STRANGE AS ANGELS:
A Tale of Mood and Music

BY M. HENDERSON ELLIS

STRANGE AS ANGELS

A Tale of Mood and Music

By M. Henderson Ellis

Wordpill Press

By M. Henderson Ellis

Cover Photograph by Russ Martin

But don't forget the songs that made you cry, and the songs that saved your life.

—"Rubber Ring," The Smiths

SIXTEEN BLUE—Sara, my first girlfriend, only initiated physical contact with me during slasher movies. In a spasm of terror she would grasp my shoulder across the arm rest, leaning in, smelling of patchouli. On the screen youth fell before our eyes, cut down by a faceless or masked killer for the crime of being promiscuous, stoned, or just careless. Counselors at summer camp, babysitters in somnolent Midwestern homes like our own were stalked and gored, mutilated or disemboweled in ways that bordered on satire. Adolescents on the brink of adulthood fled faceless terror, repelled it with whatever impromptu weapons they had at their disposal.

In the balcony, the ceiling lights of the Varsity theater glowed indifferently throughout the film, approximating the stars in sky. I too was affected by the butchery—mirroring a victim's deflective raised hand, or gripping myself in the spot of the spouting wound, as if I could stop the blood-letting on the screen. Unwittingly, I had formed a relationship with the dim-witted characters, identified with the hunted.

Sara covered her eyes, and was routinely driven from her seat. Her squeamishness, particularly at the sight of blood, surprised me. She, after all, cultivated a vampiric image: long black skirts, scarlet red lipstick, blanching face powder. Some would call her a Goth, though that wasn't really a trend yet. In the lobby I would calm her, we

would go record shopping at Vintage Vinyl or eat at a vegetarian restaurant she liked. She would make me promise not to take her to any more horror films. But we both knew it was a lie, that we would find our way back to the balcony on a future date, thrilling to the irresistible images of teenage slaughter.

"Don't kiss me so hard," Sara said. I had walked her to her door and, in my novice's estimation, barely grazed her lips.

"What?" I said, hurt. Really, it was not so much a kiss as a pucker in her vicinity.

"I don't like it. I don't like to be kissed that way."

"It's okay," I said, composing myself. "I'm straight edge anyway."

"What does that mean?" she asked, pulling back.

"I don't drink or do drugs. Or have sex. You know, like Morrissey."

"You never told me that before."

"It never came up. It's a whole movement, and kind of punk. I'll play you some Minor Threat sometime."

Sara looked quizzically into my eyes. She appeared to be reappraising me. Then, without warning, she leaned in and kissed me again. I pulled away. "No, really. I have to go," I said, turning towards my car. In truth, I had decided to become straight edge the moment before I announced it to her. There was more dignity in bragging about your celibacy than in being a virgin, and cooler to call yourself straight edge when you just don't have any friends to get drunk with. It was my only shining moment of cunning with Sara. It didn't take her long to turn the tables on me.

"Will you be my boyfriend?" she asked as I was driving her home after another date.

"I thought I was."

"I just want you to *say* it."

"Okay."

"Will you never break your promises to me?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Never."

"That's what Francis says."

"Who's Francis?"

"My kind-of boyfriend in Chicago."

"You have another boyfriend?"

"Yeah. *Francis*."

I considered this for a moment.

"So I can date other people too?" I asked.

"No. You're *my* boyfriend."

"But you date other people."

"You promised. You just *said* so. You said you'd never break a promise, and now you want to. God, you're just like my father." Sara started to cry. I pulled the car over and held her. I assured her I was not like her father. Knowing what a back-sliding father was like, I actually meant it. "I keep my promises," I whispered into her ear.

Francis lived in the city. I once met him at a party—he wore an Oxford with the sleeves ripped off and had a mohawk that somehow managed not to look confrontational. Francis was effortlessly cool. I was so impressed that I took to wearing eye-liner in imitation of his style. During the trip to Walgreen's I padded the basket with all sorts of useless items to buffer the impact of the eyeliner, as though I were buying condoms. Later, after some probing, I learned Francis's eyes were naturally accentuated without the aid of makeup. I kept hold of the eyeliner anyway, appreciating the devastating effect it had on my mother.

In my family at that time I was the only one with the last name Henderson, the rest were Ellis's. I was the middle child; my younger brother, Parker, was my stepfather's, so he came to the name naturally. But my older brother had recently been adopted by my stepfather, leaving me as the sole bearer of our namesake. My mother imparted this information casually, "Your brother has been adopted. You may do so too if you choose." All this planning and legal wrangling had gone on behind the scenes, away from my notice. Now, my brother entered into this new family as blithely as if he were accepting a particularly good offer from a gym. He was given a silver Tiffany's belt buckle with his new initials engraved into it, which he wore everywhere, as if to remind himself of his new identity. It made the schism between us literal; Mish had never liked to acknowledge me as his blood. Why had he been issued this invitation and not me? My mother had explained that because he was going away to boarding school, and starting over he was assuming the name before the final adoption papers came through.

What would my father say about the new name of his oldest son, if anything at all? My parents were both children of engineers, both English majors, for them it was enough to base a marriage on. Conceived during the Summer of Love, I was born in the winter of 'Did I say Love…What I Meant Was...' and two years later he left the family during the Spring of To Hell With All of You. My father, a nascent hippie, had been too inhibited to grow his hair long or drag us off to a commune, sated his restlessness and appetite for rebellion in private drug use. He left his wife and two children to build a log cabin in the woods and live there alone. Even at this modest exercise in misanthropy he failed, breaking his leg after falling from the roof. It wasn't solitude he longed for after all, but escape. From us. I could understand, even sympathize, for I too had been planning my escape from my family. We were a needy bunch: my obnoxious brother, my mother—who could not be attended to enough—and me, withdrawn to the point of catatonia. Instead of patriarch to this forlorn brood he ended up as a school administrator and Quaker. He remarried quickly and started a new family. As a child, lying in bed at night, I conjured his image before I went to sleep, recreating the ritual we practiced on my yearly visits. At his house he would come into my room to tuck me in; it should have been a comforting ceremony, but silhouetted in a frame of light from the open bedroom door he looked like werewolf, with his overgrown hair and untrimmed beard, rubbing the bristles against my face. It hurt, but I longed for the sensation and could not get to sleep if he did not say goodnight with beer on his breath and his strange, violent affection. Without him, only the feeling of foreboding was there to put me to sleep. At the time of my brother's adoption I had not heard from him in years.

I opted out of family excursions that summer. As the sole Henderson, I felt it was my right. While the rest of the family were watching the fireworks over the lake, I was drowning out the explosions with Joy Division and The Replacements on my step-father's stereo. Those speakers that accommodated Philip Glass so well, that broadcast *Einstein on the Beach* through the ceiling into my room when I was trying to sleep, now became agents of punk rock subversion. The entire neighborhood would be out by the lake, and it was the one occasion I could play the music as loud as I wanted to. I toured the house, now suffused with my music. It was big, a typically Midwestern prairie-style house that you can see all across Chicago and the suburbs. Carefully decorated by my mother with family heirlooms, the rooms reflected her restlessness—chairs that had been moved from room to room which she had reupholstered several times, unable to get a position or pattern that fully satisfied her.

But there was something almost imperceptible that made our house different from my friends' homes. Something that you only noticed when you went to other families' houses, when you saw the little shrines of photographs depicting graduations, birthdays, gatherings. Our hallways were bare of such family photographs, our piano top unadorned of anything but an unused metronome. It was only after everybody had left for school that the archive of photographs, small enough to fit in a shoebox, would be scavenged for representative periods of our lives, framed and displayed. So, a year later, when the offer came from my mother to go away to school I accepted. You entered this family by leaving it.

On warm nights, during that summer when there seemed to be a permanently threatening thunderstorm coming in over the lake, I would drive across town to Sara's house. She lived with her mother in a small section of Wilmette where the streets were optimistically named after Ivy League schools and other prestigious colleges. Sara lived on Cambridge Street. In a single-story house, so I was able to sneak around back and talk with her with only her window screen to separate us. On one occasion I caught her right as she had come out of the shower. Without makeup, unadorned of her smart collar-shirts, Salvation Army blazers, and long black skirts, in nothing but a peach-colored towel, she seemed vulnerable in a way I had not before encountered. My image of her as a tragic, cosmopolitan vamp was briefly shattered. It was during those unguarded moments that I liked her most. She dried her hair as we talked about Francis (we spent a tortuous amount of time talking about Francis) and his troubles, which preoccupied Sara. Francis was precociously bisexual—one more reason to hold him in total awe. I had barely enough wherewithal to handle one person of the opposite sex; Francis had already tired of this simple dynamic and had moved on to greater and more daring scenarios. I should have realized that Francis's bisexuality was almost certainly wishful thinking on her part—that their relationship was as much a charade as my straight edge—and that as a boyfriend he posed no real threat. Still, I knew that if it came down to Francis or me, in her heart Francis would win every time.

Our dates outside her window never lasted long. Sara didn't want her mother to wake and always persuaded me to leave after a brief interlude. Afterwards I would drive around the North Shore, up and down Sheridan road, past the lakeside mansions, listening to WXRT, waiting for them to play Elvis Costello or The Jam. Kids crossed the road on

their way to or from beach parties, joggers beat the heat by running at night, and off in the distance the extraterrestrial orange sodium street lamps of Chicago blazed as if the city were smoldering after a fire.

Noxious and invisible feelings were beginning to exert their influence on me. Everything in my suburban neighborhood seemed fraught with dread. As I passed houses I imagined a slasher movie killer moving through the rooms, leaving mutilation and blood-splattered walls in his wake. I willed the suburban calm to be broken the way my well-being was being broken. Sara's arrival in my life only made that dread feel slightly romantic. In my grandmother's huge silver Buick Regal, with its crushed velvet interior, chewed-up gum in the ashtray, I broke down crying, hitting the steering wheel with my fists as I drove. The act of driving itself was a relief. It felt like my natural state, driving to music, crying. I sped recklessly through the ravines that wound down by the lake in irresistible curves, pushing the heavy Buick around the hairpin turns leaving black rubber marks, listening to music and mistaking the poisonous emotion for the natural phenomenon of growing up.

I broached the subject with Sara once that summer, sitting on a lifeguard chair, watching Lake Michigan swell in the warm summer rain.

"Don't you feel it?"

"What?"

"I don't know, the *pressure*," I said, appropriating the title of the David Bowie/Queen song to express myself. I had thought the feelings were universal, like a barometric change, but the look on Sara's face told me I was wrong. Sara was, unaccountably, one of the happiest people I knew.

The more pronounced my loneliness became, the more I depended on my records to get me through. Music was becoming something other than a pastime. Instead of just listening to music I began to *use* music. Like "Pressure," I gravitated towards lyrics that articulated my condition, and in a way, emolliated it. Songs that seemed to overflow their boundaries and into the self, displacing the very grief they lovingly described.

The music that attracted me was only a genre thematically, and codified in retrospect. This was music that rejected Woodstock's idealism and personalized the Sex Pistols' nihilism—put punk on the couch, and can be framed most conveniently between two suicides, those of Ian Curtis and Kurt Cobain, between the 'no future' of punk and pharmaceutical promise of Prozac. It was Ian Curtis of Joy Division, not Johnny Rotten, who turned towards 'No Future' and hung himself, proving the slogan was sturdy enough to support his body and many to follow; Cobain who sang about Lithium, lighting his candles in a daze like Laura from *The Glass Menagerie*—imminently breakable—a shotgun blast to the head punctuating the end of an era of underground music that was mistaken for the beginning of a pop revolution. The bands that existed in the space between: The Smiths, the Cure, bauhaus, Tears for Fears, Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds, Galaxy 500, Hüsker Dü, and many others, intentionally or not, addressed depression in a language comprehensible to those not familiar with the jargon of disease. "I must fight this sickness/ find a cure," Robert Smith sang in 1982; "Interesting drug/the one that helped," sang Morrissey in 1990, the year Prozac began to become a mainstream phenomenon.

SIX FOR MY SORROW—I had spent most of my childhood in Evanston and on weekends could be found there with the friends I had made before moving up the lake to a tonier suburb and a different school district. I had never really made the adjustment and had few friends at New Trier, a place that, in those Reaganite years, was strikingly conservative and homogenous compared to the surrounding schools. I should have had friends; like my brother, I ran cross country and track. He had easily found a social circle in the other runners. But the kids in my grade were all popular, college-minded students who tracked their class rank like a hyped stock. When they congealed into a clique, I do not know. Sometime when I wasn't looking they wordlessly bonded, cemented to one another in a way that mystified me. At first I made a few tentative advances to join them, but was teased so mercilessly that I quickly gave up. I ran with them, as well or better than most—my efforts on the course were always appreciated but I was disallowed from sitting with them at lunch, from joining the tight clique they formed. In the hallways of the enormous school, with over four thousand students, I drifted. Everything there seemed impenetrable and closed off.

Even loners congregate together in high school, and a shared taste in music was as good a social adhesive as anything. I'd started going to shows at the Cabaret Metro in Chicago during the spring before boarding school. I tagged along to see Black Flag with Bernie, another New Trier kid who also listened to punk, and would be the only friend I'd make at that school. During the sets he would watch me slam dance from outside the pit, rallying me in between songs as though I were a boxer he was training. I needed to react to the music, but Bernie would absorb all the aggression of punk stoically, like an

aesthete. Bernie didn't like new wave, it was too commercial for him. He had an extensive collection of records by bands that mostly were known by acronyms: JFA, MDC, T.S.O.L., GBH, and SNFU. He was older than me and acted as a mentor in my musical initiation. Bernie liked L.A. punk—bands like Black Flag, the Germs, Circle Jerks, and Fear. He would lend me records in parcels of twenty so I could get as quick and comprehensive an education as possible. Once, I drew a mohawked skull on my arm with what I thought was a peace sign on its cranium.

"What's that?" Bernie asked.

"It's a peace sign," I replied.

"No it's not. That's a Mercedes logo." I looked at it again. He was right, I had left out the final bar. I was mortified.

"Don't worry," he said, laughing. "You've just summed up the dilemma of suburban punks everywhere."

After dinner he would pick me up in his Chevy Nova and we'd drive around the North Shore late at night talking. I was never sure about his motivations for this overture—he had friends, he had his *own scene*. But the more we drove the more I sensed that Bernie was looking for somebody to listen to him. There was something he wanted to unburden himself of, and I was the designated audience. Only later would I recognize that all that driving, all the idle chatter over the weeks was in preparation for a conversation that at the time seemed fleeting. The weather was warm enough that we could crack the windows, and Bernie blew smoke from the Lucky Strikes he smoked compulsively. Gordon Gano's singing whined from the tape deck, an angry background chorus to Bernie's voice. "You know this weird thing happened," Bernie said. "I was

down at the beach last summer and I had sex with this girl Kathy. Really stupid drunken sex. You know Kathy? Yeah, her. Well we fell asleep on the sand and the next morning I wake up with her next to me and she's crying and I ask her what's wrong and then she tells me I raped her. She used that word, rape. I don't know, it was kind of rough sex maybe. But is that rape? Actually I don't really remember much. I mean she was as drunk as I was. But it wasn't rape, I swear to god." Bernie wasn't looking at me, didn't glance over to my side of the seat as he spoke. And I wasn't sure if he was trying to convince himself or just me. Bernie had elected me to preside over this confidence, this confession. Or to witness it as he told it to himself. Perhaps it was because I didn't hang out with his friends, perhaps because he intuitively knew I wasn't going to abandon him because he was now a categorical though un-prosecuted criminal. Maybe he sensed I wasn't going to reproach him or desert him, that I would be available *on future occasions* to drive around the cobblestone streets of the North Shore with him, my friend Bernie, the rapist. And I did not denounce him. I agreed with him that it wasn't rape, though we both knew it was. I felt no guilt about my complicity, or ever anger at Bernie. I needed a friend that badly. We drove to Evanston and used his keys to pillage the Baskin Robbins in Evanston he managed. We ate our sundaes then continued to drive aimlessly.

Songs have lives that reside within the listener. Some are like bottle rockets, reaching great heights then fizzling to the ground; others never seem to fade away, or do, only to return with new layers of meaning over time, what the listener brings to the song transforming it into something entirely different. A song like Depeche Mode's "Blasphemous Rumours," so urgent in 1984, now just sounds pedantic and a bit silly,

while "Alison" by Elvis Costello still resonates with some inexhaustible, mysterious truth. Even rarer is the music that you outgrow, yet that continues to endure as something other than nostalgia. As a teenager there were few albums more relevant to me than the Violent Femmes' eponymous first album. The Violent Femmes came from Milwaukee, a mere hour north from Chicago, but *The Violent Femmes* might well have summed up the experiences of every high school reject in the country, served as *Cliff Notes* to uncountable diaries of teenage angst.

From the first chord, the Femmes sound like the kids from the school band who had taken too much shit and had finally gone AWOL on Little Kings and pot. The listener is immediately confronted with singer Gordon Gano's strange, unmanageable fetishes and private humiliations. Each emotional laceration cauterized then ripped open all over again. The response can only be: so what? You've been hurt and rejected? Line forms to the left. You're lonely and horny, is that really such a revelation? Well, at sixteen when, via the mortification of puberty, you are suddenly aware that you are utterly alone in the world, and in dire need of a fence post to run up against, the last thing you want to do is *talk about it.* Let that zit-faced Gano kid talk about it, he's got nothing to lose anyway, just look at him. We can just look the other way and pretend it's not us he's speaking for.

In every grade there was always one kid who was so outcast, so isolated, be it because he was fat or effete, a boy so untouchable that there is an aura of difference about him that is impassable. At New Trier there was one boy, Jay, who was so picked upon that it was just taken for granted that he had accepted his station in life. Even lumpen rejects—the misfits, the fey, the rebels—hated Jay, because in him we saw our own worst

fate. We never defended him because his purpose was to deflect abuse from us. Then, one day, he packed a knife and the next time somebody made a move on him he whipped it out and cornered his tormentor. This made him no more accepted, but he was treated with deference now that he wore his thorns on the outside. Okay, *it was a butter knife*, but he made his point anyway. Maybe if he had a better model, or if we lived in a hunting community, he would have brought in a gun. And I would not have blamed him for the blood he let, even if it were my own. The year after I graduated high school, his promise of retribution would be fulfilled in the doomed figure of Laurie Dann, whose shooting spree through a North Shore elementary school killed one second grader and wounded five more. I listened to the live commentary on the radio with my mother, and as the anchor ticked off the streets Dann proceeded down my eyes unconsciously scanned the yard for the berserking girl, the former New Trier and Northwestern pupil who had returned to our neighborhood to steal the lives of innocents, to negate the promise of protection that affluence affords, and settle whatever scores she imagined were outstanding.

Gano, analogously, sings the songs of the pariah. When most teenagers were busily hiding away their feelings, out of view from those who would exploit them, Gano's vocalized exile made him sound like the reject's reject, as if the singer in Joe Jackson's "Is She Really Going Out With Him" came out and said what was *really* on his mind. It goes without saying that rather than a knife, Gano pulled a guitar, driving the world into a corner, weapon flashing.

"The day is in my sight/ When I take a bow, and say goodnight." *Femmes* practically invites the listener to get into a pissing contest of rejection with them. *Oh, you*

thought you were lonely in high school? Try getting drunk alone in your room, looking down your jockeys at the sorry new tufts of hair; then, in a moment of supreme drunken insight, decide you don't want to enter the world of men and all the grotesque deeds they do, and design to reverse the process by grabbing your razor and shaving yourself down to a bare, infantalized sheen. You go to sleep thinking you now have, if nothing else, taken a stand, made a gesture against nature. As much as you want to forget this incident you are reminded by the terrible itch that will make you uncomfortable, and covertly scratching yourself through your front pockets well into the next few days. Just one in a long procession of humiliations to bum rush you during what English teachers generously call your 'coming of age.' The Femmes affirmed that these moments of dour and shameful mortification, these wet dreams and unbidden erections, were as much a proof of your humanity as any other form personal expression, that self-loathing, at the very least, acknowledges self, riding your stained sheet off to the Land of Nod.

"They'll hurt me bad but I don't mind/ they'll hurt me bad, they do it all the time." Those lines seem to cut to the core of the album: a timeless reply to the world by a misunderstood boy. The Femmes music suggested that youth is a pitiable condition, that it is meant to by wasted and squandered, that youth is good only for inciting envy in adults. The Gordon Ganos in high school never made the grade, or the team. The Ganos never got the girl. And if by chance they did, they were better off without her. You take one look at him and see it. One great thing about the Femmes, you could like them without ever having to *want to be them*. It is a rare thing: rock without the hero worship. The raw emotion and honesty of this album made it the *Catcher in the Rye* of punk rock, if Holden Caulfield had endured endless hours of Space Invaders and Puddin' Pops.

Gano was that snotty about it. He sounds like a suburban nephew to Johnny Cash, or a punkier Buddy Holly. His lo-fi, unibrow angst would be endlessly copied, quoted, but never replicated. It is the perfect album to drive around to, especially if you are an unpopular teenage boy, or if you just want to know what it feels like to be one. You can almost hear Gano's voice about to *crack* on "Blister in the Sun." There is not a dud on the album, unless you count "Confessions," which is more of a pause, a lull before the string of bilious invectives: "Prove My Love," "Promise," "To the Kill," and "Gone Daddy Gone" (the most effective use of a xylophone in a rock song ever—there is not an ounce of irony in that xylophone), and finally "Good Feeling," a song about happiness that is unaccountably the saddest track on the album.

Femmes has a distinctly boyish musk lingering about it. I imagine the Femmes' first album was to a teenage boy in the 1980s what Liz Phair's *Exile in Guyville* was to teenage girls in the early 90s. More than *Exile On Main Street* I consider *Violent Femmes* be the counterpart to *Exile in Guyville*. There is a kinship, a certain suburban restlessness that bind these albums: the feeling that the person singing the songs was not a rock star but the person in the apartment next door that you never really go to know, the quiet girl in class who was waiting to blossom or the introverted guy who is a rock star in his basement. Both albums make powerful lyrical statements by showing their vulnerabilities, by exposing their frustrated libidos, their sensitivity and anger. Both albums are manifestos of romantic alienation, though it sounds like Phair got a good deal more sex than Gano, albeit bad sex. Gano's geeky pariah had his counterpart in Phair's class slut, the girl made untouchable because she was just the opposite. (Hey wait: I actually went to high school with Liz Phair—we ran track together, and she was as

innocuous as the next Benneton-wearing preppie, which suggests a quality of loneliness that must be inalienable to even the most average looking teenage girl.)

Despite the introverted lyrics, this was an album that gathered tribes around it, assembled small communities. They may have put out the most intensely personal party album of all time. Everybody liked it. Insanely enough, to my mind, even girls like it. The album wasn't anti-girl, but it was acknowledging that girls were anti-them. Stoners liked it too: In college, when my dorm room was broken into, the thief would find nothing in my CD collection worth stealing other than my entire catalogue of Pink Floyd plus *Violent Femmes*. Perhaps I am overstating the case for the Femmes, but I don't think so. After their explosive first album they didn't exactly light the world on fire. They've put out notable, even erudite rock music—not so much forgettable as ignorable. They grew up too quickly for their fans, though I guess you can only go through puberty once, and that trauma is pretty much good for just one album. But after an album like *Violent Femmes*, there is really not much else to say. Like Guns N' Roses *Appetite for Destruction*: put out a work like that and you basically get a 'bye' for the rest of the semester.

SHYNESS IS NICE—The school I've transferred to is in a small industrial Connecticut town. But to say the school is actually in the town would be misleading, for it is set off by a mile-long driveway, separated from the community by the Farmington River on one side and a thicket-lined train track that runs to New York on the other. All

around the quadrangle are playing fields, the classrooms and the Georgian dorms set on a landfill well above water level due to the constant flooding of the river. Residents refer to the campus as The Island, a moniker that is both symbolic of its place in the community, and literal when the flooding from the Farmington becomes so high that it cuts the school off from the outside world. It is idyllic, to use a recruitment catalog word, but students who board know that there are colonies of rats that live in the network of tunnels beneath the school, that the campus is prone to frequent black outs, and the groundskeepers plant flowers for parents' weekend that will be removed when the event is over.

In the first few days before classes started there was a strange energy amongst my group of friends. Some unspoken shift in attention, an unarticulated excitement. I'd first heard Hadley's name from Nicky, my cross country teammate, who carried a life-long flame for her. During runners' camp he had spoken of this girl from his hometown in a proprietary fashion, as if they were already promised to each other in an arranged marriage. When I first met her, she was sitting on a brick wall kicking her feet back and forth as though she were sitting at the end of a dock, laughing at something that someone in the group of guys that surrounded her had said, unaware she was being courted.

Hadley incited crushes, provoked false hopes. It seemed half the school had a thing for her that autumn. It was as though we had collectively decided to forgo our traditional standards of beauty for the sake of this short, muscular girl. It would be easy to peg her as a tomboy: she never wore dresses unless required by code at the semiformal dinners twice a week; she was given to wrestling, liked to push, tease and play. There was an

intimacy in her play. You weren't her friend until you had taken a punch in the arm or wrestled her to the ground. Hadley should have been gay, but nature was against her.

"I like you," she said to me one day, not long after we met. "You don't buy into all this preppie bullshit."

"Peace," I responded, never sure how to accept a compliment.

We took to each other immediately, isolating ourselves from the rest of our friends. To her tomboy, I was an eye-liner wearing sissy. Like Hadley, I found friends more easily in the opposite sex. She had a V.W. Rabbit she kept in the day students' lot which we drove off campus to buy beer, a combination of infractions that could have been enough to get us kicked out of school a few times over. I told her about Sara, about being straight edge, and we laughed over it while cracking open Budweisers.

"I hate this place. We should do nothing to distinguish ourselves at this school," she said to me, sitting with the engine off, the radio playing quietly. At that moment the sadness of one teenage girl seemed like the most important thing in the world. Like a languishing flower, I could dedicate my attention to, to rescue.

"I agree. Absolutely nothing. Academically, athletically. Socially."

"That part shouldn't be too hard," she said. I laughed at her; she was under the misperception that people didn't like her. But in that half hour of free time before curfew there were half a dozen guys waiting for her outside her dorm. Guys who were school leaders, jocks, scions of fortune; but she was there with me, drinking, determined to do nothing.

I'm up early, lurking around the campus with my home-made camera pin-hole camera, looking for subject matter. At this morning hour when there is an unbroken silence but for the kitchen staff preparing breakfast, the fog covers the meadows and playing fields so thickly that the school feels like a ship cutting through waves. It is always surprising to see it there, having accumulated overnight, like the fog is lying in wait, swelling, readying to overtake the campus. As I walk I am attuned to the presence of every other living creature. I am a ghost, an invisible eye drifting through air, observing but not living. In front of me is a cat—it responds to my footsteps. I am grateful for this, it means I exist. I have employed this tactic before, walking from class to class, staring people in the eye to get a look in return, to provoke some evidence of myself, using the contact with these passing classmates as stepping stones to my destination.

I follow the path of the cat on its flight. In the grass there is a dead chick. The cat might have killed it, though it looks like it had been dead for days. How can I reconcile these two images, this seed of death in the midst of all this splendor? And what about the beauty of this dead bird, its secret language, whispering to me. It awakens something inside of me, sheds light on a fissure that has gone unnoticed. I expose a frame and use brittle leaf as a tissue with which to pick up the carcass, and discard it in the bushes.

Before I left the Chicago suburbs for boarding school I had a friend draw for me a skull on a white tee shirt. Above the drawing I wrote 'Suicidal Tendencies,' cut the design from the shirt and affixed it the back of an army surplus jacket with safety pins. This display of fashion, this gesture of loyalty to a novel punk band inadvertently

revealed my darkest secret. It was somehow predictive. That year I experienced my first bout with deep depression. Early in the semester of my junior year, my first semester at boarding school, when I was supposed to be making friends, I had been stricken with an inexplicable grief. I was possessed by a demon. And this demon was exhausted, spent, could not deal. I slept through free periods. I skipped meals, going without eating for days at a time. The despair mystified me, but I was always a reticent person, so it was easily concealed. And nobody at The Island knew me before the depression, so they couldn't see the change that had taken hold. The Arcadian circumstances under which I lived lost all value. Intellectually, I knew I should be making the best of this privileged opportunity, but after the darkness of my mood began to set in, experience itself began to lose meaning. I consciously knew something had changed in me, but I had only recently gone through puberty, so such seismic changes were not totally unexpected. I stopped doing homework, and for the first time in my life I failed a course: chemistry. Before that semester I had always been a competent student. The 'F' did not shock me out of my lassitude: I took the mark defiantly, resolutely. Good grades were nothing to aspire to. The 'F' would not be my last failing grade. Had I more knowledge of the clinical aspects of the disease, I might have appreciated the symbolic value: failing chemistry because of my failing chemistry.

My deterioration was not wholly unnoticed. I was instructed by my faculty advisor that a check-up had been made for me at an off-campus medical facility. One afternoon, instead of going running with the rest of the Cross Country team, I was taken in a van to a clinic where they gave me a cursory examination. Blood was taken. It was only later that I learned that in addition to checking for anemia I had been administered a drug test.

When all the tests came back negative, the issue was dropped. I didn't have anemia, I wasn't high, and my blood was of human origin—all good enough for the powers that be. They just assumed that I was a sickly child, the issue of my health was dropped. I was grateful to be left alone. The feelings diminished over the course of that year, and when I came back in the fall I thought I had put that desolating experience behind me, dismissed it as a phase. Like most teenagers, I was not familiar with the parlance of the depression, and did not realize that the phase was actually a cycle, and that I would not have to wait long before it returned.

What's wrong with you? Hadley writes. We are sitting in the library in front of a bay window that looks out over the meadows. We meet here to study, sometimes hiding on the steps that lead up to the closed off third floor, out of earshot of the librarians.

Nothing you want to hear about, I respond.

Don't give me that, Bucko.

I laugh at her quaint term.

See? She writes, taking the laughter at face value. "See?" she says aloud, when I don't respond.

During free periods I roam the outskirts of campus, restless, seeking solitude. I wear my Walkman; there is something about sauntering down a wooded path that seems appropriate to The Smiths' music. I stray from the path, always curious about what lies out of sight, even if I know it is just more forest. I frequently end up by the river's edge. There is a tree there that grows at a horizontal curvature, giving a sheltering place for

those who like to smoke. A spot tolerated by the faculty, the place is marked by a boulder known as Smokers' Rock. In that extraterrestrial looking tree Adam Horing is inevitably poised, enjoying a cigarette. His hair is cut short all around except his bangs, which hang over his face, obscuring his features. Horing grins like a mod Cheshire Cat. As far as I can tell, Horing never went to classes (indeed he is kicked out later in the year for a variety of transgressions). He is a New Yorker, lives on Central Park West in what is rumored to be an impossibly huge apartment. He would have been a punk, but he has too strong a sense of himself; dressed like a sophisticated version of Alex from *A Clockwork Orange*: white shirt buttoned up to the collar, black overcoat, black pants—the cane he carries seems less an affectation and more like a natural extension of his self. Horing points the cane then fires off barbed comments or cruelly true observations, all the while looking impartial and jaded as an old judge. I remember standing behind him in the lunch line at the cafeteria.

"Are you staring at my breasts?" the server said to Horing after handing him his plate.

"Yes."

"You little pervert."

"No, if I were a pervert I'd be staring at your *earlobes*," he said, walking away with his tray.

The first time I happen upon Horing in his tree I pretend not to see him and face out toward the river. I want to be alone with my thoughts and assume he does too. But he is a vacuum that sucks attention toward him. I eventually find myself turning toward the tree.

"I *said*, are you autistic?" he intones, as if repeating himself, though I hadn't heard him say anything.

"I take pictures," I respond, misunderstanding.

"No, *autistic*. You're hopeless, never mind," he says, dragging on his cigarette.

Over time Horing and I forge a strange sort of relationship. Though we never interacted on campus, by the river he becomes an unlikely confidant and advisor. I tell him about Haley, how cool she is.

"That preppie girl?"

"Yeah."

"You're in love with her," he says.

"No I'm not," I say.

"Who are you kidding?" Horing says, reclining on his branch, closing the subject.

The leaves were changing, hanging shriveled on the branch. It was gratifying to smell the ferment and decay in the air, as though the world was conforming to my internal wintering. Running was the only time I was relieved of the anxiety. Existence became fluid again, colors once more vibrant. As I ran I'd focus on the back of my friend Alden Doyle's shoes, their soles flying up from the pavement like the bellies of breaching fish, then disappearing again. The rhythm, the ordered steps, the exhaustion and mounting endorphins temporarily displaced the poisonous feelings. As much as I wanted to reject running, I could do anything but run my heart out, so hard that during races my eyes teared up with emotion. With a clear mind I was able to think rationally. Like one emerging in the eye of a storm I assessed my situation. Natural, healthy emotions

seemed finished. I would have to get used to it. Social life was limited at best. I could scratch by academically if I put in a bit of effort. Girlfriends were out of the question. I would tough it out, just like the brutal workouts we submitted to.

The group consciousness helped alleviate some of the emotional stress. While running I became involved in the dynamics of the team as we practiced, how we moved amoeba-like through the streets intuitively sensing each others' fluctuations in speed and fatigue, running through red stoplights without debate, simply moving as one. In my mood I was elevated by my team-mates. I had expected the same elitism that the New Trier runners affected, but there was a roguish quality to this team: some smoked; a few were discipline problems, no one was overly concerned with where they would go to college. During workouts I ran in between Alden Doyle and Nicky Dano, as if using my friends to protect myself. Alden is a member of an old political family, and had an aura of difference that is either the blessing or curse of famous people's children. Nicky was a snob, though in the best possible way. He practiced a sort of snobbery that always included whatever company he was keeping at the moment. *You know Henderson, we are the only to juniors on varsity, by rights* we w*ill be captains nex*t *year,* he would frequently remind me. (Nicky would be elected, I would not.) He was one of the few preppies who elevated the fashion to fastidious caricature of itself: pink seersucker shorts, green Izods, argyle prints down to his socks. Nicky ran in Ray-Bans.

Lydia, our coach, frequently worked out with us; leading the pack, we were ducklings behind their mother. She, over my final years in school, became a friend and confidant to me and many other students. But as open a coach and friend as Lydia was, there was something she kept sealed off from us. She was beautiful, and inadvertently

drew attention to herself everywhere she went. It was embarrassing to run with her, she provoked so many cat-calls and whistles. But there was something else about her. Lydia was *too much* like us. She went to R.E.M concerts when they are in town, she tolerated our lewd, immature pranks. Lydia held most of the faculty in contempt. It was clear she allied herself with the students and not with the institution. Even more tantalizing, it was rumored that she had a love affair with a senior runner who had graduated the year before I arrived. The runner, Brian, went to a nearby university and Lydia frequently took team up to his school's indoor track to practice. Brian's reputation loomed over us, for we would never run as well as him, and we would certainly never go to bed with Lydia. It was an unbroachable topic when Lydia was around. But over the course of long-distance workouts, we never tired of reconstructing the scenario—speculating on their secret lives and after-hours stealth; who made the move on whom; whether or not they were still together. Whether we too *had a chance*. Privately, we projected our own likeness onto Brian's when we exercised these fantasies. We were the ones who snuck from our rooms under the cover of night, dashing from tree to tree like spies in a bad late-night move, to her apartment above the Admissions office, ready to offer up our innocence. Our collective desire for Lydia found release in thoughtless pranks designed not so much to annoy her but to keep her vigilant over us. We wanted her attention, if that meant tying a freshman runner to her bed, or dressing her teddy bear in her bra and panties. *We invaded this woman's underwear drawer*. One way or another we would make it into Lydia's bedroom. When she quit the team because, by appropriating a live prop for our pranks, we had finally gone too far. We'd left a half-naked kid in her bed, a living virgin sacrifice who greeted her grinning—weirdly flattered by his own humiliation. It had felt

inevitable, stripping down the kid was a solemn procedure; anointed with Ben-Gay, he had submitted unflinchingly. The next day we felt low and shameful in our tights, waiting on the track for a practice we would not have. Lydia had crossed over back into the role of teacher and disciplinarian, because we had pushed her there. She was eventually mollified by a sheepish, carefully worded written apology to her and the freshman hostage. After that we tempered our routines. Throughout the winter months Lydia drove Alden Doyle and I all over New England in the winter in search of indoor tracks and impromptu meets to keep us in shape for the outdoor season in the spring. Every time we stopped for a meal it was Lydia's birthday, and a cake was delivered to the table at our behest.

The faculty knew something about the rumors of her affair. She must have taken some flak over it, though hers was not the only faculty-student affair to transpire that year. There was Cindy Clemm and her tennis coach Mr. Nagy. Cindy: the girl who became my best friend about ten minutes after she snorted cocaine, then dropped me the next day. And Mr. Nagy, who directed me to a passage in *The Great Gatsby* that I had read a thousand times and never really grasped until then: the episode when Nick Carroway left Myrtle's party, it's apparent he went home with another man. *Don't you get it Matt? Caraway's gay*, Nagy told me in his apartment, sipping a beer. *And Jordan Baker is his lesbian foil!*

THAT SPACE CADET GLOW—Depression is a dead moon whose invisible force brings otherwise dissimilar people together, acting as a strange social bond. That year I would inexplicably gravitate toward somebody who I realize only in retrospect, was also

depressed, huddle together in the dark part of some dorm social room listening to music, usually Pink Floyd or Cat Stevens. Or we would go down by the river where my companion would invariably smoke. These were wordless occasions, where it was enough just to sit next to another person. Little overture or initiation went into these relationships, which would last a few days or weeks, until one of us would part and drift back into the stream of the student body.

When a new sophomore showed up at The Island with the slogan 'Comfortably Numb' written in magic marker across her jeans jacket, I knew exactly where she was coming from. "I can't explain, you would not understand/ This is not how I am." Depression is hard to dramatize. It is an inward, pacifying condition, and it is not very gratifying to watch anybody in this mode. *The Wall* may or may not have been 'about' depression *per se*, but if you were sixteen years old and depressed it was hard to see it as anything but. There have been love songs through the ages that expressed emotional pain; there had been commercially remote oddities like Nick Drake, but never in pop music had psychic pain been tackled on such a grand, epic scale. *The Wall* was embraced, taken up with religious fervor by millions of young people. *The Wall* was a scream from a collective unconscious; a validation for every burn-out and misfit, whether they listened to heavy metal, underground, or The Grateful Dead.

Pink Floyd with Syd Barrett was a psychedelic art band, conceived during the death of 60's idealism. Barrett would succumb to schizophrenia, leaving Roger Waters as the primary songwriter. Beginning with the *Dark Side of the Moon*, Waters would traverse netherworlds of mental illness, drawing from Barrett's and his own experience. "And if your head explodes with dark forebodings too/ I'll see you on the dark side of the moon."

But it took *The Wall* to fully dramatize the sentiments he touched on in that song. In *The Wall* not only did Roger Waters' head explode with dark forebodings, his bad mood had an entire three-act play to reside in, along with totalitarian tendencies and its own abbreviated version of *Mein Kampf*. Roger Waters' demons, in the shape of his alter-ego Pink, would commit sexual and political crimes in the form of a sort of rock star-cum-Hitler. His mood would be put on trial, shoved out into the light. It was a lot more interesting than lying in bed all day, as my alter-ego might have done. Despite the fact that the album was very British (posing the British-school-sounding koan: *How can you have your pudding if you don't eat your meat?*) the songs struck a chord with teens in America, and was one of the few major mainstream successes to feel like a cult album.

The first song off *The Wall* is an ode to an absent father. It's no wonder *The Wall* was one of the first albums I cleaved to emotionally. Of course fathers have the most power in the world over their sons, and when they are an absence, then blank space appropriates that power; nothingness nurtures the child. Or he grows toward male role models like rock stars. Men who have also shunned responsibility, yet are present in spirit, if not body. Nihilism becomes almost natural.

The Wall was a very personal experience for the listener. The schism that Pink underwent after his complete social alienation felt very familiar. Very slowly, then very suddenly, you were transformed into a repugnant variation of your former self: this new variation of self under the control of your worst impulses. There are only vague clues as to what provoked this transformation: an absent father ("Another Brick in the Wall Part I"), an overbearing mother ("Mother"), an oppressive school ("Another Brick in the Wall

Part II"). Waters' confessional voice, his litany, becomes that of the listener; you too are invited to leave your own graffiti on the wall.

"Another Brick in the Wall," "Hey You," "Comfortably Numb,"—each song cut to a place where routine pop music just wasn't going. Pink's existential crisis is transfigured and eerily beautiful. The album, when listened to straight through, contains a series of mini-catharsis that are set off like depth charges. Perhaps these are counterfeit, unearned releases—a placebo. It was unquestionably escapist. But it must have been effective to a certain degree, as millions of teens across America self-medicated with Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. Anybody that didn't rally to the call "We don't need no education," was just as zombified as the clay-faced children that were sent by conveyer belt to their fate in a meat grinder in the film version *Pink Floyd The Wall*. The album was an agent of insurgence, fermenting dissent, encouraging upheaval. Some bands cultivated an audience; Pink Floyd was in danger of cultivating an army. But that was part of its purpose, a little vicarious rebellion, a violent internal protest that lasts as long as the side of the record.

The Wall validated desolation, gave a voice to the dark perceptions enabled by depression. Though I wonder if calling it depression might just be a convenience, if one considers depression a natural disposition for teenagers. At least for a certain sensitive type of youth, depression may be a necessary stage, like a caterpillar pupating. There are realizations and disillusionments that come with the age about family, one's place in society, the sudden awakening to hypocrisy all around—that makes for an inevitable crestfall. The awkward bodily changes associated with puberty seem to demand a retreat from the world. A sudden sexual awakening and the overload of stimulus that it

provokes demand restraint. As a counter the onslaught of hormones, depression in boys is feminizing force.

Pink's own transformation is quite literal, especially in the movie, when during "one of my bad days" he shaves the hair from his eyebrows and chest. It's a metaphoric suicide, a destruction of his world so that he might be reborn. Depression, unexpectedly, has transformative properties, and not all of them bad. There is a depth of insight, a maturation that occurs. One moment you are despairing, then next rational, and the pull between the two expands consciousness. In *The Wall,* Pink's final condition was not enlightenment, but exposure, assimilation. It was enough that he was back in the world. That was his modest triumph.

One of the attractive characteristics of *The Wall* is its amorphous surrealism. Depression sublimated into high concept. To what degree is hallucinatory imagery supposed to be taken literally? In *The Wall,* the alternate world is evinced through visions of speaking worms, war-torn landscapes and, obviously, an insurmountable wall. This inventiveness takes the album to a different plane, away from a case study of mental illness into a realm of grandiose theatre. All the drama and Wagnerian fervor of *The Wall* became a metaphor for the mundane reality of depression, externalizing the battle within. In his destruction of the society around him Pink personified obliteration; his promiscuity revealed his anhedonia, and his stardom dramatized withdrawal from society.

There is a relentless nightmarish quality to Pink's brooding that I found totally appealing, even physically pleasurable to disappear into. His self-absorption is so complete it acts like a vacuum and the attentive listener cannot help but be sucked in along with him. And if you have to spend an hour and a half with somebody so morose,

or *as* somebody so morose, if you are truly identifying with Pink the way you should, it's a good thing he is a rock star. Because along with the sorrow came a certain amount of substance abuse and easy women. In the realm of alienation Pink acted as a role model. Virgil-like, he took the listener down into its depths: *This is what is allowed and even expected when you are this much of a head case.* He schooled the listener in the concentric circle of hell reserved for rock stars who cannot get over themselves, and the kids who love them. Pink's ultimate punishment, after his trial, is to be sent out from behind the wall, to be exposed before his peers. That was the real fear, to reveal what was happening inside, to be made vulnerable in that way. The sophomore who wrote 'Comfortably Numb' across her jacket chose to express herself with a liter of vodka—she was picked up by the police miles from the school stumbling through somebody's back yard, precipitating her expulsion.

The Wall, with its major motion picture, its tee-shirts and posters was in danger of becoming just another brick in the wall of the teens who consumed it, who swallowed it whole. *The Wall* might well just have been another piece of merchandise, another lie the media told us to keep us in our places. But Waters saves the album from such cynicism, by not allowing Pink a full redemption, by not killing him and turning him into a messianic figure. We are voyeuristically complicit in his crimes, but to buy into Pink, to participate in any sort of apotheosis, you might as well be another Klebald and Harris 'hunting niggers' in their classroom hallways, blowing away the people that don't conform to their angst-ridden, poisoned outlook. Hitler, too, was an artist, and *Mein Kampf* written behind the walls of prison.

Heavy Metal, psychedelic rock, and underground music all intersected at the Wall, then parted ways again. *The Wall* was neither punk nor new wave, but would leave its impression on alternative music. Shock rockers like Marilyn Manson and My Chemical Romance have borrowed *Wall* motifs; Billy Corgan would cite it was a major influence in the Smashing Pumpkins' seminal album *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*. *The Wall* would change the possibilities about what could be written about in commercial music (look at Metallica and "Enter Sandman") and is a progenitor of so much that I liked, *albeit* briefly, about grunge, especially in bands like Alice in Chains and Mud Honey. But the real contribution was to the kids who spun the black disk on their record player; communing with the alienation of another fretful soul, and therefore, for however briefly, feeling less so.

WAR IN THE EMPTY WORLD—After curfew I can hear boys moving between rooms, organizing drinking parties. I'm not invited, but that's okay. I tell myself that I don't mind drinking alone. Nobody in my dorm shares my taste in music, so I sip whiskey beneath a *Boys Don't Cry* poster. Hadley is right, I tell myself. It is better to be sad and be ourselves than to be happy and normal. My sadness, above all else, is truly mine. It is the truest and perhaps the only honest expression of my identity. It is a third parent, exerting its influence in ways that seem natural. It dictates what I read, the music I listen to. It nudges me away from my classmates, scrutinizes the company I keep, prunes me like a plant. I want to like people, despite all I do to isolate myself—I want to belong, to be friends with even the most obnoxious bully on the hall, but I cannot. I was charged with this dark inheritance, it is my responsibility to nurture it, to perpetuate it,

this insidious, grotesque thing. Depression has given me access to an alternate world, a dead planet. In this uninhabited place only the music I listen to penetrates. The music brings life to this barren place, and recreates this internal landscape in a manageable format, as if I am writing each song for myself. For every song I listen to, its solarized image is being imprinted on my psyche, bringing my own sorrow to those songs.

I am emboldened from the Jack Daniel's. It is night, the campus is asleep, and I am scaling the gutter on the roof of the dorm, then descending the fire escape. There is a restlessness I need to rid myself of before I can sleep. My bed is useless at night, and too seductive during the school day. Night is when I feel most comfortable on campus, when there are no people around, when the moonlight like a silver-nitrate film still. I am a shadow, a shade, slipping through the thicket by the road to town. There is an all-night donut shop that is a regular destination on my nocturnal jaunts. Because I maintain the semblance of a punk, hair Tenex-ed to stiff spikes, army fatigues, I will be taken for a townie, and will not be noticed.

Walking across campus, I realize that I am privileged. My father would hate that. Any time I showed evidence of being spoiled, of wanting something more than he offered, he would chide me. Staying with him in whatever faculty house he was living, where it was always too cold, where I mouthed grace before I was allowed to eat, I learned to savor the smallest offerings. Though he has spent his career teaching or administrating private schools, I know he would resent the education I am being afforded, would hold the abundance against me. But now he does not even know where I am. He has been on one of his extended absences, blaming me for some unnamed crime. I still hoped, in the deepest and most skeptical way, that there would be some sort of

reconciliation between us. Though I hated him, I could have let all that go with a phone call, a request for forgiveness. But he would not call, that was not his way. Pink, in *The Wall*, had lost his father to war: my own father, under the influence of the explosion of personal expression that followed the 60s, was lost to war demonstrations. Because he had taken off when I was young enough that I never remembered living with him.

On my yearly visits I trailed him across a series of ramshackle houses where the floorboards stuck up and the wind drafted through poorly sealed windows. There was the first place in Woodstock Vermont, where I would wander into other people's homes and take chocolate milk from the refrigerator (which was okay to do in communal-minded Woodstock, Vermont, at that time). It was a white clapboard house that appeared to crouch against a hill, as if it were a big house that had made itself small to ward off a chill. He had a pure white Samoyed dog with black coal eyes. On his wall he had hung a reproduction of *The Unicorn Tapestry*, that majestic animal held captive behind a small circular white fence. The picture struck me as cruel and confusing. With all God's green earth around the animal, it was confined there, unable to get out, but getting out should have been easy because the fence was not so tall; I felt it could have jumped over it, only for some reason it held back.

In my room my father had left a clay frog, his idea of toy. *You play with it,* he said. He had obviously tried to think about what an appropriate toy was for a small boy, and came up with this. I had brought a box of watercolors, so I painted it. Over the following years, I would paint it each time I returned to his house. It was just what I did at my father's: paint the frog. I imagined that if I continued painting it, it would begin to grow big with all the accrued paint. I worried that it would one day get too big, would outgrow

the room, the house. I thought I might kidnap it, relieve my father of the burden of the frog that grew.

He was frequently at the day school he worked at so I was given over to neighbors. There I would learn how to ride a horse. Mr. Cottrell, my instructor taught me to brush and saddle the animal, an old slow-moving pony named Twinkle. Cottrell was disappointed that I had not taken a fall yet, for in his estimation you can't ride a horse until you have been thrown at least three times. But I was too poised on the old horse. *You're still a beginner until you've fallen, kiddo*, he told me despite how well I rode. Finally my chance came one day when Twinkle leaned forward to munch on some grass on the side of the road. I gently let myself tumble over the front of the saddle, bracing myself for the impact. Cottrell was pleased with my progress, *you'll be a good rider one of these days kiddo.* When they finally shot the old horse my father sent me one of its teeth in the mail, one of the few gifts I have received from him. My mother was horrified, but the offering secretly pleased me, that grotesque tooth, the sentiment behind it.

On the route from The Island I am forced to take an industrial back street that runs along the railroad tracks. It was there that the city elected to put its local dog pound. As I pass I rouse the attention of the strays. They bark hysterically. It is well known that this is a last stop station for most of them, the pound is cleared out monthly, the dogs are gassed to make room for more strays. It is a daily reminder that in this world we lived in dogs are killed; something lovable and loyal is treated as expendable. That there is little

to differentiate them from their luckier counterparts. I pass by them guiltily, feeling that I am failing them by not finding a way to set them free.

When I get back to my room, belly full of sweets and coffee, I decide to call my father. It's late, but I have not spoken to him in five years, and surly he will welcome the contact. I have the number of his last residence, hopefully he has not moved again. I use the calling card my mother gave me, misdialing several times out of nervousness. I finally get a connection, and after several rings my father answers. He had been sleeping, I can tell from his voice. I think back to the last time I phoned him: he told me that I should never call him, but write a letter instead. He offered no reason for this rule, hanging up quickly. I cried that night, and decided that there was no use in trying to have a father, that I would give him no more of my sadness, dedicate no more energy to his memory. Indeed I wished I had never known him, that instead of just drifting away he had died. At least his death provide me with a story, a reason for his absence. "Hello," he says more insistently. Didn't he understand that I was keeping his name, that I was not deserting him? This time it is me who hangs up without explanation. Later, I lie in bed staring at the ceiling, listening for the distant barking of stray dogs, waiting for sleep to come.

It is past the time of year when most people go to the beach; we have it to ourselves. We have traversed reedy dunes, have navigated a fallen fence to get to a spot marked by an abandoned light house. Summer homes painted white to refract the sun look gray in the autumn overcast, a light rain drizzles down on us. Nobody complains: we are in high school, we have several cases of beer and nowhere else to go. There is Lew, my best

friend; Vince, Denny, Jenna, Nicky, and Hadley. Somebody lights a joint and we are drawn around it in a circle.

Lake Michigan would still be swimable this late in the season, but the Atlantic Ocean looks less cooperative. Its surface has a chaotic appearance, its vast grayness unsettles me in an atavistic way. Anything might be concealed beneath its surface. The waves come lapping up onto the beach as though it wants to grab us by the toes and drag us in. Something incomprehensible and evil waits for me beneath those waves. I cannot look at it for too long before I have to turn away from fear.

Autumn is showing its teeth, and we wrap up tight in tartan blankets against the wind. I am underdressed: when you are from Chicago, you believe your climate is always more brutal than others. I am wearing a turtleneck and cross-country sweatshirt, looking about as close to fitting in as I ever will. Beers are opened and drunk quickly, as though we were still on campus and in perpetual danger of being caught. Hadley and I extract ourselves from the group and walk down the beach.

"What is that?" I ask, looking at the land mass off beyond the ocean.

"The Long Island Sound," she replies.

"So that's Long Island?"

"No, it's still Connecticut."

"How is that possible?"

"I don't know, just one of those things, I guess," she says.

"Weird," I say, putting my arm around her, shivering as if to imply I am just trying to keep warm. We walk in silence, wind bearing down on us.

"You know, I sort of consider you my best friend," Hadley says. The statement warms and galvanizes me, as though until that moment she said it my bodily boundaries had been ethereal, blurred into the surrounding atmosphere. We are standing at the edge of the country, looking out to sea, and I am her best friend.

As the night wears on, I become needlessly dour, silent, craving solitude. It's an unprovoked corruption of mood, one that I have come to anticipate. Alcohol has not given me the buoyant effect I'd hoped for. Instead I begin to slide. The solidarity I felt earlier is gone. I am alone in the group, silently turning inward, slipping. There is no reason for this, the numbing ether of despondency. I look over at Lew and Hadley, sitting next to each other. Their hands are locked as though they are Indian wrestling. Are they flirting? I hate Lew right now, though he has been nothing but a friend to me. The summer before that fall semester I came out East a few days early to stay at his house in Windsor. A day student and townie, he had spent the summer cleaning dorm rooms and chasing rats from The Island's underground tunnels. "If your parents have enough money to send you to boarding school, why can't they feed you properly?" asked his mother before trying to fatten me up over those few days. *The Joshua Tree* was about to be released, and Lew and I sat through hours of droll MTV pop waiting for "With or Without You" to come on. We taped it in order to play it again, and again, and again. That black and white shot of Bono clasping his hands together, reaching out toward the sky, both Christ-like and romantic. We mimicked his stance in Lew's living room as though it were a prayer or yoga pose. This was softer, less politically driven than the songs on *Unforgettable Fire*. Lew and I were instantly infatuated with the album, which

we played continuously while driving around the outskirts of Hartford during August's final dog days. Lew was dating a girl named Anastasia. We would park outside her house—despite the fact that she was out of town—to keep watch, to be close to her in that way. Lew turned up "With Or Without You" and sang it out the window, driving off when a porch light came on.

People are laughing, sloppy, drunk. Lew and Hadley are engaged in an intense conversation. I have nothing in common with these people, I am a fake, an imposter. I will quarantine myself. Cut myself off because I am a malignancy. I stand and walk down the beach. In the darkness the water has blurred with the horizon so that it appears to envelop me.

There is a small white dog on the beach that night who, with a dog's innate sympathy for those in need, follows me up the shore. I sit on the dune, the dog sits with me. I've smoked some pot, which I am not accustomed to. It is a dog from the campus pound, I am convinced. It is a sign, this specter of a gassed animal. It is my totem, my companion. I patiently unburden my troubles to it. "You see," I explain, "I am a ghost too. Nobody even sees me. Nobody knows what I do." The dog pants and looks at me with its head tilted. I reach out to hold it, this ghost dog, to save it from those that would *do it harm*, but it springs from my grasp and scampers away.

I start back to the group. There is a fire, blazing despite the weather. On the way I pass Mimi, Hadley's roommate is sitting there, legs akimbo, staring out into the water.

"We could swim," she says, not necessarily to me.

"Where?"

"There," she points to the lights across the sound. "Can you believe Long Island is right there?"

"It's still Connecticut," I say.

"How does that…work?"

"Nobody seems to know."

I make my way back to the group. They sit in a tight circle around the fire. Absent are Hadley and Lew. I had noticed Lew coming onto campus at night, showing up for free period in Hadley's dorm. I didn't make the connection, but now that they have disappeared my suspicions are justified. I had not known for certain that my friendship with Hadley was just that, friendship, that it was not one of the slowest teenage courtships ever. It was inevitable, Hadley would find somebody, or be found by somebody. Nights in her V.W. would not be enough for her, just as they were not enough for me. *Where had they gone*? I need to know. It is my job to interfere, to stop them. I take another beer and started off after them.

The lighthouse is about half a mile out into the water, connected to the beach by a granite boulder breakwater, like giant stepping stones. As I start out, I notice how uneven the rocks are, how haphazardly laid. At times I have to step across a gap to advance, the black cavity between gurgling with the rise and fall of water. I have only the muted moonlight to guide me. Waves crash against the rocks, sending spray onto me, wetting my army surplus pants. I am a mercenary, a soldier on reconnaissance. It seems to take an incredibly long time to make my way out into water, the lighthouse perpetually receding before me. Midway there I pause. One misstep and I would tumble into the sea. It is as black as India ink, its hypnotic allure working on me. I know that I would

not likely survive the fall. Would that be so bad? Let the sea batter me, the way that I crave a battering. I had been tempted by the dark charm of night water before. On a dare the summer earlier, back on Lake Michigan, I swam out to a buoy late one night. Getting out was not so difficult, but on the way back, my arms began to tire, and I had trouble keeping myself above water. It was as if death were handing me an invitation, asking only that I accept. There would be no battle. How easy it would have been, I thought to myself, to just sink under. There would be no violence, no struggling the way drowning is portrayed in the movies. It would be as simple as pulling a sheet up over my head and laying myself to rest.

The beach is so far away. I have found my own little place amid the chaos of the sea. Each step is a dare until I stop and sit on a boulder for a few minutes, a sole Henderson out on the ocean, contemplating, then moving on. I finally make it all the way to the lighthouse and begin to round the corner when I hear them. They are right there, a few feet from me. Hadley is laughing, sounding girlish for the first time since I've known her, then she is silent. Nothing. I turn back, alone with my sorrow, but strengthened by the notion that I have again turned my back on death, and that I will be back to give it another chance.

It is a weekly ritual to call my mother. A passerby might observe me clutching the receiver, concentrating, as though absorbing some bit of important news. I imagine it looks the same on my mother's end, both of us are listening, neither of us talking. Our conversation is silence built around aborted sentences.

"What is going on with you?"

"I dunno," I say.

There is a code in the silences; certain lengths provoke questions: I cannot answer a question unless it is preceded by enough silence. Other, longer intervals, mean I will be hanging up soon. I measure the dead air between us, seconds stretched out into minutes, becoming the punctuation of our dialogue. I cannot communicate even in the most rudimentary way the feelings I am experiencing. I stand in the booth in our dorm, cringing at my own reticence, listening to the other kids in the social room. Somebody is playing Simon & Garfunkel. *I. am. a. rock. I. am. an. island.* Nobody can know my feelings. I cannot make myself vulnerable to my mother in that way. I do not know her, this woman who has laid claim to me. There had been tension at home over my appearance, my sudden rebelliousness. The first time I came home with my ear pierced my mother let out an unearthly shriek and locked herself in her room. She wouldn't yell at me, she would withdraw. She knew the power of a closed door. For as long as I can remember she has used it to sever herself from us. On such occasions, she became almost mute, our love insufficient to draw her out of her depressions. If I knocked on the door there would be no answer. It created an unanswerable question in my child's mind: she is there but she is not answering. So the silence became the answer.

There is a small statue that has been handed down in our family depicting a woman holding her hands to her head as if in sleep, made of white ivory, created by a long-dead relative who was a sculptress. Sometime ago, before I can remember, it was shattered at the feet. The statue rests at its base. How was it shattered, had somebody thrown it against the wall, had I knocked it down? Did a mover break it as it was transported from house to house? We move once every four years, it seems. In my mother's quest for

something bigger, something more remote, or something smaller closer to the city than where we were currently living—to a house that she could bring from dreariness into a kind of splendor. It was her truest talent, the transformation of spaces the coaxing out of their hidden qualities, creating juxtapositions of objects or furniture that were both useful and deeply personal. It was uncharacteristic to have this damaged statue in every house, laid out, this repair put off. The statue moved with us, though broken things are discarded or fixed in our family. But in its brokenness it somehow completed the job, made all the design more congruent, this white woman with her head in her hands. Eventually the chips of her shattered foundation were lost, she would never be righted, and lay there as something incomplete, the distance between her and her unity was unreachable.

I, more than anybody in my family, assumed blame for my mother's mood, because I was the one who would enter her darkened room and try to bring her out. "What happened?" I would ask. Certainly I had missed some argument or incident that precipitated this withdrawal. "Nothing," she would say. My need to know *what had happened* would not be satisfied ever. First I would suffer because I could not comfort her, then later, because I too was visited by the condition. It was as if, having exposed myself to her depression, I would be the one to inherit it, just as she had from her mother. So I too will exercise the shut door, the exclamation point to my silence, and will apprentice myself to its power, because it seems like the only power I have.

One of my first memories: walking back from a neighbor's my brother, my mother and her new boyfriend were caught in a flash storm. Lightening struck in our midst, between where my brother and Tony stood, separating my mother and I. It is one of the only truly extraordinary things that happened to our family, the day that bolt came down from on high marking the sidewalk with black mark—us narrowly escaping with our lives on a suburban sidewalk.

It is Saturday and Hadley and I together in Founders Hall, a place that is deserted though open on weekends. At night other couples use the empty classrooms for making out or drinking. We sit in an alcove window, watching the autumn rain turn the granite grim and the brick muddy. I realize I am going to lose her. In one heroic pronouncement I might save myself. "I sort of love you," I say. She recoils like I had given her unexpected punch in the arm. I can see that she is disappointed. I am being like the rest of them, the happy dullards, with their need for romance and exclusivity, like Nicky, like those who want to possess her. In this honest admission I am diminished in her eyes. And she is right, I want her at the expense of everybody else. I want to cut classes with her, to drink with her, to fail with her, to make our lives a mess together, and in this way, maybe, happiness might trip us up from behind, sneak up on us as unexpectedly as a goblin in a haunted house.

"Don't say that. You don't mean it."

"I do."

"Say what you want, just don't say that again."

"Henderson," says Horing. I am watching the river, feeding it dead leaves and watching them float away. "Henderson, you know when you're driving, the signs on the side of the roads that have the deer on them, what are they for?"

"You mean deer crossing signs?"

"Yeah, what are they for?"

"To keep the deer from getting hit."

"No, they're to keep the cars from getting hit. It's to keep you from denting your fender. They don't give a damn about the deer. That's why *you* can't survive in this world, because *you* can't see that."

On long weekend, Jenna, a younger girl I was friends with, invited me home with her. She was a sophomore, and someone I, in retrospect, might have liked if I were not so wholly obsessed with , if I had had an ounce of *cool*. We talked about the weekend beforehand, and I was looking forward to it as a needed break from life on The Island.

In the car ride down to Fairfield it became clear to me that the excursion was a bad idea. I had been suffering terribly in the preceding days. I felt myself withdrawing from Jenna as we moved away from campus. Without our mutual friends around we had little to talk about. Jenna had her mind on Fairfield, where she still had much of her former life. She told me about her friends at home, who I would meet, what plans were in the making. I was about to be placed in unfamiliar territory, a new social milieu where I was unknown. My breath grew short, and the car seemed suddenly very small. Something terrible and grotesque was waiting for me in Fairfield, I was quite sure. I briefly

entertained the notion that I was being brought home for the purpose of ritual slaughter. Somebody was going to dose me with LSD. Jenna and her friends would mock my helplessness. Jenna and her *demon spawn* friends. I looked fearfully upon her: Jenna, who was quiet and sensitive, who only wanted to spend a day at Fairfield High, to go to beach houses and hockey games, to party within the four-hour window her parents would be in Manhattan seeing *The Little Shop of Horrors* on Broadway.

I was unaccustomed to panic and my consciousness of it exasperated my terror. Once we arrived I immediately shut my mouth. There was nothing to fear from the people we were meeting—these preppy teenage girls—but a powerful reticence came over me, like a door shutting. The paranoid delusions had passed, but I simply could not speak. I kicked myself, I absolutely railed against myself then, silently directing fury at myself for being so inept and furtive. I would tag along but I would not participate in any conversations and when called upon to do so, I barely muttered a reply.

That night, Jenna told me about a classmate of hers who had stolen several thousand dollars from his parents and bought a ticket to California to live out a lyric he had heard in the Steve Miller song "Jet Liner." *I might get rich, you know I might get busted*. Turned out he got busted. He killed himself shortly after being brought home to Fairfield. I secretly identified with him, used his invisible presence as an ally, a conspirator in impossible romance. I knew that if that guy were here I would be okay. But I *wasn't* okay. After her parents left for the city, Jenna held a party in her house. I shut myself in the room where I was staying. I lay in bed beneath a sloping ceiling. Jenna's friends were curious about me and from time to time one came up to poke their head in the room. Jenna would call them back down, protecting me. I lay on my

stomach and feigned sleep. *I was sick, didn't they understand*? I heard my name mentioned downstairs, and it was like an arrow piercing me. Every explosion of laughter I took personally. I thought of Jenna's dead friend and his escape from Connecticut, how great those moments on the airplane must have been, and how that song must have sounded to him after such a daring feat, and I wondered if he ever listened to it again once his dreams came crashing down.

NOVEMBER SPAWNED A MONSTER—As a child I had learned not to bring friends over to our house to play. My mother's moods seemed to order the house around them. If she was happy, there were cookies in the oven, if she was irritable, we would be commandeered to move furniture, dissemble rooms until she got the arraignment right; if she was depressed she would be behind her closed door and I would be hushing my friend, guiding them outside. Her moods imposed a tension on the house; even when she wasn't there, disrupting the house was the same as disrupting her. I grew self-conscious in my play. I did not like to be observed by her, it embarrassed me to have fun. Her appearance meant the abrupt dissolution of whatever imaginary world I had created, falling from my role as archeologist, or vampire back into that of awkward ten-year-old, silently waiting for her to leave.

My best friend Marco and I were would-be blood brothers who hadn't the nerve to break flesh with a borrowed paring knife. As a colleague in the study of death, he would help me collect dead birds from around the neighborhood and ceremoniously bury them under the wooden boards and mulch we had molded into the two thrones that comprised

our clubhouse. It lent those seats a sanctity, those carcasses beneath us. (We were an odd duo. Marco and I also shared a preoccupation with smells. It was in our club mission to create a signature perfume. We collected flowers and ingredients from our mothers' spice racks and concocted different scents in empty tic-tac containers.) Later, I kept a pet graveyard in the backyard filled with parakeets and gerbils. A few years on, I searched all afternoon in that space with a shovel, hoping to excavate and study the skeletons. I loved white, brittle bones and stuffed things. A stuffed baby alligators I bought at a garage sale, a mounted fox head. These objects were surrounded by a magical aura and I treated them with religious reverence.

Sometime around Christmas when I was ten my mother mentioned to me that the red petals of our poinsettia plants were lethal. Nothing had precipitated the comment, and I perceived it as a coded message to me. As much as I had tried to keep my games to myself, she had observed me; my mother was not only the pillows on the couch, the paint on the walls, but also inhabited the air and the trees. Now, she had issued me a directive; it was my turn to close the door on myself. I watched the poinsettias clandestinely that season, passing the plants quickly in the hall as though they were going to extend their stems and sting me. Finally, when no one was looking, I snuck up and plucked several petals from one of the plants and stole away with them up to my room. I tore open one of the petals and squeezed a drop of milky white sap onto my finger. I put my finger to my mouth and sucked the bitter sap off it. I lay on my bed and waited for death to come. It was just another game, except instead of archaeologist or vampire I was playing my mother. Behind her own closed door she was dying, as I too would soon die. What it would be like, I did not guess. We were not a religious family and I had no expectation

of an afterworld or an eternal father to embrace me. Instead of death I found sleep. That evening my mother roused me for dinner; in between the space of sleep and waking, she was there, shining above me, embracing me—my experiment successful.

In those days I craved the attention of older girls. They were the only ones with the capacity to provide comfort. They were surrogate mothers, and I could not get enough motherly love. There was Alexis, across the street, who would cradle me to her and ride me around the neighborhood on the back of her bike, instinctually protecting me because I was young and *in need*. I bore my feelings silently, never acting out, never thinking that I might have needed help. It was my older brother's job to act out, to provoke; I was the quiet one. Alexis played me Shaun Cassidy, Barry Manilow and the *Grease* soundtrack. Not long after, I made my own forays into record collecting. The first full-length albums I bought with my own money were Alice Cooper's *School's Out* and Van Halen's *Van Halen II*. These were followed almost exclusively by the entire KISS catalogue.

KISS satisfied the same morbid interest as bone-collecting; with KISS records I could engage in play without activity, without the anxiety of being observed. These were not people like you and me, they were creatures from another realm—a realm that rocked. I mean, *really* rocked. The *KISS Alive II* double album featured a photo of their live set. The stage was a virtual war zone, the band members barely visible against the pyrotechnics. Though I listened to the album over and over, it really was the marketing that got to me, the pastiche of horror. I favored rock songs "Christine Sixteen," "Detroit Rock City," and "Shout it Out." Despite the fact that I was consistently in bed by nine every night, I was, in my mind, poised to rock n' roll all night. *And party every day.* As

my personality dictated, I was immediately drawn to the cat character, Peter Criss. Criss knew his station and worked it methodically, betraying no need to show off. There were no unbiased KISS fans. Each had their own champion. The lizard-tongued Gene Simmons, with his blood-spurting mouth and flaming breath was the obvious choice. Few guys coped to liking Paul Stanley. He was the lover of the crew, and strictly for the ladies. Ace Frehley garnered his share of fans, with his spaceman-like guise. The music was secondary, though I was melancholically drawn to the song "Beth," and identified with the lyric, "*Me and the boys are playing, and I can't come home right now."* As a fourth grader this seemed particularly relevant.

Like Saturday-morning cartoons, KISS was embraced most fervently by children. They took Alice Cooper to his logical extension: the marketing of pure fantasy. It was the fantasy, the escape that enchanted. KISS signaled a new generation of music fan. This fact was brought pointedly home when my father took me to a music jamboree in Vermont. Folk favorites such as Arlo Guthrie and Pete Seeger were playing, people sold crafts out of VW buses. It was an event that congregated the last hold-over hippies. My father was in his element here, his appearance was earthy enough that he could fit in. He dressed well, but his beard was untrimmed, and hid his face behind its copse of rust red whiskers. When I looked at him it was the beard that I saw, a scrim he hid behind, a disguise.

I had never been to a concert before; my only reference for live music came from the jacket art from *KISS Alive II.* I patiently watched the show, waiting in vain for flames to shoot out of the back of the stage, or for Arlo to spit blood or at least a little fire. But no smoke was forthcoming. Arlo's guitar wasn't even electric. Bored, I collected a

dollar from my father and went to get my face painted. I could not believe it when the make-up artist told me he did not know who Peter Criss was. Didn't he understand they were a *phenomenon*? Fortunately, I was wearing my *KISS Alive* t-shirt to give him a visual reference. He did the best he could. It didn't matter that he had no silver paint, I only needed the *implication,* the hint of heavy metal to set me apart from the hippies around me. After he finished, I went to the playground. There, playing in the sand, also bored by the concert were the face-painted approximations of Paul, Gene and Ace. We greeted each other without ceremony—we had all expected as much.

"You look like a rodent," my father said when he saw me. He started for the car. I slouched my shoulders, falling in behind him. He could have his disguise, I would have mine.

There is a letter from Hadley in my mailbox. It's part of our mode of communication: when she has something to relate that I might not want to hear she puts it in a letter. It is quaint, romantic way to receive news; though devastating as it is irretractable. She explains that she is breaking up with Lew because she doesn't like what it is doing to me. I have provoked this, and feel compassion for Lew mixed with relief. After this, Lew stops talking to me, ceases to invite me over for dinners. We pass each other icily in the corridors of the class buildings.

One weekend later that autumn Hadley takes me home with her. She drives recklessly around the country roads towards Essex, cropping corners short, pumping the accelerator on straights. The Prout house is at the top of a hill on a blustery dead-end road that smells like the ocean. Her father is a gruff man who did not seem to know how

to perceive me; her mother is polite and reserved. Hadley's rebellion ends at the dinner table; I am surprised to see her behave like a good, obedient daughter. She eats in near silence. At night Hadley and I drink beer in a storage room filled with old shoes, Duckies, Birkenstocks, L.L. Bean boots. We lay on our backs, her hand across her mouth like a slash across a street sign. She now personifies sadness, emptiness. I cannot distinguish the natural sadness from my longing for her. Desire has conflated with anguish and became something more furious. It is only through her that I can be redeemed. Why has she asked me back here?

"There's a whole world of people out there to love," she says making it sound like a general statement, though I know it is directed at me. Since telling her I loved her I had committed that offence several times, each with increasing urgency. Saying the words was like drawing myself into existence, love was not a word we used in our family, only much later when its absence become conspicuous. So the time I said it to her was the first time I had said it. It was intoxicating, and after saying it to her, I would say it out loud to give myself a lift, even if I was saying it to nobody at all. What I was really saying is that there was hope. That life affirmed itself, even if you didn't want it to. "I love you," I'd say to the tree. "I'd love," to the back of my hand.

"A whole world," she repeats, as if in awe of that fact.

"There's a whole world of posers."

"Why do we have to just love *one* person?"

"Do you think it was just a decision I made?" I snap. I hate hearing her sound like a hippie, nor do I want to hear her philosophize.

"I had a huge breakdown over that very point," she says, oblivious to my quiet rage. "I can't get over it. Even if you love one person, other people are involved. It's so stupid."

"Then tell me you don't love me." I look at her, she won't look back.

"It's not like that. I do. But friendship is more important."

"Then tell me. Just tell me."

I think about the night at the lighthouse, how I had returned from the breakwater to smash a piece of driftwood against a wooden plank while everyone else looked on. I didn't speak to anybody until the next day, when Nicky rear-ended the car in front of us, the impact simultaneously denting his fender and snapping me from my mood, how I need increasingly destructive incidents to bring me back from my depths. If she didn't love me then I needed to hear it pronounced—to punish myself with it. I had become somebody who craved disappointment.

"Tell me again."

"Sometimes I worry about you," she says.

"Sometimes you should," I reply. We sit silently for a few moments before I get up to go to bed.

"I still like you," she says as I leave. "You don't buy into all this preppie bullshit."

"You told me that already," I say. "Stop telling me that."

IN THE SHADOW PLAY—It is one of the many power outages and the campus is growing dark. We have been instructed to stay in our dorms, but I need to get out. In the room next to mine the jocks pass the time by sitting in a circle trying to get erections

without touching themselves. I can hear their shouts and cajoles through the wall—each round won by a post-graduate known as The Gump. When it comes to such contests, The Gump *always* wins. I escape unseen out the back door and wend my way down to the Smokers' Rock. I have Black Flag straining from the tiny speaker of my tape player. On the river there is a teacher in a kayak working his way from one side of the Farmington to the other.

"Sometimes hardcore just sounds better in mono," says Horing, startling me. I had not noticed him in his tree. "Punk was not designed for state-of the-art equipment," he concludes. The statement sounds meaningful and we both listen to the rest of the tape to bear this truth out.

When the tape ends Horing points his cane at me.

"Henderson, you should kill yourself," he says. There is no malice in his voice. He made his statement offhandedly, as though it were an obvious revelation decoded by the river and the music and the darkened campus above us. I can tell Horing has considered that solution for himself and rejected it. Suicide is somehow too conventional for him. I keep silent at his suggestion. For Horing the matter is already settled, he lights another cigarette and watches the mouse-gray waters of the Farmington flow by. I too consider it settled. I will commit suicide. Dissolve into the antimatter of the invisible world. It seems like the only way out of my suffering. Horing's vocalization brings the act rushing into reality, summons it from my private thoughts into existence. The idea is instantly comforting, existence is less dire. The water flows quicker, the air is brighter, the jocks on my hall less asinine.

But how to do it? The campus springs to life with possibilities in the form of literary models from my obsessive reading. They reveal themselves to me like specters that have waited for the pivotal moment to become visible. The drowned Hans Giebenrath of Hesse's *Beneath the Wheel* calls to me from beneath the turgid Farmington's surface. Sylvia Plath puts her head in the industrial oven like a plump apple for baking. Paul from Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" throws himself on the train tracks as the express thunders through Windsor towards New York City. The deafening gunshot of Salinger's Seymour leaves in its wake a peaceful, enigmatic silence.

I consider what Bernie once said about Ian Curtis of Joy Division: *threw himself a tie party*. I like the sound of it. And with our dress code, ties are abundant in my closet. In my room that night I select one, a Liberty of London tie. My grandfather gave it to me. It was a ritual: Every time I came over to his house in Evanston he offered me a tie from his vast collection from his student days in Paris and Germany, or more recently from the Chicago Brooks Brothers or Capper & Capper. The Liberty tie is brown paisley, just weird enough to wear—and just thick enough to support my weight. Big tubular water pipes run across the ceiling, perfect to lash the tie to. I have no experience in noose making, so I estimate with a rough little knot and pull on the loop to make sure it will not come undone. I lock my door and pull my window shade down. In that wood-paneled room, the tree behind my window casting its skeletal shadow on my shade, it seems a quaint, even picturesque way to die. I have composed it like a photograph, the suicide will be a form of *self-expression*. This will be my song, the music wrung from an empty life.

It is after final dorm call, and I know nobody will seek me out until morning. I don't want this to be a cry for help; a cry for help would seem cowardly and dishonest. This will be no attempt, there will only be the action and its result. I relish the image of my dead body being found. After death the life I lead will become something else: people will go back and pick out conversations we had had, things I did, and reappraise them. Like detectives they will search for clues; insignificant things will become suddenly important to them. It will lend gravity to all these meaningless actions and words. Friends and family will ask themselves *where had they gone wrong*? They will search for portals into this alternate plane I live on and peer inside. They will reconstruct my life and make it colorful again.

I stand with the noose around my neck, at the edge of my desk chair, ready to push it back. I stand there for quite a while. I gather courage, meditate in that pose. I am a crane, a bird ready to take flight, waiting for that imperceptible rupture in the air that will signal my departure.

There is a knock on the door, then somebody tries the knob. "Henderson, what are you doing?" I recognize the voice, it's Doyle, interfering with my private execution. I never could resist Alden Doyle, even at this decisive moment. I am flattered to have him as a friend, for he has every reason to treat me coldly and with superiority, but he never does. Alden's friends are the star athletes, the elite who feel entitled to their places in the school and in the world outside. When I came back from summer running camp Doyle tackled me on sight, held me down. "Don't want you getting cocky. You're top runner now, but you won't be for long." And he was right, I never beat him that season. He took me home with him for a weekend on one occasion. He had a driver, employed by

his Congressman mother, a factotum who looked after him when his parents were away, which was a lot. Doyle's house was something of a deserted museum. It felt like a way station—uncared for and dark. Nothing in the fridge, we ate in restaurants and at his country club. He had told me his family considered him a liability: every time he got into trouble it impacted his mother's political career. Doyle's form of rebellion in his family of Democrats was to found the Young Republican's club on campus. I don't know how he had alighted on the idea that I was going to be his friend, for I was not popular like him. When I confessed to him that most of the time I was too overcome with anxiety to even go in the lunchroom, he laughed. "Just eat with me," he said. "Just look for me, and I'll make a place for you at the table." At times I thought I might have been politically viable to him as a social cause he was championing, a welfare project.

I quickly undo the tie from the pipe and replace the chair at the desk. I unlock the door and let Doyle in. A fist is flying at my face, stopping right before it connects. "Two for flinching." He gives me two solid smacks on the shoulder in accordance with the game the floor had adopted from the movie *Stand By Me*. "Jesus, it's like a crypt in here." He has sensed something is wrong. "You're not going to bed now, are you?" I am ashamed, like I have been caught playing with myself. I overcompensate, my voice tremulous. No, I was just listening to music. "Nothing's on," he says, pushing past me. "What's going on with you. You're not letting that girl Hadley get you down again." I admit that—just maybe—it was. "I don't get it. She's not that pretty. She just wants to be liked." I defend her but Doyle won't hear of it. I'm his friend and she doesn't like me, so there is something wrong with her. "She's manipulating you," he says. Perhaps he sees something I don't. "You've just got to get over it. It's our senior year. You'll be

gone soon enough. Next year you won't even be thinking about Hadley. Stop trying to be friends with her if you just want to fuck her. Otherwise forget about her. Come on, what you need is some tequila. You've got tequila? No?" he says. Doyle launches into a Pee-wee Herman imitation, doing the table top dance to the song "Tequila" from *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*. Pee-Wee Herman: Doyle's patron saint. It is a routine he has developed and honed over time. Pecking his hands in front of his hips, then behind like Bert from *Sesame Street*. A few moments ago I wanted to die and now all want is to be Alden's friend forever. If he would just stay near me nothing would go so wrong again. At that instant I love Doyle, not because he saved me, but because he is Doyle—charmed—lucky enough to be born into a powerful family, lucky enough to walk in on a friend who is about to take his own life. It is such an absurd conclusion to my plans for that night that I laugh despite myself. "Look," Doyle says, pleased. "Make them laugh, even if you have to make a fool of yourself to do it. Just keep them laughing. It will distract them from what a freak you are. It works for me." Doyle takes another mock swing at my face. "You're such a sucker. That's two more."

My arm has been sore all semester. I cannot learn how to stop flinching.

IDEAS AS OPIATES—Evenings when I can't study, when I haven't the patience to sit in the library and read, feeling oppressed not so much by sadness but by being confined and bored, I walk over to Lydia's apartment. Sometimes she is there, usually she isn't, which is also fine. She keeps her door unlocked and I slip in; it's okay, I have permission. Later when Lydia arrives home she is not surprised to see me there. If it is not me, it is one of the girls in her dorm who also seek her out. There is a group of them

who call themselves the Tumor Club, because they discovered in biology that the symptoms of a tumor are the same as depression. I am an honorary member of the Tumor Club. These girls; intellectual, attractive, congregate around Lydia, who can turn nobody away. While Lydia makes me a cup of tea I put on Joe Jackson's *Night & Day*: it is the only one in her collection I can tolerate.

Lydia hands me a mug and asks me what is on my mind. I quietly unburden myself to her. She listens patiently. I try to give her a journalistic account of my situation, trying to tell her about my suicide attempt, instead breaking down talking about Hadley. She has become a cipher for my anguish. I plead with Lydia, the most admirable person I know, to give me some sort of insight into my condition. She is quiet, the only sound between us is Jackson's voice.

"You're not alone. Think about those around you," she finally says.

For a moment I think she is calling attention to my self-centeredness. I am conscious that my world has turned inward, and spare few thoughts for the problems and concerns of others.

"We don't choose who we love," she says. "It is out of our control. It just happens, for better or worse, you have to see where it goes." It's then that I realize she is speaking of herself and Brian. She has broached the taboo subject. She pauses to let the admission sink in, and looks me in the eye to be sure I understand what she is talking about. With the constraints of teacher and student momentarily thrown off, I become aware of the heavy burden of this secret she harbors, how alone she is with it. She immediately appears both pathetic and heroic in her love. No longer the rigid goddess or omniscient mentor, Lydia is vulnerable, human.

"It's nine-thirty," she says. "You'd better get back to your dorm."

I am glad I have missed curfew, the grounds are empty as I walk back to my room. Lights are on in students' rooms, I can see silhouettes moving within; cigarettes are being snuck, term papers readied, music played—life is transpiring within this tableau of benign indifference. In my mind's eye I have laid waste to the buildings on this route so many times before, leveling everything on a mental whim. Briefly the world is substantial, a place for living. For this I am grateful.

During the summer before boarding school Sara and I would talk on the phone late into the night. We sometimes both fell asleep with the receiver off the cradle, the line still connected. I remember waking up with the sound of her breathing on the other end of the line and the needle on my phonograph having reset itself after side one of Tears for Fears' *The Hurting*. It was an album I played a lot that summer—incidental music to a lonely, inert suburban night. If I couldn't express my suffering over my family, there was plenty of product out there that acted as a conduit, opened that circle of pain, filtered it. *The Hurting* looked inward in a way that fetishized narcissism, and set the tone for so many New Wave acts to follow. *Is it an horrific dream?* I always loved that they used the technically correct 'an' rather than common usage 'a.' Tears For Fears was into book learning. The duo, made up of Roland Orzabal and Curt Smith, had been to school; their first album was an extended tribute to a book on primal therapy. Also telling was the fact that in the printed lyrics they capitalize the word 'pain' throughout the song "The Hurting," and in "Memories Fade," "Suffer the Children," and "Watch Me Bleed." Pain was a proper noun in The TFF lexicon: emotional pain, the kind sensitive young

musicians are so prone to. It was as though Pain was a third party to the duo, named like a muse. Pain—examined, internalized and regurgitated in the form of this ponderous, almost embarrassingly sincere album.

The songs from *The Hurting* make for poor nostalgia. Like a passage in an old diary that seemed profound at the time, they provoke a wince of embarrassment. Few people wonder what happened to Tears for Fears. Like the Cure, they are encased in the treacley amber of that decade. And in a way they are the prototypical 80s band. The Cure, like the well-embalmed, stuck around. But Tears for Fears, with their boutique version of new wave, their limp pony tails, their tight German Bauhaus clothing, begged to be listened to, cherished and abandoned like a toy one outgrows. *The Hurting* excavated childhood sorrows, encouraged grown men to cry. They prompted us to feel our pain, to *watch them bleed*. Then they went away. Well, not entirely away, just to mainstream success, so much so that it broke them like a weepy eyeliner-wearing WHAM.

The Hurting, TFF's first and by far best album, contained so many odes to the coddling of childhood miseries that it felt like budget therapy. "All alone/ You've been told you're wrong/ Can you see my Pain/ Can you please explain, the Hurting." Orzabal and Smith were permanent residents at Heartbreak Hotel. But who had broken their hearts? Nobody: they had been born broken. Their album eulogized the romance between two selves: one giving care, the other perpetually wounded. When on talks shows the narcissism of spirituality began to supplant the carnality of religion; when the notion of the 'inner child' was imprinting itself on the public consciousness. And Tears for Fears' inner-child had been mistreated something terrible, kicked about the

playground, or perhaps it had just mistakenly wandered into a Einstuerzende Neubauten song.

The most successful tracks on *The Hurting* are exactly the most forlorn, self-pitying ones. The songs surface like recovered memories of childhood abuse. "Pale Shelter," "The Hurting," "Suffer the Children," and "Mad World." The music, mostly synthesizer generated, was incidental to the confessional songwriting. Musically, there were no sharp edges, nothing on which the duo could injure themselves. Joy Division-lite, they wanted to unleash their rage, but couldn't undo the childproof top. TFF didn't rock—it moped, and kind of shook back and forth a bit, then drifted into a colicky sleep. One imagines Orzabal as one of Edward Gorey's Ghastlycrumb Tinies, abandoned in the dark corner of some damp uninhabited house. Even at the time, when the songs were the most relevant, I still sensed their cartoonishness. Such revelations as the ones provoked by *The Hurting* are always accompanied by a bit of embarrassment, if not shame. But that was part of the process of *The Hurting*: to push those feelings to the fore—to come to terms with that shame and hurt and to move on. Listening to TFF was therefore a very personal and solitary experience. I never brought up the band to other people, never hoped to hear it on the radio when others were around, and would have openly dissed it if I did. *The Hurting* was designed to be listened to alone in bed. It had its own weird integrity in that way. It was a secret, guilty compulsion, a closed circuit. Each listener an individual in a tribe that rarely meet, whose human contact comes from vinyl rather than from each other.

Even for a mopey teenager TFF was a guilty pleasure, because I knew I was indulging my feelings of self-pity when I listened to them. One can only 'indulge' in

self-pity; one cannot simply experience it. Self-pity was a forbidden feeling, anathema to our culture of achievement, and the word has become a slur toward the expression of sadness and dissatisfaction. He who engages in self-pity is to be mocked, the feelings behind the self-pity to be dismissed. But self-pity was my secret pastime, something I practiced with music. Other guys masturbated, I lay in my bed scrutinizing my sadness. This was not a supercilious indulgence; the feelings had a very real purpose: alone in my room the self-pity acted as a suture to more destructive feelings, a redirection of new-found angst and energy that was potentially explosive and violent, all thanks to puberty. Orzabal belts out the lines "Look forward to a future in the past/ Memories fade but the scars still linger," with such pride, such enthusiasm, as though he was not wallowing in his self-pity but reveling in it. That was the value of TFF. It elicited a coming-out for the depressed. It was call to arms for those who nursed their childhood traumas. TFF refuted the stigma of emotional pain, of the shame involved in sadness.

As sad as the songs are on *The Hurting*, TFF had a very optimistic agenda, and self-destruction was not part of it. You didn't want to have a beer to this band—herbal tea or a milkshake would be better. It tapped into self-pity and attempted to transform it into something more positive. Orzabal and Smith were alchemists of mood. The songs themselves acted as a balm, a palliative. *The Hurting* was designed to be engaged with, unlike most pop music. Their agenda was, in retrospect, rather ambitious. It was a Trojan horse, the self-help message slipped in under the guise of mope rock. And TFF aimed for the core, for that nebulous space of childhood disappointment and abandonment. They provoked not teenage angst—there was punk for that—but sorrow for the past. They revered innocence and sang about their mourning of its corruption. In

this way they were separate from most of the punk and new wave bands I listened to. It was intentionally, deviously positive.

TFF should have gone the way of the Violent Femmes—relegated to permanent cult status—but by some cosmically lucky chance they didn't. "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" was an unlikely top 40 hit and suddenly TFF was on people's lips. They made people want to shout! shout! to *let it all out*. They were sensitive but safe, and you could sing along. When a small band you treasure suddenly finds success on such an enormous scale, you cannot help but feel a bit betrayed. Their mainstream profile meant a loss of relevance to their original fans, to whom TFF remained pied pipers, guiding procession of wounded children from this dreary planet towards a celestial plane where growing up didn't hurt, where mother-love wasn't coupled with imminent abandonment, where Pain was a remote, forgotten master.

Walking the paths in between classes I routinely break down in a imperceptible, desolating ways. I can no longer look people in the eyes because being looked at hurts. The sound of my name, being called back into the world, is startling. I am rusted from the inside out. Daylight hours are spent with the shades drawn, wincing beneath my covers, rocking back and forth, shivering, or reciting whatever song I am listening to—waiting for that little payoff a sad song gives, waiting for that tiny release, that plasticised confirmation that I am not alone—using that placebo to help me through the rest of the day.

It would be nice to think that feelings could be put to rest when the album goes back into the sleeve, and left on the shelf. But, like a quality of loneliness, the good feeling a

song provokes is ephemeral. Music is not enough and ultimately it fails. There are days in school when I am so incapacitated by sensitivity that I can not walk down the hallway, when the mere gaze of another person hurts me. After this useless pain, how can I not want to hurt back? Jay, the New Trier misfit, with his butter knife; me with my switchblade, purchased at a Chinese goods store under the Belmont El tracks, drawing a line across my skin, letting the damask blood rise from the wound and flow over my skin. The message of the TFF line "For one so young fell so old/ Watch me bleed" became literal. I turn on myself. Those nights in my dorm room, there can be no salve in the form of a song. The pain I need expressed is physical. I use the soft white palette of my chest for this ritual, dragging the blade back and forth until it breaks the skin. It is hard work, and the pain diminishes once the skin was broken, and release has been achieved. I hold the wound, nursing myself until sleep comes.

My grades are in a free fall, teachers are warning me of impending failure. I stop studying, for the act of studying implies a certain faith in the future, of which I have none. One day I cease to do pre-calculus entirely, simply putting my pencil down before a test and refusing to pick it up. All these formulas nag me, I haven't any attention to give them. I am failing my photo course too. The pin-hole camera I have made from a Quaker Oats box sits in my closet, next to the handful of photos I have taken with it. Through its lens the world becomes a myopic place: dorms bleed into the sky, bodies are transparent or blurred as they moved through the exposure. Everything looks filtered through swamp water. There is a truth in these expressions. I examine the self-portrait I have taken: the photo is fluid, it looks as though it is a reflection in a pool of water that

has begun to swirl down a drain. I title it "Miserable Lie" and it will be the only photo I hand in all term.

My math teacher finally insists that I go see one of the student counselors when I hand her back a test without a single equation worked out. There is only my name on the page, the rest untouched. She asks me to stay after class.

"It means nothing," I tell her.

"It doesn't have to mean anything. It's a test," she responds. "It means you're failing," she adds after I shrug. I can see she is offended, but it is easier to face her than the vague un-apprehending gazes of my classmates, easier than gauging Hadley's reaction, upon which too much depends.

"If you drop the course now I can give you an Incomplete," she says. It is a negotiation. She does not want to deal with me. I accept her offer and do not return to that class again.

"What are you going to do?" Hadley asks. In our plan to make a mess of our lives, only I was successful. In this she has betrayed me. Hadley has turned out to be a good student and star athlete. Despite this, she clings to me even tighter.

"I don't know. Fail out I guess."

"You can't fail out. You can't leave this place. Don't leave me *alone* in this place."

During a brief but violent Saturday afternoon storm the lights have been knocked out. We're down at Smokers' Rock. Cigarette butts dot the dried mud, names are chiseled into tree trunks. A makeshift lean-to has been constructed from garbage bags for

when it rains. As usual, Horing lies impossibly poised on his branch. He takes one look at Hadley and spits. He is letting me know that she does not belong there, that I've betrayed some unspoken code. Hadley is one of the normal people. She is preppie, a jock. She doesn't belong down here with the misfits, the malcontent drinkers and drug users. He looks at me, full of malice, but he keeps quiet and smokes his cigarette.

The thought of failing out is not so terrible, obliterating the Island, becoming an invisibility. But that would mean returning home.

"I have nowhere to go," I say.

"Me neither."

There was a current of anguish running in her that she lets slip in incidental comments. Is that all there is between us, sadness spun into tethering ropes? The sky swells like a bruise, and though the rain had relented, condensation dampens my face. The air darkens by the flooded clouds as if night has fallen.

We sit for a few minutes, feeling Horing's eyes on our backs. Hadley finds nothing special about the place so I take her from there. The weird little counter-culture that exists at Smokers' Rock is not something we will share. Nor does Hadley understand the music I listen to. Her tastes are pedestrian: Dire Straits, Simon & Garfunkel, and Sting. One time she sang Cindi Lauper's "True Colors" to me as we sat next to Founders Hall. By some wicked trick of the mind, I will always have a soft spot for that song and have felt well disposed toward Cindi Lauper since.

The emergency generator has yet to get running. Branches litter the ground, whole trees have fallen. At Hadley's dorm I check for Nicky. He's not there and we take a spot behind the soda machine, quieted of its electric hum. Moments later, we hear Nicky enter

the building. He sends somebody over to Hadley's room. We kept quiet and listen to him chatting with Mimi, Hadley's roommate, then we hear him depart. She is sitting by my side, our shoulders touching. It is easier to talk to her that way, without having to look at her, our voices disembodied. Looking at her just kills me.

"Haven't you ever been in love? Don't you love anybody?"

"No. I don't know what love is. I don't think I can. I don't understand it."

"Couldn't you just try?"

She pauses. In her silence I hope she is coming to the conclusion that she can not live without me, that I've been right all along. If she is going to take my sadness then she would also have to take my love, for they are indistinguishable.

"You'll find somebody," she finally says. "Somebody beautiful. You'll tell me about it when you do." But the beauty she speaks of has been made useless, robbed of its potency. I want her if that means destroying my academic record, if that means losing friendships. I want her, and if that means annihilating myself *through her* then that was what I'll do. I hold her close in my mind, as if she is already a memory. I feel the torment of that memory, missing her. The secret I should tell her right now is that at this moment I don't even want to be with her, I want to be alone, I want to be in bed, listening to The Smiths, overcome with sorrow. My sorrow is more manageable than her person. My sorrow has never failed me.

"You know those signs on the side of the road that warn you about deer crossing?"

"Yeah?"

"Why are they there?"

"I don't know."

"Just take a guess."

"So deer don't get hit by cars," she says.

"That's right," I say. I can hear the wind bluster and batter the windows; the storm is picking up again. After a few moments of silence the generator kicks in and the lights came back on.

SING ME TO SLEEP

Call me morbid, call me pale, I've spent too long on your trail. Far too long chasing your tail. And if you have five seconds to spare, then I'll tell you the story of my life.

—"Half a Person," The Smiths

It's time the tale was told, of how you take a child, and you make him old.

—"Reel Around the Fountain," The Smiths

DIG A SHALLOW GRAVE—I've never known loneliness like I know it this winter. It has come, an invisible silent season to envelop me, to brace me, because the real core of the winter is not snow, but long, clutching cold. A solitary crystallized form, time is frozen in this secret sickness. Days last longer, moments expand and burst. I am stuck on The Island, suspended there in my unformed shape. From this place I will never leave. Graduation is coming in the spring, but I can no more imagine that day than one a hundred years from now. I sleep through classes, miss more meals. I resent these appetites: for food, for the society of people. I defend myself with solitude, but the winter seeps into my room anyway; evenings I sit next to my window and melt frost on the glass with my breath.

On a frigid night in December there comes a knock on my door. It is an authoritative knock, that of a teacher. It is Mr. Estes, which is strange, because he lives

off campus. He tells me to get dressed, I have an appointment. I accept this without question or resistance and put on the sweater that is hanging over the back of my desk chair. Hadley bought me the sweater for my birthday, picked out from the J.Crew catalog. We both had autumn birthdays, I had bought her a pair of mittens, as though we were preparing each other for the cold.

"He's a good man. Someone you can talk to," is what Estes says of my impending appointment. We drive off the campus, but we do not drive off The Island. The Island goes where I go. This part of Connecticut seems more expansive and desolate. The trees have gone bare, the homes look austere in the moonlight, as though the loss of foliage has depleted them of their affluence. Estes keeps quiet for the trip, occasionally asking me about my progress on the track team. He likes me despite himself—he is a conservative, a coach of football and wrestling who teaches my class in the New Testament.

Estes escorts me around the back of the Doctor Crump's ranch home and to the door of a basement study. He introduces me to my psychologist, and tells me he'll wait in the car. Dr. Crump is an older man, but not quite old enough to appear wizened. He wears a cardigan with bright colors stitched through it, certainly a daughter or wife's effort to put some pizzazz in his dress. He looks at me oddly, as if I have caught him off guard, as if he was expecting somebody else. He directs me to a couch in the back of the room. I sit in the middle, then move to one end. He waits on silently, looking tired. I too am tired. I want to go back to school. It is Saturday night. There is a movie playing on campus. Others have organized drinking parties, or excursions into the woods to get high. I am on Dr. Crump's couch, suspicious of him in his comfortable home, his

degrees displayed on the walls. What could he have to say about my life? Had Dr. Crump ever been part of the Tumor Club? The mere fact that he has committed to life enough to become a doctor invalidates his credibility in my estimation.

"Why are you here?" he asks.

"Because they drove me here," I say.

"But *why* did they drive you?" He appears interested. His face contorts itself into a version of concern. His basement is cold on this night. I want to tell him what I have told no one, about my suicide attempt, that most of the time I want only to die, then only hate myself more for not having the resolve to follow through with the act.

"Because it's too far to walk," I say, suppressing a grin. *Easy shot*.

Dr. Crump shifts in his seat. I didn't ask to come here and he knows it. I'm sure he has meet with unwilling adolescent patients before, and does not look up to the task at the present moment.

"You're a senior," he says, checking a folder. I already have a file.

"Yes."

"What are you going to do after graduation?" he asks. He has the question all wrong—nobody does anything but go to college.

"I don't know," I say. Crump writes something in my folder. The folder seems terribly absorbing, like I am giving him clues to a crossword that he is near completing. I have no intention of leaving the Island, but I'm not going to tell him that.

"Where are you going to go to college?" he asks, still not looking at me.

"You tell me," I say, wanting to test the precision of that folder.

"How would I know?" he says, looking up at me. I shrug. He writes something else.

It is not a great start to my talking cure. But if it will keep the teachers at school off my back, keep my parents pleased, then I will go to Doctor Crump. In the following weeks it is agreed, with my mother's consent, that he would come to the campus once a week and I will visit him in an office set aside for such occasions. The office is in a corridor with teachers' offices, but no classrooms, so my status as a damaged person is kept secret.

"How are things this week," he would ask.

"The same," I'd answer.

"The same as what?" he would ask, followed by the inevitable shrug, then an interval during which he wrote notes.

My folder was thickening, progress was being made.

Only later I will realize the value of my trips to Crump's office. He gave me little enlightenment, few helpful words passed between us. I came to dread the tedium of the visits, the long silences that I felt responsible for. Nor did he seem to have much interest in me. As far I could tell I was nothing more to him than a weird kid with an case of emotional hiccups. But his mere presence gave me insight into my condition. I am there in the office, nobody else is. There was something wrong, something that has been identified, at least on an administrative level. I was being nudged from the flock, isolated.

One afternoon I look out over the quad from the third floor window of Crump's on-campus office. The first major snow of the season had fallen the night before. Students getting out of lunch are pouring out onto the lawn. From my perspective the quad looks like an ice rink. The scene against the red brick of the buildings freezes into a diorama, halts completely, then quickens again; students chase each other with handfuls of snow, make snow angels as though they are small children again. I stand in silence with Dr. Crump. *I don't want to be different anymore*, I think. I want to lose this feeling of separation. *I want to be normal.*

Samantha is a former cheerleader from Greenwich who hadn't gotten into the right colleges, so she is taking a post graduate year at The Island. She has long, wispy blonde hair and wears monogrammed Shetland sweaters beneath a leather flight jacket. She looks stuck in the 70s; the pretty heroine in a slasher movie who survives because she is too wholesome to die. We became fast friends during the detention periods assigned for missing class. Sam keeps a low profile, she has already conquered the high school social strata, her boyfriend goes to Boston College—she has nothing to prove. She speaks in dismissive tones of the popular girls on The Island, wholly uninterested in their approval. "This will be the best years of their lives and they don't even know it. It's sad, really."

She was also quick to make fun of the jocks: Brian Mahoney, my next door neighbor was her favorite target. I thrilled to her mean-spiritedness when she spoke about him, Mahoney, who was elected hall prefect in his first year of school, who was

varsity soccer and baseball. With his politician's smile, his collars starched rigidly up, he looked like a caricature of a preppie, when in fact he was on an athletic scholarship.

I quickly attune myself to Sam's mood, which is usually buoyant and cheerful. I watch her when she smiles, note how she laughs. She does these things so naturally, and appears so radiant that I catch myself unconsciously imitating her poses and expressions. When walk into town I observe her confident gait. Dazzled by her utter stability, I become a student of Samantha, learning from her how to behave like a happy, secure person.

"Still in love with the girl next dorm?" says Horing, lying on his branch.

"Oh leave it alone."

Well I wonder, do you see me when we pass?/ I half die. I decide that I need to drop out of Hadley's life completely. If I cannot kill myself, if I haven't the nerve, then I will cut the tether that binds us. My emotions are a poison well, when they should be nourishing, they infect. I too will become an absence, a fleeting phantasmal figure slipping through the hallways. I will be a glimpse, a double-take. Look for me on the periphery—a flicker in the corner of the eye. I will undo time, unravel it like the friendship bracelets we wove for each other.

It is easy at first, I know her schedule. I know her habits, where she walks, when she eats. I test her, hoping she will seek me out, waiting alone in my room for her to send somebody to fetch me during study hall, but she doesn't. She never comes to see me. One night in the entrance way to her dorm I inform her of my plan. It is a new building,

the lights in the hall are bright, so different from the dimly lit corridors and passageways of the old dorms

"I'm going away. I mean not exactly away. I just can't see you anymore." She laughs. I am dramatizing again, breaking up with her without ever having been with her. "So don't try to come and find me, okay?" She looks up at me, her eyes smiling with pity and a sort of familiar love. She either doesn't understand what I am saying to her, or is pretending she doesn't understand. She laughs again and says something about long weekend. There had been a plan in the works for a mass exodus to the coast. I shake my head, give her a hug and say good-bye, as though I am leaving school and never returning. Nights after that I stop going over to her dorm, instead I went to the Smokers Rock. Horing is pleased with my quietism.

"You finally get over her?"

"Done. Over."

"She looked like a boy anyway." .

I dodge her in between classes. I stick to the outer paths, circumnavigating buildings instead of cutting through the main quad. Occasionally I see her among a group of people, or I pass near the basketball court where she is practicing for the winter season. Each time I see her it is a jolt of awful energy, a stab. On the lawn of the quad, after lunch she confronts me.

"Where have you been?" she asks.

"I'm *disappearing*."

"Where? Why?"

"I'm working on some stuff now. I told you."

"I don't remember."

"We already talked about it. I'm disappearing."

"Okay already," she says huffily, stalking back to her end of the quad. The next day I get a note in my mail box from her, written hastily and torn from a loose-leaf notebook, the writing a tiny island of text on the yawning white of the page:

> *Henderson, if you ever change your mind or if you ever need a friend, I'll be there. But I guess I understand and I kind of knew something like this would happen so it's O.K. But don't forget that I'm here for you.*

But I will not need her, I tell myself (though I fold up the note and keep it in my wallet, where it will remain until it disintegrates). The decision had been impulsive, and reckless—proof of life. I decide to see how far I could take it, and stop seeking out Lew, Vince, Annie and Denny, keeping time with the smokers by the river. I am beginning to learn the power of leaving. Leaving is good, if you know the one rule: not to be the one who stays behind.

SHYNESS IS NICE—In her basement, I had fallen into a sort of love with my next door neighbor, Bridget. We hid under a shelter of pillows and sheets, hugging each other, pretending a tornado swirled around us, or a thunderstorm raged outside our fort.

It did not matter what the weather was like outside, in Bridget's basement it was always storming. We knelt, clinging to each other, cheek to cheek as the world outside was obliterated. For us, the storm we created had been real, and afterwards we fell to the floor, kissing. Just five years old, I liked to have Bridget kiss me, it calmed me after our pantomime. She too liked to be kissed, and we kept a careful tally of who had received more attention. If things fell too strongly in my favor she held me down, forcing her cheek to my lips. I always wanted to push the game further, to a place where the peril was actual, to find the real storm to endure, or to succumb to affection until I was satisfied.

In years since, I have encountered girls and women who share Bridget's particular scent: vinegary, and a bit of lilac. It never failed to bind me to these strangers, to provoke a feeling of ephemeral longing and protectiveness. I remember when my mother came to me and asked if I had seen Bridget lately. I had: we were playing in her back yard, picking cherries from the tree that stooped over the fence that divided our properties. Bridget was missing, my mother said. I had been the last person to see her. She relayed the information to Bridget's mother over the phone. I had left Bridget there in the back yard, nobody had seen her since. From our back porch I looked out over at Bridget's house, the memory of her poignant in my mind. She had departed: had found a way to another place. Bridget existed, but not in this world of dingy boiler rooms, cherry mush, and fatherless homes. I admired her. She had been brave enough to let the storm take her.

Henceforth, anytime a child went missing, I was held rapt by reports in the news of their whereabouts. Little else fixated me so thoroughly, this child who had become an

absence, an essence of measurements and characteristics. All that was left was their contours reconstructed in printed articles, their likeness in a school photo, where they were inevitably smiling. They had transformed, caterpillar-like, into something more rare and appreciable. This child became news, broken up into broadcast, like the little boy in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. They were worried over, and in their on way, this person had become somehow *experienced*. Whether they were found or not, something unredeemable had been taken from them and something un-retractable had been conferred upon them.

When Bridget was later returned—she had been taken by her father, who then reconsidered—I beheld her with a sense of envy. She had a magician father who was willing to disappear her like an assistant, and return her just when the audience could not bare the suspense any further. Her father was a Zorro in the night, she was the distressed damsel. He was a comic book character, a misunderstood superhero. Our games in the basement stopped after that, and not long after I moved to another neighborhood.

"Suffer Little Children," is the last track on the 1984 Sire Records debut of The Smiths' album *The Smiths*. It is not a distinguished song by pop radio sensibilities. Nor is it included on any of the live bootleg cassette tapes I've heard, or greatest hits anthologies, but it's the track that effects me most on the album. "Suffer Little Children" is one of these stirring songs, like Big Star's "Kanga Roo" that is more about the silences and subtraction than the music; what's left out is more interesting than what's there. The lyrics narrate, almost sympathetically, the true-crime tale of Myra Hindley and her boyfriend Ian Brady, who together kidnapped and murdered several children on the

moors outside of Manchester, England. It was a particularly heinous deed during which Hindley baited the children for Brady to torture and murder, true-crime airport pulp as narrated by Edgar Allen Poe. Singer/songwriter Morrissey approaches the material with a moral ambiguity, over the course of the song he speaks directly to the victims as though he were Brady himself, then communes with the spirits of the dead children. The song feels like an eerie séance around a mass grave, "Dig a shallow grave and I lay me down/ We may be dead and we may be gone, but we will be right by your side. We will haunt you when you laugh/ You might sleep but you will never dream."

"Suffer Little Children" lays out the themes that run through the catalog of The Smiths' work. In this song Morrissey aims for a deep place: a nexus of innocence where the criminal and victim are inseparable. "Suffer Little Children" is only this dynamic at its most literal level. It is a theme that runs through even their most innocent of love songs, as in "These Things Take Time." "You took me behind a disused railway line/ And you gave me something that I won't forget too soon." No songwriter fetishizes his own victimization, or his own perceived victimization, like Morrissey. The notion of symmetrical, mutual love without subjugation or an abuse of power is nonexistent in The Smiths' oeuvre.

The Moor Murders recall for me the most one of the most notorious serial killers in the country, who was committing his gruesome crimes in a suburb not far from my own. When John Wayne Gacy was finally caught in Joliet, Illinois, the authorities found thirteen children buried in various places in his household, including crawl spaces and his backyard. Like Brady, Gacy was an intelligent man who lived and thrived in his community while perpetrating is crimes. He had no conspirator to assist him, so he

procured his victims from the pool of boys he came into contact with through his construction company, in addition to kidnapping them off the street. In his spare time he entertained neighborhood kids by dressing up as a clown. It was a riveting story, not least of all to a young child who suspected clowns were inherently evil all along. It was better than Stephen King, who even adopted the clown motif for his book *It.* Gacy, with his smiling, rotund face—he looked like any number of craftsmen who made their living on the North Shore. He appeared avuncular, his criminal mind hidden behind the doughy banality of his face. I could not help but also place myself in the body of the victims. Imagining the malevolent clown that came to lead me away; to pluck from a household that felt loveless, to entice me with both humor and evil; to produce, from up his sleeve, the flower of death.

It was a seductive story, the way Brothers Grimm tales are seductive to the mind of a child. Sometimes I walked the quiet streets of Evanston keeping a reverent lookout for clowns, going through a strange, brief neurotic phase where I would not allow myself to be seen by passing cars. Any approaching auto gave me the creeps, as though the driver's gaze was a physical touch falling on me like a hand. If I was in my front yard, I hid in the bushes, sure that were I to allow myself to be seen I would be recognized as a victim by some monster cruising in his Ford Galaxy.

The first line off the first Smiths album: "It's time the tale were told/ Of how you take a child, and you make him old." It's a drowsy, lyric-based song, a 'word song,' as Elliott Smith would say, that declaims, "don't expect too much of us." Indifference, a passionate sort of passivity was their mode. As hormones took hold, as girls seemed

more and more remote from my experience, there was no band that I turned to for consolation more than The Smiths. I'm sure some shy day student carried around *Hatful of Hollow* on her walkman and kept her head down in the hall on the way to Advanced English. We might have become friends given the right circumstances, but probably not. Less than any other band, did I want to share my enthusiasm for The Smiths. I didn't want them out in the world, for this world, with all its poseurs, was unworthy and did not understand.

In his lyrics Morrissey pontificates like an assistant professor in the study of alienation, seeming to have insight into me without ever knowing me. He was like a kindly librarian who had taken me under his wing, dropping names like Yeats and Wilde in an unpretentious, clubby way. Morrissey confirmed my suspicion that misery was romantic, that there was glamour in loneliness, or at least in its expression. The Smiths' music was palpable proof that I was not alone in the world.

Me: etherized, in bed on a sunny afternoon, stirring up my own ghosts. The passion of a music lover is ultimately a lonely one, investing in a person or group of people who are physically unavailable. Music became so important, because it formed a connection with people, even though those people I would never meet and only visit briefly, for the price of a ticket when they were passing through town. It is easy to be a fan, to form safe relationships with a body of music, because it will never ask anything of you. And it never disappointed you, that recording that was the same each and every time you put it on. The message riding in as if by sorcery, or in a Trojan horse. It is a palliative. Listening to a Smiths song I recognized myself—I liked the song, so was it too not possible to like my own reflection a bit more?

ADD IT UP—Over the phone my mother airs news of my older brother's life: he is now in school in Ohio, has broken up with his high school sweetheart. I can't pinpoint why, but news of Mish's life overburdens me, and I simply tune it out. My mother goes through phases when she totally denies that my Mish and I hate each other. I play along, for her sake. But when she talks to me about Mish, it is as though she is relating news of a stranger. My relationship with Mish only counts in negative space. Growing up, he was either out of the house or casting his shadow of aggressive trouble at home. As an infant, when my mother brought me home from the hospital he had thrown a shoe at me before she could even put me down—the relationship went downhill from there.

When Mish had a problem, he acted out, and was prone to explosive tantrums. His influence, much of it destructive, held me mesmerized. There was nothing I could do against him. Once, when we were being cared for by a babysitter, he convinced me to strip myself and run around in front of her naked. I was so flattered that he had a plan that included me that I did not refuse. I took my clothes off and appeared before the girl who had been hired to watch us, mortifying her. Mish observed the scene from the hallway. "Keep going," he urged. "Try to kiss her." It was cold in a the living room, and I had so much confidence in his guidance that I did not worry that this drama unfolded in front of a bay window where anybody could have peered in. I approached her, and she yelled, jumped to her feet and ran around me, fleeing the room. I stood naked in the living room waiting for Mish to inform me of the second part of the plan. When he didn't show up, I put a quilt around my body and went to find him. He was

watching TV, apparently having forgotten all about me, kicked back in a butterfly chair. He looked at me, then shook his head; he didn't need to say anything—I was beyond pity.

After fifth grade, when we moved over the Wilmette border to a large red brick house on a cobblestone street, Mish, older by a year and a half, seemed to thrive immediately. He needed the clean slate, in Evanston he had been banned from several houses because of his misbehavior. Due to the move I had lost years of hard-won friends. Whereas I sat in my room or walked down to the lakefront alone, Mish seemed to find his peers without looking, as though there had been a vacant space just waiting for him to fill. In school hallways he would disclaim any relation to me.

I wasn't envious, I just accepted it as the natural condition of being me. I always kept my eye out for the version of his friends who were my age, but they just didn't seem to exist. Mish's friends were 'into' *Clockwork Orange*, smoked pot and stayed out late. The only kid I could find to spend time with was Bob Ward, the child of a single mother who still lived at home with her widowed father, a judge who kept a loaded .44 Magnum in the drawer next to his bed. Bob was a hyperactive kid, and his mother let him run wild. Nobody wanted Bob in their house, nobody wanted to cop to friendship with him, though neighborhood kids could always be found at Bob's because you were free to spit on the carpet or leave spent Puddin' Pop sticks around. *Look*, Bob said, hocking a wad of sit onto the green shag, *it's allowed*. I'd learned to spit just to take advantage of that privilege.

Mish soon found girlfriends, one girl walked three miles from Winnetka to sit on our front porch and wait for him to get home. In early high school, some of these girls

were impossibly sophisticated; girls who listened to Laurie Anderson and smoked clove cigarettes could be heard giggling in his attic room. In early high school I would watch my brother make love to a girl through the glass French doors that separated out TV room from the living room. He didn't care that I was there to watch his shape rise and fall, then finally collapse beneath the afghan. There was nothing to be embarrassed about because him I simply wasn't there.

While Mish was getting high, breaking curfew, ostensibly having sex, I was developing an unhealthy relationship with a pixilated frog. I'd ride my bike, a Scrambler 36 x 36 five miles up trail that runs along the train tracks to the nearest video arcade, Tilt. Housed in a strip mall on Green Bay Road, just before you reach Glencoe. There was a smell to the place: the heat coming off the video screens, unwashed youth, it was the most familiar smell imaginable, some olfactory analog of boy-hormone. Basically, arcades like Tilt were pubs for kids. The owner circulated with his change maker, the tokens valuable little talismans of anticipation of a digital fix. But I by-passed all the Zaxons and Galagas, all the shoot-um-up games. What awaited me was a perpetually reincarnating frog that *needed guidance*. The electronic preamble played, familiar as any pop song. There was nothing to shoot at in Frogger, no buttons to push, just the knob of the joystick to manipulate. Its onomatopoeic sound. I loved this frog, perhaps more than a pet, because I was invested in it, was responsible for its life and to blame for its inevitable death. Shepherding it across the street; like the best video games, its concept is elegant. My vector changed with increasing difficulty, each screen presenting cars that moved increasingly faster. One false move…even tagging the tail end of a car precipitates video gore, the frog's eyes complete with 'x's. At Frogger I was an artist.

The world is brutal. Innocent things need protection. Everything I needed to say, I was saying at Frogger.

When I finally entered high school, I made friend with a girl on the cross country team. Liz Gilbert was bright, sympathetic and laughed a lot. Her large family was Catholic and lived in a rambling Winnetka house. We talked on the phone at night and claimed each other as dates to dances neither of us wanted to go to. Mish observed this then immediately started hitting on her. It was as if this tiny island of my social life was unacceptable to him, and he decided to appropriate it for himself. But there was no way Liz would like Mich. She was too *real*. She'd see right through him. To my amazement, Liz took the bait. "Um, can I talk to Mish now?" she asked after a few awkward minutes on a phone call I had thought was for me. Mish, pleased with his conquest, began referring to her as the 'Freshman Bush.' *Gotta have the Freshman Bush over for dinner soon*, he said to a friend over the phone. During their entire relationship I never heard him use her real name. *Freshman Bush and I are going to the movies.* I couldn't imagine being in love with Liz. She was not unattractive, but not the person you would immediately pick from a crowd. She was unlike all the precocious girls he had had before. And, I couldn't imagine Liz having a 'bush,' much less one so commendable that it enveloped her entire persona, name and all. She was so sisterly and asexual, with her large frame and the sweat that flattened her hair when she ran.

It was during this time that he became subject to uncontrollable fits of anger. I remember him holding me by the collar, for some minor infraction like borrowing one of his records or talking back to him, before striking me in the face. I don't know what it

was about me; maybe it was because I was just so small, or maybe it was my quite ability to disarm potential tormenters with a neutral, enigmatic comment, or my allegiance with the biggest craziest kids in the class, but I never once got hit in the face. As much teasing as I took, it was somehow undignified to hit me. Except for Mish, that one hit resounded like all the hits through time I had dodged but probably deserved.

I'm not sure if Liz had anything to do with his anger, but things had gone bad for them. Lying in my bed late at night, I was awoken by the sound of the car being taken from the garage. I would learn from Liz that Mish had been coming over to her house in the early morning hours, standing outside her window, insisting he loved her. His intensity made her nervous. Sometime behind the scenes, between practices and dinner, sometime during study hall, Liz had dumped Mish. When I wasn't paying attention, *the Freshman Bush* had done the right thing. Mish wrote her a long heart-felt letter. It was filled with a strange childlike pathos, he spilled his heart out, when that was insufficient he tried to explain their condition with puzzling geometric graphs. I had never seen this side of him—romantic, introspective, vulnerable. I only know about the letter because he left it in the living room, without an envelope. At first I read it guiltily. It evoked a strange feeling of pity within me. I hated him, but at the same time I didn't want him to be in pain. These were things that I didn't really want to know, yet would discover in no other way. For somebody who had excelled at being so wild, the writing was simplistic and almost naïve. He needed her? He loved her? But he *barely knew her*. I was living with a total stranger. I folded up the letter and put it on the steps that led to his third floor room.

Then another strange thing happened. The letter returned. It reappeared there in the living room for all to see. Everybody in the family must have taken a look at it, laid it back down, unsure how to approach the issue. Was it in fact, a letter intended for us? It lay there for weeks unmoved. Even the Anya, the Polish cleaning lady, cleaned around it. Nobody wanted to acknowledge Mish's letter. I remember my mother picking it up, mistaking it for a piece of clutter, then noting what it was (she has surely read it as well) and returning it to its place, hoping, like the rest of us, that Mish would remove it soon.

The following year at boarding school, when we ran against Mish's team in a Cross Country invitational, I beat him for the first time in my life. I had never done anything first. He was always there ahead of me, kicking dust in my face. But this race was no contest. I did it without thinking, and only felt trepidation after it was over. I don't even remember passing him, as it was his tactic to start out a race quickly, mine to start out slow and overtake. Though I got little gratification from the win, he seemed impressed, overly gracious, and embarrassed. *Good coach*, I said, as if by way of explanation. Even then I treated him as a ball of flying fists, a Looney Tunes Tasmanian Devil. But there was nothing to fear, I had grown taller, fitter than him. *Yeah, my coach is kind of in love with her*, he said not acknowledging the hidden concession. *Join the club*. I could see he was putting on weight, becoming stocky, and would be chubby like our father. For the first time I saw him as sympathetic. He was so angry, so audacious, at the same time growing into my father, becoming the likeness of the man who had deserted us. You could see Mish battling against it, but he was almost a dead ringer for him. Even his hippiesh proclivities, his inaccessibility were shades of Dad. The more Mish moved

away from my mother, the more he shared in that man's tragedy. On the cross country course I was ashamed of the easy win, I had never even seen him over the entire three miles, and was breathing regularly again by the time he huffed across the finish line. After that, in races to follow, I would beat him without second thought or any hint of remorse.

SILENT SNOW SECRET SNOW—In the colder winters the ice on Lake Michigan would freeze into a tundra of crags and peaks. For variety we would run along the edge of the frozen ice, peering down into the frigid water. Just one misstep, we would tell ourselves. But of course nobody mis-stepped. We lived charmed lives, and our total belief in that charm kept us safe. In a true Chicago blizzard it is impossible to run, but the storms in Windsor were just bearable. Winters in Connecticut are more merciful than in Chicago. It is possible to go outside, and when the snow falls it is not turned into gray slush by the end of the day.

Doyle has no social connections with Hadley, he considers her beneath him, and me for that matter. We spend more time together now. I like him more than he likes me: I am enamored of him, but that is okay. He finds time for me. The school has no track, so we go for leisurely runs after classes. Lydia organizes impromptu meets for us at Yale or her alma mater Wesleyan with distance runners from other schools in our division. Sometimes Nicky comes along, but mostly it is just Alden and I. More frequently though, I run alone after classes, appearing at least a little crazy by going out into the winter air in nothing but shorts and a sweatshirt when everybody else is bundled up in overcoats.

One afternoon when Doyle cannot join me, I go on a long run, five miles out, five miles back. By the time I return, the light has gone from the sky, a thin stripe of orange is all that is left on the horizon. I ran fast, but feel no exhaustion, no cold though the temperature is dropping as night falls. In the distance I can hear the commuter train approaching, an express that had barreled past the Windsor stop and is on its way to New York City. I run harder, sure I have a good enough lead to beat the train. But as I get closer I observe it baring down through the trees, a hazy bolt of golden light shooting between the branches. I cannot stop. And haven't the will to stop. I feel great, full of resolve and reckless drive. I am a get-away car being chased by the cops, eyeing my one last chance of escape. I shoot across the tracks right before the engine passes. I keep my pace up all the way back to campus, elated with my boldness, and do not think about the danger until much later.

On the coldest nights there were still kids to be found at Smokers' Rock. I go down after study hall looking for Horing. He's not there, but I am offered a cigarette by Sepp, a New Yorker so rich, it is rumored, he pays for his tuition out of his own money.

"What are you doing down here if you don't smoke?" he asks.

"Looking for Horing," I say.

"Well, he's not here," he says. There is suspicion in his voice.

"I'll wait."

"You're going to have to wait a long time. He was kicked out yesterday."

"Really?"

"Drug use. Funny thing is, he is about the only kid I know who doesn't do drugs." We stand in silence. Of course he was kicked out. People like Horing don't stick around. If I had a bit of integrity I would have been kicked out too. Sepp knew Horing better than I did (years later, as he would tell me at a party in New York, would try to track him down to no avail—he might well have fallen off the edge of the earth—when Horing left, he left for good).

"I guess they just didn't like him," I say.

"And do you think they like me?" says Sepp.

The Farmington is frozen. There is a fort that has been erected across the river, bon fires on the weekends deep in the woods. He is probably waiting for me to leave to head out there.

"By the way," Sepp says as he squashes his cigarette into the snow, "they probably don't think much of you either."

Sepp is right. One night, over at Sam's dorm, when we are joking around, safely flirting with each other for we know it will lead to nothing, a teacher draws me aside. She is concerned about my behavior.

"How am I behaving?" I ask.

"I don't know. You're different. You're *smiling*," she says. "And I'm very concerned."

"There's no reason to worry," I tell her. "I'm okay, really." I notice that she is getting up close to me, smelling my breath for alcohol.

"I don't know. You're acting very *excitable*," she says. Mrs. Ross—one of those faculty members you find who went to boarding school then returned to teach after college—basically loony as only a boarding-school lifer can be, is my teacher in a sociology class called Death and Dying. In that particular class we dedicate forty-five minutes a day to the discussion of both death and dying. We took field trips to mortuaries, chose our coffins, wrote our own obituaries. I handed in a paper on Anne Sexton's life and suicide—Mrs. Ross had called it 'very morbid' and gave me an 'A'. It is true, she was not accustomed to seeing me laughing and smiling very much.

"Matt, I am afraid you are, I don't know…high," she says. I protest, assure her that I am not drinking or using drugs. When this doesn't work I frown, trying to assume my former mopey posture. But she has seen me with the smokers. She has seen me with Adam Horing and his cadre of burnouts. Ross is looking for a bust. I tell her that I am a runner, that partying is not compatible with my regimen. She does not believe me. Of course I am drinking at every possible opportunity, but this only exasperates my indignation.

"Okay, I'm in love," I say, motioning over to Samantha. This flusters her. She looks at Samantha—easily the most beautiful girl in school—and almost certainly perceives the impossibility of her loving me back. If there is one thing Mrs. Ross appreciates it is the possibility of tragedy. She withdraws, apologizing.

A HAZY SHADE OF WINTER—Over Christmas break I try to spend time away from the house; as a family we do better one on one than posturing as a unit. I think everyone would have been happy to let appearances slide and do our own thing, all but

my mother who over the years alternated between affecting family cheer and forsaking the holiday altogether, taking us to the mall after Christmas day for presents. Each year trying to correct the mistakes of last year, either stripping away the excess of Christmas morning or adding holiday spirit by putting up lights in the bushes. We are a family without tradition, uncomfortable with ceremony, and Christmas only reinforces that.

This year's holiday is a solemn one. My mother is withdrawn and irritable. After New Year's we are going down to Bellville, Illinois to have a service for my grandmother, who had died the previous summer. Our family graveyard is down there, generations of Engleberts and Hilldagards lain to rest in the town they founded. It is an old family that we are descended from: amidst our papers I have found the diary of a soldier in the Civil War, signatures of presidents, and the land deed to the city of San Antonio. These are my grandmother's affects, remnants from settlers and early immigrant dustbowl farmers.

During this period my mother is trying to make her living as a realtor. It is the only job she has held as the employee of somebody else. It is a thrill for me, even in my teenage years, to go into the Cyrus Reality office and see her at her desk with her name embossed on a triangular holder. To experience her as a part of a community, interacting with other people in the office—to watch her *photocopy*—not isolated in our house, with nobody but her imperfect family to commune. Maybe this job would be the one to keep her interest, to draw her out. Maybe we would be normal for once. But even then, perhaps before she realized it herself, I knew there would be some small aspect of the job that would needle her until the psychic burden becomes unbearable. She complains of

demanding clients, the unpaid hours of showing houses. It is only a matter of time before she throws in the towel.

These is tension at the dinner table. I had stayed out all night again. That morning my mother told me she was sure I was dead. "I thought you had fallen onto the El tracks," she said. "I keep thinking about how you died." She has done this before, killed me in retrospect then told me about it: replaying my peril in her mind, even years later worrying over situations I had escaped unharmed. She does it with Parker too. One warm summer day, a high school kid who had been drunk lost control of his car at the beach and injured a few people. Out of hundreds, she was the only witness to testify at his trial; she couldn't get the image of Parker's body falling under the car out of her mind (never mind that Parker had been away at camp that summer).

I am getting up from the dinner table. I want to meet Jordan, my oldest friend. My mother has been silent through the meal. "Please excuse yourself," she says to me. I laugh—we have never once excused ourselves from the table. That formality was for other families. I rise. Her face seizes up in anger. "I *said*, ask to be excused." I continue to resist, she must be joking. Maybe she is still angry I stayed out so late and is trying to reel me in.

"I'm going," I say. She is screaming now. *Sit down! Sit down and ask!* Her rage comes in explosive fits. She's going to leave, she screams. She's going to *leave* this family once and for all. What happened I still don't know. She had been silent during dinner, wielding her silence in the manner of a poet, withholding rather than retreating. And I imagine she will be silent again when I leave. What would happen if I excused

myself? But I cannot give her this. I refuse to allow this small concession. She does not have to leave, because I will. The sound of the season's hit "Life in a Northern Town" fills the car as I steer the Regal down the icy streets towards Evanston.

During that holiday Jordan and I spend a lot of time together. Like most of my friends, Jordan lives in Evanston. We were next door neighbours until my family moved north after kindergarten. On weekend nights, in high school, we'd go to McGreevey's, a juice bar in the north-western suburbs, driving across Dempster past endless Greek fast food joints and car dealerships to get there. The club was housed in a firetrap of a bungalow-like building, around which a strip mall had been constructed. Once, it might have been a Cracker Barrel restaurant or a roadhouse before it was overtaken by sprawl. You had to be under the age of twenty to get in; the only people above that age were the doorman and the bartender, who passed watery Cokes and orange juice across the bar in plastic cups and had to be the least tipped bartender in the Midwest. Entering McGreevey's for the first time gave one the same thrill as the first few moments in a haunted house: confronted with pale vampirish figures, and abundance of make-up, and a palpable intention to shock.

On weekends McGreevey's played punk and new wave. Teens—loners, clusters of freaks, suburban punks—from various high schools across the North Shore and western suburbs congregated in the club on weekends for music by bands like Love and Rockets, Sisters of Mercy, the Cure, Depeche Mode, New Order, Lords of the New Church, The Smiths, Ministry, The Jam, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and Joy Division. Crowd pleasers included "Million Miles Away," "I Melt With You," "People are People," "Never Say

Never," and "Ball of Confusion." One thing about new wave, as opposed to punk: it was upwardly mobile. Class and class-war were not relevant. During the rest of the week McGreevey's played hair metal and provided a live venue for speed metal bands like Anthrax and Metallica when they were still getting started.

To mask our nervousness, Jordan and I traded barbs in between songs; it was our habit to act like rival playboys, when in fact we were both utterly clueless about the girls we asked to dance. "Saturday Boy," by Billy Bragg was one of the first songs I ever slow danced to. I held my partner close as Bragg chronicled his pathetic narrative of teenage rejection. The song gave voice to the woes of a middle school boy in love with a girl who would never be his. Bragg sings, for the most part, accompanied only by his guitar, giving it an elegiac, desolate, sadly fated feeling. It's a beautiful, haunted song, this remembrance of unrequited love, Bragg's voice sounding awkward and tremulous as a teenager's. In its articulation through music, that narrator's complacency about those searing emotions was transmuted into something else, something at once pathetic and sublime.

McGreevey's always kept the dance floor dark. Every now and again I caught a glimpse of myself in one of the wall-sized mirrors—my tiny hundred pound frame, Tenex-lacquered hair, paisley shirt; my white high-tops covered with the names of the bands I liked in black magic marker—dancing with an actual girl. Jordan was off to the side somewhere scoping out prospects, quietly nudging me along in my own. It felt like life had finally begun.

Jordan's sometimes girlfriend Langly lives in a big house on the lake in Evanston. They have been dating off and on for years. The drive over there is a relief, taking Sheridan Road along the lake past the rocket-shaped Bahai Temple that marks the border between the two towns. I cut into Evanston and pick up Jordan. We park on the street and peer into Langly's living room window to se if her mother is still awake. If she is, Jordan and I wait in the alley, shot-gunning beers, timing ourselves. Once her mother has gone upstairs it is safe to tap on the window.

Her father stays up to chat with us for a few minutes. He is getting divorced from Langly's mother and having an affair with a younger woman in the city. Langly had to spend a torturous hour flying from Michigan several rows back from her father and his lover when they were all coincidentally booked on the same flight.

After Mr Branch retired for the night, we had the run of the place. He didn't care what we did, so long as we obeyed the only rule: nobody was allowed in Langly's room. We had it good at Langly's house. In my memory, everything there is bathed in a warm, golden glow: the colors of the walls, the light from the chandeliers, Langly's curly Orphan Annie hair. The residence had an elevator and, in a solitary mood, I would enjoy a private beer alone inside its confines. More often, we would play Whales Tails, Thumper, or Quarters around their Formica kitchen table. When she'd had enough to drink, Langly would play the piano, her fingers stopping and starting again on the keys, reminding herself how the song went. Sometimes she would have other friends over, too. She ran with a variety of damaged girls who were either getting pregnant, hiding from abusive boyfriends, or were precociously alcoholic. Occasionally I would find myself

alone with one having intimate and forgettable conversations or making out in some nook.

Jordan talks about Vassar, where he is a freshman. He has acquired a new worldliness there. His departure stretched his consciousness beyond the North Shore. His new girlfriend is an equestrian. He now owns a tuxedo. It is a reality so different from mine and makes me long for college, for a route off the Island. For every success he is having I trade him a story of doom and failure. He laughs.

"I've got it figured out," I explain. I tell him what I am doing, how I have contrived to avoid Hadley back at school. How, in this way, I will overcome. Jordan laughs at my strategy. I laugh to. It sounds preposterous when voiced. This wasn't happening to me anymore; it was happening to some comic book character, some nebbish in a TV series. It is Langly's house, and with her parents asleep, it is the least troubled place on the planet.

In the morning I drive the Regal through the ice-glazed streets, skidding recklessly from side to side, still tipsy.

That year, we collectively decided to skip the New Year's dance at the First Presbyterian Church. I had broken from the youth group and Langly had gotten into hot water with Tim, the group leader, for smuggling a shampoo bottle filled with vodka into last year's party (despite her best efforts to wash the bottle out, the drink still tasted of Breck).

Jordan had been a member of the youth group of First Pres in Evanston since childhood. Their New Year's dances were sober occasions where we were locked in the church to celebrate until sun-up. We danced all night, played hide-and-seek in the enormous complex and shot hoops in the gym to reinvigorate ourselves when we got sleepy. The night was religion-free until morning when there was an early Mass. Dazed and blurry-eyed we made our way to the chapel where we were came upon the alter as though for the first time, resplendent with its nativity scene, its muted colors beneath the gilded statuary. We were empty vessels, unguarded, the music from the pipe organ filing us in a primitive, visceral way. We sang along with the hymns whether we were religious or not: we had made it through the night and when we went outside for the first time with the sun having risen, the world seemed reborn.

After attending my first New Year's party I joined the youth group, which meant that I would be going to meetings every Sunday night. Nobody else in my family was religious. I had never been to church, and entering that space felt taboo and subversive.

For most of the two hour meetings we socialized and read passages from the Bible before we were broken off into smaller groups. The groups were determined according to the ranking our each member's spiritual enlightenment. Those who had already asked Christ to dwell within them and were vocal enough about it comprised the first group: mostly they were student leaders, kids who were determined to excel at anything they participated in. Their role was mostly to facilitate the indoctrination of us strays. There were a few intermediary levels for those who had given themselves to Christ, but it had yet to manifest itself in a true commitment to the church. The bottom rank was for those who were still lost souls: the spiritual remedials. There was me, Jordan, and Brad Zipser,

who, upon viewing his company, insisted he loved Christ dearly and was forthrightly promoted to the next rank.

During youth group was the only occasion I attempted to learn a musical instrument. Tim had asked me if I wanted to play guitar on a song, and I told him I didn't know how. He told me I was wrong, that I could easily learn, it was just a matter of a few lessons. And he was just the person to give them to me. He arranged to come over to my house after school and teach me few licks. He had gone to New Trier and had grown up just a few blocks from where I lived. Tim arrived in a white station wagon, carrying the case-less guitar over his shoulder as he walked up to my house. With his long hair and beard he gave off an irreverent, even rock-starrish zeal. I had warned my parents that he was coming and we were not to be disturbed.

When we got to my room, Tamm said, "So, just what is it you can't play?"

"Everything," I said, laughing at his phrasing.

"Well, what specifically do you *want* to play?"

I had just bought a Kinks greatest hits album and the opening riff to "Lola" was particularly seductive.

"Here, like this," Tim said, peeling off the opening chord. "Now you try."

"Like this?" I said, making a clumsy attempt to copy him. I liked him and wanted to please him: he had that same red bushy beard as my father. It was easy to accept his tutelage and imagine that it meant something more.

"Come on," he said after no more than ten minutes. "Let's take a break."

Of course Tim had not driven all this way up the lake to instruct a kid how to play a song about a boy's love affair with a transvestite. He had other things on his mind. Tim drove me to a local ice-cream restaurant for a milkshake and then out to a deserted parking lot that faced the Winnetka beach front. He parked the car, turning off the ignition. We sat in the dark. It was cold, the lot was deserted. We could have been mistaken for lovers.

He told me about his childhood, growing up on the North Shore and his time at New Trier. He said he had been a drug addict.

"I was the most selfish kid in the world, Matt. Living only for myself. Running away from the world." We sat in silence for a few minutes longer. This was familiar ground for Tim. The contemplative pause felt rehearsed. I waited. "But Christ saved me," he said. He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, unfolded it and read. "Why does Christ enter our hearts? To cure our pain." He looked at me meaningfully. "Do you know who wrote that?"

The speech felt scripted, so I knew the answer. "You did."

He smiled and shook his head. "No," he said. "You wrote it on New Year's night." He handed me the piece of paper. Indeed, it was my handwriting, though I didn't remember writing the sentence. I felt like crying. "This is your chance. There's an angel shadowing you. Come on, let's go." We drove back to my house in silence. When I got to my room, I put the guitar in my closet. I had other things to think about.

The service for my grandmother takes place on a cold January day: my mother and aunt are wearing inherited fur coats. I remember those coats from the days when I was

left in my grandmother's care. My favorite hiding place, which I took to without any prompting at all, was her coat closet, where I'd burrow in behind those musky smelling furs and sit in darkness.

Their home was always filled with fanciful objects: my grandmother's walking cane, for instance, was collapsible. You could throw one end in front of you like a stone and it would assemble itself into a sturdy stick. Christmas brought silver napkin holders in the shapes of characters from The Wind and the Willows and sherbet molds in the shapes of tiny turkeys. There were owl- and cat-shaped Steubin glass molds, pale blue Wedgewood ceramics yielding sugar cubes and candied ginger. Their sedan had polished walnut food treys that came down from the back of the front seat and gave you the impression of flying in a well-appointed jet. My grandfather–I suppose due to his wife's drinking–was partial to large cars, which, because she drove, must have been a mechanism for self defence. I suppose she was an alcoholic. She was the only woman I've met who would insist on a nightcap at five in the afternoon, and my first taste of drink was what remained on the pimento-stuffed olives I'd beg off her.

Wandering among the graves, some mossed-over and untended, most with names I did not recognize, I look over my family, everybody standing off on their own, as if we had all arrived separately. My grandfather is concerned with the construction of the urn in which her ashes are stored, turning it over in his hands, examining the seams. He had been an engineer and I imagine its design tickled his curiosity. He appears unfazed by the ceremony; the truth is that he has not been the same since he had a mild stroke. I get the feeling he has retreated from the world already, back to an alternate life; that the grandfather present at the funeral was a body-double, sent to go through the motions with

no improvisation allowed. The real McCoy was off fighting with the Communist party, of which he had once been a member. Or paying for a mistress's art lessons at the 14th street studio of David Alfaro Sequeros, alongside Jackson Pollack. I would find her hopeless sketches of rendered sides of beef years later in the attic after he died.

He was several years older than his wife, and outliving her was certainly unplanned. More than an entity of her own, she was more of an extension of him. Now he was on a slow decline. On his long walks, he would get lost, calling my mother from a payphone to come pick him up. He became surly with strangers and began to make stubborn and bad business decisions. But through this he still paid special attention to me, making sure I had good clothing, paying for tennis lessons, my school tuition, and slipping me twenty-dollar bills for non-existent dates. It was he who taught me how to tie a tie then, later, a bowtie, his arms wrapping around me from behind, so looking at our reflection was like looking at my future self or some kindly version of death hovering over my shoulder.

There are no tears at the service. I was due back to school on that day, but the way the ticket worked I would have to spend several more days at home and miss the first few days of the semester. I don't know how my mother is taking the death. It is beyond my capacity to ask. I speed over to Langly's first thing upon arriving home. I have a six-pack I bought at the PM Club on Howard. I can placate myself with the tap of the quarter against the kitchen table and the beer it yields. It is not Langly, but her sister who answers the door. Langly has gone back to school early. Jordan too has returned to school. Nobody had said good-bye, we had all taken for granted, but now it seems important and even devastating. I back out of the driveway, turn into the ally, then put

the car in park. I sit in the alleyway by Langly's and drink beer and cry. Like the rest of my family, I mourn in private.

CALL ME MORBID, CALL ME PALE—Okay, you're morbid, you're pale. On a bootleg Smiths cassette I had procured from Vintage Vinyl, Morrissey dedicates a song to all the sensitive librarians in the audience. I knew I had found my champion. When it came to an uninhibited, nuanced celebration of unhappiness and inadequacy, no band did more than the Smiths. The Smiths' immediate antecedent, Joy Division, also from Manchester, likewise set misery to haunting music, though Ian Curtis was never so un-conflicted about his angst. They didn't sing the praises of misery; Ian Curtis hadn't cherished his sorrow the way Morrissey did. His songs were more like tortured testimonials of *actual* mental illness–the kind that drives people to asylums rather than to the corner pub. Curtis's coda of suicide punctuates every record, each note a noose through which he perpetually sticks his head, in each song he is kicking the stool out form under himself. Joy Division was to be ingested in small doses.

The Smiths, on the other hand, were ever hummable, ingenious, and so sincere that these days their lyrics would probably be misconstrued as ironic. "I was looking for a job and then I found a job/ And heaven knows I'm miserable now." Morrissey's feelings wove the unhappiness into splendid elegies of sadness. He was never in danger of suicide–I didn't even get the feeling that Morrissey was particularly sad–just feeling a little inadequate and befuddled.

"Love is natural and real/ But not for such as you and I my love." All Smiths songs are about unrequited love, so impossible it defies even nature. Songs about broken hearts are a dime a dozen; no doubt singers leave the ruins of relationships behind them like skid marks at a drag race. But Morrissey was a non-starter. "But when you want to live how do you start/ Where do you go/ Who do you have to know?" is the flummoxed ending to another song of frustrated love. Unrequited love is a destructive annihilating force, as I well knew. So rarefied, so broken and sensitive were the narrators of his songs. So there it is: you are an annihilated person; your choice is between suicide and living as an annihilated person. But choosing life does not mean that you CHOOSE LIFE, as the WHAM! tee-shirt commanded. It went beyond seeing yourself in the song– the song usurped you, it unified free-floating suspicions and feelings of inadequacy concrete. The songs gave feelings plot points. The known quotient of pain in a Smiths song was better that the unknown, unfathomable misery you suspected was out there.

Ultimately these songs are stories: the Smiths are a literary band. And the stories never ended well: violent crimes committed, lonely walks home, suicides or, more often, imagined suicides. Because the singer was so passive, so incapable that even suicide is useless: is there anything more suburban than that?

In a Smiths song there is but one kind of love: unrequited, and there is one perspective: Morrissey's. And, by proxy, yours. Such solace, such comfort, such a mistake. To invest so much in a band is almost masochistic, because they cannot live up to the profound need that led you there in the first place: can anything, or anybody?

"Miserable Lie": the song might well be called Miserable Life. It begins quietly enough, with typical desolating lyrics: "So goodbye, please stay with your own kind, and I'll stay with mine." Then it picks up to a rockabilly pace, his inconsolable grief at his own life growing to where he feels his pain so acutely, where he is moaning so loudly he is practically yodelling. "I need advice, nobody ever looks at me twice." It is a strange sentiment coming from any man, worrying that they are not being looked at enough. The song, in a way, reflects the covetous feelings Smiths fans tend to have for the music. Like Holden Coulfield, everybody felt they represented them and them alone.

* * *

When I returned to school I found a note in my mailbox.

Hey Henderson: Where in the name of God have you been? School is no good without you. Please come back soon and find Hadley. She's dying to see you and rumor has it she's starting to get hysterical. Find her and help her.

It is odd and touching that she is the only one to worry over where I had disappeared to. I tear a piece of paper from my loose-leaf folder and write back that I am fine, leaving the note in her box. Later, I see her peeking around a tree, spying on me, letting me know she is spying.

She has a boyfriend by now. A football player, he lives in my dorm on the floor beneath mine. He is an uninspired choice and I resent her lack of imagination; I walk

past her dorm after study hall to see her standing in her arms, wrapped in his maroon Lacrosse sweatshirt, which she wears around campus, looking branded.

Each time I see her I feel a shock, and I catch myself scanning the quad from Doctor Crump's window searching for her overcoated shape as it passes during he interval. Even more than before, every mention of her name is loaded with a secret electricity. She remains a crucible for all the pain and hope I have inside myself. There is nothing the actual person can do to live up to the image I have created from her in my mind. She has become an invention.

I stop her at lunch. I immediately become light in the head and my thoughts jam. I manage to ask her to sit with me at the library that night. There, in a dark recess, we pass notes to one another, feigning study and passing notes. I write furiously to her, my pen burning in my hand. *How? Why?* It feels like a betrayal, though I have not been betrayed.

Don't be sad, she writes. *It's just a stupid relationship*.

Then why have it?

I don't know.

But why him? Why not me?

Because I'm lonely. She hasn't answered my question, but it is enough. Nausea is rising. Soon I will be unable to speak. I get up to leave.

Are you alright, she asks out loud. The mere enunciation of the question destroys my defences. If the question had not been asked I might be able to fake it, and construct an artifice that will sustain me through the conversation. But I have been ruined by concern. Because I am not right at all. I'm dead, dead, dead.

In my room later that night Doyle decides to solve my problems by finding me a girl. No, he will do better than that: he is going to pass his girlfriend on to me, as there is another girl he is interested in. "It's perfect," he says. "It doesn't matter if she likes you right off the bat. I didn't like you right off the bat and to be honest, *nobody* did. I'm sorry but it's true. But she'll grow to like you. Do you think she liked me? No way. You have to learn not to think too much about these situations. It'll be just like in the 1,600 meter relay. I'll reach out with the baton, you'll reach back. Don't think, don't look, just reach."

I am susceptible to Doyle, and so is Connie Kost, his girlfriend, so we both agree to go to the Winter Ball with each other to please him. Luckily, she and I already know each other. She too is a runner, so we have travelled together to meets, have cheered each other on, seen each other at our panting, drooling worst at race end.

The night of the dance Connie and I eat in an Italian restaurant in Bloomfied that is known to serve to under-agers. We drink wine, talk about running, but mostly we talk about Doyle. At the dance, Alden nods at me from across the room, sitting with his new girlfriend. I dance with Connie and hold her close to "No One is to Blame." When Howard Jones sings, "and then to count the cost," Connie says, "That's me. Did you hear that? He said 'and it's a Connie Kost.' " It is a cute misunderstanding and I like her for a moment. We walk around campus after the dance. Frost turned dead grass into crystal shards and the paths are slippery. Frozen branches clink in the wind. I pull her to me in the cold. We kiss slowly, with the caution of two people who are not used to being kissed.

When I got to find her at her dorm after study hall, in the days that follow, I sometimes find Hadley there waiting for Hayden. The first evening she looks at my pityingly, with affection. She is peeved that I was there to intercept her, but somehow glad. I ask her, with all the delicacy I can muster, if she will go find Connie for me. She appears hurt, tries to hide her surprise, then disappears into the dorm. Connie emerges shortly thereafter, but Hadley does not come out again.

For a brief period, the dummy of myself is successful. I look nice, I am concentrating in class and performing well – I am getting by. I even weather it well when Connie tells me gently that she is still in love with Alden and can't be my girlfriend. Even if he has moved on, she can't. We are both damaged, but not so similarly damaged that it enables a relationship. I can understand, I am in love with Doyle too.

FIFTEEN MINUTES WITH YOU–Liza is a junior who wears all black and puts sparkles on her face. Her eyes become little galaxies of twinkling light, glistening, slick with makeup. She is transitioning from a Madonna fan into little Siouxsie Sioux, so sometimes instead of black, she wears bright vintage dresses or makes herself up to look like a pale geisha. Liza carries around something that looks like a wand. On weekend nights we go to her room and listen to the Smiths. There, she shows me the things she is forever decorating: cards, posters–those pictorial collages people make of their friends. But Liza's collages featured only herself: she travelled alone.

We are in her room. Though we are free to talk, we are passing notes, enjoying a game we've made, writing a dialogue using Smiths' quotes.

Well I wonder, do you see me when we pass?

I walk home alone.

It's driving me mad.

You just haven't earned it yet baby.

Sadly, this was your life.

"I don't like how you're dressing now," Liza says. "I liked how you were before."

"It's just clothing," I say.

"No, it's not," she says. "You were cute." Liza decides to dress me from her wardrobe. She takes a few things from her closet and turns her back while I change into them. She's a strange, capricious girls–bound to be an artist, recreating things form her own image. I am wearing a skirt.

"Would you ever sleep with a man?" she asks.

"Morrissey, I guess. He is the only one."

"I'd sleep with him too."

We sit quietly contemplating our mutual rock star crush.

"You are always so sad," she says. "I want to molest you."

I smile, readjust the skirt.

Liza checks the hallway for the monitor, shuts the door and turns up the music. She moves closer to me. The sparkles around her eyes twinkle. I can see them as pinpoints on my eyelids after mine are closed. But when she touches me my skin begins to shake. I will myself to stop but the shaking is uncontrollable. I break into tremors when she tries to get near again. "Are you cold?" she asks. I try to smile. I have an erection in her skirt and am quivering like I am malarial.

After that night Liza and I cease our visits. I turn down her invitations to dinner or movies. I avoid her, holding all the things against her that I hated to be held against me: her difference and isolation. In my new quest to belong, Liza didn't fit.

I DON'T LIKE MONDAYS–Graduation is approaching; even in the winter we are aware of this. Students who didn't speak to each other over the past three and a half years begin to nod to one another in the halls. I am busy in my room trying to get my grades up. For my writing class I compose a story about two friends who went on vacation with their families to the Mediterranean coast, where one saves the other from drowning. One boy in the story was a stand-in for me–the drowner–and the other shares Doyle's features. It was not something I would have written had I been required to read out loud in front of other students, but our teacher wisely spared us that humiliation. I need to make a photocopy for her, and do so in the library. Back in my room I check my notebook and realize that I have left the original in the copy machine. I race back to the library and lift the lid to the copier. It is missing. I looked around, ask the librarian, but nobody has turned it in. Later that night, I stop b Doyle's room. Only too late do I realize Hayden, Hadley's boyfriend is there too.

"Gonna go out to Hartford tomorrow. Get a room at the Hilton," he tells Doyle.

"Yeah. You sure Hadley will do it?"

"She'll do it. She does whatever I say."

He grins over in our direction. I am not sure if he is provoking me or asking us to share in his lecherous good fortune. Hiding from her had done nothing to alleviate my

sensitivity. All somebody has to do is mention her name or poke fun at my love-sickness to send me into a sulk. I become silent, watch Doyle high-five Hayden. I bolt from Alden's room. I lock my door. Soon I hear Doyle trying to get in.

"Henderson, I'm sorry," he says through the door.

"Fuck off," I reply, trying to stay cool.

"No, really, he was just joking. He's an asshole. Everybody knows it."

"No, really, fuck off." I will not open the door, not for anything. My sensitivity has made me ridiculous. But Doyle stays there for what must be a half an hour. I relent and let him in. One cruel word from him and I will be crushed all over again, but it does not matter now.

"You are going to make yourself crazy like this," he says. "You know what you need? To wrestle, just to get the violence of the thing out."

"No,"

"Come on," he says, pushing me.

"Stop."

"Wrestle me." He pushes me, hard enough that it is a shock. Okay, I realize, I am going to wrestle, like it or not, so I jump on him. It starts out playful, but soon becomes competitive. I pry myself from him, and throw whatever I can find at him to keep him from attacking again. He responds by opening my hair gel and letting loose with sticky slashes that hit me and the wall. I jump at him, hysterical and whimpering. I do what I can to trip him up, aiming at his torso to provoke him into hitting me with more force. He gets me into a hold and throws me to the floor, landing blows on my arms and thighs. I want him to hit me harder. When Doyle hits me it confirms something–give a physical

presence to something unnameable that I crave. I begin to laugh as his blows land. I lie on the floor, gasping for air. His visage becomes one of predatory glee. He rises above me, climbs onto a chair and springs like a flying squirrel: he seems to hold a pose in midair and then lands full force on my chest. I feel all the air pushed from my body, then my heart stops. For a moment I black out, then revive. I cannot move.

"Feel better?" Doyle too is out of breath, panting like he had just finished a race.

"Yeah," I manage.

"Good, I'm outta here," he says. He returns a few moment later, and throws a stack of paper in the air, the pages falling around me. "Nice story, asshole."

I'LL HAUNT YOU WHEN YOU LAUGH—I have done everything to transform the person I was over the past year. I have negated myself through affirmation. What is left is a sweet, agreeable kid who is almost wholly oblivious to the turns his life is taking. My stab at normalcy is a total failure. Which means that I am belatedly becoming a bit popular at school. My association with Doyle has conferred some status on me, just like he predicted it would. I chat with popular girls in the quad, receive party invitations. I begin to flourish.

In the hallways a boy named Gary Rojack, the only kid at school with a Mohawk, hisses in my ear that I am a sell-out. I understand what he means. I am becoming accepted in the twenty fifth hour of high school My skin is clearing up and I have grown in to my body. Choosing the path of least resistance, I constructed a version of myself

that is palatable to the rest of the world. I see how easily things come to Samantha, and I want hat for myself. To belong, cowardly as it seems.

Doyle and I wake up before classes and run an extra four miles to get ourselves back in shape for the upcoming season. Track practice has started and the distance runners are regrouping. Everybody but me is boasting acceptance to college.

I stop seeing Dr. Crump. Our sessions have become stressed by long silences and half-finished utterances. I understand that these silences are integral to one brand of therapy, but I can only interpret it as disinterest on his part. And why would he have wanted to deal with me? I am so furtive. I would have gotten up and done the soft shoe to avoid talking to him. So I smiled a lot and talked about my classes when pressed. To tell Crump the truth would be to tell myself the truth—that each moment seems to open up and swallow me—that I was living in suspended animation, that only death makes sense. I hide behind a batch of patronizing questions:

"I had a dream last night I was being smothered. What does it mean?"

"You feel smothered."

"My mother was in the dream."

"It makes sense. Mother, smother, they rhyme."

"I don't eat anymore. What does it mean?"

Crump does not like to be used as a soothsayer or medicine man. And he has grown tired of my sarcasm. He glances at his watch. "It means you are not hungry these days."

The strapping jocks who were friendly and warm—with the glow of entitlement and utter lack of fretfulness—were now a source of comfort. The girls who were so beautiful an unattainable now seem affectionate and sympathetic. I distained them before, but now I am attracted to them like the sick to a salve. To belong was the key, the answer. I imitate them to become one of them. Even if I have become something I hate, it is okay, because I will do anything, kill any part of myself so long as the misery dies with it.

It is night, warm enough to be outside, but Samantha doesn't like to leave her dorm, so we are in the hallway. Only recently, my adoption went through. At school I was a Henderson, but on paper I now had a different last name. From my step-father, via my mother, I received a Tiffany's belt buckle with my new initials engraved on it. It was passed wordlessly, accepted without thanks or acknowledgement. "Right now my name is Henderson, but at college it will be Ellis. I'm actually an Ellis right now."

"So why are you calling yourself Henderson?"

"I don't know. Maybe these are sort of bonus days in my term as Henderson. A decompression zone."

"So?"

"So I can do what I want with them. They don't count against my record as an Ellis."

"You seem better these days."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Should I be worried?"

"Why?"

"It just doesn't seem like you."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. It's not you, that's all."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It's different, that's all. You seemed more sincere before. Like me, I feel like shit all the time. But I look happy and rosy. It's fake, you know." That's what Samantha was about, I thought: preppy, good-looking. But she wasn't these things at all. We had disappointed each other.

"This place is shit," she said. "It turns people bad." By now, she was dating our favorite target for mockery: Brian Mahoney.

The Smiths were the first band to really capitalize on the misery market. While the Clash were railing against a society in decline, The Smiths were owning up to more personal failings. In a way, this makes them more responsible than most punk music. This distinguishes them from hardcore, which was a clattering, explosive weapon designed to tear down the traditions and values of a society they held in contempt. "Oh mother, I can feel the soil falling over my hear" is a maudlin, introspective lyric that at once cuts to why The Smiths were so successful. It's a courageous sentiment and delivered from a charismatic, lively crooner. If you weren't sad, you *wanted to be* sad, because the song was that good. For better or worse, The Smiths' music didn't ask you to go out and change the world. Smiths fans were more likely to be found contemplating the tepid film forming over their tea than smashing windows of their landlords. Smiths fans were, in their loneliness, *imaging all the people, living life as one* rather than

wanting to be anarchy. Punk was about a movement, and in its own way, conforming to the strictures of that movement. Bands like The Smiths targeted individuals.

Rather than voicing commonly held views, it is possible that The Smiths' music actually nurtured a false melancholia in their listeners—those who attached themselves to a vogue, a zeitgeist, the same way flower children attached themselves to the prevailing mood of the late sixties. A sub-culture of disaffected teens suffering from some sort of emotional hypochondria. The people who truly suffered form the obliterating feelings of clinical depression were too bust getting shock treatments as in-patients, or trying to get the energy together to get out of bed to pay any real attention to fey self-absorbed musicians. Are bands like The Smiths for depression tourists, people who seek identity in the condition, who substitute melancholia for malcontent? Affluent suburban kids who can afford to indulge their moods, and to by product that reinforces their fractured self-images.

On the Island I am sick because I want to be sick: it suits me. It gives me a sense of self, assembling a persona from angst, song lyrics and an aching longing for the future. Unhappiness is gratifying and, at some level, misery is comforting. I enjoy the inertia and find sadness both noble and worthy. The attraction of misery is perverse and strong. More than that, it feels like my true personality, and extricating it would be removing something vital. It is not unhappiness itself, but the proclivity towards unhappiness that is dangerous. Because it's the proclivity that makes its return inevitable. It is a hat that

once one has tried on, suddenly becomes irremovable, like that of Dr. Seuss' character Bartholomew Cubbins.

The longing for death is an obvious and dominant theme in Morrissey's lyrics. He enacts his suicide time and time again, from "Pretty Girls Make Graves" to "Unhappy Birthday." But it's "There is a Light and it Never Goes Out" where this sentiment is brought to fruition, confirming in every listener's ear whatever romantic illusions they were carrying around with them about love and death. It is The Smiths at their best, and like so few great songs, hits you after it is over; only once it has stopped playing do you realize something subtle and beautiful has occurred. It's a song that is so fragile–like Big Star's "Kangaroo"–it feels as though it gets damaged merely by being listened to.

"And if a double-decker bus, crashes into us/ To die by your side is such a heavenly way to die." Even in death Morrissey remains passive, a victim of the ten-ton- truck of the world that we live in. The song is a fantasy within a fantasy in which he imagines his and his beloved's sudden violent demise. Next to suicide, it's the best thing: death at the side of some unattainable love; life and love simultaneously extinguished, and thus brought together. It is romantic rather than nihilistic–nihilism was too easy for The Smiths. But Morrissey not only acknowledges the death fantasies of his audience, he usurps them and interjects his own. In this way, you, the fan, become the beloved, if only for the four minutes the song lasts.

Is it not just as dangerous to indulge in somebody else's death fantasy as it is to indulge in your own? To cede control of that longing is a small death in itself. That was the real limitation to their music. In the world of The Smiths there could be no need for love greater than Morrissey's, no existential angst more urgent. Morrissey's frangible

misery demanded attention. Like many artists, he wanted to hide, but also to be sought after.

At times in high school your personality seems as much a culmination of your cultural taste as an inherent expression of self: you are your interests. To swallow a band like The Smiths whole means digesting elements of personality and style that might not otherwise be attended to. You are sad, but The Smiths translate this sadness into something romantic; they feed and even encourage these misperceptions. In this sense, depression is in its germinal phases as a fad, as a construct rather than a disease. You get your earring from Nicholas Cage's character in Valley Girl, your black jacket from Robert Smith, your cardigans and proclivity for Romantic poets from Morrissey. Depression has become a world-view, a perspective. And you fill your head with voices that confirm that world-view: that you are unlovable, that life is usually not worth living, that sex is coercive, that the only emotion that is not deceptive is sadness. Bit by bit, you are sustaining your sadness, rather than just enduring it.

That there is a market for adolescent discontent is nothing new. And juvenilia is pretty boring; unless you take into account what follows: work, aging, *nostalgia*. (It is inevitable that a Smiths' riff will be appropriated for a pharmaceutical ad, touting a pill to cure those who feel that *everyday is like Sunday*? When will Prozac nostalgia kick in?) Dwelling in our own self-pity, or even worse, paying to participate in the self-pity of somebody else, seems at best a questionable use of time. But that's partially why you like Morrissey: there is so little room in there for you; it is as obliterating as a tranquilizer. By defining you so thoroughly, by tracing you with such accuracy and integrity, Morrissey has all but cut you away. All that is left are two slashes in the air,

shaped like two smirks that used to be makeup etched beneath your eyes. To listen to The Smiths is a cure that lies; it does not help, not even as a placebo. By design, it perpetuates sadness. This hollow, recyclable myth would be pointed out by Morrissey himself–for those who don't listen to their own intuition–on the track "Stop Me if You've Heard This One Before," off their last album. Of course you've heard it before, you wrote it. Even in misery you are a fake. At some level you realize this and put the song on again.

I DON’T LIKE MONDAYS

"Baby needs a brand new pair of eyes/ Cause the ones you've got now see only good-byes"

—*Sadly Beautiful*, The Replacements

BITTER SWEETHEART—I desperately missed the Island, and the autumn after leaving I would get a letter from Hadley that brought all those desolating feelings back.

> *I'm sitting here in my room with tons of homework to do. I can't do it though because I hate it and I'm protesting. I'm on strike. I refuse to learn until we aren't given anymore homework. That'll show those damn teachers. See what they say to that!*

I'm listening to this totally mellow and sad song tape. The music fills the room and drowns out the rest of the world. I'm alone with my thoughts and I want to share them with someone. But the music won't stop and so I'm alone. I miss you Henderson. I miss you so much. I can feel you and can hear you laugh but can't see you. The lights are off and the music continues…but you're not here. I can't see you.. Phil stops singing and lets Sting take over. But they both say the same thing, they are alone. The music continues. The world is out there somewhere but the music loses it. It's gone. It is only the music. The lights are off and the notes dance on in my mind. They step all over it and leave their traces. But I'm alone because the music is laughing. It isn't with me. I'm alone. It just dances on. It's gone—Hadley

College did little to help me get over her. I was on a sexual tear at that point, moving from girl to girl with each new week, rejecting and rejecting as I had been rejected. Then I met Annabel. She was there at a party my freshman year, leaning up against the wall, tipsy, watching me from across the room. She took me home that night, making out with me behind the tapestry I had hung to conceal my bed from my roommate. After that exploratory escapade we were inseparable. We made a funny, if striking couple: her hair cut into a crew-cut, mine past my shoulders. She consumed my thoughts immediately, walking next to her I couldn't believe she was my girlfriend: didn't she know I was worthless, couldn't she tell? Neither of us really wanted to be there, in a small Ohio

town. It was easy to shut everybody else out—which we did with speed and severity. Wordlessly congratulating ourselves on knowing what no one else knew: we alone apprehended the absurdity of the world. I had come together with somebody who, like many troubled people, exuded confidence and stability.

Late one night she called me on the dorm phone and told me to come over, her roommate was gone for the evening. I found her in bed in her underwear. We began making out, kissing with an urgency that I put down to our limited opportunity to be alone. We had yet to go all the way, so I misunderstood her intensity. I slipped my hand under the pillow beneath her head. I felt something hard. I pulled it out: it was my switchblade. I realized I had not seen it for a while, wondered how I could have forgotten it there. We continued kissing, and I put my hand under her shirt. I felt something warm and sticky there. I opened my eyes to see she had been looking defiantly up at me. I pulled her shirt up and revealed three straight lines of crimson. Three wounds there, drawn in a row. Her blood had yet to coagulate, she had cut herself right before I came into the room.

"What's happening? What have you been doing?"

Her eyes were filled with quiet fury.

"Jesus, Annabel, what are you doing?" But she wouldn't talk about it—she was there, bloodied and agonized, beyond words. Instead she pulled me on top of her again. When we were finished I had smudges of blood, the color of dried plum, on my belly. The blood had also dried on my knife, I took it to the bathroom, washing it off first, then washing myself. I tried to press her for information: I could only reproach her so far, I had a fresh circular scab from a cigarette I'd put out on my wrist.

Seeing the blood on her it occurred to me how grave an act it was. I don't know why my own garnet-colored blood never elicited such a response. Like my own blood was less crucial. But from her it was urgent, desperate. Later she told me that she had stolen the knife from my room when I wasn't looking, that she had meant to play a joke, but when I hadn't noticed it missing she decided to keep it. Otherwise she was relentless in her silence. But silence was our mode. If it wasn't one, it was the other who wouldn't speak. Lying on the mattress without saying a word while one tried to coax the other out of a dire mood. Annabel intuitively understood the importance of those moments; that one could not be coaxed out of that mood, that the importance was *in the act of coaxing*. Hearing the soothing words, feeding off the other's effort, climbing that unclimbable wall towards you. Far from repelled by her behavior, it only bound us tighter. It was good to fixate on somebody else's problems for a while.

I was kissing her good-bye in front of her dorm when she looked me in the eye and told me to hit her. I thought she was joking. "Go on," she said. "Do it." I tapped her on the face with an open hand, an affectionate pat. "Harder," she said, daring me. It was early morning, nobody else was around. I didn't hesitate, I slapped her harder. Her eyes looked stunned, excited. "I didn't think you'd do it," she said, then turned and ran into her dorm.

Our experimentation progressed quickly after that. One night, with my roommate gone for the evening she asked me to tie her up. "Come on," she said, "it's nothing." I restrained her with the same Liberty ties that once cradled my neck. "Now hit me. Not

like that. Use your belt." It was comforting to see her face focus, become less remote in sex. I was used to a vague Annabel, never letting on where I stood with her, never hinting at what she was thinking or feeling. The belt drove her feelings to the surface. After I hit her I could see her face flush with sensation and desire, gasping for air. Afterwards she put her clothes on in silence, returned to her dorm and we would not talk for a few days, shamed by our behavior. Later one of us would show up out of boredom, missing the other. We did not talk about the violence. I think it unsettled both of us. Love meant something else now, it was not what it had been before. The burden was too much for me, the hitting, the escalating debasement and the ease with which she provoked it. I broke up with her in her room, leaving her crying on the floor.

I hadn't seen Annabel around campus in a while. I went to her room and was told by her room-mate that she had checked herself into the school infirmary. She wouldn't tell me anything beyond that—the subject of Annabel made her impatient. I went to the small, off-campus building during visiting hours, bearing flowers. She lay in bed in a smock, there was a half-eaten bowl of soup next to her. In the first time since I'd know her she looked embarrassed. I asked her if she was sick.

"No," she replied.

"Then why are you here?"

"I don't trust myself," she said.

"Trust yourself about what?"

"About killing myself, okay?" she said, annoyed at having to spell it out. She'd obviously had to explain the same thing the admitting nurse and school doctor. All that

talk about *suicide*, she'd meant it. Those three scars on her stomach like ticks on a prison wall. She'd been so closed, now her openness was jarring and aggressive.

"Okay, but what did the infirmary have to do with it?" I asked. Nothing seemed more unbearable and depressing than lying there all day in that drab institutional room with its pale green walls. Unlike me, Annabel knew that her problem was partially medical, not some romantic fatal flaw. "Just because," she said, knowing this time I wouldn't understand.

I couldn't stay away from Annabel after that. She was a mirror I needed to look into. I wanted to take care of her, to participate in her ordeal. The pain was something real in a college in Ohio where nothing else seemed serious, not the classes, not the students. After she left the infirmary we spent long hours isolated in my room with nothing but the tape deck for company: Annabel listened to neo-glam rock bands like Gene Loves Jezebel, Flesh for Lulu, and Sisters of Mercy. The more androgynous the band, the more willing she was to forgive their facile pop tendencies. The mere existence of Sinead O'Connor on our planet was an incomparable triumph to Annabel, unless you were talking about Grace Jones or Annie Lennox. Annabel might have been the only person in the world to listen to Joan Armatrading because she *looked sexy*. She played me Jane's Addiction, Guns & Roses, Hoodoo Gurus, X, and The Pixies for the first time. In Washington D.C she took me to a club called Trax, which she didn't inform me was a gay club until I was being chatted up by a polite older man. Later would find out her interest in such clubs went beyond just curiosity. But that was later, for the time being I had found somebody to let into the world of warping pain I was in.

Musical taste and mutual suffering are a good basis for the initial connection in a young relationship, but there was little for us to build on past that. She resented how close I was to her—I had seen too much. And how my sexual appetite had blossomed in the short time we knew each other. By this time desire and unalloyed lust had tripped me up from behind and had taken control of me with all its brute un-subtlety. More frequently my thoughts turned towards sex with Annabel. I remember seeing her on Ash Wednesday, finding her in her room looking like she had been hit on the head.

"What's that?"

"A cross," she said.

"Why?"

"It's Ash Wednesday. Don't you know even that much?" I had never thought of her as religious, but the side that she really kept hidden was her strict Catholic upbringing. She had sex with me with the black ash on her forehead—wordlessly—the char smearing into an oily blot, which even then she refused to wash off.

The summer after freshman year Annabel came to visit me in Chicago. She made the trip only after some persuasion and the entire time she was there she kept a distance from me, wouldn't sleep in my bed even though my parents were out of town. I was excited to experience my city through somebody else's eyes. There was so much I wanted to show her, but she took in Chicago from behind disinterested eyes. She was keeping something from me, I could tell. Her distress was obvious. I was sure she was seeing somebody else, perhaps another girl—I had surmised her bi-sexuality by this

point—and I pressed her to tell me if she was seeing a girl, but she wouldn't. It would have been okay, I could have borne sharing her.

My parents were out of town that week and I had a small party. Everybody was invited to stay over, and there was a lot of beer and tequila. Annabel spent the night holding the hand of a girl from Evanston I knew vaguely and making caustic comments about my friends. I climbed out on the roof of my house with Jordan to get stoned and get away from her. Only after the party and the remains of a bottle of tequila did Annabel and I manage clumsy sex in my bed.

Somehow, the worse things got between us, the more attached I felt. We sent each other long letters, mix tapes. At the end of the summer I tagged along with my aunt to Washington DC on a business trip. I would be helping with her child but I was sleeping at Annabel's. Once there she treated me indifferently; we went out with her friends and she spent the time with them, leaving me on my own. On my last night we went out to Trax. We danced, drank gin & tonics. We were underage, out on the town. Annabel danced with girls, I danced with guys, made out with each other in dark corners. Afterwards we drove around the city in her old Buick convertible. Her father was a judge and I think she got a special pleasure out of acting wild in her home-town. I came to DC prepared for the break-up, she had been hinting at it all summer. But we had such fun that night, she let loose on the drive back, relaxed for the first time since I had arrived. We parked in a forest preserve by the Potomac and began to make love. She straddled me in the front seat. As soon as I entered her, she started to moan. I mistook the sound for one of pleasure, but shortly realized that she had her face in my shoulder crying. We separated, she fell against the window opposite, crumpled in a ball. I asked her what was

wrong. First she didn't want to tell, then finally unburdened herself of it: she had gotten pregnant sometime in the spring. She was prepared to have the child, had even picked out a name.

"It was going to be a girl named Arizona. It was going to be a girl, I know," she cried. In Chicago she had miscarried on the toilet next to my bedroom while I slept. I didn't understand what that meant and she had to explain it to me through her tears. She had kept her condition to herself the whole time. Because of her Catholic upbringing, she was ready to drop out of school to birth the child.

That was our last conversation. After that summer's week she refused to take my phone calls, and when I returned to campus she avoided me. I spent several furious weeks where I couldn't communicate with anyone. One day, my parents asked me to pick up some take-out food from Evanston. I never wore my seatbelt, but as I was passing south of Dempster, within blocks of my destination, I slid the Toyota's belt across my body. Two blocks later, while listening to the Cramps on the tape deck (which continued playing insouciantly after the accident—I remember thinking how tantalizing that detail would be to Annabel when I told her), not paying attention I ran a stop sign and was hit by another car at the intersection. No one was injured but both cars were taken away on flat-bed trucks, totaled. I had run a stop sign. When I made it home, shaken, I called her. She acted as though I was bothering her. *I could have died,* I said melodramatically, trying to engage her. Told me she was sorry for me but she had to go. She would call me sometime.

Later I would learn that Annabel began seeing a doctor and taking anti-depressants, the first I had heard of medication, the first time I identified depression with a clinical diagnosis. Only in the future would I realize they were part of the reason she could so easily dismiss me. I was part of her corrosive depression, and washed away along with it when the medicine did its job. I could never verify if she was actually pregnant, if it is possible at an early stage to miscarry on the toilet. But the idea of that child has haunted me since. Because part of it had been born. Part of it was called into this world. It has been flushed away, just like I was flushed from Annabel's life. There was no longer an angel shadowing me. As for Annabel, she continued to dodge me, then disappeared for a semester in Spain. By he time she got back I had transferred. I was stuck with the image of Annabel leaving Chicago after losing the fetus, wanting to tell me but afraid of my reaction, looking up at me unsettled, yet reluctant to let go of me at the airport before her flight. Of anybody I've known, we always had the longest good-byes.

ALL CATS ARE GREY— Over my bed at The Island that final year I had hung the poster from the Cure album *Boys Don't Cry*. Robert Smith's hair radiated from the back of his head like an alien fern that was feeding on the wan person to which it was attached. Basically there was Robert Smith and there was Robert Smith's hair. Of all the music I collected during those days, I find it hardest to return to the Cure. I can't imagine putting on a Cure album just for the pleasure of it. Smith's unmistakable voice awakens thorny feelings inside me—a wince—a touch of embarrassment, the musical analog to looking at a photo from an ugly teen awkward phase. It's not that I find them any less listen-to-able to than The Replacements or The Smiths, but listening to them is to revisit

myself at my most awkward, vulnerable worst. I find little new in their music—their songs are spent bullets.

Music-wise, the 80s in general were a pretty great time to be a depressed teenager, and the Cure were the quintessential mope rockers. *Boys did cry*, as Robert Smith well knew. Unabashedly pouty and morbid, arty and occasionally cerebral, I found a lot to like in the Cure. Plus, they knew how to use castanets. They were the inevitable progression of a sensitive KISS fan who also read a lot of Stephen King. Robert Smith wore enough make-up and had the hair to rival any hair metal band, and they might have been drawn by Charles Adams, for all their dark gothic appeal. The singer had a Ziggy Stardust persona if Ziggy Stardust had died and been unearthed after a few days. You got the sense that they understood their own cartoonishness and did not mind playing it up, as they did in their videos, in which Smith always seems a bit perturbed, as though there was a fly constantly buzzing around his face.

The Cure's music was a lot more accessible than their pop/Goth counterparts Bauhaus, The Fall, and The Birthday Party. You could listen to the Cure, you could dance to the Cure. There was something transgressively cheerful about their music; a spider web spun with cotton candy. They had come to terms with their morbidity and were, in a weird way, celebrating it. Not so *much woe is* me but *woe is everything*—so let's dance. It is hard to think about them in terms of singles, the Cure are more like a genre, a disposition, a pose. I remember, when I was a freshman, I was walking behind one of the few punks in our school—she had 'the Cure' buzzed into the back of her shaved head. It seemed to brand her as an untouchable, an outcast. I was both scandalized and intrigued.

The Cure can be credited with luring a lot of people into Goth culture. Few people listen to Christian Death and find it immediately appealing, but the Cure had strong bubble-gum instincts. I am thinking of the unbearably cute songs like "Love Cats," and light-as-air "Close to Me," which got them substantial radio play in the States. The later was off *The Head On The Door*, the album that would break them out of cult status and turn them into a commercial force. Like Depeche Mode, they were a cult band in the States, until *The Head On The Door* put them over the top. To their credit they made no conspicuous attempts at selling out—"Close to Me" is not, to the best of my knowledge, featured in any underarm deodorant commercials—they just found a niche for radio-friendly gothic pop songs. "Close to Me" and "In Between Days" were poppy and suppressed much of the unmitigated gloom that infused so much of their earlier music. It was a strange meeting of worlds, mainstream WXRT Chicago listeners and the Goth faction who had listened to the Robert Smith since he sang with Siouxsie Sioux in The Glove, since the relentlessly forlorn *Pornography*, *The Top*, or *Seventeen Seconds,* their semi-instrumental album which was more like a soundtrack to an arty vampire movie than a pop album. The Cure lost some of their cred as Goth rockers after *Head On the Door*. You can divide the people who were turned onto the Cure at that point into two groups: the ones who bought their proceeding albums (which featured commercially poppy hits like "Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me," and the reprehensible "It's Friday, I'm in Love,") and the ones that delved into their back catalog.

One only had to listen to *The Top*, one of the Cure's darkest offerings to understand the appeal it would have to somebody like me or Annabel. The first track, "Bannanafish Bones," is a reference to the J.D. Salinger story in which the savant protagonist Seymour

Glass inexplicably shoots himself in the head at the end of the story. "Put a piece of metal in your head you said/ Make you dead," Smith whines and caterwauls. Salinger's stories have value for those of any age, but their recurring themes—the corruption of innocence, the falseness of social constructs—makes them particularly relevant to teenagers. Depression makes those issues at once more urgent and less discernable. Smith's lyrics, however, do not strive for Salinger-esque cuteness or lucidity. *The Top* offers up a surreal chest of toys: a caged bird-girl, a toy soldier, an eternally spinning top. The album is filled with images of love and death intermingling, inextricable from each other. In "The Wailing Wall," as in Roger Waters' wall (or for that matter, Tears for Fears' wall in "The Prisoner"), the wall is a symbol of alienation, an insurmountable divide between the self and the world. Again in "The Empty World," Smith details a place inside one's head that is simultaneously uninhabited yet at perpetual war. It's a paradox that elucidates the condition of depression—the feeling of annihilation, the battle of the self against its zombified mirror image. *The Top* is rife with the menace of natural phenomena: vultures, worms, spiders, fires blazing, raging seas and storms. More than one Cure video featured the band on the edge of a cliff; in one they do not fall off, in another they do, into a burrow. The cliff is an appropriate symbol for the Cure, who go over the edge just like a depressive.

I didn't like the Cure in spite of their morbidity, I liked them because of their morbidity. "Look at the piggy, the piggy in the mirror," sings the perpetually cherubic Robert Smith. I could relate to his self-loathing. In fact, a lot of his lyrics were just past the border of the poetry I was writing. Yes*, I Was A Teenage Poet*. The Cure's music is a sort of aggrandized version of the typical death-obsessed adolescent poetry that can be

found in spiral notebooks hidden in between mattresses, squirreled away at the backs of the closets. Bad teenage poetry, like the Cure, is a genre unto itself. Glimpsing one of my own high school notebooks, I opened it at random to what I had demarked as 'The Page of Eternal Darkness.' *Enough said*. The Cure somehow parlayed those sentiments into pop music. That they were out in the world being adored, idolized, that they had money and wives and girlfriends, seemed to suggest there was value in well-produced doggerel. And, actually, the Cure aside, there *is* value in teenage poetry, and the more clumsy the better. Within the poems, with all their dark imagery and morbidity, there is a message. Because depression hides itself in such convincing camouflage, it takes some insight for the sufferer to recognize it as something apart from the self. Through writing, the condition makes itself known, primarily to the poet. For once, depression takes on an un-retractable form. A poem is not a symptom, and there need be little decoding to understand the messages in verse, like this anonymously written one found on the web: slit my wrists/to keep the world at bay/close my eyes/and sleep all day.

That Smith was a rock star didn't prevent me from imagining that he wrote his lyrics in a tiny white room just like mine, scribbling away feverishly before lights out was called. Though he strived for a Camus-like dispassion in "Killing an Arab," he could never fully resist the pouty boy who likes to play in crawl spaces. Robert Smith reminds me of the chubby, teased kid who likes Victorian literature instead of *The A Team*; who, in his teen years, discovered the power of a persona, and never grew out of it. That was one of their real values: the power of posing. Smith's persona—the jet black hair, the jewelry, the make-up and black clothing—was so strong it should be trademarked. At

any Cure show, minions of imitators aped Smith's look—kids using a persona to articulate themselves when they felt their own voices were mute.

The Cure are undoubtedly special: a trendy band that outlasted the trend. Like the undead, the just didn't know when to give it up. In their own way they are The Rolling Stones of mope rock; you get the feeling that they will cannibalize their careers until they drop. (Though, in truth, The Rolling Stones are the Rolling Stones of mope rock, and the genre's unlikely, perhaps unwitting, forefathers, with songs like "As Tears Go By" and especially "Paint It Black.") I have to wonder what the Cure's audience looks like these days, as most of their early fans have lost the fashion of their angst in their approach to middle age. It's tough to play child-of-the damned when your are post-forty. And what do the younger fans have to say? Are the Cure a just a lite-rocking joke to the Marilyn Manson set? Over time they have become less George Romero and more Tim Burton—a palatable version of a dark imagination. The Cure continue making music, though I don't think they are saying anything new except that the gloom seems to be mitigated a bit by success. Not that they particularly *need* to say anything new. Their synthesized Munch-like shriek will be set on replay for as long as people will pay to see a sideshow.

DIE WITHIN YOUR REACH—Spring began to shine through: tulips poked up around Founders Hall, the ice slicks melted, the slush turning into puddles across which students jumped or trudged straight through like the recusants we felt ourselves to be. The buds of trees that lined the entrance road to school camouflaged the campus, dusting it in green. The willows by the bridge bore catkins again, softening their whip-like branches. For a time mud was everywhere, then suddenly the paths dried out and the air

became fragrant. The tree outside my room blossomed in pink flowers that pressed their faces against the window screen.

Afternoons are spent with the team. It is lullingly predictable, circling the track again and again, there is something pleasantly mad about track races that cross country lacks. You are running in circles, the rest of the track meet happening around you—you are an inconvenience at best. As a distance runner you are largely ornamental, especially in the 3,000 meter race. The other runners admire and pity the distance runner on a track team: *Better him than me*, is the prevailing sentiment. Unlike them you are less attuned to the team score than your personal best time. You work harder for less glamorous rewards. The sprinters combust in heroic bursts of energy—it's exciting to watch, and over in the blink of an eye—but you are a panting absurdity out there on the track, without a fan in the world. People are not watching you, rather checking to see if you're finished yet. But you have access to a secret world, a meditative calm and solitude that doesn't exist in other team sports. They think you are being fiercely competitive, strategizing, plotting how and when to overtake the runner ahead of you, or how much of a lead you will need so as not to need to kick too hard at the end. But really you are easing into the utter lack of thought, letting your breathing lull you away. Only then do you realize that your time on the Island is finite. It will be like a death, leaving. Rounding the curves on the final lap, the end is in sight.

Lydia put me in the number one spot in the 1,500. I was winning races, contributing to a team that would go without a loss for the season. At one such meet, we were running against a school in Waterford, at a strange campus where one enormous,

castle-like building comprised all the schools facilities from dorms to science labs. Rick Starns, their top distance runner—blonde, preppie, therefore Aryan with all the negative connotations, was overheard referring Lydia a 'dike.' As a team, we couldn't be overly sensitive about Lydia. Comments from competitors about her body were frequent and permissible (she was the only female coach of a boys' team, it was worth putting up with). If somebody called her fuckable, all we could do was shrug our shoulders—*didn't we know it*. But to call her a dike negated all that was erotic about her, in short, negated our hopes, and that outraged us. We couldn't beat him up outright, though there were incitements in that direction. No, the only way to protect Lydia's virtue (as we saw it) was to demoralize him on the track. I was used to winning races at this point—beating everybody but the truly talented who were good enough to be recruited by university teams—but I had never beat Starns before, and it was up to me, as he was entered in my race.

In distance running you can basically choose between two strategies: starting off fast and trying to build up an insurmountable lead, or you run slow, conserving your energy to out-kick your opponent at the end. Starns decided on the former, which was fine, I had no confidence in my kick. I let him set the pace, trailing a few feet behind. We rounded the first lap in 62 seconds, which was an unprecedented time for me. Psychically, leading in a race can be damaging, because you are concentrating both on what is in front and what is behind you. Instead of leading, you feel you are being chased down. Second place brings out the predator in a runner, looking to pick off the guy ahead, familiarizing yourself with the fluctuations in their pace, gauging their energy. I could tell Starns was discouraged that he hadn't lost me with that furiously run first lap,

and slowed a touch, his head twisting into the lap's curve to see how close I was. This scared him, and he darted ahead again, but I kept up. The other runners had fallen back far enough that I felt no distraction, clinging to him. It wore him down over the course of the next two laps. Sensing this, I got right up to his pace, to where if our steps fell out of synch I would be tearing out a hunk of his ankle with my spikes. If I couldn't beat him, I wanted intimidate him. He had decided to go out fast, so I was going to make him pay for his arrogance for as long as I could. I fully intended on tripping him on the last lap—making it look unintentional to all but me and him would be easily—but then I realized, as his pace relented, that I was going to beat him outright. I overtook him on a curve, another demoralizing tactic, as you are not only running faster, but covering more ground around the perimeter, and sped down the back strip in a solid kick. I finished several seconds ahead of him to Doyle's welcome embrace (I would repeat this feat at Championships too, I imagine leaving him with a life-long grudge).

It would have been a nice, sportsman-like payback but for Starns' father. He was known to take his video camera to meets, stand on the inside of the track, pointing his camera in your face, crowding the runners, all the while yelling disparaging remarks. On the last lap, just as I had passed Rick, seeing the camera bearing down on me, virtually on the track so that I had to direct myself around it, knowing he was catching it all, I flashed him a two-fingered peace sign. No sooner had I finished did he approach me, stalked all the way from the opposite end of the track, to say "I don't like what you flashed in my camera, son." He thought I had given him the finger. His own son was there behind him, panting and distraught. You could see he was used to falling in behind his father, no matter what the circumstances. I was too worn out to say anything (it is not unusual for

runners to collapse, to puke after races) but look at him. But Doyle felt free to pipe up, "Well if you didn't crowd him, like you're doing right now. It's not his fault he beat your kid." This incited him beyond words. He turned and stalked away, seeking out Buff, the head coach. We watched him kicking up dirt, gesticulating with his camera. Buff also coached soccer in the fall, he was not one to brook any shit. He was a steely old man who derided my earring, and chewed out a sprinter for bringing his girlfriend on the bus. Buff asked me if I had indeed given the man the finger: no, I said, it was a victory sign, which I thought would go over better than a peace sign. "Some people just don't appreciate team spirit," Buff said, shaking his head in the direction of Starns' father.

Doyle, once attuned to the prospect of trouble, wouldn't let it drop. "Hey," he said, pursuing the man, "don't you owe my friend here an apology?"

"Oh, so sorry," he said, shaking his head. "Why don't you two grow up."

"What," I spat out, in my snottiest *Repo Man* cadence, "and be like you?"

"Jesus," muttered Lydia under her breath. She had been conferring with Buff, and had followed us over to keep the situation from escalating. She collared us and lead us back to the team. "You shouldn't have said that," she said to me. "But I'm glad you did."

Nicky woke me up with three dulcet, perfectly rhythmic farts. "No need for an alarm clock, that's how I wake up every morning," he informed me, yawning on the couch, pleased with himself. We were back in Essex. His house looked out over the Connecticut river, a small property they called Turtle Bay. His Greek step-mother made strong, molasses dark coffee for us in the morning.

"Got a prom date yet?" Nicky asked.

"No," I said. I hadn't even thought about prom.

"You?"

"Yeah. I'm going with Hadley."

"But what about Hayden?"

"Oh they broke up," he said off-handedly.

"Really?" Nicky grinned at me, both of us trying to conceal the excitement the news provoked. I pressed Nicky for more information, which he was happy to relate. Sometime she had bored of the novelty of a jock boyfriend. She had used him for what he was worth, then dumped him. He was apparently inconsolable (I too, grinned at this—and would, before the end of the year, form a bond with Hayden out of sympathy). Nicky knew how important that information was to both of us, as important as the comment about prom. I had planned on rebounding and asking her myself.

I HATE MUSIC—"How young are you/ How old am I?/ Let's count the rings/ Around my eyes." "I Will Dare" is a song about fleeting youth that makes you feel young—at moments, driving in your grandmother's car—it felt like the most teenage song ever written, and felt that way for a long time after my teenage years receded in the rearview mirror. Pleasurable as any pop song, filled with reckless energy (both it and me) the song acknowledged that there is no youth that does not expire, or get wrung out. What remains is the grist behind the album, *Let It Be*, the seminal recording by The Replacements, the best band never to have

made it. Self-depreciating from the band name, even the album cover art sets you up for lowered expectations: sitting on the porch roof of a prairie-style house drinking bottled beer, The Replacements (brothers Tommy and Bob Stinson, Chris Mars and singer/songwriter Paul Westerberg) looked like local suburban ne'er-do-wells, hair too long to be punks, not primped enough to be metal. Even the title, *Let It Be*, was a big fuck you to 'serious' music fans, if not to the Beatles themselves.

In the heyday of the music video, it was this sort of marketing self-sabotage that was both the charm of the band as well as their downfall. By making some of the most careless, throwaway party music, they were also (intentionally or not) making the best underground music in America. They seemed to have faith in only one thing: not caring would make them infinitely cool. It's an ideal pose for a punk band aware of its own expendability, but not for one intending on making a long-haul career, like REM. The Replacements wanted you to believe they were a one-car demolition derby, ready to take out or be taken out by anyone crazy enough to share a pit with them.

After opening with "I Will Dare," a song that is both gratifying as a punk song and pleasurable as any top forty pop—as if to say, see what we could do, *if we gave a shit*. It's a song that takes on the pop world on its own terms, a jaunty tune with rockabilly sensibilities worthy of Big Star at their best. Then *Let It Be* takes a sharp turn. Westerberg's voice on "Favorite Thing" sounds cigarette scorched, consumed by impossible yearning. Like the Violent Femmes they were filled with young aching sounds of growing bones and cracking voices—their songs embodying a comic growing pain. He sounds like a kid who *wants to sound* like the piano player

at a burlesque joint. Who or What is Westerberg's favorite thing is irrelevant, as were most of the lyrics on this album. For instance: "Coming Out," the lyrics were un-crafted, and indeed, the whole song is un-crafted. But to paint them as inept is way off-base. To capture the sense of spontaneity in a Replacements song is something band after band fails at.

"Excuse me if I fuck this one up," Westerberg says to the audience at the beginning of a bootlegged show. As if anybody had a choice; you could forgive him for fucking it up, or find another band to listen to (there were any number to choose from, some—like Hüsker Dü, and the Minutemen—were a lot better than The Replacements). Maybe that's why their legacy has endured so resiliently, their fans are still forgiving them. The Replacements self-fulfilling prophesy of failure. There was an utter virtuosity in how many ways they could fuck up. Their refusal to capitulate to juggernaut MTV and make a video, their live shows that degenerated into brawls or Black Sabbath covers—their insistence that the world treat them like juvenile delinquents against the ropes—rebels without a clue. They sum themselves up in almost any number of throwaway lines: "One foot in the door/ the other one in the gutter," "God, what a mess/ on the ladder of success," "One more chance to get it all wrong/ One more night to get it half-right." If The Replacements had an ideology, it was based on the music fans' knowledge that great band burn out or fade away. But being a rock 'n' roll band, Westerberg being an *artiste*, the real cause of their failure would be to go against that ideology.

But that was later. *Let It Be* continues with its mission to lower expectations, just when you think they are getting serious about rupturing eardrums, they pull a

thrash song "Tommy Gets His Tonsils Out," followed by their ode to cross-dressing "Androgynous." There is no apparent consistency to the album, they move from heavy metal to punk to wrenching ballads, from irony to sincerity, to songs where both postures become irrelevant. My punk friends didn't like The Replacements, they weren't hardcore enough; my new wave friends didn't listen them, they hadn't even heard of them. It was genre breaking because it had no genre, instead of depreciating of self, it proclaimed that The Replacements could transcend any genre they worked in. This was optimism bordering on arrogance. They could even take a KISS song—"Black Diamond"—strip it of all its artifice, and rebuild it like the transmission on a souped-up car.

The album peaks at the seventh track, "Unsatisfied." The song finds the right alchemy between the brothers Stinson rust-never-sleeps guitar work and Westerberg's trashcan Sinatra tendencies. "Everything you dream of is right in front of ya/ But every dream's a lie," is such a desolating, sincere lyric, delivered an understatement that hints it was almost not delivered at all, as though he was bitterly turning away from the mic. Their dreams might come true, but nothing good could come of it. The same bootleg: Westerberg leaves lyrics unsung, maybe he is taking a swig off a beer, you hear the audience singing the words back: not in the way that singers prod audiences to sing the song back, they had been singing all along, making the song their own, making the tiny venue sound like an arena.

As the album rounds out with "Seen Your Video" and "Answering Machine," Westerberg's true Luddite tendencies are revealed. While others were at least achieving a modicum of televised fame on MTV's *120 Minutes*, The Replacements

held firm to their anti-video stance. Fugazi didn't make videos. But The Replacements weren't Fugazi, no band is Fugazi (who would want to be?). When they would capitulate for their major label debut *Tim*, the video would be nothing but an uninterrupted shot of a speaker and a hand wrapped around a glass of what looks like whiskey. In *black and white*. Not a Replacement in sight. Or maybe that was because there wasn't a Replacement in sight in The Replacements either, Westerberg effectively taking over the band, playing the instruments *properly*.

So what would have happened if they had made a video to "I Will Dare?" Might it have hastened the revolution of "alternative" music on the charts? If they had made themselves up like Goo-Goo Dolls and played to that facile romantic chord that so much New Wave music had prepared audiences for? *Let It Be* was a more perfect expression of teen angst than *Nevermind*, and for that matter, it was more accessible. What it didn't have was major label backing. The Replacements came out of, and represented, a scene where music that was traded by hand, on vinyl and cassettes. Word-of-mouth via friends or the guy behind the record counter (in my case there was Matt Adell of Record Express, who played in the punk band Nascent Rebel). Flyers and an ad in *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll* were the standard marketing tools. Any kid who was tapped into this vein of underground music was covetous of it, and outright hostile to any corporate or mainstream intrusion. Communities were created around music scene. It was, in its own way, exclusive.

All scenes die, whether it is by the closing of a club, the demise of a band, or uptake of a band into the mainstream. By design The Replacements should have put out another album or so on Twin Tone and imploded. So when The Replacements signed to a major label (Sire—just like Madonna!) there was a feeling of betrayal amongst those who wanted the house party to last a bit longer, or those who felt complicit in their remedial attitude towards responsibility. Big surprise, they wanted to have careers, become famous, not die of cirrhosis or move back in with their parents. *Tim*, the result of the jump, was a non-starter commercially. *Tim* was more mature (to its detriment). It was less sloppy, less reckless. This was the work of a contender—they now had something to lose, and it showed in the music. Gone was the attitude, the feeling that it could self-destruct on the turntable. Gone are the youthful hardcore riffs. It was a tempered, level-headed debut. This is a loungey album, textured and generous. The album of a band with great 'promise,' that might capture some of the sales bands like the Clash or REM had achieved with their more commercial material. *Tim* was, for a lot of Replacements fans and critics, their best work. That is was so good made the heartbreak easier. You can't blame a band for making the jump to a major label, you can blame them for betraying sentiments they had expressed that you had sympathized with, paid money to sympathize with.

"People don't know how to slam here," was the complaint aired my friend Art, who would only accompany me to see the 'Mats at the Metro if I bought his ticket. He was right: instead of the cliquish thrashers we were used to mingling

with in the pit, the audience was filled with drunker, more boorish suburban kids. It was a far cry from my first hardcore show, Black Flag. While being hurled around the pit, absorbing blows, acquiring bruises that I would be showing off for days to come, I was knocked to the floor and all I saw was a mayhem of black boots flying to and fro. Within moments I was hoisted to my feet by multiple arms and back in the dance. There was a tacit agreement, and acceptable level of physicality, the blows landing like thudding bass, I was inventing myself there in the pit. Watching from the side, I realize, I had not been given special treatment because I was so small, it was part of the code of the pit. It was so civil and egalitarian, it was touching. Nobody who fell was in danger of staying on the ground before they were helped up. Stage divers were caught, passed to the back over people's heads. For all the gnarled, shaved, pierced people, it felt safer than walking down the hallway of a high school.

The Replacements shows were attracting a different sort of audience than The Descendants, and certainly than straight-edge Metro regulars 7 Seconds. For lack of a better word, 'mainstream' kids were coming to shows. The same kids who, a few years before, had no more imagination than to listen to classic rock. These would be the same people who, were they a few years older, would be following Jimmy Buffet around in parrot hats. That years later, there were sexual assaults in the pit during the Woodstock revival is a good argument for reviling bands that sell out. The bands who played Woodstock had mud slung at them, it was a fitting ending to any notion of alternative rock. Bands like Green Day may have sold

themselves out, but they also unintentionally sold out the kids in their scene, if not the pit itself.

But The Replacements weren't invited to play Woodstock. The alternative revolution that they, more than any band except maybe Dü, helped enable, had passed them by. Other bands: the Goo Goo Dolls, The Gin Blossoms, Semisonic, Better than Ezra, would have hits with Replacements-like songs (at least one even written by Westerberg himself). By that time they had imploded, Paul Westerberg had moved to LA and Bob Stinson was but a few years away from his fatal drug overdose. After *Tim* they began to put out serious music, befitting serious contenders on a major label. *Pleased To Me*, their self-conscious poke at themselves for dealing with 'the man'. They pulled out no stops for the single "Can't Hardly Wait," replete with a horn section. But Westerberg was increasingly having a Hootenanny all on his lonesome. The riff between his sentiment and ambition, and the no-frills party band seems to have grown irreconcilable. It is like The Replacements felt that selling out means sounding more and more like they should be playing Saturday night at Holiday Inn. There was a groovy saxophone. There were a few irreverent hard rocking songs, but The Replacements had grown up. On "Never Mind," "I'm hoping that the shouting ain't a waste of time," foretells the end. *All Shook Down*, their heroin-chic last album, was basically a Westerberg solo project. "Never Mind" would, in five years' time, give way to *Nevermind*. By that time Westerberg was putting out highly uneven solo albums, tagging along for the ride with contributions to the "Singles" and "Friends"

soundtracks, catering more to The Replacements faithful than garnering any new audience.

Instead of the perpetual adolescence Westerberg seemed sentenced to, he was prematurely relegated to codger status. His solo work betrays a bitterness at not having been minted a radio star despite himself. And the mid-tempo rock songs he put out proved merely watered down rather than commercial. His move from his band, geographically, to LA divested him of the obligation to be remotely punk. This in a time when the radio was turning to a rawer sound. When Chris Cornell sang, "Looking California, but feeling Minnesota," it was a nod to the work of Dü, The Replacements, Soul Asylum who created—and within the underground, popularized—the sound that Seattle would benefit so greatly from. Nor did he strike the white-hot indie chord of heart-throb and anti-throb of Jeff Buckley and Elliott Smith respectively. Nor did his ballads ever tap into common sentiment that fellow pioneers Soul Asylum were able to do with "Runaway Train." Instead he became more a Peter Frampton, without the benefit of *Frampton Comes Alive*. His lyrical irony became cheesy, as in songs like "Dyslexic Heart"—it all felt like going to work with a hangover. There are no doubt fans who would have preferred that he went the way of Bob Stinson, or more tantalizingly, Kurt Cobain, and died in some romantic pose that they might remember through time. But even at this ambition Westerberg proved inadequate—only this time the his deficiencies were not romanticized, the same humanity that endeared him to his fans made him ignorable.

PICTURES OF YOU—A small revelation I could have lived without: popularity does not cure loneliness. Not true loneliness, when it has ceased to be a condition and turned into a characteristic, when it moves from a sorrowful, nagging emotion into something that is a physical ache, the kind that makes you curl into the fetal position when lying down. The ache you become accustomed to—it has entered into your blood now, and before long you cannot do without. The ache dwells in you like a phantom, rises at will. You can be with any group of friends and it persists. Companionship, relationships do not alleviate the feeling. But even worse, you cannot do without people. You try to isolate yourself, to break your social interaction down to the bare minimum, but it's no use. You end up going to every party you are invited to, sitting at lunch with whomever will have you.

It should have been the best part of my high school years, and on paper it looked pretty good. I had friends, I was finally accepted to college (by a well-regarded school in Ohio that had, if our admissions department is to be believed, never rejected a single applicant from the Island. Indeed, I was accepted in my interview and never even filled out an application). I had asked a sophomore to prom. She was an easy target, mostly because she didn't know me and would not be asked by anybody else, someone who was in no position to refuse. And she would look pretty in the pictures; even then, I knew what prom was worth. If I had known that that would be the one picture of me from high school my mother would have framed, that it would be displayed in our house for all time to come, I might have taken care not to sabotage that night.

The evening started out well, as those pictures I have reflect. Me standing proudly by my date wearing the corsage I had coordinated with the colors we wore. (She in a simple black dress, elegant beyond her years, me in a black tux, the corsage white carnation and baby's breath.) We had planned it as though it was important, because it was important. Lara looking, peeping almost, into the camera, bending slightly towards me, not to get close to me (as I may have vainly thought at the time) but to ensure that she was in the frame.

Like most classes before us, we elected to have the dance off-campus in order to drink with impunity. A party band was hired that was sure to play "Rock Lobster" (just as we in our glad-rags were sure to go *down, down rock lobster*) and 'shout' on cue to "You Make Me Wanna Shout." Hadley wore a dress any stern puritan nanny would admire, with a white lace collar. There in that particular photo she is leaning toward the camera holder (me) as though a great gust of wind was coming from the lens. Her smile bashful, that of a girl getting discovered dressing up in her mother's clothing. I was with a group of runners: Nicky, and Dave were amongst them, all except Doyle (the only one of us with an actual girlfriend). They too had asked pretty underclassmen, none whom would have dated us under any other circumstance. We all stood proudly by our dates aware of what we were getting away with, them smiling placidly. We were their tickets in, and through them we were cheating history.

I danced with Lara, one song, then the next. And suddenly she was no longer by my side, but there dancing by the side of her boyfriend (this was a person she had started dating the week before prom, he too got in under the ropes with a dateless senior girl). I feigned a partner for a few moments, then went and sat at the table alone.

"I can't believe you did that to me," I said. There was that poison amulet of sensitivity hanging from my neck. I began a pout that a joint I'd smoked in the parking lot with Nicky seemed to encourage. "It's my prom, and you left me standing there."

"Well what about you. You went and disappeared outside for forever."

"You were invited."

"I don't get high. Besides, it was just for a few seconds, it was like our song."

" 'Hip to Be Square' is your song? 'Hip to be Square?' "

"You're an asshole."

Once I had been proclaimed an asshole by somebody who liked Huey Lewis there was no turning back. I looked over at Nicky and Hadley, coolly enjoying themselves. Who would she take next year? Where would I be? My head dipped. I would speak to Lara no more that evening—she would cry in the ride all the way back to campus, getting out of Nicky's Saab without salutation. Nor would I partake in the beach party in Essex; instead Nicky dropped me at Hadley's house, Hadley lead me to bed, tucked me in as though I were a child she was babysitting, and turned out the light. I buried my head in a pillow and wished myself away. *Down, down rock lobster*!

BLED WHITE—Though my father has certainly been sent notification of my adoption, I do not hear from him. I wait for that phone call to come, for him to show up and reprimand me like a naughty child, but he never does. Of course, he is busy with his new family now. I have a half brother and two half sisters.

Many years later, on a subway ride, sitting in the orange bucket seat, zoned out, trying to ignore the tedium of the commute from Manhattan to Brooklyn, I am distracted

by the couple sitting across from me. Their posture suggests two friends, perhaps he is trying to impress her. They might have been NYU graduate students coming from class. It's not their conversation that engages me, though they are talking about some film they recently saw, and he is making some entertaining insight. She is smiling, amused. A similar conversation could be transpiring anywhere across New York. It is the fleshy cheeks covered with reddish whiskers that draw me to him.

The last time I saw my half brother Chris was during my sophomore year in college. I had driven down to Philadelphia with my girlfriend, stayed at Swarthmore College with an old friend from the North Shore. It is unclear whether my mother gave my father my number, or if he'd tracked me down with a private investigator (I prefer the later scenario) but he had called me on campus, and because Vermont was so close, suggested a visit. He picked me up on the Swarthmore campus in his new Volvo. Gone were the hippie trappings, his beard was trim, he wore a preppie oxford shirt. He drove me back to Media, where he was staying in his old house, having separated from his second wife. He now worked as a drug and alcohol rehabilitation counselor.

The plan was to have me over for dinner. On the way to Media, he pulled through a Burger King drive through and asked me what I wanted. It struck me as highly inconsiderate and I let him know it. I hadn't eaten in fast food in years, was an intermittent vegetarian. "It's what we have," he barked. My father, the hippie, who wanted to live alone in the woods and sustain himself with his own vegetables. I ordered a large fires, and let it rest. We didn't speak of the ride. Nor could he do right by me when we arrived at the big, clapboard house he would soon be moving out of.

"I don't think you've ever been here," he said. I had visited that house on several occasions, including a Christmas. I had slept in numerous rooms, I had chopped down trees to help clear the adjoining land. I had played whiffle ball with his son Chris in the yard and attended his daughters' birthday parties. I kept my mouth shut and counted the moments until I would be driven back to Swarthmore, where there was a hall party to look forward to. Over dinner my father was happy to spill the beans on my family; about my aunt's pill overdoses, the wasp excesses of my grandfather, whom he clearly held in contempt, believing he had spoiled my mother. For the rest of the visit I read most of *Born on the Fourth of July*, almost finishing the book while my father attended to business in his study.

"You know, sometimes booze makes you do funny things," he said to me on the drive back to Swarthmore. "It makes you forget things." At first thought he was talking about me. I had been out on the town in Philadelphia the night before. How did he sense my growing habit? Did he smell it on me? "So I'm sorry for the things I did," he said. "Or might have done." It occurred to me immediately that he was in Alcoholics Anonymous. He was apologizing for how he had behaved during his time as a drinker. I was familiar enough with the parlance by then from television. I was one check on the list of things he had to do as part of his twelve steps. *Apologize to those you have hurt.* It would be the last time I would hear from him.

Now I am sitting across the isle of a subway car from his son. I remember going up into his room during that visit, where he was flipping through an art book. In high school he had the wherewithal to know that he wanted to run a gallery. He seemed remote and

unsure how to take me. He had the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue on his desk, and I tried to impress him by telling him I had met one of the models, who came up to Vermont occasionally to visit a girl I was friends with. I wasn't sure why impressing him was important to me. I tried to tell him that Mish, also his half brother, had also shown interest in gallery work, and that my aunt on my mother's side was gaining a good deal of prestige in the art world as a painter of surreal landscapes.

Chris did not see me on that New York subway, might not have even clocked me though I sat but a few feet away. He said something funny to the girl next to him and got off a few stops into Brooklyn, leaving her smiling. I rode until she got off, then disembark a stop later, well past my own neighborhood.

LIVE WITHIN YOUR TOUCH—Kids stayed up real late, well past midnight to be sure the faculty were asleep before beginning the string of room parties that preceded graduation. Hallways began to take on the faint reek of weed in between classes. While the authoritarian grip of the administration slackened, their declarations became harsher: there was still time to be kicked out, it didn't matter how little time was left. They regaled us with stories of kids who were kicked out of school just days before graduation. But that event did come, the girls dressed in white dresses, the boys in blue blazers. My mother had a tiny Kodak camera that captured of small blurry image of me receiving my diploma.

It has crept up on me, the heat trapped in the red brick quad threatening me like a physical mass, like a smothering blanket. On certain cloudless days it is like a big clay

oven. I am staying on campus for today, though everybody else has left. Hadley is driving down from Essex to pick me up and take me to New Hampshire, where there is an overnight party. I am thinking about the Shad Derby, for no reason at all. It is the only day that people from town are invited onto the campus (they line the river in lawn chairs, looking like they are waiting for a parade to go by) to fish for the shad, which swim from the Atlantic to spawn. The shad didn't stand a chance, pulled one-by-one from the river, flashing like coins as they flipped about in the air. Townsfolk and students were shy on one-another (my photography teacher tried to remedy this by having us go into town and stop ten people and ask for to take their photos). Now I realized how feudalistic the event was, and how, when given a choice, I too would keep with my own.

Hadley is late; I feel like I will never leave here. Emptied of students, the campus is lonely, the sounds of bird call, the June bugs that buzz languidly through the air are more pronounced —the place feels like a living entity that is settling in for rest. I'd packed my stuff into my parents' Toyota after graduating and sent them off without me. Mish had not been allowed to stay for the week following his graduation, but for some reason they didn't protest my staying.

Finally I see her burnt orange Cabriolet pull up next to the dorm. Without a look over my shoulder, we tear out of that place and drive like mad north. She's happy, drinking cola through a straw from a McDonald's cup, map folded haphazardly next to her.

"I like that hat on you," she says. It was a Portuguese fisherman's hat from Commander Salamander. It is black wool and kind of hot, but I wear it anyway. I put in

a mix tape I made for her. It was filled with desperately tragic love songs, narrating eternal love or suicides. Nothing she didn't know already.

"Sugar Ties, that's a funny name for a town," she says as we pass into New York.

"Fresh Kills is better. You live in Sugar Ties, but I'm moving to Fresh Kills."

"Oh, in that case, we can write postcards to each other. Cause I'm not coming to Fresh Kills."

"Sugar Ties is beat."

"If you say so." We drive in silence. I am conscious that it is the last time I will be seeing her. I'll be stuck in Chicago for the summer painting houses, she'll be off to Nantucket.

"You know," she says tentatively, "I wish you had asked me to prom."

"Why?"

"Things might have been different," she said.

"What things?"

"I don't know. I might have dressed, you know, less conservatively." Suddenly she is acting coquettish with me.

"Let's blow off the party and just drive across the country," she says. "Don't stop until we hit the Pacific. You can get a job in the movies or something." It was a curious comment, implying I had, at some point, made an impression on her other than the sad-sac following in her wake. Earlier that trimester I had somehow managed to get cast in the Spring one-act theatre program. I got to play a character in the William Saroyan play 'Hello Out There.' The play ended with me getting shot on stage, dying in front of the school at every appearance. I loved the dying scene, didn't milk it too long, but relished

the part where I was shot, taking the bullet harder with each performance, falling to the ground, allowing the director a melodramatic pause before the lights went out on me and the play was over and I was resurrected for the curtain call. It was high school theatre, but I lived in that pause, where I lay crumpled on the ground in my practiced death in front of my class-mates. My pretend melodrama had made an impression that I couldn't on my own.

"Okay," I say, living in a mutual fantasy, pleased to have her there.

We hit Nashua before dark.

"We're leaving. We're leaving. It will never be like this again," Ace cried uncontrollably. The beer hit him early, pried open and released what everybody was thinking to some degree.

"But we'll see each other again," I countered.

"It won't be the same. You know it won't be the same. You'll be showing me how cool you are at college and I'll join some fucking frat or something."

"No, it will be better than that," I said. (Ace was right, of course. Geography would remove all my friends from me, and when we did get around to visiting, it would not be the same. Ace would join a frat and I would achieve a sort of affected rakish cool that for a time included wearing a beret. Both of us would quit running: me because of my German roommate, who was sitting on our house steps with a six-pack. We ran past him at the start of a long workout. He grinned, held one towards me, thereby ending my running career.) Mister Nagy did the only thing one could do to counter his devastating truth: he took Ace in his arms and held him until he his tears stopped.

There had been a barbeque, volleyball games, cards. In one of their barns there was a DJ. I looked for Hadley, but she was nowhere to be found. Finally, I saw her emerging from a path with a group of guys trailing behind, bubbling laughter from some joke she told.

"Where were you?"

"Just off with Szink and the others," she said.

"Jesus," I said, furiously jealous.

"Since when do you smoke," she said, noting the cigarette I was holding.

"Since you decided to disappear for half the night."

"Oh just shut up and come dance with me." I followed her to the barn. It was a fast song—Van Halen, or something but we slow danced. I was probably drunk. At some point a chaperone came over and took the dwindling cigarette from my fingers.

"You know, you hurt me," she said.

"How?"

"When you disappeared like that," she said.

"I thought I explained."

"You didn't. Not really."

It had not occurred to me that I had the power to hurt her. I had given so much power over to her, it seemed impossible that I still held any. Sometime during the next song, we began to kiss. I felt hot tears coming down my face. She pulled away. "I hate slow songs," she said. "Let's go." Soon we were out in front of the house where the lawn stretched out into the green rolling hills. Where the horizon receded into a night and stars above like a pin cushion. She was there in my arms. She was mine, there.

Every muscle that now turned quiveringly supple. I held her as though to hold her forever. The small imperfection on her breast, a tiny hair that sprouted defiantly from the aureole making her suddenly very human, no longer a dream that hovered somewhere in front of me. That realization, that emergence of her as a person crystallized my crush, my obsessive crush, into something permanent. It ensured that the dream would not dissipate in the rush of time. I slowed time down, I don't know how. Each moment picked up, isolated and archived. My life was over—from then on I would be broken and searching for that embrace to return to.

Ace walked by, say me there with Hadley. "My god Henderson," he said, "Tonight is your superlative," then moved on, laughing to himself.

Hadley and I went to her car, where I held her until we began to drowse, then went and wrapped ourselves up in a blanket in the barn. I held her through the night, held her as she slept, I stayed awake as long as I could, feeling her breath against my arm, feeling the secret warmth a sleeping body emits. She stayed with me that night out of friendship, though we weren't friends, and perhaps out of love, though we weren't lovers. In the morning she woke brightly. She wanted to get away before anyone else was up, not wanting to say good-byes. I held her, feeling she was already gone. "Keep wearing that hat," she said as she was getting into her car. "I know you'll be okay if you keep wearing that hat." I watched the car disappear down the driveway, the loss seeping in like cold air. I already had her picture placed in my wallet, where it would not be removed for years and years to come.

That summer Jordan and I walked around the path the Northwestern University landfill. Jutting out into the water, the bulbous droid-like planetarium on one end and the cityscape of Chicago at the other, stretching out beneath the monolith of the Hancock Building. Jordan was off to be a camp counselor in a few days. I didn't tell him, or anybody, about my last night with Hadley.

The night before we had shared a handle of vodka, trading shot for shot until the bottle was almost gone. During the night I admitted that I had never really gotten over Hadley, that it had somehow permanently damaged me. Once I had gotten Hadley on my mind, there was no way to shake her. I became immediately maudlin, incredibly unfun. Through our entire friendship, I had never known Jordan to express regret, or indulge in self-pity. But he was used to this behavior from me, and eventually he invited other friends over to continue with his reverie. Sometime during the night I wandered off. I had the matchbook-sized photo of the that I carried in my wallet, which I took out and gazed down at. Her on the beach, in her hometown of Essex, the night after prom, looking back at the camera which I held, impatiently waiting for me to take the photo. I'd looked at that photo so many times, it was like I no longer saw it; instead it was the ritual of the looking that comforted me. I made it upstairs, out of my clothing, and into the bath tub. On some level, I knew getting into a tub full of water after almost a liter of vodka was a dangerous proposition, but I also felt that no damage could be done in a tub full of warm water, that it was an arena for recovery. And I needed to nurse myself, for the alcohol had striped away me defenses, leaving not much more than my sorrowful memories of Hadley. I turned on the water and immediately passed out. By rights I should have flooded Jordan's house. I should have drown in that tub. Instead, I woke up

early the net morning shivering from cold and poison, naked in an empty tub—I had never put the plug in the drain.

"Remember that secret passage way we had between our houses?"

"Yeah."

In retrospect it wasn't so secret; it was just a gate behind some bushes.

"Do you wonder if it's still there?"

"No. No, not really." We walked on, people jogged around the path, bikers who were doing laps whizzed by to return ten minutes later.

"You know, I'm sick of these shoes," I said, looking down at my white converse All Stars with band names written all across the sides of the sole. 7 Seconds, Minor Threat, the names of punk names looked better than new wave ones written on shoes . "Fuck these shoes," I said, taking them off and throwing one over the boulders and into Lake Michigan.

"You know, fuck these shoes too," said Jordan. He took his tennis shoes off and chucked them too into the Lake. We continued on, barefoot.

Held for one moment, I remember a song/ An impression of sound/ Then everything is gone forever

—The Cure, "Pornography"

EPILOGUE

THIS PERFECT WORLD—Music suffered a huge lapse for me in the nineties. Grunge exploited the banal aspects of punk, but it really had more in common with heavy metal and arena rock. It took the aggression of bands like Motorhead, Iron Maiden, and AC/DC and turned it inwards. Heavy metal needed feminization, and had undergone an outward transformation with the hair bands (Motley Crü, Poison being the most obvious offenders), but it took grunge to exploit heavy metal for all it was worth. With the exception of Nirvana, who seemed to have little in common with overwrought sound of Soundgarden and Alice in Chains, most bands that were being sold on alt-rock (as it had become known) bill were reactions to the candy floss of MTV metal than an extension of Hüsker Dü and The Replacements. They appropriated the cache of integrity underground had accrued by sporting *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll* tee-shirts, by sounding ambivalent in interviews about signing contracts with major labels. But there was nothing so radical about grunge except the juggernaut of its marketing and its sudden and complete uptake by the record-buying public.

Not only was grunge boring, it was popular: everybody wanted it. The community appeal of alternative music disappeared in the nineties. Clubs like the Metro banned slamming—it had become too unsafe to assume legal responsibility. And the marketing and distribution of grunge didn't rely on word-of-mouth: it was all right there for you on MTV, on mainstream radio, on the catwalk. The only interesting phenomenon of grunge was the way that bands who had broken up began to break in retrospect: the Smiths, The Pixies, Dü, the Germs were cited as influences in so many reams of interviews, they received so much post-mortem attention, they became more popular in their absence. One should have been pleased that this music was getting its due, albeit late. It seems a petty thing to covet: the fact that you were there first (especially in the form of a fan, about which there is always a whiff of subservience), but who doesn't cherish the artifacts of their youth. Nobody wants to see those particularities exposed, exploited and commodified beyond meaning. You want to believe in the illusion that you were part of something unique, that your indignation at the popular uptake of alternative music (so much so that the very word alternative became a label for popular music and 'pop music' shrank into a more defined genre) is justified.

What else was interesting about grunge, music aside, were the great dark motifs that were now being explored on mainstream radio. Instead of the pastiche of horror presented by heavy metal—Iron Maiden's monstrous puppet Eddie comes to mind, as well as KISS—darker emotional impulses were mined. "Black Hole Sun" feels like the expression of a very gloomy mood indeed. Why the sudden appetite for all things dark and desolating (to remember just how dark, just put on *In Utero*—which has to stand as the bleakest album to reach number 1 on the *Billboard* charts, *The Wall* notwithstanding).

If the media is to be believed, and if personal anecdote counts, the country's emotional landscape during the early '90s was going through an upheaval. I was no longer buying records, but CDs instead; a more lifeless format that would prefigure the digital revolution. It's no coincidence that Prozac exploded the same year that *Nevermind* came out. Things like depression were suddenly permissible to discuss in public. The airing of personal troubles became a matter of therapy, of clinical import. After all, it was no longer a personality trait but a disease. Bands like Nirvana were merely reflecting the hunger for dark revelations. Nobody was feeling Minnesota more than Cobain. Pfizer, creators of Prozac, may well have broke Nirvana in the same way that Timothy Leary and LSD broke so many bands from the sixties.

You drift through the halls, it's okay, nobody sees you. Do what you want, you are invisible. Only drugs can give you color again. Three lines of powder dissolve inside you like sugar in warm milk, you are becoming solid again. You think of your mother, flashing in front of you, appearing then disappearing before your eyes, her grim chin softening and dissolving. But its not just her: the world is becoming invisible, soon there are only contours, outlines of furniture, walls evaporating like melting snow, vaporizing, then there is nothing left.

You don't feel it happening, but suddenly you look behind you and your innocence is gone. You try to pinpoint when it happened, but it resists such scrutiny. Was it when you lied to Lydia about your drinking; or it might have been with that girl who you gave a ride home from Leslie's, instead stopping at your house and losing your virginity to her on the downstairs couch, ignoring her later; or when you cleaved Jesus from you in favor

of whatever band you liked. Discarded unceremoniously as a jacket that has gone out of fashion.

At that point I think of Annabel, but rather than three slashes of blood across a young woman's stomach, I was hunched over lines of white powder, snarfing my share of the dime bag Farrah and I had bought in a tenement corridor from a man in a Green Bay Packers hat who would turn me away at first because I tried to pay with singles. Of course by that point every hipster dufus in the East Village was doing heroin, and scoring it was easy. We'd retreat back to her mother's apartment and chop it up in her tiny room, a stack of Springsteen and Galaxie 500 cassettes to see us through. Forget the Velvet Underground, heroin taught me to appreciate The Boss, particularly his less commercial work (*Nebraska* and *The Ghost of Tom Joad*). Nobody sounded as good when you were drifting in and out of your dreams. And no dream was broken with such dignity as in a Springsteen song. Heroin and Springsteen share a sense of larger life and possibility that is more tangible than the reality you are trapped in. *Like a vision she dances across the porch, as the radio plays.*

Of course I was in no danger of getting hooked or of overdosing, because that autumn night in my dorm room on The Island I took that final step, and fell from the chair on which I was standing. The tie strangled me, and afterwards everything was just my future flashing before my eyes. I died that night, and nothing of me remains but a flimsy spirit drifting through the lives of those I have loved, passing through their bodies like a run through morning mist.

If love and hate sit at the opposite ends of a continuum, then heroin and unrequited love sit somewhere on a parallel continuum, and being shot from one end to the other

takes little more than a snort or a needle. You will balance along that line well, with such dexterity that falling off seems impossible, even as friends get hooked, or slip, never to recover. By this time the two bruises under your eyes have grown into two perpetual black eyes, like you've spent years straining to see through the darkness, or like you had sustained two blows, like the eye-liner you wear has bled down in the rain.

Late in the morning, still dark I would make my way back from Farrah's to where I was sleeping. Bits of the drug still releasing warm waves of comfort that makes me wish I'd stayed longer. Woozy, queasy, waiting for the subway, looking rakish in a hunter's jacket, black jeans and cowboy boots. Nothing changes, only what is compromised by sadness hardens into a thorny sort of defense against other people. Walkman on I am tapping my foot to some irresistible rhythm. It's only after I get on the train that I realize that the tape had stopped long ago, there is no music playing.

Spotify Strange as Angels playlist