy looked down at the fold-up wooden table's splintered sides covered in a tattered plastic blue tablecloth. Strewn across the table were rocks. Red rocks with streaks of piss-yellow or grayish-blue. Billy shook his head, and thought, how the fuck did my sorry ass end up here?

The Market sold neon-coloured                      dream catchers, small cotton woven rugs

(made in China), fake silver jewelry with fake turquoise stones in the forms of animals that didn't live in the desert. Their authenticity as a Native American roadside market deteriorated and faded like the billboards bleached out by the sun. When Billy had first met Sam, the Market's reluctant owner, at Rusty's bar, they'd gotten along well enough. Billy could see the Market's dilapidated state, everyone held their breath, knowing it would go bust any second. Billy saw his chance. He had remembered seeing other markets by the Canyon and in Monument Valley selling petrified rocks from the Petrified Forest. He'd laughed at first, because they were charging 10 to 15 dollars for a rock, but he quickly saw the profit they were making. Billy could make enough money to head north for a while. The only problem, as Sam often reminded Billy, was that they weren't authorized to sell the rocks. One needed an expensive permit, and the National Parks charged exorbitant fees for the rocks. At first, Billy told Sam he had an 'in' with the Park. Sam didn't have much of a choice: the mark-up was outrageously good. So he let Billy man his own Petrified Rocks stand. After a month, it became evident that Billy didn't have a permit, or any intention of getting one. But, as Christina had said, "they sell like pancakes!"

During the summer months, and on weekends, Christina sat with the vendors, "helping" them to sell their wares. Sam picked her up in the morning and brought her home in the evening. Bianca told Billy that she was his daughter, his *illegitimate* daughter. Billy felt that Sam treated her with the same attitude that he treated the boxes of dream catchers he had "invested" in, which collected dust in the back of his truck. As if he had once hoped they would be valuable, but now were more of a burden that he just had to put up with.

Billy thought she was sweet looking, if a bit disheveled. Her brown bangs parted in the middle and often stuck to her forehead with sweat. Her long hair was always braided down her back. Her eyes widened with excitement, and she smiled at almost everything. She often came to the Market wearing the same clothes as the day before, and they were usually stained.

“Hey Billy, you know Sam’s wife?” Christina piped up suddenly.

“Who, Lucy?”

“Yeah. Is she sick like me?”

“Huh?” Billy flicked his cigarette into the dust.

“Sick like me? Cause you know, when I was at school they said I got a head that’s sick, like I’m real slow. And Mama says she’s sick in the head.” Christina looked down and swung her legs, feet trailing the ground. Dust rose steadily to cloud her face. She wondered if Billy couldn’t see her, maybe he would forget the way she looked, the way she spoke.

“Naw, she’s not sick in the same way. She just can’t have kids no more. Well, and she goes to that Evangelical church.”

“Wha?”

“Nevermind. You won’t understand.”

An SUV pulled out from the road and parked in the lot in front of the market. A middle-aged man and woman got out, equipped with cameras and hats with oversized rims and cloth hanging down over the backs of their necks. Christina giggled.

“Oh boy! Oh yes!” Christina squeaked, stood up and began waving furiously. Two teenage boys slunk out of the car’s side doors. Both still grossly involved in their

hand-held gaming devices, they reluctantly followed their parents to the stands. Christina was still waving by the time the family made their way over to her stand.

“Hola!” the woman said enthusiastically.

Christina looked suddenly at Billy; her eyes wide open with alarm. Her once-waving hand fell to her side. She felt the same as when something strange happened and she didn’t know how to react. Like when the TV turns on, she thought, but the noise is up real loud and I can’t find the button to shush it.

“Hola, senorita,” the man said, “er, cuantos los rochos?”

Christina turned bright red and took a step back, tripping over her chair and falling with a thud into the dust. The two teenage boys began to laugh. Christina opened her eyes. Dust rose around her. Sunlight blinded her as she looked up. Billy reached over and helped her to her feet. Christina stood and brushed her bangs away from her face, smearing reddish-brown dust over her forehead. She looked at the younger boy who was still laughing at her.

“You’re not speaking right,” Christina said. Sometimes words came out of her mouth that she didn’t mean, or that sounded mean. Like when Mama said there was no going outside, she thought. Mama had said it was too sunny and hot--*no way*. But that’s why Christina wanted to play outside. She had felt her face get really hot and like her eyes turned to small suns and the words “shut up!” came stumbling out of her mouth. She had gasped. Her mama had gone silent. Christina had begun to cry and her mama held her in her arms until the sun went away anyway.

Christina worried that she had said something mean and the woman certainly wouldn’t want to hug her afterwards.

“Oh, we’re very sorry,” the woman said. She elbowed her husband in the ribs.

“What are y’all selling?”

Christina took a big breath and started to explain.

“Pet-tree-fied rocks is wood from the forest a long time ago. It stuck in mud for a million-gazillion years. Then forest turned to desert ‘cause the rain went away. The wood got stuck in the mud and turned into crystal! But crystal’s fragile, *and* it’s hard like rock. So it’s not really wood anymore. It’s like a rock.” Christina spewed words as fast as they could exit her brain, worried that she would forget just one very important detail and then all would be lost.

“Wow Mom, rocks from a long time ago,” the older boy said sarcastically. “Let’s go. You said we were just gunna stop for Burger King. I’m hungry.” He moped back to the car, his brother following.

“You’re so sweet, thanks for that explanation!” The woman reached for her purse and took out a few bills. “I’ll take that big one.”

Billy bagged the rock and gave the woman her change.

“Sure is hot out here, how do y’all do it?” the woman said, wiping her brow.

Christina closed her eyes and smiled. She crossed her arms and reached for her back. “It’s like a big hug!”

After the truck had disappeared down the highway, Christina rearranged the rocks into a different formation on the table.

“You know Billy, these pet-tree-fied rocks are real silly things.” Christina smiled, crossed her arms and nodded her head. She felt that this made what she said become

true.

“Sure.” Billy paced the length of the table, lighting another cigarette.

“Hey Billy, what does pet-tree-fied mean?”

“Petrified means scared.”

“Well, that’s real silly ‘cause Mama says that only silly things are scared.”

“Your Mama still holdin’ out?”

“Oh yes! She holds out this far!” Christina giggled and stretched her arms, holding a great big imaginary belly.

The only time Billy had ever seen Maria was when she had taken Christina to a doctor’s appointment. A handicap taxi-van had stopped at the Market to pick up Christina. When Maria opened the side door of the taxi, Billy had been shocked to see that she weighed at least 300 lbs. He had realized that the van was for Maria’s handicap, not Christina’s.

“She don’t get out of that trailer much, does she,” he asked, somewhat rhetorically.

Christina didn’t answer. She was preoccupied with something out in the far distance. Across the highway was a small valley, surrounded by mesas and smaller hills. The land the Market sat on had once been a lookout point, when the highway was just a trail. She squinted, looking to the deserted land, her chin resting in her hands. She saw cacti, creosote bushes and the rare ocotillo. Not much else. She thought that the cacti must be lonely out there. Lonely, like Mama. She wondered if lonely got lonely too, seeing as no one liked lonely. She wondered what the land looked like beyond where the cacti were. Further than where her eyes couldn’t see anything else. Christina knew there was stuff out there, she had seen people come from other places. Places her mama



said she'd no need to think about.

Billy felt a tickle in his nose and wiped it with his sleeve.

“Hedi-on-dilla!” Christina burst out suddenly.

“Huh?”

“Hediondilla,” Christina repeated, rolling her eyes. “It’s the creosote you smell ain’t it? The yucky smell you had in your nose--you scrunched it up. That smell means it’s gunna rain.”

“Uh-huh.” Billy felt he needed an excuse to get out on the road, break up his boredom. Remind himself (even temporarily) of his own freedom.

“The man at the Canyon Store says the creosote bush is mean ‘fore it rains. It knows and then it makes the icky smells. The smell kills the other plants ‘round it so it can get all the rain. It’s greedy. And we can’t be greedy.”

“Uh-huh.” Billy stood up and walked over to the bed of his truck to check the straw bags for more rocks. There were a few smaller ones left in the bags, but he decided to leave them. He’d tell Sam he was running low, and he’d have to drive a few hours out to the Petrified Forest to collect more.

Billy found Sam sitting in the parking lot in his truck, the door open, his ear glued to his cell phone. He was arguing.

“Hey, I’m running low on the rocks.”

“Hang on,” Sam spoke into his phone and covered it with his hand. “What?”

“We just had some lady buy tons and there’s practically nothing left. I need to go and get more rocks.”

Sam gave Billy an exhausted look.

“Don’t want to miss an opportunity,” Billy pleaded. He heard a woman yelling on the other end of Sam’s phone.

“Fine.”

“Christina’s here though.”

“Give her to Bianca.”

“We’re not here to babysit, Sam.”

“Fine. Just go.” Sam reached for the car door and slammed it shut in Billy’s face.

Billy walked back over to the stand and grabbed his knapsack.

“Hey Christina, I gotta go and get some more rocks, but Sam’ll look after you. Just sit tight, okay?” He jogged into the Burger King next door to take a piss before setting off on the road. As Billy pulled out onto the highway, he felt the tension in his shoulders ease.

At 1:15 p.m., Maria drew a check mark in the TV Guide over the listing for *Friends* as she turned on the TV. She wondered what it was like to live in a big city, in an apartment, so close to other people, so close to friends. She suspected real life wasn't really like it was on TV. People popping by, everyone having sex with each other and it still was okay, somehow. How do Ross and Rachel face each other after all of that history together? she thought, they just keep hurting each other. Maria decided that in real life, they would not really be friends. She imagined it would nice to have a group of friends to share stuff with. But they always ended up stabbing each other in the back. On TV it all worked out in the end because they have to make a new episode with the same people. She wondered what it would be like to live in half-hour spots. How simply everything resolved, tied up neatly in one group hug or apology. But didn't things happen when people were intimate that could never be taken back? Weren't there consequences? She knew it was all for a laugh, it was just a TV show, but wasn't there someone else out there that felt like she did? Probably. But not anyone she had ever met.

When the programs changed at 1:30, Maria marked a 'check' over *Seinfeld*. By now Maria had figured out that everything on *Seinfeld* was about nothing. Despite that it made no sense, she laughed every time. There was something about Kramer's hair when it shook, stuttering, his eyebrows raised in surprise. Something about Elaine's voice and George's bald head and belly. Something about the door in Jerry's apartment. It just made her laugh.

When the show changed at 2 p.m., Maria marked a 'check' in the TV Guide.

She liked *Oprah*. Because people had shit happen to them and they lived to tell about it on the show. And it was inspirational and motivational and sensational and such. And Oprah had it rough when she was a kid and look where she is now, right? Women like Maria had kids like Christina when they were young and it was wonderful and an inspiration to others. Maria thought she'd always like to write a book about what it was like for her, living with Christina. About how she had been through so much, and come out the other side more or less in one piece. She felt that her life's story was quite poetic. Maybe not romantic, but certainly poetic. Like when Maria was young, like really young, her dad had come home and found her all alone; her mother had vanished. Her dad said there had been a note, from her mother, telling a story about how she had tried to teach Maria to walk. But baby Maria had been so stubborn, all she wanted to do was sit. She couldn't get her to crawl or walk. Her mother had blamed herself. Maria knew that her mother had run away because she wouldn't walk. That kind of story was poetic. Movie material. The kind of movie Oprah would endorse and she'd be an overnight sensation.

She wondered if she could share so much though, like about her dad leaving for Vegas when she was thirteen. As if for twelve years, her mother had been living less than forty miles away, sunning herself in the bright lights of the strip. Maria had tried to imagine what her mother was like, but regardless of the fact that she couldn't remember much about her, Maria simply couldn't picture her in Vegas. Her mother was a candlelit cheek, hair soft as a peacock's feather, not fluorescent neon lights, not gambling men. Her dad was a gambling man.

Maria suddenly felt an ulcer-like pain in her stomach. Maria was not dumb, even at thirteen. She had known what an eviction notice looked like, why her dad had

unplugged the phone. So when she walked home from school one afternoon and saw Lucy's dad waiting with an empty suitcase outside her house, she knew her dad had just up and left.

Maria felt her stomach burn, a lump growing in her throat. Her head throbbed. She was hungry. Yes, food in her belly would soothe the familiar pang. She reached down, flailing her hand by her leg, fingers searching for the recognizable crinkle of a bag of potato chips. The woman being interviewed by Oprah had had her face burnt off by her husband. She had no nose, no lips, just a small hole to mumble out of. Maria watched, horrified. Perhaps it would be harder to tell her story than she thought. All the same, she liked to think about people knowing about her. People would know that she was a woman in a small trailer in the middle of no man's land who could have been so much more.

When *Dr. Phil* came on at 3 p.m., Maria drew a check. Dr. Phil's guests always seemed more real to Maria. Like Oprah picked the good ones and Dr. Phil picked the crazies. She figured it made Dr. Phil's job easier. Maria didn't have a degree and she could tell right off the bat what was messed up with those people.

Sometimes when she thought about this, she was amazed. That she had never had many friends in school, at least the twelve kids in her grade were slim pickings for friends. And she hadn't really met a whole bunch of new people since then, but still, somehow she could read people. She thought it was probably because she spent so much time thinking about herself. She had almost figured herself out. Convinced that it was partly due to the "what if" games she played. Maria made up scenes in her head, like if Christina was having a hard time in school, or they wanted to send her to a special expensive school, she'd already thought of that and knew to take her out of school.

Maria could home school her, and she felt that she would do a better job than the teachers who basically ignored Christina the whole day. She knew that it would be a bad idea to take Christina to the doctor's too often, she didn't like the idea of doctors prying too much. What if they said she couldn't afford to keep Christina? What if the doctors decided that Christina needed a surgery they could only do in Canada? What if the social services believed that Maria wasn't fit to take care of her own daughter? Those what if's were too scary to think about. So Maria planned, and kept Christina in arm's reach, or at least in someone's arm's reach. Maria thought she had figured out ways to protect Christina from the world, and was doing a pretty good job.

### 3

The mid-day sun sweltered above the market. Sam threw his cell phone against the inside of the passenger door of his truck. He was fed up, worn out. He didn't want to hear his ring-tone nagging at his ear one more time that day. He got out of his truck and walked over to the market stands. He re-clamped the wooden trays together in groups of six, three wide and two down across the wooden fold-out tables. Bianca had moved her trays that morning into groups of four, leaving several trays to be placed haphazardly on a chair. He looked at the trays and for a second felt like one of them--clamped down.

He was always the first one at the market in the morning, sweeping blown dust and dirt off the benches and tables, unloading the plastic boxes from the back of his truck. He'd lie out the rugs and shawls over the wooden fence behind the tables. Sam usually enjoyed that part of the day, before everyone else showed up. Peace and quiet, no one to come to him with problems or stupid quibbles. Bianca and Pedro argued most of the day, and without a doubt one of them would come to complain about the other at least once a week. Bianca was on his case often, she wanted him to buy her beads so she could make and sell her own jewelry. He tried to explain to her that buying the supplies to make jewelry was actually more expensive than buying it pre-made from their importer in Tulsa.

But he tried to keep Bianca and Pedro happy, they were the only Navajos left at the market. The other markets he'd seen always advertised 'Native American Crafts', or used the words Hopi or Navajo. He'd often wondered why Lucy's dad had insisted on

keeping up the cheesy signs along the highway. The signs, two west of the market, and one further east, said: “3 Miles to the Roadside Friendly Indian Market,” “1 Mile! Really, Very Friendly Indians! We Make Good Deals,” and “You Missed Us! Turn Around Now!” He wondered how many tourists didn’t stop because of these potentially offensive signs, and how many stopped because of them. Sam could barely afford to re-paint the signs he hated so much, let alone take care of himself and Lucy--and Maria--and Christina.

Sam knew he would not leave Lucy. Even if their relationship was always on the rocks. They’d been together for most of his adult life, and sure, he loved her. But he loved other women too. Like Vicky and Maria.

He felt there were distinctions in love. Being *in love* was different than *loving* someone. He loved Lucy. He couldn’t really picture his life without her in it. They had grown together, like a cacti growing through fence links. But he also wanted to protect Maria, almost like he would protect his sister, if he had one. She and Christina were the closest thing left to “family”. That must be some kind of love too, he thought. And of course, he loved the way Vicky made him feel physically.

Sam realized he had long ago bitten off more than he could chew, and now all he could do was mop up the frequent spills. He could never have all three. He wished he could just choose bits and pieces: Lucy’s friendship and the way they used to play fight, Maria’s stubborn heart, and Vicky’s passion. But he couldn’t. Not ever.

All three women had changed so much from when they were young. Sam and Lucy used to have an incredible friendship, a common unspoken understanding that they were meant for each other. Lucy had never minded if Sam stayed out all night at the



bar, so long as he came home to her. Until she got pregnant. Suddenly it was vows and legally binding ceremonies. Then nine months later, the world fell upside down and shook Lucy into an alternate universe. She was in mourning, grief-stricken, and was angry at everything, especially Sam. He tried everything he could to fix things. Still, nine years later, he felt her heart had pushed him out and filled itself with God, or at least a God that didn't allow for forgiveness.

He felt that he spent most of his life picking up things that were left behind. Stepping in when no one else would. Putting back pieces that had been broken by someone else. Cleaning up someone else's spilled milk. Filling in the gaps. Making new keys for keyless locks. Emptying the dishes from the drying rack. Replacing burnt out bulbs when everyone else seemed content to stand in the dark.

He glanced at his watch. Close to 1 p.m.. Vicky was finishing her maid's shift at the motel soon. He'd leave the market to see if he could catch her before she left the motel. Sam sighed as he re-hung dream catchers from the awning over the tables. He had done enough filling and covering and replacing in his thirty-one years to know that he'd have to fix things. The wind started up, and blew sand into his eyes, over the tables. Sam looked at the clamps, the trays, the blankets, the dream catchers, the signs. There must be some way, he thought, to arrange them so that the dirt didn't get into everything.

“Heard Billy’s on the run from the law.”

“Like a fugitive?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, what’s he runnin’ for?”

“You mean from. What’s he runnin’ from.”

“Yeah, what I said.”

“I dunno.”

“How do you know he’s a fugitive then?”

“I can just tell these things. He shows up outta nowhere with that vintage Chevy, I mean, for one, he musta stole it, and for two, he don’t always answer to his name.”

“Whadd’ya mean? Like Billy’s not his real name?”

“I dunno, all I’m sayin’ is that he don’t talk much and he don’t share much neither.”

“Well, sometimes you talk enough for both of us.”

The road. Billy didn't know what it was about the road, but it seemed to speak to him. It seemed so straight-forward. There was no fear of running out of road. In the years that he'd spent driving in his Chevy he felt this sense of control, of power over his life. He often didn't have any money so he slept in his truck. Instead of eating regularly, he pumped gas. Even during the months when his transmission was broken and he couldn't afford to fix it, Billy stuck his thumb out along side the road. When he'd run clear out of money, he'd pick up a job or two, sleep in his truck or a cheap motel and save until he could be out onto the highway again. Destinations didn't matter. It was just him out there, sun in his eyes, hand loosely on the wheel, music on the radio and a cigarette in his mouth. Billy could lose his former self, his present self and his future self out there on the road.

Billy realized he'd been in Flint for over five months. Longest he'd stayed anywhere in three years. Sometimes he'd stay for a month for a girl, or at least the convenience a girl would provide. If the sex was good she'd buy him a few beers but she'd eventually want to get serious or she'd find out he was living in his truck. Deal breakers. He'd feel his feet tingling. Or people started asking too many questions. Employers treated him like an immigrant because he refused to give any of his information. Billy liked the irony. Of a first generation American being treated like a Mexican. Despite his mother's attempts to Americanize him, America still saw him as a criminal, an illegal.

‘Ping!’

Billy snapped out of his forward stare and glanced at the dash.

“Damn.”

He had been so excited to get going that he’d forgotten to fill up with gas. He knew there was only one station left between where he was and the Petrified Forest, and he was thankful that it was coming up soon. He’d been stuck with an empty tank before in August, and it was hell. He’d walked miles, in 120-degree heat to get gas. The arid sun beating down, its heat beating back up at him from the asphalt.

When he got to the Exxon, he pulled in and stopped his engine. He looked to his left. There were no gas tanks, no gas meters, and no gas pumps. They had been ripped out of their sockets, and all that was left were wires and pipes sprouting out of concrete. He got out of the truck and walked towards the station. The small store was empty. A window was smashed in, but an American flag still hung down above the door, flapping in the wind. He looked up at the Exxon sign. Numbers were missing, advertisements were gone. Billy walked around to the back of the truck to check if he had been smart enough to keep some gas in a gas can. He lifted a straw sack and --

“What the fuck!”

Two scrawny legs and a girl’s body was hidden under another sack. Her legs curled up in an attempt to hide again. Billy grabbed the other bag and to his disbelief, there lay Christina.

“Christina! Get out! What the hell are you doing in there? You could’ve killed yourself!”

She looked at him with wide eyes. Her small body shaking. Hair matted from

the wind.

“S-sorry,” she whispered. Christina looked at Billy, trying to read the reaction on his face. She got up and climbed out of the bed of the truck and into the passenger’s seat. She was mad at herself now. And Billy was mad and Mama was going to be so mad too, she thought, afraid. She thought about what she had first felt, climbing into Billy’s truck. It was a fizzling in her belly, like soda.

Billy sat in the driver’s seat, staring at the road for a few minutes before starting the truck. He tried to call Sam on his cell phone but he couldn’t get reception. He contemplated turning around. By then Sam would have realized that Christina was missing. But he was so far out. The forest was only a twenty-minute drive from where they were. He could hit the station just east of the forest. Turning around at that point was too risky without gas. Billy imagined walking with Christina along the road until the next station in the heat, her constant questioning and chattering driving him crazy.

No, I’ll finish what I came out here to do, he thought. Not going to let her mess this up.

“Just be quiet and everything’ll be fine.”

So instead of talking, Christina counted the cacti from her window. But they moved too fast and she lost count. The cacti all looked the same, she thought, the same as in Flint. They weren’t so different. So she looked ahead of them at the road. She tried counting the yellow dashed lines. But they too moved too quickly. Christina began to wonder if anything was different after all. She decided things weren’t so strange in other places and now she knew. She had discovered it for herself.

Soon Billy was on the outskirts of the forest and felt fairly confident that no other

cars were around. The forest had no trees. The hundreds of layers of red, orange, brown, and grey rocks looked like layers of a cake, cut down the middle spanned for miles around them. Mesas and buttes were striped from hundreds of years of sedentary movements. The larger trees had fallen centuries before, and had petrified where they had fallen. Old dinosaurs in the modern world. He drove off-road until he came down into a ditch. It looked like a good place to hide the truck so it couldn't be seen from the road. He stopped the truck and looked at Christina. Her eyes were gaping wide open. She was smiling.

“This is the forest?” she whispered, amazed.

“Stay here. Don't you dare move. Open the window a crack.” Billy said and then slammed the door closed. As he walked off, he could hear Christina's voice from inside the truck. She was yelling “Hediondilla!” He ignored her and kept walking, searching for pieces of petrified rocks along the ridge, his nose itching.

## 6

Sky hadn't rained down on Land in a while. How was Land supposed to keep giving, digging deeper and deeper into herself for life? For that single drop that the prickly pear, the ocotillo, the cactus wren, the red ants desired--they all kept asking her for more. They crawled and scratched and dug and hid and howled and shriveled and dried and snapped.

She could not take much more of their slow, dehydrated death-drive. And Sun, well, he could be cruel as he could be generous. He was just so extreme that time of year, absolutely relentless. She needed him, they all needed Sun, but he was blinded by his own light. Blinded by the fact that they all depended on his gifts.

What Sky could do, rather what Sky decided to do was life or death for her and her creatures. When Sky relaxed, he slowly trailed a few clouds along, and the days would be warm and smooth. He could gather his Clouds and provide shade, protecting them from Sun, but if his Clouds got rowdy, and billowed out of control, chaos rained down on Land for days on end. Sky was so flippant, indecisive, unpredictable, sometimes even vindictive. If he felt Sun had had enough of the spotlight, too much time shining, he'd call his dark clouds and cover the light. Sun sometimes fought back by finding the little clouds and shining right through them, or peeping behind the black ones. Land loved when this happened. Their anger, their collision would produce Rainbow. Everyone loved Rainbow.

But at that moment, she didn't care about seeing Rainbow. All she wanted was

the dark clouds to appear. And, after months and months of the usual drought, she was relieved to finally see that Sky's temperament had changed. Clouds were congregating in the South. Clouds were blowing in from the West. Wind had been playing tricks with the Clouds, revealing and mixing rumours, until Clouds billowed towards each other, rumbling, ready to clash. Wind loved to push ahead and whisper the news; the scent of water caught the noses of jackrabbits and coyotes. The molecular mist touched the creosote's leaves, triggering an excited reaction of a chemical nature. Birds fell silent and slipped into saguaro holes.

Then, two Cloud gangs met and formed a wall, dusting down to Land and reaching up to cover Sun. The dark wall swept Land, racing to cover all of Sky. Lightening struck down to Land, shocking and burning her as it touched down. Land became exhilarated, Lightening reminded her she was alive. Thunder cracked and rolled down from the hills and mesas, echoing in large canyons and tiny eardrums.

She called her creatures into hiding, into her arms and dark warm places, out of harm's way. Then Clouds let loose. They emptied themselves, in an epic fight to cause as much damage as possible. She felt as Water splashed down, in giant, round, perfectly shaped drops. She breathed a sigh of relief as the drops quenched her dry sands. She warmed Water with the heat held in her surface.

Land felt Water rush down her face, covering her forehead, then her cheeks, then her chin, down her neck, cascading to embrace her shoulders and her bosom, flowing faster over her large belly, that by the time it reached her legs and feet Land could feel water rushing back up from her toes, up her legs, filling the contents of her belly. She looked down at Water pushing up her body, it was brown, muddied. Water mixed with



her sands and she tried to keep it from surging back up but it quickly coursed up her neck, flooded her lungs, and spewed out of her mouth in a five foot wave.

Sky watched as Water drowned Land, as it ripped plants from their roots and flooded gopher holes, gophers dragged along in the instant river. An orange truck's tires bobbed in the undertow.

Land gurgled fruitless apologies as Water smashed against her sides and rose in rapids. She tried to scream, but the sound of rushing rose louder. Land pushed as hard as she could, forcing Water to run off her surfaces, spreading out to still-dry sand. Land pushed until the waves had subsided, leaving lakes and ponds and pools where the washes lay dry before.

Water trickled everywhere. Palo verde trees tilted, still swaying even though the storm had passed. Sand displaced, and began to resettle. Saguaro spines dripped.

Land felt the girl's small body crumpled in her sands.

Sky became flat. One-dimensional, one colour. He had exhausted all of his Clouds, his face wiped of expression after the exertion of the storm. Sun slowly revealed himself, gently reminding Land of his warm touch. And she glowed. Cacti and brush had been replenished, and they showed off their deep hues of green. As if green was a badge of survival.

Sam and Christina were more than an hour late. But Sam was sometimes late, a fact Maria tried to calm herself with. A few times he'd been kept late at the market with a tour bus. Or that's what he told Christina to report back. Sam lied. Maria was all too aware of the lies he told. She didn't understand why he told them. He said he'd call, but he didn't. Then he'd say his cell phone had died. They both knew he couldn't call because of Lucy. He'd lie and say he had to do something for Lucy, when Maria knew he was screwing Vicky. As if lying made things better.

Maria decided to call Sam. Find out where they were. She wanted Sam to know that she knew they were late. That she cared. She rummaged through the piles of things she had collected, looking for the grey cord that led to her phone. Without lifting her heavy body from the built-in love seat, she overturned piles of clothing with her feet, threw plastic bottles to the other side of the room, wiggled her fingers into dark holes. She'd arranged her belongings so that she rarely had to stand up. Remote, tightly tucked into the love seat. TV Guides stacked in a pile to the left of her chair on the floor. Her microwave was perched precariously on the stove, she only used the oven very rarely because she'd have to take all the pots and pans out of the oven to use it. Clothes doubled as blankets on the bed where she and Christina slept. The fridge held both cold and dry foods, as her limited cupboard space was filled with old TV guides, collectable plastic cups and various other items. Maria found the phone under a towel that was underneath Christina's sleep apnea machine and dialed Sam's number. It rang, and rang until she heard

his voice, explaining he was unavailable and please leave a message. She slammed the receiver down and redialed. Maria called Sam seven or eight times with no success. Maria felt instantly helpless, and angry. Why can't he just pick up? she thought. She tugged at the phone until the cord ripped out of the wall and snapped back, hitting wall behind her. Hmph, that'll show him, she thought.

She adjusted her weight and felt a piece of paper crumple under her body. She pulled a receipt and a small piece of scrap paper out from under her. The list was written in her handwriting, from two days before:

*Sam: 6 Hearty-man dinners  
2 frozen spaghetti dinners- whatever's on sale  
1 box Rice-a-Roni (spanish style)  
Hunt's Pudding cups- chocolate  
ABCO brand frozen pepperoni pizza  
No name Saltine crackers. (NOT Reduced Salt!!!)  
Mary's frozen chicken wings- HOT  
Mother's Circus Animal cookies-- 2/ 5\$  
Oreo's - 2/5\$  
Baked beans- with lard  
Lay's chips- Buy 1 get 1 free  
4 jugs of water  
use the rest of the stamps for this month*

Maria then compared her list to the ABCO receipt.

### ABCO

1268 Navajo Highway Road, Flint, Az

Hearty-man dinners *6	6@ 5.00
Mama Mia's Spaghetti Dinners *2	2@ 2.50
Spanish Style Rice-a-Roni	.79
Hunt's Light Chocolate Pudding cups	.98
ABCO brand frozen pepperoni pizza	4.99
No Name Brand Saltine Crackers	1.99
Mother's Circus Animal Cookies *2	2@ 2.00
Mary's Frozen Chicken Wings- mild	2.99
McCain Crinkle Cut French Fries	29 <sup>2.98</sup>

Tinned peaches *6	6@ 3.00
Tinned mandarin oranges *4	4@ 2.56
Bananas *4	4@ 3.89
Fuji apples *4	4@ 2.15
Baby Carrots	.99
Tropicana Orange Juice- extra pulp	3.98
1 gallon ABCO 2% Milk	3.50
1 gallon Water *8	8@ 7.89
SUBTOTAL:	52.18

Maria thought that maybe it was okay that Sam was late. There could be a good reason, he might have taken Christina to get an ice cream.

Sam stared at his face in the motel mirror, the intense afternoon sun refracting light off the glass.

“Don’t you dare light up inside this time!” Vicky yelled to him as she remade the bed. “Last time you did, my boss accused me of smoking while workin’. If I don’t get paid in full this week it’s your damn fault! I’ll take it out of your wallet, and you’ll have to force the girls at the Market to sell more dream catchers and they’ll bitch at you too--see how you like that!”

Sam wrinkled his forehead, examining each deep line.

“Your cell’s beepin’. Jesus, you must have like ten messages on it the way it’s been beepin’,” she yelled from the other room.

“And it ain’t a surprise who’s been calling,” Sam said to himself, and ran the taps until the water turned cold.

“Hey, when you get back there, can you ask Bianca to pay me back? She owes me 10 bucks.” Vicky put her white cleaning tunic back on and pulled her hair back with a rubber band. Sam splashed his face with cold water, drying his hands on his jeans. He walked back into the room, looking for his shirt. He found it folded already, on the bedside table. Then, his cell phone rang. He pulled it out of his jeans and answered it.

“What do you want now?”

...

“What?”

...

“Ok, okay, I’ll be there in five.”

Sam hung up, threw on his shirt and grabbed his keys from the bedside table.

“Where’re you goin’?”

“The market. Something’s happened.”

“*Something’s happened,*” she mocked his serious tone. “Just say what happened, Jesus, sometimes you can be so weird.”

“They can’t find Christina.”

“Sam, you were supposed to be looking after her weren’t you!” Vicky slapped Sam’s arm. The room was silent.

Vicky moved towards Sam and he tried to hug her. She pushed his arm away and reached for his cigarettes in his back pocket.

Sam handed her his lighter and walked out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him. She could hear his truck start and stall, then peel out of the parking lot.

“I wish sometimes you weren’t only thinking about yourself.”

Disoriented, Billy walked over the stony ridge, towards the road. He didn't know how long it had been since the rain, but the road was already dry. The few cars that drove past were dry too, as if it had never rained, as if the flood had never ripped the land apart, as if his truck had never been swept away. As if it were all some cruel mirage or trick. But he could see that the dust was stuck to the cars in little circles, a dry reminder of the rain that had passed. The few creosote shrubs that were sparsely scattered glowed an eerie bright green colour, instead of being heavy with a layer of fine, grey soil. The dirt glowed too, as if the ground were the illuminated sun, against the thick charcoal grey sky that seemed to have a watery depth only the sea knows. The sound of water was still ringing in his ears; the sudden rushing of an instant raging river in the desert. He had never heard water like that before. Had never been to the ocean. His only memory of a river was the one in Phoenix, called Salt River, a sorry, dry excuse for a river. There had been so much water, it just didn't make sense to him. He looked down at his clothes. His white t-shirt was crusted with an orange hue, his jeans heavy and damp. One shoe was missing. He wondered how he'd not felt his shoe come off, how he'd not felt rocks stabbing his foot as he ran along the ditch. He suddenly became aware of the pain in his neck, in his foot, and his ankle throbbing. He let out one long breath and noticed that his heart was still beating fast. Billy stood by the side of the pavement, looking at the painted yellow line, trying to streamline his breathing, his thoughts.

A beige pick-up pulled over to the side of the road where he was standing.

“You okay?” A man in a cowboy hat leaned over the seat, his window rolled down. Billy stood looking at the man in the truck. He then looked down at his hand, extended towards the road, a stubborn thumb, out of habit, was up in the air. He put his arm down.

“Get in, you must’ve been caught in that god-damned storm. Man, I had to pull over for twenty minutes to wait ‘til it passed. Saw some people letting the water drain out of their cars just by openin’ their doors.”

Billy was suddenly aware of the heat, radiating off of the truck, steaming off of the road and burning his shoeless foot. He climbed into the truck.

“I’m heading down to Phoenix. That okay with you? We could stop and get you looked at sooner if you’d like--”

“Phoenix,” was all Billy could stomach saying.

“What’s your name son?” the cowboy asked.

He opened his mouth to answer, but couldn’t find the words. As if the slate which held his name had been erased by the rain.

“You’re not an illegal are ya?”

“Jerome,” he finally answered, defeated.



## 10

The girl forgot about breathing. Her body was broken and became useless to her. With one swift twisting movement, she rose above it. Looking down, she saw that her body was the same colour as the earth. Dirt clumped in her hair and mud covered her skin. Water pooled in her eardrum. Her neck was twisted. The storm had rushed her into a small rock formation. She took some comfort in the image below her. The body was cuddling up to the rock. That was as good of a place as any to leave it behind.

While Maria waited for Christina to come home, the sand scratched at her door. They were late. More than late. There was something bad, something souring in Maria's stomach. She looked at the TV screen in front of her. It rattled on, flashed brightly, flipped through images of other people smiling, laughing. She felt as if she had suddenly stopped. The people on TV kept moving, spinning around her. Maria looked around. Everything in her trailer was the same. She needed it that way. Perhaps now more than ever. The same so that when Christina came home, they would fit together like pieces of a cog wheel. She would come home.

But people moved on in front of her. Characters resolved problems and Oprah changed lives. She needed Christina home. So they could eat dinner and watch *Extreme Home Makeover* and Christina could fall asleep cuddled into Maria's body on the foam mattress on the floor.

A frightening thought held Maria's breath hostage in her throat. It was something about things suddenly changing. A routine halted. Familiarity ripped away. Stopping love, cold turkey. Maria felt uncomfortable, cold, heart pounding louder in her chest. She needed to bring it all back, as if her life was slipping away.

Yesterday, she thought. Yesterday was good. Yesterday will be like today. But what had yesterday been like? It was like the day before, and the day before that. Yesterday felt so far away. Maria closed her eyes and re-traced yesterday, for fear of losing it all.

*Imagining yesterday, Maria saw herself sitting with the TV off, patiently waiting until she heard the crumbling of rocks under tires. An engine rattling. Then it stopped. A slamming door, another slamming door.*

*“Wait.” Sam’s voice was calm and strong. Maria winced, kept her eyes shut. Christina tapped her fingers against the tin door, softly, playing a game. Plastic bags ruffled, crumpled and were set down at the door.*

*“Wait.” His voice was fainter, softer. Car door slammed, engine started and the trailer door flew open, light bleaching the small trailer.*

*“MAMMA!” Christina stood in the doorway, beaming. Maria opened her eyes, but could not see her daughter’s face. Christina appeared as a small dark figure somehow radiating tremendous light from the sun and dust around her.*

*Christina ran towards Maria, arms wide open.*

*“Dirt, Christina!” Maria stopped her before contact. “Wash!”*

*“Oh yes! Oh boy, oh yes!” Christina stopped dead in her tracks, body wobbling, one foot on a crushed RC cola can, the other, behind her on a magazine, slowly slipping and tearing the page. She turned her torso in slow motion, and reached for the sink. Christina watched as, upon contact with water, her hands turned a darker shade of brown, and when she rubbed her hands together, the brown slid off, onto white plates and blue cups and finally onto the silver bottom of the sink. Maria stood up awkwardly, her knees aching from being bent without movement for hours. She moved slowly past Christina, and opened the tin door.*

*The sun took over everything, as if the sky was overexposed. The few clouds*

*floating around were bleached of contrast and shadow making capacity. She looked down. She could make out a few bags, lined up in the shade of the trailer. She bent to her knees, held on to the side of the trailer and reached down to pick them up without stepping foot outside.*

*“Mama, it’s six!” Christina sat on a pillow on the floor by the built-in love seat. She had a pen and the TV Guide.*

*“Press 8, and then the big blue button,” Maria instructed as she piled cereal boxes and cookie boxes and a box of rice and a few boxes of microwave dinners into the small cabinet above the sink and into the freezer. Christina sat with the remote in front of her, her small fingers softly running over the buttons, as if by touching each button, she could feel which one was marked 8.*

*“Don’t forget to open the guide to the right page, Christina.”*

*The girl stared at the front cover of the guide. She opened it and turned the pages forcefully using the palm of her hand.*

*“Don’t rip them! Turn the pages properly.”*

*“I don’t ‘member, Mama,” Christina huffed, “it’s too hard, to ‘member how, what page is good.” Maria felt a familiar string of tension in her jaw-line tighten.*

*“Give it here,” Maria gave into her grinding teeth. Christina sprung up and tripped into her mother, remote and guide flying, and a bony body jabbing into Maria’s cushioned side.*

*“Christ Christina!”*

*Christina giggled and crawled to the other side of the room where the remote had lodged itself between a pair of odd shoes. Maria concealed a small smile.*

*Maria let Christina mark a check in the TV Guide, the news was always at 6. She microwaved two Hearty Man dinners, opened another cola, poured a glass of milk and grabbed a box of Ho-Ho's. She sat back down in her chair and Christina nuzzled up to her leg.*

*"Mama, there were people today at the market who come from Miss-ery."*

*"There's no such a place."*

*"Yeah-huh, they said they from Miss-ery. And I asked Billy what Miss-ery is and he said it's being sad. But it's also a place. Like Tuba City. Tuba is also a ninstrument. And Snowflake is a place too, he he! And Billy tol' me that Phee-niks is a bird on fire!"*

*"Missouri?"*

*"Nah-uh, Miss-ery."*

*"Eat your dinner."*

*"Mama, what's it like in Miss-ery? Is everyone sad? If they is, then they should come here. Or we should go there and make everyone smile!"*

*"We're not going anywhere. There's nowhere you need to be but here. You promise me that? You're not going anywhere. No need." Maria rested her hand on Christina's head, and rubbed her fingers through her hair, which often calmed Christina.*

*Maria looked down at the TV guide in front of her. She loved Extreme Home Makeover. A smile grew across Christina's face every time Ty yelled something incomprehensible. Maria's eyes welled when they said 'Move that Bus!', Christina chiming in.*

*"Would you like it if Ty and his crew came to our door, Christina?"*

*"No."*

*“No? Wouldn’t you like it if they tore this place down and built us a big house?”*

*“No.”*

*“Why not? Don’t you think it’d be good--”*

*“--No!” Christina stood suddenly and stormed towards the door, opened it, and sat down on the step outside. Head in her hands, she had watched the sun go to bed in the ground.*

After Sam confirmed the bad news with the Sheriff, he got in his truck and began driving. He wasn't sure where he was going, but he kept on south, down the highway. He thought about going down to the scene of the accident. If he kept driving, he'd be there in an hour or so. But what use would that be? He guessed it depended on the state of things. Maybe he could just drive there and help out. At the very least, scope out things. He was sure there'd be something they'd need him for. He'd have to identify Billy's truck. And maybe his body. The way the Sheriff spoke it seemed he was pretty sure that Billy couldn't have survived the storm. Said they'd have to search a lot of land, that the water drags plants and animals a few miles out.

Then there'd be things like identifying a body, funeral arrangements, forms to fill out, clothes and toys to get rid of, the list seemed endless. And he knew Maria would do none of those things. He felt angry again. Maria was so irresponsible. Why couldn't she have just kept Christina at home? Kept her in that trailer out of harm's way. Never let Christina leave her sight. Why couldn't Maria take responsibility for once? Done something, anything instead of leaving it all up to him to take care of. And why the hell did Billy take her out there? Hadn't Billy had asked him to watch her? Why hadn't he protected her? How could Billy have put his daughter in danger? It dawned on Sam that Christina had died around the same time he'd gone to see Vicky. Sam felt a weight on his forehead, like he had been hit in the face with a shovel.

He remembered when he had first seen Christina.

*He went to talk to Maria about Lucy. He wanted to know how he could possibly console Lucy after the death of their baby. When he came up to the trailer he heard Maria crying and moaning. He tried to open the door, but it was locked and she wouldn't let him in. He yelled through the door, offering to drive Maria to the hospital, but she had refused to go. So he called Vicky's cousin who was a nurse and she got there just in time. She delivered Christina, right there, in that trailer, and made Sam wait outside, listening for the wail of a new-born. He was so nervous, wary of doctors but also of birthing complications and the complete devastation of death. Maria said he didn't deserve to be the first to see Christina come into the world. She'd told him she would raise her baby without his help. Sam had not argued, seeing as he and Lucy had had their own baby on the way. But a month prior, Lucy's baby had been a still-born. Christina was all he had left. So Sam waited outside the trailer all night until she finally let him in. Christina was so small. Her head fit perfectly in Sam's palm. She was the first baby he'd held in his arms.*

Sam drove further south. After about an hour, he came up to a point in the road flooded by rainwater. This was the first sign of a storm. The road dipped as an old dried-up riverbed crossed the highway. Several cars were stopped on the other side and a man was attempting to drive his truck across. The man drove slowly, everyone watching as the truck inched forward and the water inched higher. The dip in the road seemed impossibly deep, the water incredibly high. A woman on the other side of the highway leaned out of her car window and yelled at the man to give up, to back out of the water. Sam watched as the man, determined to cross, pushed his truck on. He sped up suddenly, as the water lapped over his wheels, rising over the grill and nipped at the hood of his truck. The



truck stopped. The man leaned out of his window and saw the water rushing at quite a speed beneath the truck. He attempted to reverse and back out of the ditch, but his engine sputtered and the man frantically watched as water leaked inside his doors. The man reached over to the back of the cab and grabbed his shotgun and climbed out of his open window. He jumped into the water, which was up to his chest, and waded to safety, his shotgun in his arms above his head.

There was no way Sam was getting across the ditch to the accident. He'd have to turn around. Sam looked to the sky. But there was nothing there. Just blue, cloudless sky. Unrelenting sun. No sign of storm.

“Can you remember the last time it rained, like *really* came down?”

“Last summer, I think.”

“It must’ve rained since then.”

“You know, I can never remember the last rainfall.”

“On the news they said there were 100-year floods in ‘78, ‘79, ‘80 and ‘83. Do you remember them?”

“100 year floods? Aren’t those only supposed to happen every hundred years?”

“They just happen so fast, I was here during those floods and can’t remember a darn thing except that we lost our dog in one of them.”

“Maybe the sun’s fried our brains.”

“That would explain a lot of shit that happens out here.”

When Jerome arrived in Phoenix, it was late afternoon. He checked into a downtown Motel 8 on Van Buren Avenue as Jose Cuervo. But at 43 dollars per night, the sandy cash in his wallet would go fast. He sat on his 43-dollar-bed with the curtains drawn, the TV off and the lights dimmed. He stared straight ahead at the motel's excuse for art on the wall. He'd stayed at maybe thirty motels in the past few years and all the paintings looked the same. Always the same three or four shades of beige or pink or brown. And turquoise. Always a washy image of a desert landscape, but so washy that you weren't sure what you were looking at.

The desert was a landscape that was out to fool anyone who set foot on land. Coyote wasn't the trickster. It was the mesas, the dust devils, the prickly pears, the bright blue sky that was the blame. He was angry. No one can predict flash floods, he thought, that's why they're called *flash* floods. And it never rains like that. Never. And there was nothing he could have done.

Well, he could have parked the Chevy on the ridge, instead of in the ditch. But someone could have driven by and caught him. He wasn't allowed on government land like that, and if they had realized he was collecting rocks to sell? He would have been fined or thrown in jail because of his priors and then Sam would lose his job and the market would be shut down and then Lucy and--then he remembered Maria. She rarely left her trailer; everyone else had to step in. That was part of the problem, Jerome knew. Christina became *everyone's* nine-year-old- with-the-head-of-a-four-year-old daughter.

Jerome rested his head in his hands. The worst had happened. He shouldn't have run. He should have stayed, called for help, but who would have heard?

It didn't help to think about it. It was too late. He told himself not to think about Christina and her tiny, perky voice. Or her bubblegum pink nails. Don't think about the way she smiled every single morning Sam brought her to the market, or how she stared off into the desert like she was trying to see further than she could. Quit thinking about the way the red dust was caked in the lines of her sweaty palms and covered her no matter what she'd been doing.

Bang, bang!

The thin metal of Maria's trailer door rattled against the thin walls that rattled against the tin stove.

Bang, bang, bang!

Christ almighty, she thought.

Bang, bang!

"Mrs. Hernandez, are you there?"

Two men in beige suits and beige hats with silver badges waited outside for Maria to open her door. The two faces and the black shoes, the only contrast against the beige of the desert soil.

"She's here," one whispered to the other. "Give 'er a minute, it's hard for her to get up and stuff."

Maria shifted her weight to one side and pulled her thin, faded housecoat from underneath her body. She tied the sash, placed both hands firmly on the arms of her la-z-boy, and pushed up. Maria groaned as she slowly stood. She looked down at herself and brushed Doritos crumbs from her shirt as she made her way to the door.

As the door opened, the men peered through the darkness at a woman hidden beneath her layers upon layers of body. Her feet were swollen and throbbed as she stood, her own weight slowly crushing her ankles. She shielded her eyes at the stark and intense brightness of the late daylight. At this moment, she was glad her trailer had no

windows—apart from obvious expenses that heating caused—as the light of the desert seemed unbearably blinding to Maria.

“Ms. Hernandez,” said the first man while taking off his hat. “We tried to phone you first, but it seems that your phone is disconnected. I’m real sorry to--” Maria recognized him as Steve, a county officer.

“May we come in?” the other man, with a Sheriff badge impatiently interrupted.

“You can’t.” Maria placed her arm across the threshold door, her body blocking the view inside.

“D’you mind comin’ out?” the Sheriff asked.

“I do.” Maria huffed. “What’s the meanin’ of this anyway?”

“Maybe you’d like to take a seat Ma-m’am?” Steve fumbled his words.

“I’ll be just fine standing here.”

“It’s Christina.” Steve confessed.

Maria held her hand to her mouth and her heavy breathing cut short.

“S-see, Sheriff MacDonald here, he’s from Navajo County, and he, well, he found Billy’s truck out in a wash. See, there was some flash floodin’ this afternoon and a few cars got washed off the road. So Sheriff MacDonald went to go help and on his way he saw Billy’s orange Chevy in the wash...”

Maria’s hand began to shake. She suddenly felt dizzy. Maria looked out past the two men and saw dust devils forming and twisting and instantly disappearing into the ground. She didn’t want to listen anymore. She knew what they were going to say, and she didn’t want to hear it.

“The truck was trashed from the storm,” Sheriff MacDonald started

abruptly, “I found a little body, she was stuck in the mud. At this point, we’re assuming that it was your...”

Maria took a deep breath and said, “Leave. Just leave me be.”

The men looked at each other and Sheriff MacDonald shook his head and muttered something about seeing to the removal of the truck and an extraction of the body, and walked to his truck. Steve followed, dragging his feet in the dust.

While driving down the long dirt road that led from the trailer, Steve wondered if Maria was watching the dust rise and twist in the air after his truck. But she wasn’t. Maria didn’t have a single window to watch the men leave from.

Maria closed the door behind her but the sudden darkness became disorienting. She felt her knees give way and crashed down to the floor, the trailer creaking from her sudden movement.

“She dunno how to leave,” she whispered to herself. Maria lay crumpled in a pile of her own body in the doorway. She lay there for a few hours, looking at the ceiling, tears streaming down the sides of her face, pooling in her ears.

Outside, the sand settled in swirling patterns, covering the truck’s tracks leading to Maria’s trailer.

The girl traced her wind-like fingers over the sand, swirling and twisting over the patterns in the dirt where the water had pushed it away. She followed the ridges that formed like dry waves, where the land had shifted and undulated, forming lines like a drunken farmer's fields. Some of the small grooves veered from their pattern and led directly to a creosote bush. She touched its tiny circular leaves and felt a resinous coating, like a soft wax. The girl sat with the bush as its hundreds of buds slowly unfurled into miniature yellow flowers.



Not able to reach the site of the accident, Sam reluctantly returned home. He opened his front door to a living room filled with boxes, bags and junk in piles on the floor. Lucy sat cross-legged in the middle of the wreckage, her blonde-streaked hair falling over her face out of a loose scrunchie.

“Where’d you put the baby blankets?” she asked, without looking up at Sam.

Sam didn’t know what to say. He realized that Lucy had dragged practically everything they owned into the living room. Lucy kept a tidy home, drawers were organized, paintings and crucifixes hung straight. Now, two large but separate piles rose on either side of her. She was going through a box he had put away a long, long time ago in the back of an unused closet.

“Sam, baby blankets! Where’d they go?” Lucy called Sam back to attention.

“What blankets, Luce?”

“Don’t start with me Sam...”

“Well, why do you need them now?”

Lucy was silent at first. She would be needing them. She was two months pregnant. Something had to change.

“This time’s for good.”

“What on earth are you...”

“You know why.” Lucy was too afraid. They’d tried for years to have another baby.

Lucy was secretly relieved that they never had any luck. If she lost another baby, she

had been sure she'd ruin.

“But where are you going? You've got no where else to go.” Sam's anger was slipping out.

Lucy glared at him. This was why she was leaving, she reminded herself. She took a deep breath. She was tired of fighting.

“Margaret from Church, you know, the place *you* never go, is letting me stay with her. Where are the baby blankets, I thought you put them in here?”

“For how long?”

“Forever--look, I just wanna know where they are!” Lucy had decided not to tell Sam about her pregnancy until she'd found a way to take care of it by herself. It was a miracle baby, if it survived. There were a lot of ways to screw up “if”.

“Oh give it up Lucy! I gave away the blankets a long time ago, Maria needed them more than we did.”

Lucy stopped searching through the boxes. Tears began to stream down her face.

“But they were *mine*!” Lucy screamed, her voice hoarse.

“Stop being so fucking selfish! Christina's dead and all you care about is yourself!”

“What?” Lucy asked, stunned.

“She died today.”

Lucy looked at Sam. The bags under his eyes had darkened.

“How?” she asked quietly.

“Billy took her on one of his runs to the Petrified Forest. Flash flooding must have swept them both away.”

“Good lord. I'm sorry, Sam. I'm really sorry. But there was no rain here...”

He looked at Lucy. She was being sincere. He wanted her to stay, to wrap her arms around him, to rub his shoulders. Instead, he asked her, “So when are you leaving?” hoping things had suddenly changed.

“Now, Sam. This is me leaving.”

Lucy looked at Sam, almost pleading with him to understand her side. She had never been good at making the subtleties clear. But she could not let Christina’s death compound into another.

“This is bad timing, but--”

He turned away from her and walked into their bedroom, leaving her alone in the living room again, lost in the separation of their belongings.

At 1:43 a.m., Jerome wrestled with the motel sheets, sweaty and fighting a dream. Jerome was standing in front of Christina's mother. Her massive mother, sitting in her narrow trailer, fists stuffing rotten cake into her mouth. Eating herself into the grave. She stunk like vinegar and onions. Food was caked in between rolls of her fat. The trailer itself was sweating, beads of moisture rolled down the walls, dripped from the ceiling. He was standing there, thinking how to explain things to her. He wanted to say "Maria, it was an accident and I never meant to hurt her and I didn't know she was in the back of the truck, I swear, she musta hid or something, and when I found her, we were too far out to turn around, and how was I supposed to know that it would rain, and how was I supposed to know that it would flood and how much I regret...." but Jerome couldn't voice a word. Maria began to sob violently. Tears wouldn't stop pouring out of her eyes. Food wrappers and soggy potato chips were floating around his legs and then all of a sudden he felt the trailer start to tilt, like it was teetering on the edge of the Grand Canyon. A wave of black water with red froth rushed up behind Maria's la-z-boy chair and she started to gasp for air. Jerome tried to grab her, but he was in a dream, and he couldn't. Instead he woke up, out of breath and tangled in the sheets.

Jerome felt his legs trembling. He stumbled out of the bed, dressed and grabbed his wallet and room key. He knew exactly what would help him chill out. Jerome exited the hotel and walked along East Van Buren until he got to the Jack in the Box. This was familiar turf. The wide streets were

deserted, save a few cars speeding through

the downtown strip. Cicadas competed with the hum of air-conditioning units. Several four or five story buildings were clumped on the corners of intersections. They had small fountains lit by blue lights. Even the colour of water's faked, he thought. In between the corner office buildings, large, dusty lots had "For Sale" signs or hand-wash car garages.

Jerome walked past numerous new-built houses and construction sites. He shook his head; he couldn't figure out why so many people flocked to Phoenix. It seemed to him that everyone who relocated, came under the guise of good weather and golf, but were just trying to escape some other life somewhere else. People were strange, opting for gated communities and hiring illegals to landscape their grass, regardless of the fact that every summer it would dry out and die. A car pulled over to the sidewalk in front of him. Jerome watched as a dark silhouette of a woman got out and re-arranged her skirt. She continued walking westward.

Jerome sat on the curb in front of the fast food joint for what seemed like half an hour, until a black SUV pulled in to the lot. The driver, a kid no more than 17 years old with a backwards red baseball hat, rolled down his window, regarded his surroundings. A few minutes later, a white sedan pulled up next to the SUV. The passenger of the sedan, a twenty-something male with his pants hanging down below his butt, got out of his car. He walked around the cars and leaned into the open window. Jerome waited a few seconds, then walked slowly towards the cars. He made eye contact with the twenty-something, who stepped suddenly away from the car.

"Get in your car and fuck off," Jerome said to the sedan's driver as he stepped closer to the window of the SUV. Jerome could feel his heart beating faster as he watched the guy stumble back to his own car and drive off. Jerome leaned into the SUV's

open driver's side window.

“What d’you got?”

“I, uh, I got, uh,” the kid stumbled on his words nervously.

“Listen, kid, you’re gonna give me whatever you got, okay? I’ve got a gun in my back pocket and neither of us are going to want me to use it,” Jerome said calmly, reaching for his empty back pocket. Jerome remembered how easy this kind of thing had become.

“Uhuh,” the kid whimpered and fidgeted in his pockets and produced a few small re-sealable bags with various pills and powders enclosed. Jerome glanced around him, the parking lot was still empty. The kid placed the drugs in Jerome’s waiting hand.

“The money too,” Jerome pushed. He knew that the longer he stuck around, the more chances the kid had of remembering his face. Jerome felt his heart rate rise. His hand shaking, his stomach on fire. He’d lost his cool. The kid quickly reached for the dashboard and Jerome panicked. Afraid the kid had a gun stashed in there, Jerome turned and ran out of the lot behind the Jack-in-the Box and into an empty dust field and into the night.

Sam rolled around like a marble in his bed. Lucy was gone. Vicky wasn't answering her phone. Maria wouldn't talk to him ever again, he was sure of it.

He got out of bed. Walking to the living room, he stubbed his toe on a box. He sat on the couch. Sam looked down at a box at his feet, and began rummaging through it. He pulled out a cassette, which Lucy had labeled "January-September 1998". It was a tape from their old answering machine. Sam rummaged some more and pulled out the machine, plugged it in and played the cassette. Lucy's voice chimed cheerily:

"Hi there, you've reached Sam and Lucy. Please leave a message after the beep! Adios!"

Sam smiled, he'd missed hearing Lucy's voice when she was happy. Sam fast-forwarded the tape until he reached a message.

"Lucy, it's me, call me back." Sam fast-forwarded again.

"Sam! It's Maria. Pick up, it's an emergency Sam, Christina's missing!"

Then Sam heard his own voice, as he had picked up the phone while the tape had continued to record.

"What's wrong Maria?"

"She's gone! Sam, I don't know what to do!"

"What do you mean, gone? I'm sure she's just playing around back."

"No, I checked *everywhere*."

"Everywhere? She must be playing around those old palms--you know, just up

from the road?”

“I fucking checked everywhere Sam! I’m serious-she’s gone!”

“Okay, okay. I’ll drive along Cactus Road from the school to the highway--”

“--I can’t do this Sam, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t!”

“It’s okay. We’ll do this together. Calm down, I’ll be right there.”

Sam heard the click of a phone, hanging up.

*He remembered how he found Christina, sitting under the palm trees where Maria’s driveway met the highway. He pulled off the highway and had stopped his truck next to her. When the dust settled, he saw that she was examining the trunk of a small toppled-over palm tree.*

*“What’ch’ya doin’ Christina?” Sam asked and knelt next to her. Five-year-old Christina shrugged. She pointed with a tiny finger to a line of red ants carrying a palm leaf to their hole under a rock.*

*“You know, your mama don’t know where you are,” Sam said. “C’mon, let’s go.” He lifted her up under her arms, pulling her away from the palms. She began to wail and cry.*

*“Shhh. Sorry, it’s okay.” Sam put her back down. Christina sobbed quietly.*

*“Christina, you have to come with me.”*

*“No!” she yelled and crossed her arms in a huff.*

*Sam felt his face redden and his ears begin to throb.*

*“Christina. Now.” He grabbed her arm hastily, pulling her up off the ground.*

*“No!” she screeched as she twisted her arm in an attempt to flee.*

*“Look, I’ll tell you a story if you get into the truck.”*



*“A story? About the ants?” she asked quietly.*

*“Yes. Now get in the truck. We’ll get you home to your mama.” Sam brought Christina to the passenger side and helped her inside, buckling her in safely. As he drove her to the trailer, he told her a story about the ants.*

*“They were blind at first,” Sam made up the story as he went along, “you know, they couldn’t see.”*

*“Reeealllly? Nah-uh.”*

*“Yes, just listen. And because they were blind they could never see where they were going and always forgot their way back home to the ant hill. Hundreds of them would walk out of the hill in the morning but never make it home at night. So Queen Ant would get very worried, because she was losing all of her ant babies. And that made her very, very sad. One night she thought of a way that her ants wouldn’t get lost. She made them promise that they would follow each other very closely in a line wherever they went. And it worked. No ant ever got lost again because they listened to what Queen Ant told them.” Sam had smiled. He’d never told a story like that before.*

*“What’s a quee-ant?”*

*“The Queen Ant. She’s like your mama. What’s the important thing to remember, Christina?”*

*“Um,” she responded quietly, “the quee-ant is like mama”.*

*When they arrived at Maria’s trailer, he helped her to jump down from his truck. She looked at him, smiling. He felt Christina’s small arms around his waist in a tight hug. His heart grew warm.*

Looking around his empty living room filled with half-empty boxes and

empty picture frames, Sam stood up from the couch, walked back to bed and resolved to make amends with Maria in the morning. He could take care of her, maybe.

## 20

Jerome returned to his rented room, hands in his pockets. His fingers gripped four small bags. This anticipation was nothing new. He'd felt it every time he couldn't run. So he snorted the cocaine and lay down on his bed.

*Jerome opened his eyes and saw a house with a pool and marble floors. He was sitting on a sticky leather couch. A bong was passed around, kids were watching a TV that spanned half of the wall. A kick-back. Tortilla chip bags scattered and a guy and a girl were making out in the corner. He had seen this before, a déjà vu, a memory from when he was fifteen. Jerome rubbed his face, slapped his cheeks. He did not want to go through this memory again.*

*He didn't know the kid that lived there, David, but he was invited by some kids from Ahwatukee, the suburb on the "right" side of the I-10 highway. Jerome focused on the huge shelf full of DVD's and CD's next to the TV. He'd never seen such a large collection. He tried to remember titles and band names that he'd never heard before. But his memory was ephemeral, compared to the level of concentration and fascination he had, stoned. The Godfather. Pulp Fiction. Star Wars. Psycho. The Godfather. Pulp Fiction. Star Wars...The guy beside him passed a bong and a bottle of tequila around.*

*Jerome was then standing up, in front of the TV, making up stories about his father, whom the kids dubbed the Mexican Cage Fighter. According to an increasingly intoxicated Jerome, his father had been brought from Mexico to fight the American sissies in Las Vegas.*

*“Yeah, but the thing is that he started to win all these big American Championships. Like he had this secret move that no one could figure out how to do, and he went undefeated for months. But then we started to get letters in the mail and there were rumours around the ring that the Feds were on to him--because he was Mexican and didn’t have a green card--they started to get pissed that he was taking American money, you know, a wetback beaner stealing American dinero, so he had to escape underground back to Mexico, where he’s been training for his big comeback ever since.”*

*The kids were laughing, they were yelling “Cage Fight! Cage Fight!”*

*The door bell rang. A shaggy blonde haired kid, Jerome recognized as David, got up to answer the door. Jerome heard shuffling. Low talking. Louder talking. He heard a “fuck you”, a “get the fuck out, loser”. A few heads turned from the TV, listening. A door slammed shut. David reappeared, laughing. He threw himself down on the couch next to Jerome.*

*“Fucking guy,” he said, “you know, Eric, the dude from our school who works at the McDonald’s? He thinks he can just show up and chill with us. Fucking loser.”*

*Jerome was quiet. The kids were saying things like “he’s so gay,” “what a beaner,” “he’s a creep”. South Park came on TV and the kids were distracted again, laughing, giggling, slapping each other and wrestling on the floor. Jerome laughed. He studied the library of DVDs, Taxi Driver. Vertigo. Alien. The Shining. Taxi. Vertigo---*

*A crashing sound from the front room. David jumped up.*

*“What the hell?” David said as he scrambled to the door.*

*Jerome turned, everyone turned. People were still laughing.*

*Someone said, “What the fuck was that? Ha-ha”. But no one could see the*

*door from the living room. They could only hear yelling, two loud voices. Fighting. A r-r-r-r-i-i-p. Kids were laughing, one girl got up to see. They heard screaming, screeching, stumbling, sobbing, stumbling, slump, thud. Silence.*

*A girl ran to the door. "Help! Holy Fuck! Call 9-1-1! He's blee-- fuck fuck fuck fuck he's bleeding! Help fuck!"*

*Jerome blinked. On the TV, Jerome watched as a cartoon character spewed blood and ran around, decapitated. Slowly, blinking, heart beat thumping, stomach churning. Kids jumped up, ran to the door. A layering of voices yelling and screaming and crying and screaming and swearing. Jerome stood, stumbled towards the door. They were crowding in the doorway, pushing outside and back inside. Unable to decide whether to look or to run. Jerome pushed out.*

*David lay motionless, his blood streaming onto the gravel of his front yard. His turquoise polo soaked up blood from his abdomen and Jerome watched as blood crept up the fabric of his shirt to his shoulders. A butterfly knife stuck out of the left side of his chest.*

*Jerome could not hear the voices anymore. All he heard was his heart beat pounding. Silence and heart beats. He watched as one boy started to run in as if in slow motion, grabbing a girl's arm, dragging her away from David and into his car. Another guy followed suit. His engine misfired, tires peeled.*

*Sirens. Jerome looked at David. A girl was holding his body in her lap, she was covered in blood, blood was on her cheek and on her hands. Blood soaked into her shirt, a heart-shaped red stain. She was screaming. In Jerome's peripheral, he could see red lights flashing onto the side of the stucco home. A paramedic rushed to David's side*

*and pushed the girl away from his body.*

*Jerome felt his legs begin to move. He ran around the side of the house. Jumped over a stucco wall, into a back yard, over another stucco wall into a maze of pools and back yards and stucco walls and pools and finally he ran out to the street and his heart beat became too loud, the heat from the black asphalt always rising even in the heat of the cold night.*

Maria woke suddenly, jerking her head up from her seat. The TV still blaring. She reached down between the love seat pillows to find the remote. She watched the end of *Friends*. Sleeping was not a constant. Waking was strange. She woke suddenly several times a day, as if she were late for an important appointment.

After watching *Seinfeld*, Maria thought the episode was the first one she'd seen that wasn't funny. Maybe she'd seen it too many times. The commercials also seemed longer. And stranger. Remotes for dog training. The broom with the funny German name. The Grand Canyon GMC dealership's Bankruptcy sale. Spray-on hair.

Maria changed the channel, out of habit, unaware that she had pressed the buttons. *Oprah* began. Maria was hungry. Instinctively, she reached down to her feet and grabbed an open bag of Doritos. The episode was about the happiest people in the world. The interviewees couldn't stop smiling, like 'serious' was not an expression in their repertoire. The families were all groups of four or five, kids saying things like "Gosh, I just love my family!" They wore matching polos and dresses, son matching father, daughter matching mother. Fathers had finance jobs with all their benefits paid and mothers volunteered their time at the school's after-school programs. Kids had even started their own charities, raising money for middle-class kids to go to Disneyland. Their secret to happiness? They took regular vacations. They ate at their dining room tables. There was a 'lady' to do their laundry and cleaning.

*Dr. Phil* came on. Maria looked up. She had zoned out again. She dried the tears that had collected in the sides of her eyes with her sleeve. She was thirsty. She fished by her chair for the plastic coffee mug on the ledge beside her chair. She sipped on the straw but she sucked in stale, dry air. She would have to get up to reach the fridge to refill it. Maria didn't know what was left in the fridge. But frankly, she didn't want to. She was going to get used to the groaning sounds, the acid reflux, the hunger. She felt the back of her head, her body sinking into the love seat.

Maria woke. A woman with huge yellow hair and cleavage galore sat in a chair in front of a fake desert landscape. She was laughing. Words and numbers ran along the bottom of the screen: 3 DEAD AT GUN RALLY. JOE ARPAIO MAKES JOKE. TEMPERATURES RECORD HIGH. Maria couldn't watch the news, not then, perhaps not again. The TV turned black and Maria saw herself reflected in the screen. Distorted and widened and fattened. Like a carnival mirror. A small head struggling to stay atop a gigantic lump of body.

Staring into the screen, a slightly distorted Maria staring back at her. Too much, too much, too much, she thought. Turning the TV back on, she searched through the four channels she got for the spanish news. At least she wouldn't understand what they were reporting.

She woke at intervals, each time checking the TV

Something that looked like *Cops*.

Something that might have been *Court TV*.

Something that was selling something.

22

“It was on the news. You didn’t see it?”

“Naw. Guess I didn’t. Did they say what happened?”

“Well they said they were still speculating. They said that a child died and one man is missing as a result of the flood.”

“Jesus. I wonder how she died.”

“Billy probably just drove right through the flood. You know how sometimes the road looks flooded and people still think they can drive through it? But then when they get to the middle and they realize the water’s a lot higher than it looks and suddenly the water’s rushing into the windows and doors and that’s it for them.”

“Do you think there was any foul play?”

“God forbid--but wouldn’t they put him on the Most Wanted list and show his photo on every news program? They would have called him a suspect or an outlaw or something.”

“I hope you’re right. It’s a damn shame that Christina got caught up in all this.”

“Well it was Sam’s fault for letting her go with him.”

“I heard that Sam had no say in the whole thing. Billy just took off with her without askin’.”

“You think Sam’s gonna keep that market up and runnin’ after all this mess?”

“I dunno. Lucy’s dad poured his life savings into it.”

“Well, that and poker.”



“Oh hush. There ain’t much left around here, if it weren’t for the god-damned highway even Burger King would go out of business.”

**23**

The gecko blinked quickly as it sunned itself on a rock. It twisted its head from side to side as if it wanted to ask the girl a question. She smiled, and tilted her head, mirroring the tiny lizard. It lifted its head, looking towards the sky, and she saw his throat pulsing in and out, in and out. It quickly slid its tongue from its mouth and slapped it right over its eyeball, licking sand and dust away. The girl giggled, and startled the gecko. The gecko scurried into a hole in the ground. She followed down through the small hole, and found it dark and cool and damp. The girl slept in the gecko’s tiny burrow.

Then, just as Jerome thought he'd gone through the worst of it, he felt his body slip from the sheets.

*And he was in Fort Sumner, New Mexico with the address of his mother's friend written on a crumpled receipt. He was seventeen (again) and his mother had sent him there to work at a car wash, a friend of the family's business. There wasn't much to do in Fort Sumner. He had worked on weekdays and weekends, washing one or two cars a day, the rest of the time he stood restless, itching to leave.*

*Jerome was fascinated by the vacant lots, the empty buildings with signs faded by the sun. The main, or only attractions in town were the two Billy the Kid museums, each claiming to have the 'real' Billy the Kid gravesite. He had heard stories about those old cowboys, but found it pathetic that after over 100 years, people still cared. There're no cowboys anymore. Only stupid hicks who wear cowboy hats and boots to ride their F350's to work downtown in an office.*

*The old myths didn't relate to real life. He found it strange that his mother would love stories of Wild Bill or Wyatt Earp, considering all those cowboys ever did was scalp and kill Mexicans. People always forgot about the racism and violence, blinded by what Americans called "Cowboy Justice". It bugged Jerome that his mother didn't see that Cowboy Justice meant that the white man was always in the right. She seemed to hate anything over-romanticized, anything with any drama in it. She hated telenovelas and*

*Jerry Springer. His mother dealt the cards straight, and she didn't believe in luck either.*

*Jerome felt it was just his luck or maybe his mother's design that there was nothing to do in Fort Sumner. Of course his mother would send him there. Jerome borrowed a car once or twice to drive out into the desert. Once there, he turned right back around. There was nothing out there but dust. And it was no different to Phoenix. Jerome desperately wanted to find some weed or beer, but he also knew that if his mother's friend found out, shit would hit the fan. His mother would sell his truck. She had told her friend that he was mixing with the wrong crowds back in Phoenix, so she watched him constantly. His mother's eyes through this woman's eyes, relentlessly watching, despite the miles and miles of distance.*

*A guy at the car wash had suggested he go to the museums. So, with nothing else to do on his day off, Jerome went to see Billy. Driving down Billy the Kid road, Jerome stopped at the Fort Sumner Museum. It was 5 bucks to get in. Jerome peeked inside, and saw that there was nothing but old pictures hanging on the walls, and scorpions forever sealed in a paperweight of glass.*

*He drove to the back and found a field walled in by a short stucco wall, with a grave in the middle. Jerome parked the borrowed car, and walked up to the grave. The grave sat, inside a giant black cage, as if it were a wild animal, intent on escape. Jerome wondered if it was to keep others out, or if it was there to keep Billy in. The grave was small, grey and the only writing Jerome could read was a name.*

*The more he looked at the grave, the more Jerome liked the idea that Billy could escape, even after his death. Billy could break free, Billy could hide, Billy could vanish, Billy could change his name and escape again. Jerome imagined that Billy didn't*

*care about the law, he was probably running away from a controlling mother. No one knew exactly how he died, where he was born, where he lived. No one even knew how many people he had killed, or why. And they seemed to love it. In this barren land, in this desert, Billy could re-invent himself, time after time again, alias after alias.*

*Jerome gripped the hot black cage and made up his mind. He would save all his money. He would go back to Phoenix, take his truck, and leave. He could go to Cali, or Texas. He could just take off, start over, not have his mother nagging. Billy left Fort Sumner in a Greyhound bus and never came back, dust rising and covering the bus' tracks as it sped down the highway, westbound.*

In the afternoon, after seeing to the Market, Sam drove along the highway towards Maria's trailer. He could feel the beads of sweat dripping down his back, soaking into the waistband of his jeans. When he got to the line of stunted palm trees at the dirt road entrance to her property, he pulled over onto the side road.

The six trees had never stood more than 6 feet high and had been there for as long as anyone could remember. Maria's mailbox had fallen over and flyers had fallen to the ground, scattering along the road. Sam turned off his engine and stepped out of his truck. He picked up the mailbox and the wooden two-by-four that it was nailed hastily to. It had uprooted cleanly, as if the soil had turned to dust around the pole. Sam felt that everything around him dried out or turned to dust or blew away. Opportunities to make more money or to sell the Market seemed to pop up like the rare mirage, disappearing as soon as Sam got close enough to really want it.

Sam looked down at the mailbox and decided to do what he'd always done. He began to dig a new hole for the mailbox with his shoe. He kicked dirt up with the steel-enforced toe of his brown work boots. The dirt rose as dust and it stuck to his forehead against the sweat. His shoe was useless. It just obscured his efforts. He dragged the wooden two-by-four to the hole to use it to hack a hole into the dry earth. Sam began by twisting the lumber clockwise and then counterclockwise in the hole. The timber responded by leaving small splinters in his hands. Sam threw it aside and walked back

to his truck. He grabbed a pair of weathered leather work gloves.

He'd lived in Arizona his whole life, but he swore this summer was hotter than most. It was just harder to deal with. Maybe he was getting old, he thought. He was only thirty, one third of his life had already passed. Two-thirds more, he thought, Jesus, too long to keep on like this. Too long to keep running around in circles, getting nowhere.

Returning to the hole, he took the lumber and raised it above his head with a burst of strength. It hit the ground with a thud, his actions proved slow, weak, making no difference to the earth. He needed a proper shovel to get the job done properly. Or a jackhammer, for Christ's sake, he thought. He looked around, the back of his truck was empty, but he spied the tin mailbox. He could use it as a shovel, perhaps.

After emptying the box's contents out onto the ground, he held the front flap open and used the curved opening as a shovel. It worked at first, like a small sand shovel, and made a wide dip in the terrain. Sam began to shovel faster, using more force. Then the mailbox hit a hard rock and the soft tin bent backwards, pinching Sam's finger. "Fuck!" Sam threw the mailbox aside in frustration. The mailbox was so bent it would never hold mail again even if he could get the pole to stay in the ground.

But, he'd dug a hole that he thought was deep enough for the two-by-four. He heaved the pole into the ground, burying it with dirt and his shoe. Sam let go, and watched it fall right back down again. The ground was too hard, too dry; it would not hold.

"Screw it," he mumbled in frustration and kicked the box. It flew several feet away, landing beneath the palms. He walked over to see where it had landed. Where Christina used to play beneath the trees, a naked Barbie stood, feet buried in the dirt,

leaning against a plastic sand pail. Her blonde hair matted, body covered in dirt.

Sam looked down to the broken mail box, the buried Barbie, the dead palm trees, the lone trailer that stood further down the road and understood his inherent failure. He stood, defeated under the burning sun. Sam brushed his hands on his jeans and got back into his truck. He would not be able to reconcile with Maria. He'd caused the death of her only child. If he couldn't forgive himself, why would she? He drove away from the trailer, travelling further away from what he could not change.

“It’s been signed. The governor signed it today, even after the protests and the warnings from Obama. It’s ludicrous.”

“Are you serious?”

“Dead serious. Now everyone has to carry immigration papers with them and if they don’t have them, they’ll be arrested and charged for a crime.”

“This is just an excuse for racial profiling, you know, they’re going to see a Hispanic and assume that they’re illegal.”

“The worst part is what are all the legals going to do? I mean my family’s been here for five generations--I don’t have no immigration papers, I’m American. What if I’m walking around and the cops think I’m an illegal? They’re just going to arrest me and charge me and harass me because I don’t have papers that say that I’m not an immigrant? It’s like, like Nazi Germany-- demanding documents and punishing people just because they look a certain way or are suspected to be from another country. Sometimes I think around here we move backwards instead of forwards.”

“At least they’ve caught the Baseline Killer and the Serial Shooter.”

“Both of ‘em? That’s a relief, my niece in Phoenix told me she was scared to go out walking at night.”

“Yeah, sure is, turns out they were roommates.”

“Do you know why they did it?”



“No, the TV reporter said it was completely senseless. Said that they’d just get in their cars at night between 10 at night and 4 in the morning and just shoot people who were walking or on bicycles just randomly. You know eight people died, and they were charged for 19 attempted murders. They were even shooting cats and dogs-- those guys are gunna get the death penalty for sure.”

“That stuff is messed up man. You can’t even make that shit up.”

The girl woke in the middle of the night, and crawled from the lizard hole. She stood upright, her toes curling in the dust underneath her feet, and her head rose above to touch the dark, midnight sky. As she turned her head to look around, her long flowing hair caught and tangled itself in the stars. She brushed the stars out of her hair and noticed that as she pulled her hair, a star would unfasten from the sky and shoot across to a distant position. She flicked a star and giggled as it soared brightly to a far-off land. Then, the girl travelled as fast as the speed of light over to where the star had landed, lifting and twisting the dust as she went.

After two sleepless nights, Jerome checked out of the Motel 8, mad at himself for choosing such a stereotypical alias. It was unlike him. He had a list of names engraved in his mind (Lupe Lorenza, Chuy Rico, Jon Jackson, Clint Weston, Matt Gold, Esteban Gutierrez). He bought a new pair of sneakers at Payless and walked for an hour south along the highway ditch until he reached Guadalupe. I

t had changed since he had left years before, but that was the way Phoenix was: always changing. When Jerome's mother had first arrived in Phoenix, there had been a gas station, the last one for at least an hour south at what had been the last exit off the south-bound I-10 for Phoenix. Part of the empty land that spanned all the way down to Tucson, was now Ahwatukee Foothills, an entire suburb, so big it was developing suburbs within it. He walked through the streets of Guadalupe until he came to the community center and the Mercado. It had certainly not changed. The same painted walls, the same fruit, the same trashed trucks and wooden stands. He bought a churro, a pack of cigarettes and a Mr. Pibb, then sat in the minimal shade of a palo verde tree.

Most of the Mercado vendors were women. They weren't getting much business, mostly locals stopping by to say 'hi' or to bargain down the price of habaneros or corn husks. By noon, the Mercado began to get busier and Jerome realized that he would have to find somewhere else to hang about. There were too many eyes that could recognize him, that could see his mother through his eyes.

When he was seventeen, he'd committed the worst crime in her eyes. He'd stolen the money she'd been saving to smuggle his aunt over the border. When she had caught him, he'd tried to explain that the Coyotes were scamming them. That they'd shove her in the back of a truck; they'd drop her off miles away from the border and just say "correr!" She wouldn't have enough water, she would lose her direction, she'd get arrested and sent right back. And that was only half of the story. She'd get stuck at a border town, probably Nogales, with no money, no way to get back to her hometown.

His mother already knew all this, having made the journey herself, pregnant, chasing his American father. But really, he'd been trying to cover up the fact that he'd stolen the money for drugs. So he changed the subject and said that his aunt was better off dying in Mexico than dying in the U.S.. His mother threw a plate at him. It smashed against the wall and shattered. She threw a cup at him, and it bounced. Jerome yelled that they would be better off living in Mexico, and that he'd wished she'd never followed his father to Utah, and that he probably never wanted to have a wetback family anyway. His mother had turned a deep shade of red and chased him with a knife outside into the night, calling him an ungrateful bastard. That was when he realized that he liked the feeling of being chased. It validated his drifting habits, his escape gene.

Jerome looked around the Guadalupe Square. The Pascua Yaqui Tribal Complex was still a permanent trailer, El Pueblo de Guadalupe Mexican Food restaurant (or food stand) still served carne asada and caldo de pollo, shoes still hung from telephone wires, and junk still piled in backyards. The palo verde tree trunks were still painted white in defense of the ants, and the perpetual line of landscaping company pick-ups trailed Guadalupe Blvd., like moving parts of an assembly line. The faded "Agua para

tomar” sign advertised itself as 25 cents per gallon, up five cents from the last time Jerome had left home. Men still sat in the shaded areas on the curbs, clothed in long shirts and jeans despite the 110-degree heat, some talking, laughing, singing, some silently distracted with something in the distance. It was too late in the day for them to get picked up for work, and nothing else to do if they were not chosen.

Walking around in the late August heat, Jerome started to feel weak. He knew he should have bought water, and was facing a dead-end road and the vast expanse of the desert of the reservation. Dried, ravaged cotton plants in long rows spanned out to his left. He had to turn around, but he found himself transfixed in a stare at the open land. His muscles began to ache and his eyes watered. The wind picked up, and was blowing little dust devils around his feet. The birds fell silent and had taken shelter. The sky in the east began to darken with clouds.

And there was that smell, a bitter-sweet citrus of the creosote bush. *The hediondilla! that yucky smell in your nose!* Jerome remembered Christina’s words. *That smell means it’s gunna rain!* He had thought her bursts of excited speech were just something that she had overheard. She had always repeated what everyone else said. Repeating what he had said, what her mom had said; repeating, often without understanding. *My mama says I ain’t got no where to be but with her.*

Jerome now understood that this was original thought, she understood what she had heard and was applying it to the world--and he had not listened. *It don’ rain much ‘round here. But when it does, oh boy! when it rains it rains like the sky’s cryin’ for everyone!* It was his fault that Christina’s little body had dried out in the mud, left to slowly petrify. Jerome felt a strange prickly feeling rising up his legs. Under the pressure, his knees

buckled and he fell to the dust. His vision was blurry. He lifted his hand in front of his face. It was covered in red ants and they were biting his hands and his legs.

Thunder cracked and he saw giant bolts of lightening touch down from the skies in the desert in front of him. Then came the rain. Hard. *The desert ain't got no idea what to do with all that rain, it just pushes it all away!* It sizzled on the asphalt of the road and as it fell on the dirt, tiny poofs of dust exploded under each drop. His heartbeat became unbearably loud, and he began to run. Jerome scanned the land, searching for anything, for shelter, for hope. *Two eyes to the dark water, searching, for two eyes looking out.*

Reluctantly, Lucy pulled into her driveway and saw Sam's truck parked on the road. She realized that he had left the driveway clear so that if she came back, she could park her car in the shade of their carport. She felt a strain of resentment in her chest. He had assumed she'd be back. Can't he see it's for good this time? she thought. Except that she *was* back. Her car *was* parked in the driveway.

She turned the engine off and sat in the car, in silence. Lucy debated whether she really needed the things she came back for: her hair straightener and her crock-pot. Before she had left Margaret's place she was sure that she needed them. That one day she would make the effort to straighten her hair, maybe at Christmas time when it wasn't so hot. And Margaret didn't have a crock-pot. It had made her life so much easier in the past, dinners could be thrown into the pot in the morning and *presto!* dinner was ready hours later. It had made her life easier when she'd had to help Sam out at the Market. But sitting in her car now, she realized that it was Sam who liked her hair straight, not her. It was Sam who expected dinner on the table when he came home, no one else. She didn't need either thing. They were just things.

She looked up and saw that the garbage bin beside their garage was overflowing. Sam had not taken it out on garbage pick-up day. Sam wasn't coping well. He'd forgotten to do something he'd been doing for the past ten years. She re-applied her lipstick in the rear-view mirror. Stepping out of the car, Lucy put on a smile. She wanted to see if

he was suffering without her.

Sam stood facing the window, staring out of his house into the front yard. His focus blurred, as the small stones in his front yard became a smooth surface. He blinked. The dust on his window caught his eye's gaze. He liked how the dirt faded the world outside. For a moment, he felt as if he was at the hospital, nine years prior. He had spent hours staring through the dirty windows at the ambulances driving by, absent-mindedly ripping the tops off sweetener packages and pouring it into his hospital coffee. He had stood there for hours, facing the dirty windowpane, staring, maybe at his reflection, maybe at something far off in the distance. Both had seemed interchangeable. Even at that moment, he could tell by the way Lucy looked at him, her eyes tired and face pale in the blue hospital gown. She would never forgive him. His wife, who became his wife because of this child, he could tell, would leave him soon enough, child or no child. Their baby, even if it had survived, could not have filled the hole in their marriage.

But this time was different. He could tell by the red rash that had spread across her neck and cheeks that she had been crying for hours. The last time she had left, she packed a small bag of toiletries and underwear and a few dresses. This time she'd taken almost everything. All her jewelry, her favorite teapot, *all* of her shoes--Sam was surprised she'd forgotten the crock-pot. Lucy always cooked with it.

Sam refocused his eyes, and there she was, in their front yard, walking up to their door. She looks good, he thought. Her long legs flowed from her shorts. But the dust on the window was like a smoke screen, and Sam couldn't tell if Lucy was smiling or frowning.



As soon as Lucy opened her front door, her smile dropped. The place was exactly as she had left it: in a mess. The paint on the walls was darker in squares and rectangles, where she had taken down paintings that had been there for years. The house smelled of dust, as it resettled on new surfaces and boxes. Sam's hunting rifle, the stereo he had built, shoe-boxes of CD's and the guitar he hadn't played in years still sat in the pile labeled "his". She could see the kitchen counter with plates and newspapers, empty cans and cutlery, the sink with coffee mugs piled high. She had half-hoped that he'd been able to fix it up, maybe prove to her that he could make things right again.

Sam was standing in front of the living room window, staring outside. He did not look at her.

"I just came for my crock-pot," Lucy said.

"Thought so," Sam said quietly, "didn't think you'd leave that thing behind. I'm leaving now anyway. Going back to the market." If Lucy hadn't changed her mind, Sam knew there was nothing he could do now. There was no reason for him to hang around while she tore apart their house again.

Lucy felt her stomach tighten. She ground her teeth.

She took a deep breath. Stress was not good for her, not good for the baby. Lucy looked down.

"I heard the whole story from Bianca. I feel really bad about the whole thing."

"What the hell would you feel bad about? You never cared for Christina. You hate Maria. You've been a bitch to them since Christina was born. And for no good reason, either. You're not the one who had to take care of both of them every day. You're not the one who had to..." Sam ranted as he looked for his keys. He always knew where his

keys were. He would place them on the edge of the counter, with his cell phone and watch when he'd get home. "Sometimes you can be so--so--unfair Lucy."

"And you think it was fair for me to watch *you* have a daughter?"

...

"Well do you?"

"Where are those damn keys?"

Jerome looked up, a small white stucco church seemed to glow white against the orange dust and the ever-blackening sky in front of him. The rain had already soaked him and the soil stuck to his pants, his hands, his shoes, everything. Jerome heaved himself up, and ran towards the church for respite from them rain.

He opened one of the two heavy wooden doors. He worried that someone would be inside, but once inside, all he could think about was the rain outside. The church decor reminded him of the churches he'd been terrified of as a child. The walls were covered with framed photographs and religious paintings. Red, brown, green and orange paint faded and peeled like scabs off of the carved walls. Not one inch of the wall, ceiling or floor was left undecorated or unpainted. Wooden carvings of saints were draped in real clothes, placed on top of shelves, and reminded him of the dolls that his grandmother from Mexico sent him. He walked further into the church, past a few hard, worn, wooden pews, closer to the altar. In the center of the back wall, a large wooden carving of the Virgin Mary stood, dressed in a dusty blue silk dress. One of her hands was raised to her head, as if she were preaching. Jerome studied the figure, seeing the familiar pose of his mother's hand raised, threatening a beating.

"La Madre de los Dolores," Jerome whispered to himself. He knew all about the Lady of Sorrows. His mother had practically been a martyr for suffering, and she had reminded Jerome that it had all been for him. "I never wanted this..." Jerome

whispered under his breath.

The dark church was beginning to feel as if it were caving in on Jerome; claustrophobia was settling in. The church smelled like a mix of must and incense and the freshly soaked timbers in the roof creaked. He turned around and walked back to the door where he found a bench and decided he would wait out the rain there. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back, trying to keep his mind free of childhood terrors, free from the rain outside and the havoc it reaps.

“Hola, señor, hola,” a deep voice spoke to Jerome, startling him. A heavy-set man in jeans and a red shirt stood over Jerome. “Esta-bien? Are you okay?”

Jerome quickly regained his bearings and sat up, knocking a framed photo off the wall with his shoulder. He tried to catch it before it hit the ground, but the frame slammed against the bench and shattered on the floor.

Jerome looked up to the man in the red t-shirt. “Sorry--”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll get a broom. Don’t touch, it’s ok.” The man in the red t-shirt scurried off through a side door. Jerome bent over and started to recover pieces of glass and wood. A shard of glass sliced his finger as he turned over the photograph. In the picture was an old head-shot of a young girl, with a wide face and a lost smile. Her hair was feathered and the photo paled. Jerome looked into her eyes, and at once saw it was *her*. Jerome rubbed his face with his hands. It couldn’t be. He was hallucinating. Perhaps the drugs hadn’t worn off. A traumatic flashback. But it *was* Christina, she was looking at him through the photo. Her eyes were green, even though the photo was black and white. Her hair was brown and her cheeks a rosy petal pink. *Water not like from a bucket, like the sound of the grey part of TV*. She was wearing a traditional Navajo shawl, woven

in a pattern that mimicked a desert horizon, but it was Christina alright, and she was staring right back at Jerome. *It's ok, I ain't scared*, she said, *it's ok, I ain't gunna be petrified like those stupid rocks*.

Jerome felt his legs moving again. He burst out of the church's side door into the night rain. He could smell the creosote strongly. As he ran through puddles and into the street gutter that was already rushing, he felt the warm water splashing up around his legs. He was running, he kept running, but sensed he was being chased and he could not run fast enough.

He ran along Guadalupe Boulevard, past several trailers and tiny shack homes. A dog barked at him as he ran past its yard. There were very few street lamps, but the road was lit up periodically from bright flashes of lightening. He ran into the street and up to an old camper van that had stopped at the red light. It was an old Ford, orange and rusty.

Before Jerome understood what he meant to do, he was facing the driver's side window yelling at the man to open his door. A man in his fifties with long white hair and a bright turquoise Mexican embroidered shirt opened the door and Jerome pulled hard on his arm and the man stumbled out of his van and onto the wet road. The van began to roll forwards as the brakes had been released. Jerome hopped into the van and slammed the door shut. The rain was rushing down the windshield and Jerome could barely make out a few feet in front of him. Jerome ran the red light and pulled onto the highway, headed north.

Tap tap!

Lucy stood, preparing lines

under her breath, outside of Maria's tin door.

Tap tap!

Her deep red-orange acrylic nails scratched

against the metal as she knocked. She waited.

'I'm so sorry, Maria. This must be hard on you...'

The unbearable brightness of a pink room.

Tap tap!

An empty crib that looked more like a tiny prison.

She opened her purse and fished out her lipstick.

Blood-orange, like her nails. She re-applied.

Bang bang!

A darkness that was safer, depression's tight hold.

Lucy looked down at the concrete step. Sand had

piled up against the trailer.

I shouldn't have come, she thought,

and began to turn around.

Maria napped in her chair.

Noise now rarely disturbed

her sleep.

Maria woke.

She pulled her t-shirt down and

wiggled her toes

into her slippers, and stood.

Maria shuffled towards the door

and opened it.

“I know that you had my baby blankets all along.”

She had not meant to say this. Lucy stared in shock, as she saw Maria’s enormous girth for the first time in many years. It looked like Maria had avalanched down a mountain of fat, her mid-section an inner-tube around her. Maria had never been thin, but when they were thirteen and Maria came to live with her, they at least shared clothing. Lucy became conscious of her shocked facial expression.

“Oh.”

“And, I’m, um, sorry for...” Lucy looked down again. Maria’s hair was disheveled, she had big black bags under her eyes, and her clothes were wrinkled and stained.

“Sorry for what?”

“I should go. I shouldn’t have come.” Lucy became more and more embarrassed. “I just thought, that if I came, that I could, you know, help you with the, the um, grieving process.”

“Why? Because you had a baby that died? Think that’s the same as losing Christina? Think that’s the same as losing what used to take every ounce of me to raise for nine years? Think you know where I’m at?”

...

“Well?” Maria crossed her arms.

“Now that I’m here, I, um, don’t think that I’m in the position to, um, I don’t think I’m the one to tell you how to grieve.”

“Well maybe not.” Maria said. She was surprised that Lucy groveling at her doorstep was less satisfying and more painful than she had imagined.

“But, um, what I do know is that I couldn’t do it alone. I needed the people around me

to help me through. I looked to God and knew that He always had a plan for my baby that was bigger than anything I could have ever offered.”

“Lucy, you mean to say that you had Sam. And a family. And God. Well ain’t that all fine and gravy. But I ain’t got Sam or God or no one else. Not even an ex-best friend--not even you. So thanks for reminding me where I’m at.”

“Maria-- I--”

Maria grabbed the door handle and slammed the tin door in Lucy’s face.

It felt less gratifying than she had wanted.

The flimsy tin door’s momentum stunted by the breeze from the south.

Lucy stormed back to her truck and saw the tiny, never-worn baby shoes hanging from her rear-view mirror. Maria needed help, she knew. She had no way of getting to the store, and with Sam wrapped up in his own pity, she would eventually starve in that trailer, alone.

Lucy opened the cab and grabbed the three bags full of groceries that she had bought for herself. She placed them in the shade of the trailer.

“Maria. You can’t shut us out forever,” she yelled, “but here’s some food until you decide you wanna come out!”

Maria slid her back down her door and cried.

The door was warm against her back, and felt like the closest thing to a hug as Maria had felt in days.



## **Part II**

A giant black dog stuffed animal, tail and hind feet. A hula hoop, pink with a blue spiralling ribbon. A crushed brown cardboard box. Plastic ABCO bag. Blue plastic cereal bowl. Beige fan blade. RC Cola can, red. An empty orange bottle of medication. One crushed roll of yellowed paper towels. Plastic ABCO bag. Air conditioning unit. The Little Mermaid VHS. One plastic 2 gal. water jug, crushed. Two white hangers. Two pink plastic containers. Box of Cheerios, crushed. Pink tights. A greyed mop. Black clothing, rolled in a ball. Plastic ABCO bag. RC Cola can. Hearty Man box. Fork. Cardboard Pepsi cup, with straw. Top Gun VHS. A stack of approximately fifty TV Guides. A purple feather boa. One bottle of bleach. RC Cola can. [Maria sat on a built-in love seat, faded blue, torn at the seat.](#) Ice cream tub, large, with spoon and melted, dried ice cream. An empty orange bottle of medication. One bleached, blue towel. A faux-wood panelled microwave. Plastic 2 gal. water jug. Beige fan grate. One wicker basket, handle broken. A plunger. Can of hairspray. Plastic ABCO bag. No Name cough syrup, bottle, empty. Blank VHS tapes, (4). Blue plastic bucket. RC Cola Can. Empty bag of Doritos, Ranch flavour. A small pot. A pink quilt. An empty bottle of water. A crushed box of saltine crackers. A Barbie with a pink mini skirt, and matted hair. A bottle of No Name shampoo, for fine hair. A pink ear wax remover. An empty orange bottle of medication. Plastic ABCO bag. 2 gal. bottle of water, full. One child's flip flop. A purple sip-cup. A black garbage bag. Plastic plates. An empty water bottle. A faded red towel. A pink care bear stuffed animal. A cardboard box of grocery store flyers and coupons. A small box filled with unopened mail. RC Cola can. 2 gal. empty jug of water.

## 2

The church service was somber, Lucy thought while driving home with Margaret. Margaret was talking about something Father Brian had said, but Lucy wasn't really listening. She nodded every few seconds, but knew Margaret would keep talking, despite Lucy's acknowledgements. Sitting in the church an hour before, Lucy had felt alone. But she had been surrounded by people. People she knew, like Margaret who had been so generous to her; people whom she had grown up with. They had known her father and her mother. People who had lent a hand when that fire ravaged her home, stealing her parents.

But that had been ten years ago. These people smiled politely now, complimented her on the cookies she brought to church fundraisers. People who said she was beautiful, that she had great style, just like her mother. They had sent flowers to her home when she returned from the hospital. But she had not wanted to see flowers. She wanted to see tiny, wrinkled baby fingers wrapped tight around her own finger.

Making cookies for strangers was not enough. The nesting urge ran thick through her blood. She wanted to make cookies for her daughter. And she wanted to be complimented on her daughter's beauty, just like her mother's.

“You think they’ll ever find him?”

“No, probably not.”

“Even though they’ve got the County P.D. searching?”

“Yup. The way I see it, one less Mexican round here ain’t going to hurt anyone.”

“You can’t be serious. Wasn’t your grandfather from Mexico?”

“Yeah, but my family’s been paying taxes legitimately for generations now. It’s different. I’m not saying that I don’t like those people or nothing. I’m just saying that people round here are sick of their tax money going to illegals instead of their roads.”

“You think they’re just going to turn a blind eye?”

“A man can’t survive out there long without water or shelter. Feds are used to finding bones and dried out water bottles. They find over 500 people out in the desert each year, and believe you me they don’t find ‘em living. If he ain’t dead by now, they’ll make him a saint.”

Maria had lost track of the days. She wasn't sure how many suns had set since the last day that really mattered. She had not needed to open her door. She had not needed to let the rest of the world in. The TV changed shows, other fake lives were lived out, hurricanes destroyed parts of the east coast, women found out their boyfriends were cheating with their mothers, Martha Stewart demonstrated how to make a bag out of gardening gloves. The TV world continued, but this time at a mumbled drawl. Images flashed on the screen in monochromatic colours, voices and songs droned into monotone.

There was a strange, calm silence in her trailer. She had nothing else to worry over. Maria had nothing left to think about. Christina had been everything. She had been morning, afternoon, night and mid-night thoughts. Hundreds of situations had needed to be played out, re-played out in Maria's head. So that she would be ready to deal, solve, deal. To keep her daughter safe. Maria thought about putting these thoughts to rest. A scary thought. If she put her worries to rest, what was left? Who was left? Who was center, who was behind, what was forward? What if she stopped thinking of Christina? What if her brain stopped spinning and the view finally came into focus? Would the minutiae of possibilities becomes overwhelming again? What happens when there is no more pain? Nothing left to heal, no one to console. When could she stop re-living and just live? But the darkness is like a warm womb, Maria thought.

## 5

Sam woke at 5 am, showered, took a can of Coke out of the fridge and sleepily got into his truck. Instinctively, he turned left onto Navajo Highway and drove right past the Market. The sun had not yet risen. He rolled down his window to let the fresh morning air circulate. The dust was trapped under a layer of dew this time of morning, the sun had not burned it off yet. Sam drove in silence until he reached the six dead palms.

Routine's a bitch, he thought as he turned his truck around.

“D’you hear Billy’s ghost’s been hauntin’ the market?”

“Now what kind of bullshit are you hollerin’ about now?”

“Yeah, Bianca said that ever since the accident, well, she said things have been blowin’ over.”

“What *things*?”

“Like the signs and the dream catchers. Been blowing off the racks and stuff.”

“And you’re sayin’ that’s cause Billy’s *ghost* is hauntin’ the market? You’ve really cracked the pot now.”

“It’s ‘cracked the case’, not ‘the pot’.”

“No, it’s the pot. Like, you know, you’re crackers. Your pot is cracked. Anyways, it’s the Santa Ana winds, you idiot, that are makin’ shit fly off the tables.”

“Those winds are in Cali. They don’t make it this far out.”

“Yeah they do, they basically control all the weather in the U.S.”

“Well, all I’m sayin’ is that Bianca swears it’s Billy’s ghost.”

Maria wanted to feel the blackness around her. She wanted to crumble and blow away like dust. All Maria felt was the perpetual wetness under her eyes and the heaviness of her body. She felt like her body was crumpling like a can under the weight of the entire world. Like her trailer was sinking into the shifting sands.



Then, the girl stumbled upon the strangest thing she had ever seen. She came up to a wall of cotton plants, planted in straight lines. Balls of white fluffy cotton were attached to what looked like dead twigs. She moved around the field and saw that it was shaped in a strangely perfect square. She reached to touch the cotton, expecting a soft bed she could lie gently upon. But the plants were not forgiving. The dry leaves and stems were prickly. Then, she heard a noise that frightened her to her core. She looked up and saw a giant green and black mechanized animal chomping on the cotton plants, moving slowly towards her. It had big teeth that protruded from its body and the girl could see that it was destroying the plant and confiscating the cotton, which was now growing inside a cage-like belly. She felt the ground rumbling and shaking beneath her, and she became very afraid. The girl moved very quickly through the cotton plants, until she was far from the machine. But now she faced a long, strange, black path with yellow lines.

Maria had not wanted to go. The very idea of stepping outside in the heat made her stomach burn. Having to sit in a stranger's car, having to make small talk, smiling even, made Maria nauseous. Couldn't she say she was sick? Shouldn't she have just refused? Said it was all too much? But she also felt that she had to make sure.

Maria was grateful that the woman from the morgue offered to pick her up at her trailer. She couldn't imagine the difficulty she'd have trying to find someone to give her a lift.

What Maria couldn't swallow was the silence. She had expected an ever-present darkness of night, but it seemed she woke only to blinding sun seeping through the bottom of the door. Maria expected a procession of people, expressing regrets while standing on her doorstep. But there was none. No one. Not Sam, not Bianca. Lucy had come, but she felt it was just to say I told you so.

Maria had expected all these things. Christina had reminded her daily. The pills: morning, afternoon, evening and night-time doses. The thousands of bottles that emptied like bottles of water. The words and numbers that sifted through a sieve in her brain.

Maria had spent long hours with Christina in her lap, with words and letters and games. Pieces of random information sometimes clumped together, but when shaken, would fall through the tiny holes, piling with toys and empty bottles to the floor.

The heavy night breathing, a swimmer gasping for air. Trips to the emergency room, with nothing but luck between a speeding ambulance and a slow hearse. The constant tripping, tumbling, slipping and stumbling followed sometimes by a guttural laugh, sometimes by a wincing cry and more recently, by a sudden look of frustration before Christina brushed herself off again. As if Christina were desperately trying to convince herself that things would change, that something could get better, as if she were trying to prove to herself that she could do it on her own.

Maria had given up that normalcy long ago, defeated by doctors who pronounced long words with uncertainty, diagnoses longer than the tiny baby in her arms, doctors who had said things like “not much hope”. Forgive me, she thought, for preparing--she stopped. Maria couldn't have possibly have prepared for the darkness of her trailer. She hadn't expected the sudden emptiness of the trailer, the blandness of food and the deep pang in her heart.

When the woman from the morgue knocked on her door, she was still in her white lab coat. Maria stepped outside. She was drenched in sweat even before she reached the woman's mini-van. Maria opened the passenger door and looked anxiously inside. She would not fit. Maria became bilious and supported herself against the inside of the door. She had not been in the front seat of a car in a few years. But she was too embarrassed to back out now. She took a deep breath and bent over, reaching underneath the seat to find the lever to release the seat from its claustrophobic position. The seat slid back smoothly and Maria heaved her body into the van.

As Maria sat next to the woman, breathing heavily, she wondered if she should smile politely. Because they had met before. Maria had seen her once or twice

with her son at Christina's school. But maybe Maria shouldn't smile, because frankly, this woman was bringing her to identify her daughter's body. Maria looked down by her feet. A baseball rolled around the floor of the car. The woman began to speak in a slow, quiet, calm voice.

"This is a very brave thing to do. If you want, I can give you some tips on what to expect, so that you won't be so surprised."

Maria nodded and stared straight ahead, hoping the way to the morgue took a long time. She wasn't ready to say good-bye yet.

"Most people get dizzy or weak in the stomach. It's okay. Let yourself feel whatever you're feeling. If you need to leave at any time, just leave. I'll be with you, and I can be there to give you a hug or hold your hand if you want. Some people wish to spend some time alone with their loved one."

Then the woman was silent. She took a deep, loud breath and Maria noticed that her knuckles were white as she gripped the steering wheel of her mini-van.

"I'm sure I'll be fine," Maria said in a momentary lapse of fear.

"I can't imagine what you're going through."

Maria watched the road as the car ate it up. But there was always road in front of them, and it looked empty and calm. As if the land in the distance were a future time that didn't contain this harsh sadness. Maybe somewhere in the distance there was a tropical rain forest, Maria imagined, or an ocean with a cool breeze that could take her away from this dry, deserted land.

Lucy walked up and down the aisles of the ABCO grocery store. She picked up milk, some fresh vegetables and fruit and then headed to the pharmacy section. She wanted to be sure. Sure of what doctors told her would be next to impossible. Lucy carefully selected a pregnancy test that purported to tell you everything you need to know, “the instant it happens”. Lucy snickered, imagining a scene where a couple had just finished having sex. The man immediately begins to freak out, knowing *instantly* that the woman was pregnant. Too bad it doesn’t tell you who the father is, Lucy joked to herself, you need Maury or Springer for that kind of information. She balanced the test in her arms, holding bananas, lettuce and a carton of milk, and turned the aisle corner. Lucy stopped suddenly, and stood in front of a man she swore was a ghost. Her groceries slipped through her arms.

Jerome stood frozen in front of her.

...

“You’re surprised to see me.”

“Surprised? To see *you*?”

“Yeah, I guess y’all were looking...”

“They stopped looking, Billy. We all thought you were--”

“Dead?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’m not, I guess.”

...

“Look, I gotta be honest. My name’s not really Billy, I lied about that. It’s Jerome.”

He bent down and began collecting the groceries on the floor. Lucy snatched the pregnancy test from his fingers.

“Please don’t tell anyone. It’s early still.”

“It’s okay, I won’t.”

The two looked at each other, silently.

“I shoulda been the one in that storm who didn’t make it. But I guess I got a second chance. I don’t deserve it, but here it is.” Jerome began talking, blubbering, as if Lucy were a priest, Jerome in confession.

Lucy had never thought about second chances. But the idea resonated in her heart, and settled in her mind. “Are you going to ask for forgiveness?”

“From Maria?”

“I meant from God.”

“I’m not sure I deserve that either.” Jerome gave the groceries back to Lucy and walked out of the grocery store, a little bit more sure of himself.

The coolness from the morgue's air conditioning unit blasting into the room gave Maria shivers. She felt an instant release from the heat's hold. The air conditioner in her trailer had been nailed to the small, square emergency exit hatch in the roof. It had been running for many years, and Maria worried it would turn off one day, for good. Her breathing became softer, slower. The smell of formaldehyde was intense at first, but as Maria breathed in and out, the fumes seemed to calm her. She felt the beads of sweat stop dripping down her belly from under her breasts. She walked up to where the woman was standing, in front of a row of large silver drawers. They look the same as on TV, like CSI, Maria thought. She wondered if the CSI unit had used any high tech lights or DNA-detecting-chemicals. She wondered if the show would be called CSI Flint or if it would be a case from CSI Las Vegas that brought detectives out to Flint for a very special, mysterious case. Maria was still thinking about CSI and all the cool ways they had of finding killers when the woman slid the drawer open and Maria saw her tiny daughter lying, naked, crumpled, broken and bruised on the cold metal sheet. The woman saw Maria's pale, horrified face and quickly slid the drawer back. Christina disappeared into the darkness once again.

Her stomach lurched. The room began to tilt. Maria's breathing cut short. She subconsciously held her breath in. Until it became unbearable. She closed her eyes

and saw the same disturbing image, only this time as a negative. Maria felt as if she had just been pushed into freezing cold water, but instead of feeling revived, she felt like she was drowning too. As if waves were rushing over her head, she rocked back and forth. Her arms ached. Her knees weak. Her skin on her face felt bloated, her joints swelled as if filled with water. She looked at the closed drawer. It could not possibly contain Christina. That could not be her. Sure, Christina lay in hospital beds. She lay on her foam mattress. She slept with her head in Maria's lap. Christina sunned on a flat rock beside their trailer. She did not lie in morgue drawers.

Maria noticed her heartbeat, still racing. The high-pitched buzzing of the halogen lights rang in her ears. She heard the humming of air conditioning units. Then, out of nowhere came a voice, it was muffled but Maria could hear it yelling, screaming. The last thing that Maria felt was pain shooting through her body and saw the lights quickly fading.

The woman's voice startled Maria and she fainted. The woman tried to break her fall, but Maria was so large that the woman twisted her wrist and had to let Maria down to the ground. A few seconds later, Maria came to. The woman helped Maria to her feet and let her rest in her office. She sat in a chair, head in her hands, staring at the floor for over an hour in silence. When she finally looked up, the woman asked her if she wanted Christina to rest in a coffin or an urn.

"I... I can't," Maria said quietly.

"You've never thought about it, did you?" the woman sympathized.

"No, I did. Cremated."

"We can fulfill that wish."



“Only, I can’t pay for an urn.”

“Oh,” the woman said softly. She felt that she could not just let Maria’s wishes fall to the wayside. “We’ll figure something out then. I’m sure the community would help out, if that’s okay with you, of course.”

Maria looked to the woman with incredulity. Community? she thought, community? Where the hell was this *community*?

“I don’t have family. No friends neither. It’s just been my Christina and me. No one else.”

“Well, let’s start here then. My name’s Sandy,” the woman said, “I live on the lot next to the school, my husband owns the junk yard.” Sandy knew that there was no community, really. She felt that the people of Flint (and she knew most of them) didn’t really believe in charity or the notion of helping others out. Every man for himself.

Sandy felt that they refused to vote for any type of health plans or to increase welfare, or even to put more money into their school. They thought that the poor were lazy and greedy, refusing to work so that they could get welfare and not have to work. And it wasn’t like people were that far removed from poverty either. People around Flint begrudged any tax that didn’t improve the quality of the highway, as if a smooth blacktop was a sign of prosperity. And god forbid one of those people should lose their job, or get into an accident and become unable to work. Or have a handicapped child. That would obviously mean they were lazy. Perhaps Margaret could get some of the congregation members to donate a few bucks. This surely was a special case. Surely people would band together, she thought.

“Thanks, Sandy,” Maria whispered. “Can we stay in this cool room just a bit

longer?”

“Of course, Maria. Sure is hot this year, huh?” Sandy said and they both managed to smile, if only slightly.

## 12

It was getting dark. The sun hung low in the sky, hovering over a distant mountain. Sam drove fast, his window down, begrudging his passenger. So much wind and dust and heat blew into the back of the cab that Sam felt tiny rocks slapping the back of his neck. Jerome felt them too. He wanted to say something to Sam. Every time he opened his mouth, he swallowed dirt. Instead of speaking, he ground the dust between his molars, grinding his anger and the sand until it dripped down the back of his throat.

Rusty’s, the bar in the one strip-mall on Yavapi Road was empty. Sam was relieved. He didn’t want anyone to see Jerome yet. It was bad enough that Lucy had stumbled upon him at the store. He wished no one knew that the man that killed Christina was alive. One part of Sam wanted to beat the daylights out of him and send him out of town. He wasn’t sure if it would help things though. The other part wanted to find a way to make Maria smile again. But Christina wasn’t coming back.

Rusty took one look at Jerome and shook his head.

Sam ordered a whiskey from Rusty. Jerome sat mute.

“You getting a drink?” Sam finally asked.

“I’m broke.”

Sam reluctantly pulled out his wallet again and bought him a whiskey and they sat silent for a few minutes, neither one sure when to speak or what to say.

“What do you want from me?” Sam said, exasperated. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I don’t know. To be honest, whenever something goes wrong, I run. Running ain’t working no more. I figure I gotta try and face my last mistake. So I’m here. But fuck me if I know what to do now.”

“Well, I don’t know how to fix it neither.” Sam shook his head and waved to Rusty for another drink.

“Sometimes I just wish there was some way of letting people out of their pain.”

“Like death?” Sam gave Jerome a sideways glance. It was a strange thing to say.

“Maybe.”

Jerome downed his whiskey and traced the line of the glass with his finger.

“I had this dream where Maria was drowning in her trailer.”

“Drowning?”

“Yeah, and I wanna tell her ‘sorry’ but I can’t get nothing out.”

“It’s too late for sorry. Christina ain’t never comin’ back and there’s nothing any one of us can do about it.” Sam knocked back the rest of his drink. “Maybe it was easier with you being gone. It’s easier to blame someone who’s not gonna come back.” Sam realized he had nothing left to say to Jerome. He wanted to stay angry.

“Well fuck you too. Seriously, I’m trying my best here.”

“Trying your best?! Your *best*? That’s all you got?”

Sam stood suddenly, tipping his glass on the bar. He wanted Jerome to feel his anger. He wanted Jerome to pay for Christina’s death, for his lies. Sam felt his jaw tense, his hands curled and tightened. He wanted Jerome to feel the end of his fist. Before

Sam knew what he was doing, he felt his arm extending and connecting with the side of Jerome's face. Jerome was caught off-guard. His stool tipped over and he crashed to the floor.

“Hey!” Rusty yelled from behind the bar. “Git out!”

Sam looked down at Jerome, still on the floor, his hand defensively over his face. Jerome felt that he could have easily gotten up and kicked the shit out of Sam. But he didn't. There were times to fight and times to give in.

“Coward.” Sam said and spit on the floor next to Jerome. Sam tripped on a leg of a stool, steadying himself on the bar. He then pushed the door open, and disappeared into the night.

Jerome stood back up and dragged the stool up to the bar. His cheekbone was throbbing, it would swell soon. But Sam had missed his eye, no blackened bruise would show. He understood the punch. Jerome stared down his empty glass before leaving. He threw up behind a car and walked back to his camper van. Cicadas competed with air conditioning machines for precedence over the otherwise silent night.

Maria woke in the middle of the night with the TV still on, advertising a “Prayer Hands Fountain” for \$29.99. She raised her head and sat up straight to get a closer look at the fountain on the screen. It was a grey stone-like statue of two hands clasped in prayer. Water gurgled from the tips of fingers, cascaded down two hands and splashed into a small pool at the bottom. Maria turned up the volume. “And if you call in the next ten minutes, we’ll give you the Prayer Cross Necklace for just \$19.99, a \$60 value!” Maria wondered if the necklace really was worth \$60. And what water had to do with praying. At that moment, Maria remembered that Christina had never been baptized. They had never been to church. Maria had never considered herself faithful, but she now worried that she had made a serious mistake. She thought she had done everything to protect Christina. Everything. She had had all of Christina’s waking hours away from home planned. Sam drove her to and from the Market, to and from school (when she still went). She was only allowed to play by the trees, with the trailer door wide open, so that Maria had her eye on her at all times. Christina never went to anyone else’s house. She never went on sleep-overs (not that anyone invited her) or on the fourth grade class trip to the Canyon. Maria never needed a baby-sitter, and they never went anywhere except when Sam took them to the Wal-mart, the ABCO grocery store or to the hospital. Maria had thought of everything, except purgatory. And now it was too late.

The trailer suddenly became sticky and the things piled high around her started to grow. The heat had seeped through her walls, and it was now trapped inside. The air thick and smelled like skin and rotting food. The TV seemed to scream at her, “CALL NOW”, “19.99\$”, “FOR YOUR LOVED ONES”. She threw the remote at the TV. It bounced against the screen and the batteries flew back at her.

Maria stood up and opened the door. A cool breeze blew in, and she took a deep breath. She sat on the doorstep of the trailer, legs dangling into the dust. A coyote howled in the distance. Backing into her trailer, Maria tripped on a tiny pink flip-flop. Christina’s tiny pink flip-flop. The one that had gone missing a month before. Christina had searched the trailer for two hours, carefully removing a box or an article of clothing, looking under it, then replacing it in its spot. Christina had searched the entire trailer and left nothing unturned and yet nothing out of its chaotic place. Then, she had run down to the palm trees and searched there. She came back, head hung low, tears washing away dust in long lines down her cheeks. Maria had tried to convince her that they would buy new ones, but Christina had been inconsolable for a whole day. Maria picked up the flimsy shoe, and threw it out the door. It flew through the air, flipping and flopping, and landed in the dark dust. Maria broke into a smile. She grabbed Christina’s bean bag chair and threw it out too. It landed with a satisfying ‘thump’. Maria then took a handful of pill bottles on the counter and chucked them one by one into the night. She grabbed a few plastic bags and filled them with as much of Christina’s medication and toys as they would hold. Maria stepped barefoot into the dirt and walked all the way down to the palm trees, holding a lighter and a pile of TV Guides.

Lucy woke from a dream that intruded in on her usual morning cheerfulness. She burned her toast. She spilled coffee on her white shorts. She couldn't shake herself from the sleepy images of burning water.

Margaret walked into the kitchen and told her that she was going to pass a jar around at Sunday mass for Christina's cremation expenses. Lucy asked if there was anything she could do to help.

"Well, you used to be very close with Maria, weren't you? Why don't you go and make another visit?"

"That was so long ago, I don't think she'll listen to me..."

"It's never too late to do good," Margaret said as she put four pieces of bread into the toaster. Lucy cringed at the trite lines Margaret usually spewed, but she knew Margaret was right. She thought of the tiny body slowly growing in her belly and decided that she needed to improve her relationship with God. Lucy felt that she needed every good blessing and a strong, steady God-like hand to help this baby survive. And Sam should do the same if he wanted to get into her good books.

She wondered if Sam told her that he was through with Vicky, did it mean she had to believe him? Would it actually make a difference? Was admitting the cure-all for infidelity? For guilt? What could a few sorry's actually change? What's that

proverb, she thought, or maybe it's just saying. Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me? Could she ever trust him? Was it really necessary to trust? Or was forgiveness just forgetting? She had heard people say that they had started their old, tattered relationships anew. Just decided to forget their pasts, pretend as if the past had never happened. But did she have to forget the good times too?

Margaret set down two fresh pieces of toast in front of Lucy on the table. They were dripping with butter, the way she liked. The smell of burnt toast had left the room.

“I remember after the fire at your parent's place, when the firemen were trying to get into Maria's room, wasn't it your old room? Anyway, Maria had a tough time of it all. It wasn't the fire that scared her. The idea of these firemen smashing the windows of her room was a violation of her own privacy. I had to hold her back, she kept trying to get in the way to stop them from doing their job. She wasn't very responsible back then, was she, leaving candles unattended like that? But she needed help then, whether she wanted it or not.”

Maria was a private person. Lucy thought about the invisible line they had to draw across Lucy's room, so that Lucy wouldn't touch Maria's collections and piles of clothing on the floor. They'd had such a hard time living together in the same space and the girls argued so often that it just became easier for her parents to let Lucy live with Sam when she turned seventeen.

“Have you managed to forgive her?” Margaret asked in that superior-sounding voice that Lucy hated. It seemed to Lucy that all her life she'd been expected to forgive the people who hurt her.

Lucy looked down at her plate, her toast left untouched.



“Of course,” she lied and stood from the table. She slid her toast into the garbage under the sink and left the kitchen.

## 15

Sandy looked at the cream coloured urn placed on her desk. It was much smaller than the others she'd prepared. She picked up the phone for the fourth time in as many days and dialed Maria's number. It rang and rang into eternity. Sandy thought she could almost hear an empty silence in between the rings. She looked at the urn again. She picked up the receiver and dialed another number that she knew would be answered.

“Sam?”

Lucy had not wanted to drive into the motel parking lot. She turned off Navajo Highway Road into the empty lot beside the motel. The single-storey motel stretched back from the road, in an L-shape. She squinted, looking for Vicky's red truck. It was there, parked in front of the room furthest from the reception. It was not Vicky's truck that worried her. She'd seen it a thousand times, passing her on the highway, parked at ABCO. Years ago, Lucy had even parked right next to it unknowingly and walked into Cindy's Tanning and Hair Salon which also doubled as a Bob's Water and Ice Store. It was only when she got back to her car, smelling of tanning lotion and feeling sticky, that she noticed Vicky's truck. She had pulled out of the lot as fast as she could, retracing her steps in her mind--perhaps she had been in the room next to Vicky, both of their skin bubbling and blistering, both their bodies touched by the same man--her heart racing, aching. But this time she saw Vicky's truck parked in the motel lot, and didn't feel a thing.

It was Sam's white F150 that she was afraid of seeing. But the lot was filled with other white cars. Cultishly white, she thought, as if no one wants to be noticed, as if everyone wants to blend into the desert light. Sam's white truck was continuously covered in a thin layer of reddish dust. His truck, parked there, would signal the end of second chances.

Lucy parked her car in front of Reception and went in. She had no idea where Jerome was, but this was the only motel for miles and miles. Earl, the old guy who seemed to have always worked at the motel, was at the front desk. He put down the Bible he was reading when he saw her. She noticed the painting of a saint nailed to the wall above his head. Poor guy, she thought, having to rent out his beloved motel--by the hour.

“Hi Earl. How’re you doing?”

“Fine, Lucy, just fine. Nice to see you here. What can I do you for? Don’t need a room do ya?” Earl chuckled nervously and kept glancing at the door behind Lucy.

“I’m just looking for someone, thought he might be here.”

“Oh, Lucy, I, uh, I’m not really allowed to give out guest’s information, but if you’re--” Earl fidgeted with his pen.

“I’m not looking for Sam.”

Earl smiled nervously. “Of course not.”

“He’s-- well, how do I put this? Do you remember Billy?”

“Sure do, hon, it’s a real shame about Christina ain’t it?”

“Look, he’s alive. And he’s back in Flint. I was just thinking that he might be here.”

Earl picked up the pen again and flicked it quickly between his fingers. “Well, he’s not technically a guest, he’s not staying in a room. So it wouldn’t be a violation, right?”

Lucy shook her head. Violation of what, she thought, the carnal code? The criminal code? “It’s real important Earl.”

“That rusty old camper van, the Ford behind the building. That’s his.”

“Thanks Earl,” Lucy said and left the reception.

Out behind the motel, Lucy found Jerome’s van. She had never seen it

before, and wondered how he'd acquired it. He had been living in a room above Earl's garage, but she'd heard that he'd let his niece stay there a few days after Jerome had gone missing. Was presumed dead, she corrected herself. She banged on his door and he opened it, surprised to see her.

"Let's go," she said.

"Where?"

"Just get in."

Lucy drove Jerome along the highway, past the new Super Gas station on the outskirts of town, past the two billboards advertising Napa Auto Parts and Burger King, and out between where the road had been dug through the mesa until they came to the bend in the road and the opening of the valley. Mesas and buttes jutted out in the distance. Grey dust rose from the land, making the hills look like they were just part of the sky, part of the clouds. Everything in the distance seemed bleached out, fuzzy or mirage-like. Lucy slowed down at the Dinosaur Tracking Stand and waved to Jesse who was re-nailing the hand-painted "Dinosaur Tracks" sign to the shack.

"Jesse's been there his whole life, at that stand," she said, "his grandfather started it, and now he runs it."

"Does he make any money?"

"Sure, but not much. They own the land. That shack don't cost much. His wife told me that he charges 10 bucks and then he takes them out back and shows them dried mud. There can't be too many other costs. Kind of like the Market. Except that Sam's got other costs like shipping the jewelry and blankets in."

"Which is stupid," Jerome mumbled.

“What’s that?” Lucy asked.

“Nothing. I just think there are better ways to do things.” Jerome stared at the shack. The sign was made from plywood; “Dinosaur Tracks” in a green-blue colour had been painted long, long ago. The arrow was missing its point, and all that was left was a sideways line, pointing either way. Two American flags waved from the roof of the shack, but without a strong wind, they betrayed their tattered ends and faded colours.

“He used to have a teepee, and some horses out there. He used to make drawings in the sand like his grandfather did. Then he got this idea that he should modernize, probably after the Burger King was built, so he built the shack. But as you can see, he isn’t so good at carpentry. Then, a State Ranger told him that it was too dangerous to have horses by the highway, so he had to sell them. He really believes that it’s his calling in life to give these tours of the ‘dinosaur’ poop and footprints. Most people only stop to laugh. They think he’s lying, or primitive or something. I mean, he really believes that the human footprint is from the same time as the T-Rex’s. Says it’s a caveman. And he doesn’t like it when people say ‘shit’. Says it’s rude to cuss. I feel bad for him sometimes.”

“Yeah, but at least he’s got something he believes in,” Jerome replied. Since he’d been a child, Jerome’s mother had told him that he’d be a lawyer or own a landscaping company, have a good Mexican wife with tons of children who attended church every Sunday. Have the Mexican-American dream that for his mother, was only ever a dream. Jerome felt that ideal was pretty typical of his mother to expect from him. What she didn’t see was that only a handful of kids from his middle school ever went on to graduate high school. And most of them were the random white kids who just

happened to live on the wrong side of school district lines. His mother didn't understand that when Jerome would get kicked out of school for wearing gang colours, it was just because he happened to wear the colour blue and his pants hung low around his hips. Or when he was suspended for destroying school property, it was because he had written his name in permanent marker on the back of his ID card. Jerome felt he could never win. He'd tried the American way, and he didn't fit. They didn't want him. But now he was tired of trying on different masks. He was tired of looking in the mirror and seeing someone else.

“Sam's gotta get rid of the Market,” Lucy said suddenly. “He doesn't care about it anymore. I'm not sure he ever did. It's draining him of all his energy. He's got to find something that *he* wants to do, not something my dad wanted.” As Lucy drove towards Maria's trailer, the wind picked up, buffing sand against her car, and Jerome's stomach lurched in his body.

Sam looked at the urn strapped into the passenger seat of his truck as he turned off the highway to Maria's trailer. He had not known what to do with it. At first he set it on the floor of his truck by the passenger's seat. But it would rattle around, possibly break. So he placed it on the seat, and pulled the seat belt around it, buckling it in. The absurdity, he thought, of seat-belted someone who was already dead. Was she still *someone*? Did the ashes count as a person still? Or just a representation, he thought, so we don't have to let go just yet.

The urn was nothing special. He looked at it, trying to picture a little girl inside. But Sam had a hard time connecting ashes to a human being with a spirit and a personality and bones and hair. He looked at the urn again. It had not spoken to him figuratively, or even literally. It had not said, "I am closure. It's okay now." He felt silly that he had expected it to. He was not sure how to cope with these types of things.

Coming up to Maria's trailer, Sam saw the row of six or seven stunted palms by the side of the road that were charred black from a very recent fire. The palm leaves were mostly burnt to ash, but the stumps stubbornly stuck up out of the dirty-beige dirt. A small patch of palm was still smoldering in a thin serpent-like line snaking its way up to the sky. The black trees contrasted ominously against the soft sand of the

land and the baby blue of sky. Junk was littered along the road to her trailer. Toys and bottles and clothes were strewn across the barren land, caught on rocks and cacti, blown into the ditch.

“Holy shit,” Sam whispered and then sped down the dirt road to her trailer. The truck skidded to a stop and Sam jumped out, leaving the engine running and door open.

Sam banged the door of her trailer until it crumpled inwards. He ripped off one of its hinges and climbed into the trailer. A dark cloud of smoke escaped from the door and Sam was caught in the fumes.

“Maria!” he yelled inside, coughing on the smoke. “I can’t fucking see! It’s too fucking dark! Maria! Are you okay?”

Sam frantically shifted and threw things across the smoldering cave of a room. He stepped on crushed boxes, a metal tray, embers. The heat in the trailer was unbearable, he could feel it radiating through his work boots up from the floor. Sam thought that perhaps through the smoke he could see a large, black silhouette. He pushed the TV over; it sparked and flickered on and off before it landed on the floor with a crash. There was nothing behind the TV except a wall. There was nothing left in the trailer but remains of a life and four walls caving in.

He reappeared at the door, soot clinging to his cheeks in long streaks, where tears had fallen. He was sure she couldn’t have left the trailer on her own. And he didn’t trust Billy--no, Jerome, whatever his name is. He pulled out his cell phone and called Lucy. It rang and rang until her machine picked up. He dialed Vicky’s number. Her phone went straight to voicemail. He felt lost without them, but realized there was nothing they could do either. Maria needed some serious help, if there was still time. Sam looked out



into the desert. He could see for miles, but he saw nothing but desert.

Steve, he thought, Officer Steve will know what to do. Sam then dialed the only number he knew for law enforcement, 9-1-1, hoping dispatch could connect him to Steve.

“9-1-1 What’s your emergency?”

“I, um, can you connect me to Officer Steve Lundy?”

“What’s your emergency, sir?”

“A fire, and a missing-- look, this would be easier if I could just speak to Officer Steve. He’s at the station in Kingman.”

“Is the fire still active?”

“No, I don’t really think this is an emergency.”

“Has anyone been hurt?”

“I don’t know, okay, I just would feel better if he’d be the one to come down here.”

“Okay, sir, what’s your location?”

“Can’t you just connect the line? It’s real important--”

“*Where* are you located sir? I can’t help you until you give me your location.”

“Just off Navajo Highway, it’s 6232 North Navajo Highway. Now are you going to connect me to Officer Lundy?”

“Yes, just hold the line, but I’m not sure I can connect you directly, let me just check with my supervisor. Hold the line please.”

“Just forget about it!” Sam hung up on the dispatch, throwing his cell phone at the blackened trailer.

Further down the road, the charred palms scratched the air, crackling and

snapping in the dry wind as if they were still on fire.

## 18

Maria sat on a rock on the top of the hill behind her trailer, waiting for her epiphany. She was ready for it. Ready for the part in the movies where the main character looks out over the fields, or into the ocean surf, or out of a window and finally understands. Instantaneous release from their own tragedy. And they see what was there all along. What cures them from the sadness that is ruining their lives. Tears stream down faces, there is a flashback of happier times, and the person can finally see how to make things right. Every movie Maria had ever seen had this moment. It was her time.

She felt that maybe she was beginning to change. She was sitting *outside* in the peak of summer, for God's sake. She'd slept outside the whole night too. Not that she could go back inside now. Her trailer, which for most of her life had felt like a safe bundled cocoon, felt like a restrictive coffin. Looking down at the charred beast of a trailer, she was not sure what she had done.

It had started at the palms, as a way to rid herself of Christina's stuff. Maria could not bear another day looking at the colour pink, at the child-sized chair, at the ratty Little Mermaid blanket. They were getting in the way, they were creeping up on her, they were burying her. So, up went drawings, medical bills; paper burned with satisfaction.

Fire had been an agent of change; burning Christina's stuff just made sense.

And then the fire spread to the palms. As they burned, the smell had been so sweet and the sounds of it cracking and sparking, just so right. Looking back, she thought, I may have been carried away.

But then it had been the foam mattress Christina slept on, dragged from the trailer. And then the bean bag chair. And the whole stack of TV Guides. There was so much stuff in the trailer, that it just seemed better to set the whole thing on fire. She'd seen a house enveloped in flames before, Lucy's home, but it was different back then. Instead of fighting to get back inside to grab her belongings as firemen with gas-masks and yellow rubber suits pushed her away, she was in control of this fire. *She* decided what it touched, what it consumed, what parts of her life it destroyed. She wasn't going to have anything holding her back anymore.

As she had watched the flames licking the side of the trailer, escaping from the door and the exit on her roof, the acidity in her stomach had subsided. The pressure weighing down on her forehead released.

At the top of the hill, she turned away from her trailer. She didn't have to pay for Christina's medical expenses. She didn't have to worry about Social Services. She didn't have to think about future plans that included wheelchairs and hospitals and assisted living. The rest of her life would not be consumed with regret, sitting in the form of pill bottles and medical bills. She let out a long sigh, closing her eyes.

The wind whistled softly at her ears. She looked out into the distance and saw miles and miles of land. But there was nothing out there. Nothing that would tell her something new. Dirt clung to her palms as she put her hands down on the ground to balance her weight on the rock she sat on.

“Come on,” she said, waiting for epiphany to answer. She wanted to feel something other than the sadness, the numbness, and the lethargy. She stood and faced the land that sprawled below her.

“Hey! I’m out here!” she said loudly. The wind responded only with a gentle silence.

“HEY! You know what? Screw YOU!” Maria yelled at the desert. “I’m SUFFERING out here, and you don’t even care! Can’t you see this is too HARD?” Maria screamed and stepped back and felt something crunch underneath her foot. She lifted her foot and saw that she had stepped on the carcass of a snake. It had dried out in the heat. Its mouth was open, and Maria saw that inside its teeth was a small stone. She picked up the snake, careful not to touch its rattler and placed it under a rock.

“It’s just too hard,” Maria whispered to herself.

## 19

The girl was afraid of the great, long expanse of hot, black road that spread out in front of her. But she followed beside the road anyway. Sometimes another machine would swish by very quickly and the girl would remember not to travel so close to the edge. There were things out in the desert that she knew were dangerous and frightening.

The girl travelled for a long time until she got to a place that felt very familiar. She recognized a saguaro cactus that had four arms, three small arms on one side and one large arm on the other for balance perched precariously halfway up a small hill. She recognized a rock that jut out of the cliff, as it had the profile of an eagle's head. She roamed the land, passing by a silver structure that looked more like a large, shiny, rounded rock. Then, returning back to the road, she saw the thing in the world that she cherished the most. The tiny, stunted palm trees were now black and smoldering. At first, the girl was horrified. She didn't understand why the trees were dead. There was no reason that the girl could think of that would make sense for the palms to be burned. But then again, she felt that she didn't need to understand why they were dead, all that was important was to understand that they were dead. The girl touched the palms, the leaves were dry and brittle. She listened to the stump crackling as it slowly fell in upon itself in the wind. The girl felt the small plume of smoke rising above the palms, and rose

above the land with it.

## 20

What Lucy and Jerome saw first were the burnt palms, still smoking. Then they saw Sam's truck. It was parked next to Maria's blackened trailer; both trailer and truck doors were open. Then the large amounts of junk, clothing and furniture that were littered around the trailer. Lucy stopped her car and quickly got out. Jerome sat in the passenger's seat, stunned, not ready to face what lay ahead of him.

Sam appeared from behind the trailer and ran towards Lucy.

"She's gone--she's...I don't know what...she's not here."

"What do you mean she's not here? She must be here, she, she can't leave," Lucy said and stormed past Sam to look inside the trailer. Sam followed, eyeing Jerome suspiciously, who was still in the car.

As Lucy got closer to the trailer, she recognized the sweet, toxic burnt smell. She was familiar with the ashes and dust that clogged noses, throats and ears. Suddenly she saw blackened shingles. *As if black paint had been applied only above the windows and front door of her childhood bungalow. The roof was caved in. Her dog, Ruff, was barking at the house, still chained up to a tree in her yard. Firemen breaking windows and the sirens wailing and Maria screaming. The flames. Staring at the front door, through a blackened doorway, waiting for her parents to come out. Ash and water falling in*

*slow motion like snow.*

Lucy blinked the tears from her eyes. Sam's hand was placed supportively on her shoulder for perhaps the first time since the fire at her childhood home. Sam remembered how devastated Lucy had been. How she had refused to leave the home, eyes glued to the door, even after the firemen rolled up their hoses and called for the coroner. How he had held her in his arms for days after.

"I didn't think that Maria could have done this." Sam said softly. "It just never occurred to me."

Lucy turned her body into Sam, her head nuzzling into his chest. His heart swelled, and he placed his arms around her small body as she sobbed. Sam could feel two wet spots where his shirt absorbed her tears.

Back in the car, Jerome debated whether he should get out or stay in the car. Was this his fault? Could he possibly be responsible for this much damage? The dominoes topple over so easily, he thought. Could his urge to get out on the road have triggered wide-scale disaster? Lucy's car stifled with heat. He felt himself breathing heavily, but the air he inhaled was stale, hot, musty. He reached for a cigarette in his shirt pocket and opened the car door.

Jerome lit his cigarette and walked past Lucy and Sam, who were pulling blankets and pans and other junk out of the trailer, as if the objects contained clues to the wreckage. Jerome circled the home, stepping over empty water bottles and pill bottles strewn across the property.

"No windows," he said out loud to himself. He had passed the trailer fifty

times perhaps, but never saw it any closer than from the highway. Even in his nightmarish dream about her trailer, he had not imagined that it had no windows.

He continued walking around the desert on her property, closer to the small hill. He coughed and felt the back of his throat being coated and clogged with dirt. He could feel sweat dripping down his back. It pooled in the small of his back and at the backs of his knees. The wind's intensity increased. Jerome thought he heard a faint, female voice yelling, *Billy, Billy, it's gunna rain!* It seemed to come from the top of the hill. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve and began to climb. *It's too hard!* The yelling became louder and louder as he got closer to the top, so he sped up into a run. Rocks and gravel crumbled below his feet, and he slipped several times as he frantically climbed. Someone needed his help. He could help. He would help. He had to help this time. He tripped on creosote bushes, his jeans caught and ripped on barrel cacti.

Maria didn't hear the cars drive up to her property. She had turned her back to her trailer. She was convinced that she would not leave the top of the hill until she got a sign. The snake could not have been a sign. It was dead. She stood and stepped closer to the small cliff that fell from the south side of the hill. The wind was dry and hot, but it moved quickly up the side of the rocks.

Then she could hear shifting rocks, heavy breathing, and crumbling gravel. She turned around swiftly, but stumbled backwards as she saw the last man to have ever seen Christina. Jerome staggered forwards towards her, propelled in some way by their surprise. She looked into his eyes and saw fear. She saw torment. This was the epiphany moment. Maria waited for him to say something. She had to let the moment just



happen.

“I’m sorry,” Jerome said quietly. “I don’t know what else to say but that I’m so, so sorry.”

Maria looked at him and waited for him to say more.

“I didn’t mean to leave her alone. It’s just that she snuck into the back of my truck and by the time I noticed she was there, well...” Jerome tried to explain but the more he said, the less satisfying it felt.

“The water came out of nowhere.” His words were empty. Maria began to feel the same. Like the words were generically strung together. Like they were a grocery list. She was reliving a bad midday soap opera. She turned her back on Jerome. He was not her epiphany.

Jerome noticed her sudden distance, that she had stopped listening. She already understood what he’d been saying. He’d have to tell her something that she didn’t know.

“Christina knew it was going to rain.”

Maria looked at him again. “How?”

“She just knew. She tried to tell me. She said something about the hediondilla. She tried to warn me, but I didn’t listen.”

Maria nodded. “The creosote. She told me about that once.” She remembered a time when Christina was a toddler. Maria had reached for her shoes, sitting outside the trailer, and Christina had immediately begun to cry. She hadn’t stopped crying until Maria had put the shoes back down. As Maria had laid them back along the side of the trailer, she had noticed a scorpion hiding in her left shoe. She believed that Christina had saved her from being stung. Christina was more aware of these things than most

people. And there were things that Maria learnt from her.

“What was she like before she died? What did she say?” Maria asked.

Jerome felt the lump in his throat swelling. The pit in his stomach twisting. He opened his mouth to speak, but sound was being choked. The words were being pushed back down his throat. He tried to think of what he was going to say. Memory was blank. He thought he could picture what she looked like when the truck flipped, but realized that was impossible. That image was a fabrication of his nightmares, not a memory.

Maria and Jerome both heard Sam and Lucy’s voices become louder and clearer as they too climbed the side of the hill, their heads appearing slowly to Maria and Jerome. When they reached the top, Maria saw that Sam was holding a small, cream-coloured urn.

“Thank God you’re here. We thought you were lost--we thought something had happened,” Sam said.

“Something *did* happen, Sam. You just didn’t notice I was lost,” Maria snapped. She wanted to ask him why he hadn’t come to see her after the accident. All that came out was anger.

Sam wanted to tell Maria about the mailbox, about the loneliness in his bed, about the daughter he would never have, about the stories he had told Christina, about the doctors he had called for second opinions, about heartbreak. But he was pretty sure he was not capable of making her understand. Or maybe she already understood.

Jerome could feel the hair on his arms rising, the hair on the back of his neck prickle. He blocked out their voices and could hear Christina’s voice whispering in the wind. Jerome closed his eyes and let himself hear her words. *The black clouds*

*are startin' to squish.* Jerome turned around and he could hear the loud rush of water, *the water's comin' real fast!* He could see his truck, floating, bobbing in the sudden river in front of him.

“The sky suddenly broke. Rain in drops the size of fists pounded down,” Jerome interrupted. “So I turned around and headed for the truck. I had rocks in my hands and pockets. Like I couldn’t drop them, I just held them for as long as I could. As if they were valuable. Before I could get to the truck, there was just this sound of rushing water. You could hear it almost crashing before you could see it. I came up to the wash where the truck was parked but it was already surrounded by knee-deep water. And I could hear her. She yelled for the water to stop. She was yelling for the mud to stop. But the truck was almost completely submerged, the water rushing around the truck, up over its tires and--and then it rolled. It was impossible, the way that water just picked up my truck and ran away with her in it. I ran, I ran on the edge of the ditch, where the water was shallow and I ran and ran after her and there was no way I could get to the truck. I--I saw her eyes looking out of the water, her tiny hands reaching for the sky, so I jumped in. The water was like a river, with rapids, and trees were being uprooted and dragged along with me. I couldn’t swim. There was sand in my mouth and gravel was being whipped at my body under the water, it was just too strong, a current in the fucking desert. I just got swept further away. I swore I saw her eyes looking out of the water.”

Maria, Sam and Lucy were all silent.

“I was choking, drowning maybe, in that water, reaching down into that muddied water for her but coming up with branches of palo verde or fists full of mud. All the time thinking that this was my fault, knowing that this was my punishment, thinking

that all she wanted was to see something new... she was so beautiful.”

That’s it, that’s the epiphany, Maria thought, somewhat deliriously delighted. Sam, Lucy and Jerome watched as Maria reached for the urn, taking it out of Sam’s hands. She held the urn tightly in a hug-like hold. Maria knew what she had to do. She pulled the top of the urn off and threw it against the rocks. It shattered loudly.

“What the hell are you doing?” Sam asked in disbelief.

Maria turned to the edge of the cliff, and reached down into the urn to pull out a thick plastic bag. Her hands were sweating and the bag became slippery. She felt a sudden breeze cooling the damp skin on the back of her neck. This is it, she thought, this is the wind I’ve been waiting for. The wind that could take Christina away from there.

Maria brought the bag to her mouth and tore it open with her teeth. Particles of ash stuck to her lips. The wind whispered to her and she shook the bag out into the wind. Grey ash seemed to sparkle and glimmer in the sun as it caught in the wind, floating down, away from the hill. Away from Maria and Sam and Jerome and Lucy.

The wind took Christina away from the four as they stood silently, watching as the rest of the bag was emptied into the sky until the wind swiftly changed directions. The ashes instantly turned and blew into their faces. It covered Lucy’s hair and peppered Jerome’s face. Lucy screeched and messed her hands in her hair, trying to shake the ashes loose. Sam squinted his eyes and blew out his nose. Jerome wiped his eyes with his sleeve. Maria licked her lips, tasting the bitter ash dusting. Tears formed in her eyes to wash themselves. Maria felt her heart steadily rise.

Then they all heard sirens and turned to the highway. A police car was speeding towards Maria’s trailer.

“Shit,” Sam mumbled, and turned to descend the hill. Lucy saw that the car was turning into Maria’s driveway. She followed him down the hill.

Jerome stood frozen. Had Sam ragged him out? He couldn’t be in trouble for the accident, he hadn’t really broken any laws. Or had he? Perhaps Sam had told the police his real name. How could he have known his last name? He’d had so many other aliases. Were the police tracking him? Did they know about the stolen cars? Did they know about the dozens of robberies? The drugs? The girl in Tucson? His mother?

“What are *they* doing here?” Maria looked to Jerome. She could see the sheer panic in his pale face. “You couldn’t possibly think you were to blame for the accident. Or the fire, the fire was my doing.”

Jerome stood, speechless, his heels aching to lift, his calves tensing.

“Come, let’s go sort this out. I’ll vouch for you. They won’t send you to jail for this.” She took Jerome’s arm and led him down the hill. This has gone too far, she thought. They picked up speed as they descended the hill.

Jerome didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t run at that point, if the cops weren’t there for him, he would be running from innocence. But what if they *were* there to arrest him? Maria pulled his arm harder and he stumbled down the hill beside her.

When the officer drove up to a disaster of a burnt trailer, he parked his car and got out to investigate. He was alone. He saw a man running towards him from behind the trailer.

“Sir, stop running!” The officer yelled. His heartbeat rose steadily. His caffeine-induced headache throbbed.

Sam slowed to a jog, and yelled back, “It’s a mistake, I made a mistake!” Sam

could see that the officer was not Steve.

“Stop running!” The officer yelled again. He saw a woman running from behind the trailer, towards him.

“I didn’t...mean...to...” Sam said, out of breath, as he approached the officer.

“I made the call,” Sam began again, “but I realize now that I was wrong, there’s nothing wrong here.”

“Well I can see a burnt trailer, so don’t tell me nothin’s wrong. What’s your name?” The officer could now see two other people coming from behind the trailer, a very large woman and a younger man.

“Sam Buck. This is Lucy.” Sam said, pointing to Lucy who was a few steps behind him.

“And who are they?” he asked, pointing to the two people approaching them.

Jerome saw the officer pointing directly at them. He became petrified. Maria kept tugging at his arm, dragging him closer.

“Maria. And Billy. I, uh, I mean his name’s Jerome.”

“Well, which one is it? Billy or Jerome?”

“Jerome. I think.” Sam said, hesitating.

“Well, since none of you are sure of your friend’s name, I’m going to have to ask for your ID’s, driver’s licenses, social security cards, whatever you’ve got.”

While Lucy and Sam were fishing out ID cards from their wallets, Maria and Jerome arrived at the police car, Maria still holding Jerome’s arm.

“He’s done nothing against the law,” Maria blurted prematurely, remembering police asking her questions like “So you’re trying to tell me this fire was an

*accident?”*

“M’am, what’s your name?”

“It was an accident.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Your name. Then we’ll talk about who did what.”

“Maria Hernandez.”

“And his?” The officer said, pointing to Jerome. Jerome looked at Maria.

“Billy.”

“Last name?”

“I’m not sure. You should ask him.” Maria said defensively.

“Can I get your ID’s?”

Sam and Lucy handed the officer their drivers licenses. Maria and Jerome stood motionless. Maria felt defiance rising up in her body.

“I won’t repeat myself to you people. I need to see some kind of ID to verify your identity. If you refuse I’ll be forced to take you both down to the department, on account of you being suspected illegal.” The officer was becoming edgy.

“I don’t have a license,” Maria said. “And the rest of my stuff, well, you can check for ID yourself. It’s in the trailer. But it might have turned to ash like most of my stuff.” She was annoyed at the officer’s impatience.

“I’m sorry. I still need to see your ID.” The officer took a closer look at Jerome. He was covered in ashes. His jeans were covered in dirt and torn, and his shoes blackened.

Jerome felt the officer’s eyes inspecting his appearance. He could feel sweat dripping down his forehead. The officer was on to him.

“I’ll give you five seconds to produce an identification or I will be forced to

arrest you,” the officer said firmly. “Five, four...”

“Come on man, just show him your license,” Sam urged. Jerome shot an angry glance at Sam. He was sure that Sam was in on it. He was trying to get him arrested as pay-back. Jerome took a few steps backwards and the officer took a few steps forward, rushing Jerome.

“Three...two...one. You’re being arrested--failure to co-operate—suspected ill--” the Officer said and reached behind his back for his handcuffs. His hands were shaking. He fumbled with the handcuffs attached to his belt as he stepped closer to Jerome.

Jerome snapped into survival mode. The officer was going to arrest him. They’d link all of his crimes. He’d be in jail for years. There would be gangs, places where he would have to pretend again to fit in, to survive. He’d be a wetback, a beaner, a Mexican criminal and the identities he had run from his whole life would be trapped in a cell with him.

He pictured his proud mother, being shoved into the back of a prisoner’s van with other men, women and children. He wondered if they gave her water before throwing her out of the country. Or if she had arrived in Nogales, lost, confused, frail, without money or protection. Did she keep her lips closed in protest? Did she resist? He could almost hear her high-pitch voice screaming in defiance. He knew that if he ever found her again, she’d blame him. She’d say he could have hidden her from the immigration sweeps. He could have gotten a job and earned enough to move her out of the neighbourhood. Out of Guadeloupe, on the right side of the American dream that had suddenly closed its borders.

He needed to hold on to his second chance. Jerome felt his calf muscles



tighten, his heart rate rise, anticipating flight. He turned and ran for his life.

The officer began running, and so did Sam.

At first, Sam felt like he was in a pack of dogs. When one began to run, the others followed instinctively. He'd seen coyotes run in packs like that, rushing their prey. The two men chased Jerome around the trailer and past the edge of the small hill. Sam gained on Jerome.

Maria and Lucy stood, shocked, watching the dust rise behind the men, covering their tracks. Maria yelled at them, pleaded for them to stop. Lucy shrieked Sam's name. Then, Lucy turned to Maria's chest.

"I can't watch," she said, and Maria wrapped her arms around Lucy. Maria's arms suddenly felt less empty.

Jerome had run like this before. He concentrated on his breathing. Kept his arms in line with his body. Adrenaline was in full force and he kept his eyes to the ground for obstacles. Don't look back. Don't look back.

Sam could see the faint outline of Jerome in front of him through the rising dust. He was still unaware of why he was running. But he knew he had to stop the officer. This was crazy. The officer misunderstood. Jerome misunderstood.

As they passed the edge of the hill, Jerome turned and hugged the side, running faster than Sam had ever seen a man run. Jerome has done nothing wrong, he thought, no more wrong than I have. As Sam ran, he saw how dust rose from their feet and clouded everyone's vision.

Jerome couldn't see where he was going. He didn't know where he was going. If there was even anywhere left to run to. Had the desert finally run out of space to hide

in?

The officer slowed down considerably, his arms and legs almost flailing trying to keep his balance while he came to a stop. He reached for his belt, fingering his handgun.

Dust rose like a smoke screen and Sam lost sight of both prey and predator. A shot pierced the sky; sound ricocheting against the hills and rocks.

Lucy buckled over with a sudden stomach cramp. Maria held Lucy's shaking body close to hers, absorbing the shock.

Sam stumbled forwards, his left leg both ice cold and fire-hot. His face smashed down into the ground, a mouth full of dirt.

In all that distance, who could recognize a man's face?<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Spicer, Jack. *Billy the Kid*. Stinson Beach, California: Enkidu Surrogate, October 1959.

### Works Consulted

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, California: Aunt Lute Books, 2007.
- Baylor, Byrd. *The Desert is Theirs*. New York, New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1975.
- Bethell, Kathleen I. "Reading Billy: memory, time and subjectivity in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*". *Studies in Canadian Literature* 28.1 (Winter 2003): pg 71.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Disinterested Killer Bill Harrigan". *Collected Fictions*. transl. Andrew Hurley. Toronto, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada, 1999.
- Brewton, Vince. "The Changing Landscape of Violence in Cormac McCarthy's Early Novels and the Border Trilogy". *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Fall, 2004), pp. 121-143. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press. March 17, 2009. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20078400>>.
- Brown, Richard Maxwell. "Western Violence: Structure, Values, Myth". *The Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No 1 (Feb., 1993), pp. 5-20. Western Historical

- Quarterly, Utah State University. March 17, 2009. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/970005>>.
- Butler, Judith. "Merely Cultural." *New Left Review* 227 (1998): 33-44.
- Calder, Jenni. *There Must Be a Lone Ranger: The American West in Film and in Reality*. New York: Taplinger, 1974.
- Cant, John. *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. New York, New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1992.
- Clark Mitchell, Lee. *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Ellis, Jay. "What Happens to Country in *Blood Meridian*". *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, Vol. 60, No 1 (2006), pp. 85-97. Rocky Mountain Language Association. March 17, 2009. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4143880>>.
- Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994.
- Folsom, James K (ed). *The Western: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1979.
- Freedman, Russel. *The Life and Death of Crazy Horse*. Toronto, Ontario: Scholastic, Inc, 1996.
- French, Philip. *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre*. New York, New York: Viking, 1973.
- Kollin, Susan. "Genre and the Geography of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the

Contemporary Western". *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 557-588. University of Wisconsin Press. March 1, 2009.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208996>.

Limerick, Patricia. *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. New York: Norton, 1987.

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage 1992.

---. *All the Pretty Horses*. New York, New York: Vintage International, 1993.

---. *Cities of the Plain*. New York, New York: Vintage International, 1999.

McClure, Michael. *The Sermons of Jean Harlow & the Curses of Billy the Kid*. San Francisco, California: Four Seasons Foundation, 1968.

McVeigh, Stephen. *The American Western*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Mullin, Robert N & Charles E. Welch, Jr. "Billy the Kid: The Making of a Hero". *Western Folklore*. Vol. 32. No. 2 (April 1973), pg 104-111. Western States Folklore Society. March 6, 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1498322>.

Nichol, BP. *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid*. Toronto, Ontario: Weed/Flower Press, 1970.

Ondaatje, Michael. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Toronto, Ontario: Vintage Canada, 2008.

Owens, Barclay. *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*. Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2000.

Phillips, Dana. "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*". *American Li*

Press. March 17, 2009. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928305>>.

Robinson, Forrest G. *Having It Both Ways: Self-Subversion in Western Popular Classics*.

Albuquerque, New Mexico: U of New Mexico P, 1993.

Roosevelt, Theodore. *The Winning of the West*. ed. Christopher Lasch. New York, New

York: Hastings House Publishers, 1963.

Sadler, Frank. "The Frontier in Jack Spicer's 'Billy the Kid.'" *Concerning Poetry* 9, No.

2 (Fall pg 15-21. Sourced in *Poetry Criticism*. Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 78. p235-368.

Detroit, MI: Thomson Gale, 2007.

Shaw, Patrick W. *The Modern American Novel of Violence*. Troy, New York: The

Whitston Publishing Company, 2000.

Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century*.

New York, New York: HarperPerennial, 1993.

---. "Nostalgia and Progress: Theodore Roosevelt's Myth of the Frontier" *American*

*Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 5, Special Issue: American Culture and the American

Frontier (Winter, 1981), pp. 608-637. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins

University Press. March 18, 2009. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712805>>.

---. "The Movie Western." *Updating the Literary West*. Ed. Christina Bold. pp. 874-881.

Fort Worth: Texas Christian UP, 1997.

Smith, Henry Nash. "Myth of the Garden and Turner's Frontier Thesis". *Virgin Land:*

*The American West as Symbol and Myth*". Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University

Press, 1970.

Spicer, Jack. *Billy the Kid*. Stinson Beach, California: Enkidu Surrogate Press, 1959.

Spinks, Lee. "Sense and Singularity: Reading Ondaatje's *The Collected Works*

*of Billy*

*the Kid*". *Canadian Literature*. Vancouver, British Columbia: Summer, 2008, Issue 197, pg. 62.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Frontier in American History*. Henry Holt and Company of New York, 1921. March 1, 2009. <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/TURNER>>.

Watson, Sheila. *The Double Hook*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart, 1989.

Will, Barbara. "The Nervous Origins of the American Western". *American Literature*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (Jun., 1998), pp. 293-316. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

March 1, 2009. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2902839>> .

Wister, Owen. *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*. 1902. New York: Signet, 1979.

White, G. Edward. *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederick Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister*". New Haven and London, Yale University Press: 1968.

"Dinosaur Tracks and Dinosaur Poop". Youtube Video. [www.bigaveTV.com](http://www.bigaveTV.com), August 21, 2008. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0W-o8lNIE>>.