

Jad Josey

Between Us, This

There were rumors he had a map of every tree in town. That, of course, was ridiculous. Liam had a map of almost every *fruit* tree in town. There were also rumors this map had been in his pocket for seven years, that the creases had begun to rip, the paper worn so thin in places it had simply started vanishing. Liam agreed the idea was romantic. It just wasn't practical. Believers of these notions would have been more astounded with the truth: There are a lot of fruit trees in town, and Liam had carefully redrawn his map dozens of times, hunched over the paper, working until his eyes grew fuzzy with wine. I asked him once if he had kept all the iterations of the map, and he stared at me for a long time before answering. "That's a damn good idea," he said, and then he shook his head and smiled as though he couldn't believe he hadn't thought of that before.

The litmus test for the map was simple: If he had to cross onto private property to get to the fruit, the tree didn't make the map.

The abundance of trees on the map was partially owed to Liam's wingspan. He was tall enough that most doorways presented a problem. He had grown accustomed to walking through indoor areas with one hand hovering loosely in front of his face to protect himself from light fixtures and door frames. "Inside," he told me once, as we stood outside the Alvarez house on Palm Street, the one with the tall Pinkerton avocado tree hanging over a white picket fence, "I bump my goddamn head all the time." He craned his neck skyward. "Out here there's nothing but space." And when he reached into the branches to grab an avocado, he reached higher than most. "I like to leave the low ones for the widow," he said.

Liam lived in a small house close to the freeway. A thick stretch of eucalyptus trees padded the sound of the cars. The trees had been planted in dense rows hundreds of years before by Spanish settlers who were foiled by a diabolical twist that made the timber unusable. The house was on a

steep hill overlooking the southbound lanes, and at night he would sit in a homemade tree swing and throw small pebbles down toward the rolling lights. The pebbles would skitter through the branches and leaves below, and the cars were safe.

One August night, we sat outside on the sagging picnic table and drank tall bottles of beer. The evening was clear and warm, and it slowly chased away the golden dusk.

“I was born in Alabama,” he said.

“When did you head out west?”

“I think I was about three years old. The little girl next door had just gotten bit on the lip by a rattlesnake. I remember playing on the plastic slide in her backyard.” He was cutting up some weed he had grown last season, ushering it into a small pile with his fingers. “I remember riding down the street with her on a piece of cardboard in the snow, but I don’t remember when she died.”

“Maybe because it didn’t mean anything to you back then. The dying, I mean.”

“Maybe,” he said. He pulled a rolling paper from the pack, then crumpled it into a loose ball. He slowly unrolled the paper, smoothing it out, tearing away a small triangle from each corner. Then he gently rolled the paper back and forth between his fingers.

“Impregnating it,” he said. “That’s what an old hippy told me once. ‘You gotta impregnate the paper before you add your weed.’ He could roll a bomber joint with one hand.” He sprinkled the weed into the immaculate crook of paper.

“What made you think about Alabama?”

He licked the edge of the paper, ran his finger along the thin layer of glue. “I was wishing there were fireflies out here,” he said. His lighter flashed several times before a flame appeared. The taillights continued to drift southward. It was the first time I’d ever pictured him somewhere other than here.

“I don’t even remember if there were fireflies out there,” he said. He took a deep drag of the joint. He exhaled, and the smoke faded into the hazy smear of the Milky Way above. “But it feels like there were. I’m pretty sure there were lightning bugs in Alabama.”

He passed me the joint. I took a pull and passed it back to him, and we repeated this ritual until the roach was too small to hold. My beer had warmed up, and I worried at the label with my fingernail, rolling the edge into a tight curl over and over again. I took long sips and watched the cars float past us. I looked up into the sky and felt smaller than I ever had before, but everything seemed okay.

There were mornings I awoke to find a small plastic basket of figs on my doorstep. Sometimes I shared them with my roommate, and other times I would sit on the porch outside and peel open a dozen figs, holding them up to the sky and splitting them at the end that pointed upward, like a drop clinging to the surface of the rising sun. Liam was fascinated by the innards

of the fig, and not for the reason most folks might expect. “Look at how efficient this thing is,” he said. “There are thousands of seeds stuffed inside. The tree knows some bird is going to gorge his tiny little heart out and spread them far and wide. Maybe hit a car with some wicked purple shit.”

I thought the insides looked like flesh, an arm torn open or a jagged cut in the thick part of the thigh. It felt like a thought that should have felt worse, but it didn't. It never stopped me from eating every single fig in the basket, even if I knew my stomach would ache like hell an hour later. There was something about eating the last fig that felt like reciprocation.

Liam always knocked on the window instead of the door. The sound of knuckles rapping on glass is much different than wood. On this particular night, he was especially animated, and the glass rattled in its pane. The sky had been black for hours. He smelled like Guinness, and his beard had small twists in it. I could tell he'd been biding his time for at least a handful of pints at the bar.

“Ready to go see it?” he asked. He'd gotten a text earlier about a Banksy piece showing up on a building in the industrial part of town. His excitement was palpable.

“Sure. Let me grab my hoodie.”

“Got any beer?” The fridge was freshly stocked, and we loaded as many bottles as we could fit into my old backpack.

I held up the tired old pack, shaking it in his direction. “Zipper's busted.”

“I'll carry it,” he said.

The cold air burned in my lungs. We drank the beer and walked more quickly than normal to warm up. “Couple more blocks,” he said. Every few blocks he said it again. I smiled, but I didn't say anything. By the time we arrived, Mars was just rising in the southeastern sky, bobbing in and out of sight behind the hills.

I heard Liam's breath catch in his throat. “Goddammit,” he whispered.

Someone had come before us armed with a can of gray paint. There were small globs of it moving slightly in the breeze, like tags of skin protruding from the wall. The paint was heavy at one side, thinner toward the other, and you could tell the guy's hands had stopped shaking as the paint can lightened. I imagined him looking at the unsolicited public art—feeling whatever it was he felt, because I couldn't figure that part out—setting the can of paint on the ground, prying off the top with a paint key—maybe a house key, the blade flexing between the lid and the lip of the can—him lifting the can and touching the edge against the wall, checking to make sure he would cover the outside edge of the piece, tilting the can so the gray paint spilled down the wall in thick rivulets, walking the edge of the can across the wall, working to save enough paint to cover the whole thing.

“The guy ruined a Banksy,” Liam said. “What kind of person does that?” He ran his fingers along the wall. There were pads of gray on his fingertips.

A couple walking up the street stopped and looked at us. I felt as though I was looking out from behind several screens, like they could barely see my face. The Banksy and the gray and Liam looking and me watching Liam look. I thought, If a car drives by, I might just disappear.

Liam fished into his breast pocket and pulled out the remainder of a joint from earlier. The flame was close to his face, the smoke wrapping its way across the darkness of his eyes. He took two long pulls and handed it to me.

“It’s probably not even a real Banksy, right?” he said. He didn’t look sure.

There was a piece of chalk in his hand, glowing like clean white bone. I laughed out loud, because I couldn’t remember him reaching into his pocket for it. The sound of my voice was loud and awkward. He didn’t seem to hear me.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said, and then he reached to the wall with the chalk and wrote carefully in his familiar hand: FUCKER.

“Because he is,” he said.

I offered him the last of the joint, and he shook his head. I pitched it onto the sidewalk. He handed me a beer, and we walked downtown without talking. The brightest of the stars hung in the sky, and I knew there were a million more tucked beyond the glow of the town, and that made me feel better.

After every winter rainstorm, I could count on finding Liam at the Shady Bean, a constantly reborn coffee shop that still offered four-dollar bring-your-own-plate dinners every Thursday. Liam didn’t drink coffee, but the baristas at the Bean were into yerba mate, and they tolerated his constant requests for hot water, which they poured into his old thermos with patience.

The place employed an exceptional number of beautiful women. Liam was almost as meticulous with their individual schedules as he was with the fruit trees. Cammy worked the morning shift on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and she loved pineapple guavas. Julia was the cold and distant bitch Monday through Friday evenings—until you got a couple shots of Jameson into her, and then she was the opposite of cold and distant. “She’s the stone-fruit girl,” Liam said, a wide smile on his face. Leann had the greenest eyes I had ever seen, dark brown hair, and an affinity for Haas avocados, and she was the one with whom Liam fell in love over and over again but particularly on the night trash dumpsters floated down Higuera Street, the rain pouring from the sky in thick sheets that made carrying an umbrella impossible, on the night the creek rose eight feet and filled backyards with silt and took away lawn furniture and a homeless man whose bloated body was found three days later near the river mouth. When the power went out around 10:30 that night, there were twelve of us inside the Shady Bean. I had just closed up shop at the liquor store across the street.

“What’d you bring?” Liam asked me a few moments after the lights went out. The music had been turned up loud against the din of the rain,

and when it cut out it left a startling void, even with the constant drumming of the storm. I could feel him close to my face, but the darkness was a kind of emptiness that pressed down on my shoulders, and I couldn't see him at all.

"We're not running out, that's for damn sure," I said.

"Julia," Liam said. "How many candles do you have here?"

We passed around bottles of dark beer, single-malt scotch, tequila, peppermint schnapps. Julia and Leann filled carafes from a percolator working endlessly on the gas stove, and we buzzed along together in a harmony of highs and lows. There was laughter and the drumming of the rain, the sound of dice on the backgammon felt, and at times the fullness of the moment made the hair on my arms stand on end.

I looked over and saw Liam hunched over at a small round table, his fingers moving across the map. Leann was in a chair right up against him, her eyes never leaving his face, even as he gestured and pointed at the map, telling her things she might not have heard over the sound of the rain. We passed around the bottles and opened new ones and shared steaming hot gulps of thick coffee. The next time I looked over toward the table they were both gone.

The candles in the Shady Bean threw strange shadows, and I spilled more weed than I normally would have. I licked my finger and ran it across the grain of the table, swiping up the dregs and redistributing them among the contents of the joint. Cammy walked over and sat down next to me, and I carefully bit off each end of the joint with my incisors and handed it to her. She placed it between her lips and leaned down, touching the tip to the edge of the candle flame that licked up toward the joint. Her eyes looked black in the candlelight, her long dark hair wrapped into a messy bun on top of her head.

"Where'd they go?" I asked.

She took a deep draw and handed it to me. "Why does it matter?" she said.

"I guess it doesn't."

"Nope." She took the joint and tapped the long ash onto the floor, stabbing her shoe at the glowing ember that landed on the stained concrete. Cammy was an artist, a painter. Several months ago, she brought me a pen-and-ink sketch of a mermaid laying at the tide's edge, naked from the waist up—as mermaids are wont to be, I suppose—a beautiful left-hand wave peeling off in the background. She was a decent surfer, but it always felt like she belonged in the warm-water tropics of Bali or Tahiti. Her body wasn't made for a five-millimeter wetsuit. She was a tequila connoisseur, and when the surf was too big for her, we'd stop off at the expensive liquor store near San Simeon and pick up a bottle of Cazadores. She would sip tequila and sketch while I surfed, and when I got out of the water she would tilt the bottle to my lips and rub my frozen hands until the feeling came back. I would have fallen in love with her, but she was adamantly against the idea.

On the back of the mermaid drawing, in her meticulously steady hand, she wrote, *It's always ourselves we find in the sea*. Sometimes after a long

night of tequila and beer and whatever else, I would read her lines of poetry from one of my anthology texts until she turned off the light. On the good nights, I would continue to recite lines from memory, the darkness blackening the lines on the page, and she would light candles and wait for me to forget the words.

“Doesn’t Leann hang out with that guy from the Tin Foil House?” I asked. We all had an idea about what happened at the house, although we didn’t talk about it much. All of the windows were covered in sheets of tin foil, the front lawn was a tangle of weeds and unkempt rosemary shrubs, and the house emanated a corporeal copper smell.

“Maybe sometimes,” she said. A miniature candle flame flickered in her glossy eyes. “I don’t think it’s anything, really.”

“I wonder if Liam would agree,” I said. The rain made a tambourine of the window glass in the Shady Bean, and I kept waiting for a jagged branch to punch through the darkness.

“You follow him around,” she said, her hand stroking the back of my neck.

“I don’t follow him.”

“You do. And I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. I’m just saying it out loud.”

I had never really thought about it before, but I suppose she was right.

He was at my house early the next morning. I could feel him in the room before I’d even opened my eyes.

“The big Haas on Marsh lost a branch last night,” he told me. “Looks like it broke right at the trunk, too.” Cammy pulled my puffy comforter up over her head.

“Good morning, Cammy,” he said to her. She limply waved a hand in the air. “I gotta figure out whether it has to come off the map,” he said.

“Can you still get to the fruit?” I asked. My head was more than fuzzy.

“Not without going into the yard.” He pulled the map from his pocket and rubbed his forehead. “I think I have to take it off—if you can’t reach the fruit from the street, it doesn’t really count.”

This was serious business. Liam had been arrested for trespassing three times in the last four years, and the local sheriffs were tired of getting the phone calls. No one wanted to lock him up—he simply didn’t belong in jail, and there’s no other way to put it—but the law was the law, and most folks didn’t want Liam walking around their yards, even if he wouldn’t dream of peeking into a window.

“Yeah,” he said. “You’re right.” I hadn’t said anything. “I just have to take it off the map, at least until we see if they can save that branch...” He stood there looking at me.

“You want me to go with you?” I asked.

He smiled. “Yeah, man.” He reached down and picked up my pants off the floor, then tossed them onto the bed. “I’d like that a lot.”

We walked to the coffee shop and grabbed a cup, then we worked our way across town toward Marsh and the old Haas tree. The gutters were

thick with water, currents eddying in the low spots of the streets, torrents of water piling into the storm drains. It was like watching time move past us.

“I thought there’d be more people here,” Liam said when we reached the house. As though he expected a crime scene.

“No, man. Just us.” The rain was starting to come down again, and I pulled my hood up. The biggest branch of the tree was split near the trunk, and the limb jutted up toward the sky just out of reach from the sidewalk.

“I wonder how she’s doing,” Liam whispered. In the distance behind him was a chunk of bright blue sky, even as the raindrops pattered on his shoulders.

“Who?”

“The old lady that lives here,” he said.

“She might not even know yet, Liam,” I said.

He stared at the limb for a few beats, then turned to me. “I seriously doubt that,” he said. He drew in a deep breath and let it out. “You bring a joint with you?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Good,” he said. “It looks like this one is coming off the map, my friend.” He put his hand over his breast pocket, the place where the map lay safe behind a layer of waterproof polyester. “Let’s get out of here. I told my dad I’d stop by sometime today.”

His father was a tall man, even taller than Liam. His name was Levi, and he had bushy white hair that perched high above his head and made him look even taller, and he spoke with a thick Durban accent. He had spent thirty-odd years working in the South African VW factory, and his hands were rough and calloused, and his knuckles reminded me of bulb kelp. “I started with a broom,” his father had told me the first time we met, “and ended with a padded steering wheel.” There was a quiet pride in his voice. He was a kind man, but he didn’t speak much, and I could tell he expected the same from me.

The rain had stopped, and a dramatic blue sky had found its way through the clouds as we turned up the long drive. Liam’s father was outside on a ladder tending to the gutters, and he raised a hand as we pulled up. “Go sit down inside, boys,” he said. “I’ll make some tea.” I followed Liam in and wiped my shoes on the thick bristle mud-catcher outside the kitchen. A short time later, Liam’s father walked into the living room and set down two steaming cups of tea, then he disappeared into the hallway. I picked up the mug and looked at the Matisse hanging on the wall across from me. When he returned, there was a pistol in his hand. He set it down on the coffee table. Liam looked up from his map and stared at the gun.

“What the hell do you want us to do with that, Pop?”

Liam’s family owned twenty-five acres of land butted up against the south side of the valley, a jagged depression running west to the sea. There was rich black soil in the foothills that rolled into a steep rocky stretch of dense, windblown oaks. The most valuable asset on the land was not the

herd of goats, the pole beans poking through the steaming earth in March, the four Jerseys that milked in the barn, the well-used tractors or the almost-new ATV. It was the chanterelle mushrooms that pushed their way through the acid-rich soil beneath the shady old oaks. Those chanterelles were worth a small fortune.

“What do you expect me to tell you?”

“Pop, I’m not taking the gun up there. You know that.”

His father shuffled over and leaned down to pick up the pistol. He started to put it in his waistband, but it was awkward, and it made me nervous. Then he stopped and looked at me.

“Here,” he said, and he shook the gun at me, holding it by its black barrel. I grabbed it and looked to see that the safety was on, then I shoved it into my backpack. Liam looked at me, but he didn’t protest further.

“Those poachers aren’t even cutting them. They’re just pulling them out of the ground, and it pisses me off.” Levi walked to the kitchen counter and grabbed a half-full French press of tea, poured it into a tall mug, and raised the steaming cup to his face. He breathed deeply. “Check the bees while you’re up there,” he said.

We walked with the sun beaming on our faces, the ground steaming and wet and dark beneath our feet. Soon enough we were deep beneath the shade and the cool of the oaks, the sound of water running underground.

The chanterelles seemed to grow under every oak, thick swatches of pale and fleshy orange pushing up through the dark humus. The further we climbed up the thin trail that switch-backed its way up the foothills of the range, the more chanterelles we saw. Long tendrils of poison oak spun up every vertical limb, and I pulled down the long sleeves of my shirt to cover my wrists. Wet leaves stuck to our shoes, and I chucked my heel against every thick root I saw to loose them. We reached the first highland. Here the ground was turned and dug out carelessly, a thick ring of unsettled earth around the base of each tree. There were cigarette butts pressed into the mud, airplane bottles of cheap liquor scattered about.

“Goddamn poachers,” Liam said. “They just don’t understand the sacred mushroom at all.” He knelt down and ran his hands over the wet leaves, then looked up at me. “Give me the gun,” he said.

I shrugged the pack off one arm and swung it around in front of me. A red-tailed hawk cried somewhere high above us, and I handed the gun to Liam. He stood up and pointed the gun into the wet earth and squeezed the trigger. The roar was louder than I could have imagined in this quiet place, and my ears suddenly felt like they’d been stuffed full of cotton, my blood bounding loudly inside my head. He fired off three more shots.

“The empty shells should make them think twice the next time they come up here,” he said. The air was acrid and thick, and he handed the gun back to me. “Remind me to tell my dad it needs to be reloaded.”

We walked back in silence. Liam’s head swung side to side, constantly surveying the surroundings. He would squat next to a tall shoot of hummingbird sage, let his hand wander over the sticky buds, raise his fingers to his nose, and breathe in the scent. He rubbed lamb’s ear between

his thumb and forefinger, plucked new growth from the stinging nettle and raised it to his mouth. The poison oak he treated with reverence—palms down, he let his hands hover just above the glistening leaves, tracing small circles in the air like an invisible Ouija board. I wondered what that plant might have been trying to say to him.

I met him at the Bean early the next morning. He wanted to go check out a cherimoya growing near the creek-side wall of the Tin Foil House.

The girls hadn't even unlocked the door yet, and Liam lightly tapped on the glass with his ring. Cammy appeared with her big brown eyes.

"Good morning, boys," she said. "Coffee's on. The mate is just about ready." She let her thin fingers run past my leg as we entered. The lights were dimmed almost to blackness, and the air was wet with steam.

"Where's Leann?" Liam asked.

"I thought she was with you," Cammy said, her hands falling idle.

"No," he said. "She said she was heading over to your house."

"I figured she just ended up staying at your place," she said.

"She's supposed to be here, though, right?"

Cammy was already fishing through her purse. She found her cell phone and began tapping the screen with her long fingers. "Yeah," she said. "This isn't like her at all."

"If you see her, tell her I came by," Liam said.

I reached out and touched Cammy's wrist, and she gave me a wan smile. Her face looked ghostly in the pale glow of her phone.

We crossed the bridge over the creek and hopped a short fence. There was a thin and well-worn trail that ran along the bank of the creek, just outside the fence line of the houses that lined the edge.

Liam stopped at each new fence, peering into the backyard. "We should be getting close to the backyard," he said. "It's a good thing cherimoyas don't need much attention."

I'd never thought about the Tin Foil House having a backyard, nothing beyond the torn siding and overflowing trash bins that dominated the front.

"Here it is," he said. "Goddamn, it's beautiful. Look at that split trunk." The leaves were pale and wrinkled, and it probably stood ten-foot high. The backyard was littered with scores of black trash bags dropped in piles. There were white five-gallon buckets everywhere, most filled to overflowing with dank rainwater. A large German shepherd lay in front of the sliding door, and my stomach lurched a bit with adrenaline. My fear of dogs was sometimes crippling, and I thought about ducking my head below the fence before he could see me. His eyes remained closed.

A thin hand split the sliding door curtain, and Liam stiffened beside me. "Oh, fuck," he said. She slid open the door, standing naked and beautiful with dark black half-circles beneath her eyes.

"Raimy," she said. The dog raised its head and staggered to its feet. "Old hips," she said. "Come on, boy."

BETWEEN US, THIS

I watched Liam's eyes as she shut the door, and then he pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Do you believe in fate?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Me neither." He bent down and touched his toes, then stood up and stretched his arms up toward the sky. "Give me a boost," he said. "I'm not going home without some of that fruit." I laced my fingers together, and he stepped into my hands. The soles of his shoes were muddy. He disappeared over the fence, and I wiped my hands against the wood. Then I turned and squatted and watched the water flow by in the creek.

When he appeared again, his arms were laden with cherimoyas. "I should've brought a bag," he said. "I had no idea this thing would have so much fruit."

"We should go," I said.

He turned and started walking back toward the house. "I'll meet you around the front," he said. I thought about trying to change his mind, but I chose to remain silent.

I walked along the path back toward the footbridge, my legs moving through the tall blades of grass wet with dew. I watched for small black circles on the tips of each blade. I've had one tick in my life—I discovered him buried deep in the flesh behind my left knee. When I first tried to pull him out with my fingers, he wriggled his way deeper into the crease of my skin, his ass shiny and fat with my blood. Liam had heated the tip of a needle with his lighter, then touched it to the backside of the tick. The thing squirmed its way out of the angry hole in my leg, and Liam grabbed it and dropped it into a glass of water. So I watched each blade of grass and checked for black dots hitchhiking on my clothing.

I rounded the corner toward the Tin Foil House, and I heard Liam's voice. I couldn't make out what he was saying, but it was loud. There was a loud bang, and then he came into view. He had a cherimoya in his right hand, shaking it back and forth, and then he cocked it back and threw it against the side of the house, where it exploded in a mess of pale green pulp and black seeds.

"No more figs for you," he shouted. Another cherimoya christened the side of the house. "No pineapple guavas, no lemons." His voice was reaching a kind of crescendo. The screen door banged open, and a lanky man with greasy hair appeared. He was shirtless, and his face was pitted and ruddy. I recognized him from town. He was older, but not much older. Liam might say he was one television series removed from us.

"You better get off my property, son," the man said.

The next cherimoya ricocheted off the corner of the house and sprayed wet chunks across the screen door. The snout of the German shepherd appeared, and a low growl rattled from his throat.

"Easy, boy," the man said.

"Fuck you," said Liam.

"I was talking to my dog."

Liam looked down at his cache of fruit. There was a moment where things almost broke the right way. "Fuck you anyway," Liam said.

The man nudged the dog with his leg, and in a streak of dark brown and black the animal was across the porch and latched onto Liam's left arm, and they tumbled to the ground. The world became primal. There was blood and dirt, and I could almost feel us spinning our way around the sun. Someone was screaming, and I was relieved when I realized it wasn't me. Leann stood on the porch with her arms wrapped around her body, hands grabbing her shoulders. She was naked beneath a stained T-shirt that wasn't hers, and it was hard not to think of how beautiful she was. She was saying Liam's name over and over, until the word stopped making sense.

Liam had his arm around the dog's neck, his other wrist buried deep in the animal's mouth. The dog kept readjusting his jaw, improving his grasp on Liam's arm. Liam dug his heels into the dirt and arched his long back, a dull howl breaking his lips. There was a tension like a bowstring, a dried-leaf crack, and then everything became slack. Liam's head fell back onto the dirt, his mouth open to the sky, his breath ragged. The dog lay across his chest, Liam's wrist still hanging in its jaw.

"You killed him," the man on the porch said. "You killed Raimey, you son of a bitch."

Liam slid the dog's body onto the ground and stood up. His wrist was black with blood and dirt. He looked at Leann. He looked at her like the man on the porch wasn't even there. Her cheeks were dark with thin rivulets of mascara.

"You son of a bitch," the man said again. He stepped down off the porch and started toward Liam.

"Don't," I said. The man stopped. He looked at me, and then he started toward Liam again. "Don't do it," I said again, and I shrugged my backpack off one shoulder. "I've got a gun in here."

"The hell you do," the man said.

"Goddammit, man," Liam said, turning toward me. "You didn't give that back to my dad?" The man looked back and forth between the two of us. "I'm serious," Liam said. "You really didn't give it back to my dad?"

I shook my head. My mouth felt like the time Liam had bet me five dollars I couldn't eat six Saltines in a minute without taking a sip of water.

The man stared at me. Then he held up his hands, palms facing me, fingers splayed. "I'm gonna get my dog," he said.

"Then get him."

Leann winced as the man hoisted the animal into his arms. His arms were thin and sinewy, and there were dark pockmarks wending up his forearms. The dog's head hung down at a sickening angle, and I knew it was a geometry that would appear behind my eyes for many years.

The man started toward the house, then turned back to look at me. "If you don't have a gun in that pack," he said, "you better think about getting one." Leann was staring at Liam, and he was returning her gaze, holding his wounded arm close to his body.

"This one won't make the map," Liam said. It felt like he was talking to both of us, even though his gaze never left Leann. "The fruit isn't close enough to the fence anyway."

She nodded, and the man pushed past her with the dog.

“Don’t worry about your clothes,” Liam said. He motioned with his head toward town. “Come home with us.” She nodded again and stepped off the porch. Her green eyes were glassy and bright.

I unzipped my pack and pulled out a wrinkled long-sleeve T-shirt and handed it to her. “Put this around your waist,” I said.

We walked back to my house in silence, and I fought the urge to look over my shoulder. The two of them moved ahead of me, and Leann reached over and took Liam’s hand, and they walked like that for a while. I listened for fast-approaching footsteps and studied the throw of shadows. I marveled at how the wind moved through the treetops but didn’t disturb our course at all.

Leann sat in the middle of the bench seat in Liam’s old truck, one leg straddled on each side of the gearshift lever. We drove toward the coast cloaked in a silence that should have been easy. When the cab started smelling like blood, I rolled down the window, but I did it carefully and as quietly as I could, as though there was an equilibrium I was terrified to upturn.

The day had grown up around us, and the sun was shining through a tall bank of fog. We turned into the dirt parking lot, and then we sat there while the dust settled around us.

“There should be some serious upwelling after that last storm,” Liam finally said. “The pelvetiopsis should be going off right now.”

The sand was in ruins on the beach. The small half-moon bay had been pummeled by big tides and huge waves, and there were logs strewn about the steep incline of sand. Huge clumps of dead seaweed lay rotting in piles, swarms of flies marking the decay. Liam stripped off his clothes and dove into the ocean, trailing a thick burlap bag from his ankle. It was hard not to think about the big fish in there, the great whites trolling the coastline with ampullae tuned to some frequency I would never understand.

Liam swam with powerful strokes toward a jagged outcropping of rocks. The swells stacked on the horizon like now after now after now, and Liam swam through this convergence like a lance piercing the horizon. He reached the rocks and clambered atop them, freeing the bag from his ankle and slinging it over his shoulder. He knelt down and reached into a thick crease in the rocks, a dark place not visible from the shore. His hands came back thick and ropy, fists full of dark brown strands of pelvetiopsis. He stood up tall, shaking his arms at the sky, his naked figure small against the endless backdrop of the sea. His clothes lay folded next to me in the sand. I knew the map was somewhere in a pocket, and I glanced at the garments. I imagined a rogue wave climbing its way up the steep shoreline, thick swath of tallow-shaded foam leading the assault, clearing the way for the dark ocean to swallow us with indifference. I pictured the paper softening in the cold water, the lines bleeding into a hasty smear and then into nothing, the

white pulp floating for an instant before sinking below the surface. I slid his pile of clothing closer to me.

Liam was stuffing the seaweed into his sack, bending again and again to rend thick ropes of pelvetiopsis from the sea.

“He calls them sea vegetables,” Leann said. “He’ll get mad if you call them seaweed.”

“I know,” I said. “It’s hard to remember.”

She rested her chin in the palm of her hand. “It’s not hard if you think about it,” she said.

I hummed a Wilco song, and soon Leann was humming along. We sat there in the dim sunlight of the day, lips itchy with vibration, and we made sound together as Liam dove into the ocean and began to swim shoreward. He dipped below the rise of the swells, and for many moments he was simply gone. I wrapped my arm around Leann’s shoulder and pulled her close. When he reappeared against the dark space of the sea, I held her more tightly. I promised myself not to let go until his feet touched the shore. Pelicans flew in tight formation against the ambiguous skyline. I steadied myself by counting them, and counting them again. They dipped and swayed and found their equilibrium once more, and then they silhouetted themselves perfectly against the muted sun.