

Doomsday Movies

Tom

The producer is the first person I've seen in a month. I throw open the door after watching the car pull up, the man swing carefully out the back seat. The producer holds and waggles my hand for several seconds, shares all the usual pleasantries, and lets me know I will become the subject of a movie.

I serve haunches of rabbit, bleeding translucent juice all over the floor. The producer eats in mouse nibbles, sloughing off tiny pieces of meat. I pass the foot tall pepper grinder, a gift from my mother made out of some imposing, heavy hardwood. It's always been slightly phallic, I've thought, and I tell the producer this. "We all have our Oedipal side." "So, who's going to play me?" I ask.

"Well, we're considering Brad Pitt." The producer rubs fork tines against a rabbit bone.

"Sounds good." I laugh, making the big vase in the middle of the table shake. A man refusing to be played by Brad Pitt is a prickly old hermit who must be convinced. A man jovially agreeing to be played by Brad Pitt commands respect.

I tell the producer everything I've accomplished, all the CIA information I'm allowed to share, all the stories of camping in blizzards with just a knife and a blanket. I ask the producer about his own life, but he stalls and refuses to say much. I ask what movies the producer's done before. He says, "Well, a few of the more well known titles are..." and ticks off a list of names I've never heard of.

"So, what's next for you?" asks the producer in an interview-ready voice. I'll drive the thirty miles out of the low Appalachians, those tree-lined hills like the backs of furry animals. I am leaving to teach in the city. Helping people who've never even seen a coyote learn to track bears and wolverines. I received an offer from a middle school, a new state grant for wilderness education, a few eighth graders shipped over to learn wilderness survival skills. "Youth education?" says the producer, like a question. "Oh, that's very important."

"The most important," I say, "I can't even remember middle school. Just a blur of angst."

The producer chuckles, pulls at a string of meat, and decides to leave.

From the syllabus:

- Being an expert tracker requires experience. There's no way to cram your head with knowledge from books and emerge able to track. Tracking is 10% book learning, 90% practice. I know how to distinguish the prints of a hungry animal from a satisfied animal. I cannot explain how I know; no one who hasn't tracked for years can understand from an explanation in a book. Most biologists still refuse to believe such detail-oriented tracking is possible, but all the old Native American trackers used such techniques for hunting.
- Occasionally, you will glance up and notice an unusual shadow, an odd colored leaf. Pay attention to these, they are future scientific discoveries.

I staple the paper in the top corner, clean as cutting flesh from a rabbit. I considered simplifying my language, to teach thirteen year olds. In the end, I decided to recycle the syllabus I used for adults. Thirteen year olds are too smart to be talked down to.

Joaquim

The second day of class, Tom Johnson gives the class rabbits to skin. He thinks it will be an immediately interesting activity for thirteen year olds. A few squeamish kids shell hickory nuts in the back. Tyrone, Joaquim and Law peeled off all the skin except the tail and head, the hard parts.

Joaquim asks if anyone's seen the scene from *Repulsion*, where the mentally deteriorating beautician murderer girl leaves a cooked rabbit on the counter for two weeks. She watches flies dig holes in the rabbit flesh, observing the process of rotting from a chair in the kitchen. She never moves to put the rabbit into the fridge, or the trashcan, on the floor a few feet away. *It's just about the creepiest thing I've ever seen*, he says.

But now Tyrone and Law are joking about the legendary promiscuity of rabbits. "I bet this

rabbit was a dick father. I bet he never paid any rabbit child support.” “I bet he was overcompensating for his tiny dick.” And then Joaquim is miming sucking the rabbit’s dick, Tyrone and Law giggling, mouthing dramatically at the air around the limp flap of penis.

Tom Johnson says, “We learn for spiritual fulfillment, but also, more than ever, for survival. Climate change may seem to you like something not quite real, or something which will only affect people a long time from now. But it is hugely, disastrously real, and it will come to render the world unlivable in the next twenty to thirty years.” Tom Johnson says, “I’m not generally superstitious, but the Apaches never taught me anything impractical. An old Apache prophecy predicts five signs of doomsday. As of five years ago, four of those omens have now come to pass.” A shiver falls down my ribs, and I grin.

Joaquim

After class, Tyrone and Law run into the hallway, backpacks jingling. “Come on, Joaquim,” Law calls, “Let’s go to the playground. We can enjoy it way more than those third graders.”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I says, and I do, but afterward I duck back into the classroom. Just to see what Tom Johnson’s doing.

Tom Johnson sits inside shucking cattails, separating the roots from the plants and peeling the skin off the white, soft stuff inside. The plant makes a sucking, plopping, muddy sound. Only Tom Johnson’s fingers move, working like he’s doing a Rubik’s cube, swapping tiles in memorized movements.

“I read a movie’s being written about you,” I say. Tom Johnson looks up. “That’s really cool.”

“Yeah. I’m played by Brad Pitt.” Tom Johnson laughs, raises a glass of water and takes a big gulp. “But it’s crap.”

“But the plot has to be somewhat true true, right? It’s based on your life.”

“All that action crap. It might be based on a true story, but it’s not true. Never trust any script based in truth. I told your class the real truth.” Tom tosses the spent cattail shells at the

trashcan. A wad of plants bounces off the edge, hitting the floor with a damp sound. “Joaquim,” Tom Johnson looks up, hands pausing for a long second, “Joaquim, most people are liars. Judge for yourself, OK?”

Joaquim constructs a scene: Watching end-of-the-world movies with Tom Johnson, sprawled together on his grease stained couch. “Ready for something more intense?” Joaquim asks like an amusement park controller, making sure everyone’s ready to discover their worst nightmares. Unsheathes an unlabeled disk, and starts the VCR with a thick whine. The copyright infringement information, the warning of gratuitous violence will flash and disappear. From the couch in the living room, they’ll nod in affirmation of the fire-ravaged landscape, the humans turned marauding cannibals, the necessity of traps and knives, gloriously aware what the end of the world promises. Becoming people who count and measure signs of doom, as if tracking some huge, reluctant animal.

Tom

Second class – a tall black boy makes a convoluted reference to an old movie. I nod, ask questions to fill the beats in the boy’s sentences. I’m not really listening, but I know we’re bonding, as the kid asks, ravenously, if I’ve ever watched that movie with some obscure-famous actor, that movie that came out a few years ago, smoothing the creased cuff of his sleeve with one hand.

I’m not here to discuss movies, and neither is he. I draw three feathers from a drawer as the boy stutters into his sweatshirt. “Have you ever read a feather?”

“Here are the stress lines: one forms every few days the bird is either hungry or sick or under some kind of stress.” The faded marks which speak of babies just out of the nest, of a long migration, of exhausted nights slumped in a tree in a city park. I show the boy a feather from the Cooper’s hawk who steals birds from my landlord’s feeder. That Cooper’s hawk reminds me of wilderness, a crazy predator brought into the city, slamming into city cardinals in a sudden storm of feathers. The boy’s fingers run over every inch of the feather, breaking and seaming the barbs

over and over. “That one’s from a Cooper’s hawk. They’re little falcons which live in the city.”

“I wonder what the world would be like if people had stress lines,” the boy says.

I say the obvious. “It would be a lot different.” I dig for something better, truer. “People would have a lot less to hide.”

“It would be a good idea for a book. Or a movie.” The kid scratches the feather against the desk, writing chicken scratch sentences on the wood.

“How are you liking your first experiences with tracking? It’s an important thing to learn.” I take back my feathers and straighten them in the vase. The kid mouths a smile and says something short and vague I don’t remember.

Joaquim

I find the prints of a five-toed cat embedded finger deep in the snow. The posters were up all over town: *Missing: Stripes. She has Five Toes on both feet.* I didn’t know cats existed with five toes on only one foot. But here are the tracks, blurred holes going behind a building. I try to imagine the look on the woman’s face, when I arrive with her cat slung under one arm. I take careful note of the heart-shaped pad, the perfect round toes, marks of feline prints, mom’s camera dully slapping my coat, *thunk thunk*. Snapping pictures, that loud click-click sound, snow showing up too grainy and bright. Those Kodak moments, men snapping perfect pictures of little boys blowing bubbles and real cats stroked by smiling new wives.

The cat’s so precise, prints placed the exact same distance apart. Like clues dropped in a secret pattern, trails through a video game. Maybe to be picked up and followed by other cats. A dad-aged man and a twenty-something woman with a purse turn to look as I hump over the snow mountains. I stare back, spotted with dirty snow, cutting across a park, zeroing in on my prey.

Joaquim tracks the cat through gritty spaces between buildings, through the jagged thicket behind Seven Eleven. Battles through grabbing hedges and comes out gasping in front of the soda machine. The slick bottle looms, drops of pixelated spray hanging. There are two boys standing in the bottle’s glare, a white kid with perfectly slicked hair and a tall Hispanic kid with gold earrings. The Hispanic kid’s T-shirt advertises a band with a hand-drawn picture of a fox.

The fox is sitting on a red stripe; inside its mouth, jags of teeth. The kid's hair falls like a fox tail.

There is another kid, leaning against the other side of the snack machine. The kid is Tyrone. He is facing away, the black Tupac T-shirt he wears flashing in the light. Gritty snow melts and drips from Joaquim's pants. He slips from behind the Seven Eleven and walks towards home pulling narrow toothpick-sized sticks out of his hair.

Tom tells him about stalking deer with a Native American grandfather, about sacred bows and first kill celebrations. Joaquim holds the photos in his left hand. Smooths each one and puts it in the folder behind the syllabus and the instructions for tracking and the picture of a sample rabbit skin hat. He doesn't take them out again.

Tom

Tom remembers the field behind the house when he was thirteen, when age mattered deeply and vividly. He stood on the field one day in March, staring down at the brown stalks pocking the snow with black halos. He tracked a coyote. He wanted to say, The coyotes punched holes in the snow. The walls of vole-made tunnels are melted by the shooting rays of sunlight. The coyote tossed back shreds of dirt, digging to grab a rabbit out of its hole. Wait long enough, and the voles will stumble from collapsing snow tunnels and fall into your footprints. It was almost Spring. Instead, he sewed a buckskin vest, crimping the edges, spent an hour whittling down a bone with an old swiss army knife. He used the bone for a needle, which split down the middle as he pressed its clumsy head through. He re-carved. He re-carved four times.

Joaquim

Joaquim asks Tyrone and Law about plans for the end of the world. *What if you were the last person on Earth? What if everyone else died from a natural disaster, or a nuclear war?*

"That's easy," Tyrone talks with premeditated definitiveness. Tyrone is the resident expert on the general outlines of the world. "I would just steal food and weapons from all the abandoned businesses. I'd find an old Walmart or something, and live there. It wouldn't even matter if there was no power, I'd just eat out of cans. Everyone thinks surviving as the last person on Earth after an apocalypse would be hard, but it would actually be really easy." Tyrone

jumps and slaps a low hanging branch.

Law says, “There’s too many books about the end of the world. It’s gotten lame.” *What if nuclear blasts leaked into Walmart, particles of radiation squeezed through cracks in sealed cans? What if writhing, all-consuming monsters absorbed store-fulls of food?* “Can you believe Mr. Johnson really believes in that Native American prophecy? That’s like something out of a bad disaster movie.”

Tyrone and Law play the Vagina Game. In the Vagina Game, each player must replace part of the title of a well known book or movie with the word “vagina.” His mind travels frantically, removing and substituting, shaking down movies watched two, three years ago, books read in last year’s English classes. *The Great Vagina*, Law’s words bounce off the metal playground bars, the slides sticky with static. *Lord of the Vaginas*.

“The Vaginas of Wrath,” Joaquim says. “Invasion of the Vagina Snatchers,” He sits down on the bench and runs both hands over the worn wood edges. “Has anyone watched that movie?” Law giggles. “The real one, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers?*”

“Harry Potter and the Vagina of Secrets,” Tyrone says, in measured tones, perched next to Law on the creaky monkey bars. Law and Joaquim gulp out loud laughter; the sky shivers. Joaquim squeezes out crying laughter until his sides ache. The monkey bars creak like legs of an old horse.

“I have to go now,” says Tyrone. “There are some people I have to see.” Tyrone’s been spending time with a group of six high schoolers. *What if you were stranded in the wilderness? What if the whole world were infected with a contagious, flesh-eating virus? What if an asteroid blocked all sunlight?*

Tom

I make birdcalls into the trees, fashion an acorn into an improvised whistle. *Phish, phish*, wait for the birds to respond to my crude alarm calls. My sister watches the sky, waiting for the shapes of birds to appear over the horizon. “It’s a universal alarm call,” I talk to the forest in front of me, the birds refusing to fly down from skyscraper trees. “All birds use the same basic noise to signal danger. It’s a clever system.”

My sister Judy moved to Jersey's outer suburbs, she tells me she likes the shade. "There are more parks in that area of New Jersey than most places close to the city," she says. "I like to think Robert will spend a more time outdoors there."

"That's wonderful," I say. "That's very important." My sister glances at the ground, tracing bittersweet vines up hundred year old pines. The vines grow arm-thick, suffocating trees in a decade-slow death grip.

"The whole forest understands which birdcalls mean danger. One of the most obvious signs that humans are losing touch with nature is that we no longer recognize bird calls. Every animal knows which calls are alarm calls, automatically, by instinct. We're the only animals who don't understand." The forest fills with wind. Spots of sun shake as the trees inflate like sails. I am waiting to teach Judy's son, lead little Robert down brush-picked deer trails, peer gently into the cavities of beaver dams crowded with sleeping kits.

"He should come to my house, sometime," I say. "I have a Cooper's hawk in my yard. He snatches songbirds off the feeder and eats them." Fourth graders love nature's honest savagery, hawks ripping through bird flesh like paper. Judy squints at the ground, fuzzy plans forming. "Whenever you want. Whenever you have time, come over."

"He's busy for a while," Judy says, "He's in a play. *Oklahoma*." We walk off the trail, find the ribbon of highway cutting fifty wooded acres in half. A deer lies splayed at the side of the highway, blood mixed with bile gelling on the concrete. The wind blows in the trees sending spots of sunlight running across the ground.

"After school once – tenth grade – my friend David showed me how to skin a deer. He'd hit one on the way to school, heaved the body into the backseat and drove. David picked me up and after school I ended up pulled over next to David's yard, deer splayed out on the lawn, sliding out the intestines." He flicked out his knife, slide stripes between the deer's stripes of muscles, trace between hanging slabs of intestine and stomach. *Pull down, now, above the vein, cut off at the legs. It's all one motion, like writing in cursive.* Robert will understand cursive, looping rows of e's and o's in a Waldorf school in the outer suburbs.

"I remember David," Judy opens and closes the palms of both hands, watching pieces of sunlight and shadow blow across her fingers. "Tragic, what happened to him." In senior year,

David collapsed while hunting. After David failed to return for three days, clumsy men flooded the woods. I slipped between bushes at the destructive parade of neighbors and fathers of people who were not my friends. Clad in heavy hiking boots, carrying first aid kits, walkie talkies, dangling plastic water bottles which slapped sharply against the trees.

“He was a wonderful teacher,” I said. “Afterwards I brought home six pounds of deer meat, remember? The best hunter I’ve ever known, you should have gone out with him.” I knew men that loud would never find David, slapping branches to the ground, snapping leaves like a forest fire. I work my knife between the ribcage, prying out strips of meat. Deer jerky, dried in the sun, all for me.

Joaquim

Once, Tyrone shaved my head. Tyrone and I were playing monsters, and I suggested which ones I could play.

“I watched a movie where mermen drowned sailors, dragged them down and covered their mouths.” I composed lists of monsters, all the important, realistic ones. Along with scientific drawings, labelled, combining deadly animals with the most disgusting traits. A wolf with a gaping hole mouth. Alien worms whose flesh sprouts poison teeth. But I remember Tyrone’s best: a wolf ghost with holes in its face, a bear monster with tongues long as snakes and eyes hanging from veins. I saw our original ideas copied in the classic horror movies. We made monsters with the Thing’s throbbing muscle tentacles, Pinhead’s surgical needle hair, even the giant eyes and caterpillar legs Pennywise grows at the end of *It*.

“You’ll be a monster called Eyesnake. Your whole body is an eye.” I had veins all over, pulsing as I rolled through the hallway. Tyrone led me around, hand on my wet skin. “You’ll scare people to death immediately,” Tyrone said, but I already knew this, knew how gossiping girls would see me and clamp their hands over open mouths. White spreading across their faces, blood suddenly dripping out of pale seashell ears.

“I’m going on a mission,” I said. “I’m going to kill the homecoming queen, rampage through the town.” Except I actually said *rape and pillage the town*. I didn’t know what rape was, but I heard the phrase used in the context of Vikings.

Tyrone went to the window, city blocks spread out beneath us. “Could we open the window?” I said, “And shoot darts out on the streets. We could shoot arrows at people going by.”

“We shoot poison darts,” Tyrone shakes his head. “Besides, you don’t need them. Your weapon is your stare. You look at people, and they die.”

“Let me cut your hair,” Tyrone slipped scissors from my mother’s drawer. Drew patterns on my head with the blade, then began to cut. Tyrone cut, looked, nodded, cut some more, like a master sculptor. Snip, take note, snip, take note. Scissors touched my hair like fingers, tickling, all over. “That’s it. You look good.” The light came in through the bathroom window, all fuzzy, and lit up my new skin. I felt ready to turn inside out. My head would split open, over flow with tentacles, claws.

Tyrone just stood there, proud of me, proud of his work. “Now you can see out of the top of your head, too,” says Tyrone.

“What will you be?” I ask.

“Razor Wolf,” Razor Wolf is Tyrone’s favorite, even though he isn’t the scariest monster. “Let’s go terrorize the neighborhood,” Tyrone said.

Tom

“That’s not safe,” Judy says, “I know you’re careful, but that’s not safe for anyone. I heard David might have died from an animal-carried disease.”

“It’s harmless,” I say. “Native Americans used to carry water in the stomachs.” I press down ribs like piano keys I stick a hand under the sheath of fur, shifting the round shapes of liver, stomach, kidney. Everything inside in its right place; however much you put your body through, it’s hard to knock anything vital out of position. Insides feel tender, velvety, sliding against my callused fingers. Cars whoosh by, and I lift my head to smile at the drivers. I wave.

“Do you know that man?” asks my sister. My sister didn’t come to David’s funeral, but that’s OK. Times change, his blood started to congeal approximately an hour after his heart stopped beating.

“No,” I shout a greeting at a maroon pickup. “I have no idea who he is!” I jump up, sunlight streaming down my shirt, the cars pounding like river waves.

“They’re cutting down this forest,” I say, the big reveal, the climax. “I want to bring Robert here,” I say, “before everything’s destroyed. Judy, I want to live here, until the bulldozers come. I’m going to build a tree house in the tallest oak tree. I’ll show you which one.”

My sister frowns, takes tiny steps around the deer carcass, a policewoman surveying the murder scene. “The whole forest? I thought only half of the forest was being cut down. For affordable housing.” Five years ago, David’s parents sent a letter, asking if I would donate to a memorial for David, a varnished plaque surrounded by marigolds. The marigolds arrayed in patterns like an oriental rug. That day I shot a deer which bled out all over my pickup’s back seat.

“I don’t know,” I say. “The world’s dying. That vine? That vine squeezes closed the tree’s oxygen-transporting veins. In ten, twenty years, that vine will suffocate every tree on the property. Why should I care which tree?” I wiggled two fingers between the deer’s sweating muscles, prying at the leather flaps of a heart.

I miss the Falkland Island’s wolf, the dodo, the hundreds of others, the Bishop’s O’o, only known from pictures, the dusky seaside sparrow I saw flicking between mangroves ten years ago. They say Carolina parakeets filled trees with bright green, chattering forms, stripped trees of fruit in a few hours. They said passenger pigeons fell out of the bird-covered sky like part of the clouds. I will sew feather coats and carry water in a deer stomach. All your parts will sustain me.

Joaquim

I’m standing in the 7-11, looking at the racks of waterproof cameras, clipart-style cats and parrots and smiling kids stuck on next to “Water Resistant” or “Over 200 Photos!” Tyrone trails three of the high schoolers through the candy aisle, flicking the price marks sticking out over the jelly beans and gummy bears. “Watermelon Jolly Ranchers are the best flavor,” Tyrone calls over the shoulder of a tall Irish boy.

The pictures of cats and tropical fish and kids carrying balloons stare at me from the cardboard, like reflections, or things underwater. I’m holding a plastic bag of baby carrots in one hand, bread and a can of corned beef in the other, stuff my mom asked me to buy. I try to catch Tyrone’s eye, waving across the store.

“No,” a thin Hispanic kid, one grade older, grabs a bag of candy. “New type of Snickers. Remember when I fit three bags under my sweatshirt. The guy at the counter just thought I was really fat.”

Tyrone laughs, “That’s crazy. That’s crazy.” He slips a plastic bag of watermelon flavored Jolly Ranchers in his jeans pocket. Tyrone’s steps are loose and sure, soft as the sound of fan blades or the click of the heaters. CVS runs both, heating in the frozen foods aisle, fans everywhere else.

“I got Exterminator on Halo 3,” says one of the boys. Tyrone looks at me and stops as the high schoolers grab a pack of Reeses cups and crowd to the counter. “Hi, Joaquim!” Tyrone calls, and runs to catch up with the high schoolers.

When the high schoolers go outside, Tyrone starts shouting the titles of articles in the Enquirer across the parking lot. “Paul Newman’s Secret Mistress Births Alien Lovechild!” A pucker-lipped woman with a shopping cart stops to scowl. Tyrone flips the bird and the Irish kid smiles, a genuine smile, big and loose as his sweatpants.

I read the Enquirer in the store every time my mom sent me to buy something. It’s all fake, but I used to believe some of the headlines were real. If the Enquirer ever publishes a true story, no one would believe it, no men in black, everyone would just leave Paul Newman’s alien lovechild alone. Maybe the child would live a secret mansion in the southern California desert, strangling rabbits and dragging the bodies back to the house to devour. Sleep in pools of blood on the hardwood floor, staring up at the shining chandeliers. I still look at the headlines, with Law and Tyrone or by myself, roll my eyes and smile.

I walk towards them, between the cars. The ice made veiny patterns on the windows, like eyeballs. I remember something I heard about Marlon Brando. Marlon Brando never memorized lines, just read dialogue off post-its taped around the set. No practice, just reading, off the cuff.

“Britney Spears Product of Soviet Medical Experiments!” I yell, my lungs dry and straining in the cold.

“Kennedy Sighted In Men’s Bathroom, Fucking Megan Fox! Extra, extra, read all about it!” Tyrone yells, glancing at me. The thin Hispanic kid laughs a slow rumbly laugh.

“Have you seen Jeffery around?” Tyrone asks.

“Jeffery’s probably at Sarah’s house, you know, 69!” Irish boy drawled, and Tyrone called back “69! 69!” fast. Like partner spies with a secret code.

“Maybe Jeffery’s Paul Newman’s alien love child. Maybe he’s wearing a human skin suit,”

“You don’t know Jeffery,” says Tyrone. “Joaquim’s such a geek. He’s a...what do you call it? A black nerd. A blerd.”

“I used to believe the Enquirer was real,” I said. Everyone laughed, I stood there, laughter spurting out in little puffs of breath. Off the cuff.

Tom Johnson Composes a Mental Letter:

Dear Abbot and Barnes Steel Manufacturers,

The world thinks I’m a St Francis, surrounded by docile animals, taming man-tearing bears with my alluring voice. If I was, I would give them all a show. I’d walk down the street with a wolverine under each arm and weasels strutting in step at my heels.

I am only one eighth Indian, but I’ve never drunk or taken white man’s drugs and I slough rabbit skin with three quick cuts. I’ve lived miles-deep in wilderness with a knife and a blanket, I’ve tracked a lone wolf through three states, but the important thing is not that I’ve done those things, or what kind of man that makes me. The important thing is, I could not have shown my face to the world if I had not done these things. Experiences create a barrier against embarrassment. What I wonder is, how do your company’s decision makers and associates face the world while destroying your only claims to respect? You’ve never watched crows whittle sticks with clever beaks, or prairie dogs clumped in a burrow corner, hissing like snakes to scare the coyotes away. How do you not feel like fools, destroying the possibility of knowing that which you control, to claim knowledge and claim power?

I am religious, but I do not participate in established religious institutions. I pray to visiting gods, gods which appear through patterns in the woodgrain and lines splicing my eyelids. A fox walking on two legs, with a moose skull for a head, biting down on a cherry. With sudden heaviness, the skull face drops onto my pillow, the bone and cherry juice smears across my face.

Believers’ fear of God is one of society’s most ridiculous traits. If God controls daily life,

you should fear every aspect of living, every decision, as much as the face of God.

Joaquim

When Joaquim comes home from the Seven Eleven, his mother's already home from work at the hospital, eating noodles out of a big pot and watching TV. She mutes the TV and pats the spot next to her on the couch, marked by a couple of splatters of drying tomato sauce. A name tag from the hospital, reading LINDA S, RN in big Helvetica font, blows back and forth around Joaquim's mom's neck. "Hey there! Did you do anything fun at school today?"

"What're you watching?" Joaquim's mom watches TV after work, flipping through channels for a few minutes, thinking, switching, thinking, switching, finally settling on a thriller, a science fiction movie, or a horror film. Joaquim remembers flipping through the TV guide as a kid, before his mother got home, making educated guesses at what movie she would pick out and whether she would let him watch it. When Joaquim was ten they watched *Alien* together. Joaquim screamed just enough to show excitement, but not too much fear. Linda still covered his eyes during all the gory scenes. Joaquim's mom is an excellent scary movie watcher, sitting bolt upright, never screaming but making tiny, flinching movements at the scary parts.

"A science fiction show I like. *Room 116*. Keeping up with all your classes? Get yourself a fork and a plate, if you want some spaghetti." Linda wears glasses rimming tiny, squinty intense eyes, like the eyes of an eagle or a heron, Joaquim thinks. Possibly the epitome of the kind of eyes all people named Linda should have.

"Yeah, I am. I'm not all that hungry," Joaquim stretches out, feet pressing into the end of the couch, toes digging into the cushion. Carefully avoiding touching the tomato spots.

"Great," Joaquim's mom says, as a toothpaste commercial with talking animals comes on. The show is a Buffy knockoff: three friends, a muscly tough guy with an incongruous love of romance novels, a handsome detective who spits one liners and a smart girl scientist investigate supernatural occurrences. In this episode, an unknown disease strikes the town. The victims stagger around hospital rooms, spitting and shrieking incomprehensibly.

"Here it is," says the girl, crouched over a thick book, hair falling in her eyes. "Ancient Egyptians described an unknown plague that swept through the empire around 3500 BC.

Symptoms are listed as uncontrollable movements, speaking in indecipherable languages, and congregation at holy sites.” The girl brushes back a strand of hair, facing the others determinedly. “It says the cure was buried with the pharaoh.”

“So you’re saying that it’s in some Cairo gift shop — or down some tomb robber’s throat, more likely,” the handsome detective eyes the book skeptically. The pot screeches as my mom scrapes noodles from the bottom, ringing in my ears.

The muscle bound guy’s hands tighten into fists. “We’ve got to try.”

“The ancient Egyptians attributed the disease to a kind of double possession,” the girl flips a page, looks steadily up at the handsome detective. It’s obvious there’s a love interest. “When Anubis, the jackal headed god, sensed bad spirits inhabiting a person’s body, he also entered the body to drive the demons away.” A victim bursts into the room, eyes veiny and stained with orange. The victim thrashes and makes screeching, yelping sounds, like a knife being sharpened. My mom leans forward as the musclebound guy grabs a Bible and smashes it over the infected person’s head.

“Well, Grandma always did say the Bible would deliver us from evil,” quips the detective. Linda hoists herself off the couch, rummaging for something in a kitchen cabinet, sneaking glances at the TV from the other room.

“Everyone OK?” asks the muscle bound guy as Joaquim’s mom returns with yogurt in a bowl. But there’s something wrong with the girl; her eyes roll back, smears of grey spreading across her skin. A white grub squeezes from her eye socket, then another, then a thousand half-formed grubs, curled up, the size of beans, until the girl’s skin starts to sag and crease. Her head caves in like a pillow, her stomach and breasts flap in the wind made by the air conditioner. Joaquim’s mom watches with pursed, sucked in lips while the detective and muscle bound guy scream hysterically. Leaning forward, as if about to kiss the television. Like someone deciding whether to disapprove or say something sad. Onscreen, puddles of grubs form on the floor. A grub wrenches itself out of the handsome detective’s eye, and a commercial comes on.

The girl died a beautiful death, Joaquim thinks, collapsing like water. A method of killing worthy of one of Tyrone’s best monsters. Joaquim wonders if his mom purses her lips while taking the vitals of dying people, frowning and pressing and sliding the stethoscope. Hands

moving in circles to rub lotion on puffy boils or scabby rashes. Lifting the papery eyelids of men with yellow veiny skin. The commercial comes on and after a few seconds Linda looks at the clock. “10:30, sweetie. Time for bed.”

Joaquim’s mother kisses his eyelashes, pressing each lid shut for a second. Like a Greek mourner placing coins on the eyes of the dead, left first, then right. Turns Joaquim towards the stairs, casting him towards his bed. Joaquim climbs up the stairs and sprawls in the middle of the floor, clutching onto his humming laptop. He looks up *Room 116* on Wikipedia and finds out the three main characters die every episode in unexpected and gory ways. Joaquim imagines the characters drinking an accelerated aging potion, skin folding and bones hardening. Or the three friends being slowly and silently dismembered by the gravity of a planet that floats too close to Earth. Joaquim watches four more episodes online, dozing off with the laptop leaking warmth onto his chest.

“I hate white vegetables,” says Tyrone. “They look like mashed potatoes someone jizzed on.” We’re mashing up cattail roots, making squishy paste. Like the insides of the wormy aliens in the movie *Slither*, Joaquim thinks, fatty and oozing. Tyrone drags a spoon in lagging circles, Tom Johnson says, “Cattails taste like mashed potatoes, and produce more food than potatoes per square acre. They’re one of the most important, dependable food sources in the wilderness.”

Earlier that day Tom Johnson had told a story of finding a wolf den in the center of a blizzard. “It was so cold,” Tom Johnson said, “If I spit, my spit froze before touching the ground.” Tom saw the wolf’s fur heaving through a hole in a snowbank. Johnson took a calculated risk, numb limbs cracking with the cold, sliding through a hole in the snow to lie next to the wolf. Joaquim could see the wolf, fur full of icicles, curl around Tom Johnson’s half-starved body. The wolf and Tom stayed close that night, feeling each other’s breath. Joaquim’s still thinking about it, turning it over while kneading the mush.

“Sweatshop labor,” Tyrone leans towards Joaquim and Law, mush drips from his fingers onto the table.

“Tyrone.” Tom Johnson’s head appears in front of our table. “What did you just say?”

“I’m sorry,” Tyrone’s a quick talker, a quick apologizer. Usually the type of kid parents like

and teachers suspect.

Tom Johnson leans against the table, into the pot of mush and Tyrone's face. "I've eaten tree bark for days in the wilderness. Even with my training in hunting and fishing, there was nothing. I was lucky to find cattails. A few times, cattails saved my life." Tom Johnson shakes his head. "Show a little respect. Just show a little respect. Your life might depend on this someday, then you'll understand what I'm talking about."

"Yes. I'm sorry." Tyrone scratches the polish off the table.

"Don't be sorry. Just stop." Tom Johnson stays by our table, staring at Tyrone with old eyes.

"I understand," Tyrone says, squinting at the mush. "I understand."

"I thought we were going to learn to hunt and fish, not eat this shit," Law says, after Tom Johnson moved on to check on another table.

"I'd eat shit if it would keep me alive," Joaquim says. "Bear Grylls drinks urine."

"Joaquim, you're crazy." Tyrone smiles, a quick dying smile. "If I really had to live in the wilderness, I'd go crazy. I'd miss my friends," Tyrone says, flicking the mush onto the sides of the pot, leaning further and further back in his desk chair. "Tom Johnson must have always been alone in the wilderness. It drives you crazy, always being alone. You would be willing to eat shit."

"I'd drink urine, to help me stay alive," Joaquim's in Law's face, squishing a cattail in his fist. Joaquim feels crazy, like Bear Grylls, like young Tom Johnson standing on top of a mountain in South Dakota and laughing in the faces on Mount Rushmore. "It's gross, but I'd drink bucketfuls, you know? If I had to. I'd be a crazy old man drinking urine." A song bursts into Joaquim's head, that song from the radio. *It's so clear now that you're my only someone, I something fear 'cause you're my only someone...*

"Mr Johnson's already been driven crazy. My mom says he's already crazy. He shouldn't be allowed to teach, he just want to be some modern day Crazy Horse and get us to join his cult. Fight his battles, you know?"

"Yeah," Law says. "He's crazy."

"Tyrone." Tyrone stares into Mr Johnson's face, like someone watching television.

“Didn’t take his pills today,” Tyrone mouths, not loud enough for Tom Johnson to hear.

“Both feet on the floor.”

“Feet on the floor. Come on, this is not your house.” Tyrone places one foot on the floor, the slow sound of uncreasing pants.

Tom walks away, moving deliberately, lifting a spoon to check a pot of cattails.

Law laughs, “Jeez, he was on your ass.”

Tom turns around. “Lawrence. Elbows off the table. Off.”

Joaquim thinks of explaining Tyrone’s behavior to Tom Johnson, after class, to get everything sorted out. *We all know Tyrone acts up, smart but not a good student, that’s what the teachers say*, Joaquim would explain. *No filter; that’s his problem.*

Joaquim thinks of laying low with Tom Johnson in a cabin stocked with DVDs, hunting by day and watching by night. Stuffing their mouths with greasy meat and ears with explosions.

Joaquim imagines walking in the woods when the blizzard rolled in, lost and numb in the splitting cold. Unwittingly, he and Tom Johnson fight the wind, and crawl toward the same hole in the snowbank. When Joaquim gets there, Tom is already pressed against the sweaty fur. So he squeezes next to the wolf on the other side and falls asleep. Snow fills up the folds in Tom Johnson’s old face, collects in the little lines in both their palms.

Tom

“Tyrone, feet on the floor. This is the second time I’ve told you today.”

“OK.” Tyrone’s eyes say no problem, no problem at all. He extracts one elbow, gradually, as if parts of his arm might come off and stick to the tabletop.

“Oh, I know it’s hard.” A kid to my left giggles, knees thumping against the desk, and Tyrone rolls his eyes. “Get your act together.” Tyrone’s two friends scratch at the polish on the table. They watch out of the corners of their knifepoint eyes, evaluating my moves like wild creatures.

Everywhere I go, people tell me not to give up on kids. Why not? Biases form like tumors, routinely grow too big to remove. Teaching requires transforming yourself into publicity machine, a radio preacher for the survivalists. Asking for respect means running up against

fundamental boundaries, boundaries that set red meat Americans apart from people who know survival matters, who see the birds and animals. To Tyrone, I'll be David Henry Thoreau no matter what I do. Appealing to mainstream culture means becoming Bear Grylls, Brad Pitt, crazy woods man. And Tyrone might allow for that, appreciate it even, but he will always be something else, something neutral. It's not Tyrone's fault, it's his mom's, but at this point does it even matter?

After the students leave, I find a folder left at the place one of Tyrone's friends sat during class. I look inside: handouts, some doodled designs.

I flip through the pocket and see pictures in the boy's folder, neatly centered images of cat tracks. I wonder if he's been tracking – him, or a friend of his? The boy – Joaquim, I remember – watched wide eyed while I told the story about crawling into a wolf den to escape a blizzard. Thirteen year olds like stories of taming ferocious beasts, man harnessing the power of nature, all that crap. A few years ago my colleague in the CIA published an account of Elizabeth Drury, a feral child raised by wolves. Elizabeth was discovered by a band of hunters in the early 1900s and reeducated by renowned biologists and psychiatrists, but never successfully socialized. I wonder if Joaquim would benefit from the book, from the strength of people's animal instinct, from the natural ferocity that drives all our lives.

When Joaquim cuts back to retrieve the folder, I tap him on the shoulder. "Did you like that wolf story?"

Joaquim stops. "Yeah, I guess." Faking apathy.

"I have a book I think you'd like. It's at my house. I'm going to give you my address, OK? Stop by anytime," I tell him, my hands feeling sweaty and heavy. The weight of waiting for a kid to choose to pursue learning or keep passively mocking people by not standing up to the bullies. All I can do is wait, be a bystander just like Joaquim. Joaquim accepts the address like a deer mouths a carrot from my hand.

Joaquim

Tyrone invites me and Law, finally, to see a movie with his high schooler friends. Jeffery answers the door, an Irish boy with crazy red hair and new sneakers, and Tyrone says, "Hey,

what're we gonna watch?"

Jeffery laughs and says, "A great movie. Don't worry. This is the funniest movie I've ever seen." Five boys spread out on the floor, wearing crumpled, baggy t-shirts like blankets. Jeffery wears a clean black shirt, jeans, and carries a huge bag of popcorn with movie-theater red and white stripes. I brought few movies from home, hanging from my hand, a couple bad B movies and the old version of "The Fly." Maybe I'd leave them sitting on the coffee table, for one of the lying-down boys to pick up and say, *Why don't we just watch this?* Everyone gathers around, shaking hands, three of the boys coming over to ask smiling where I'm from, how I know Tyrone. The name of the Hispanic kid I saw earlier is Tomas, the Irish kid is named Russ.

Onscreen, a girl twists, waving her body like snakes in pain. Like the worms from *Lair of the White Worm*. Russ and Tomas narrate. "Mmm hmm, baby!" a boy with curly hair throws bits of popcorn at the screen. "I love that fast food grease lube you use! Tastes so delicious!" I forget whether lube goes onto a penis, or into the woman's vagina somehow. I try to remember. The girl's eyes pinch together as the man thrusts. A piece of her tongue sticks out, twitching back and forth like a little lizard.

We time how long the man, with a sticking out lip and huge abs, can pee on the girl's back. Jeffery tosses back words like a fire eater. "Pee on me some more, baby! It's just like a hot shower!" Tyrone takes up the chant, "Pee, pee, pee."

I will make a joke. My mouth dries up. "Let me scream like a dying cat," I say, and Jeffery moves to look at me, and the ripple of expected laughter, and the popcorn bags rustling, tossed around, and the juice of ground-up kernels and butter leaking into the carpet. The woman onscreen screams like a seagull with all its bones broken. At my grandfather's funeral, my father cried in garbled whimpers. *He hasn't cried in his life*, my mother said, and it made sense, my father, new, unpracticed at crying, releasing sudden, alien cries. The man's dick is half up the woman's throat, and the woman's still making noise, loud, crying-moaning sounds. "Let me scream like a fucking dying cat," I say. "I wouldn't let anyone suck my dick who screams like that. Does everyone who has sex scream like that?"

"Joaquim, I'm willing to try. Would you like to suck my dick?" Jeffery lifts his dick up in a pocket of his pants, stands up and lifts it over my mouth. I smell dusty blue jeans and semen.

“Presented to you on a silver platter: one dick, for your consumption.”

“Would you like to suck my dick, too?” Tyrone steps towards me. “Two at once,” he says, quietly, glancing at Jeffery, at the other five boys smeared with popcorn grease.

Jeffrey laughs and steps back. “Just kidding,” he says.

“Just a joke,” says Tyrone. “We aren’t actually going to make you do that.” Tyrone throws one arm around me and leans me back against the couch. “I have to go to the bathroom,” I say.

“To change your underpants?” Jeffery laughs, and Tyrone says, “Hey, you like this? There’s ice cream in Jeffery’s fridge, you want some?” I imagine Tyrone straddling my body with skinny legs. His ribs stick out like chicken bones. I throw up in the trashcan, and open the window. It grinds and I have to splay my legs to fit through. One foot falls in a shrub and I pull out my other leg, I am on the street. Outside, the red glare of the screen against the windows shows up as a fuzzy explosion. The boys talk like people surprised to be on fire.

Joaquim

I dart through the garden and into the neighbors’ garden. I jump from backyard to backyard, through the snow slumping into mush. I left my coat in the house. I should have thought of it before I left. I could have snuck into the mudroom and snatched it before going into the bathroom. It would have been easy, if I was quick and stepped slowly, quiet like I had velvet fur feet. I am full of regret for leaving the coat, the catalogue said it was a “hunter green parka.” It was smooth and slick as a rock face. I felt sorry for all the things I’d lost stupidly. I stop when I am five or so minutes away.

I pull out Mr Johnson’s address from my folder, only five blocks away. I walk, sticking to the backyards, until I need to duck in front to read the house number. Mr Johnson comes to the door, holding the phone between his head and his shoulder, screaming like an eagle. “Red salamanders purify soil,” Tom Johnson waits with his mouth open, ready to speak, as a voice drones on the other end. “Did you hear me? There is no way to kill salamanders and protect the forest.” Mr Johnson drops the phone and lets me in. His mouth opens again, tongue about to scream, but instead he says, “Hello,” and after a second, “Come on in,” and “Are your parents worried about you?”

“They think I’m at a friend’s house,” I say. I’ve always been pretty good at lying.

“Sorry, I got to make one more call,” Mr Johnson says and walks to the phone. He dials and starts yelling again, making declarations of war. He pronounces each syllable actively and angrily. Like a singer for a metal band, or a rogue crime fighter, the one the boss always writes off as crazy. “In the wild, minks travel approximately six miles per night. Minks vault up trees and leap across rivers. Minks travel, that’s the only thing minks do. Why keep them in cages too small for them to turn around? Why do that?” He pulls back the phone violently, a few inches from his ear, and I hear the fuzz of a polite message machine. I memorize all the animal things hanging on the wall. A buck skull painted with red stripes. A string of what I think are porcupine quills, as big as pencils, hitting each other and clicking. A skin of something with black fur a few inches thick, hairs corkscrewed and dangling. Mr Johnson drops the receiver and runs back to the door.

Tom

I look at the boy while I talk, making sure he see what I’m doing. I compose speeches in my mind. I know exactly what the polite interns and secretaries will say, but no one else knows what I will say, what truths I will declare. I make one or two more calls, but the boy stands, sliding socked feet across the floor, not asking anything. “We’ll consider your input,” says the monotone on the other end of the line. I push back the receiver and the boy sits on the carpet.

“Do you want food? I can get you food.”

“Sure,” the boy says, “Sure.” I consider the refrigerated rabbit, roasted crispy and sprinkled with wild sage. A demonstration of the usefulness of the subject matter. I chose a jar of peanut butter and a precut loaf of bread. I spread a table-flat layer of peanut butter on a slice, covering all the corners and crumbly edges.

“Do you want to watch some TV?” My friends gifted a pixelated 18-inch when I bought the apartment. *Well, this is basically the same as not having a TV, I had said, Except now I’ll feel like a hypocrite when I talk about American materialism.* The boy and I squint at the screen, blaring a recently-to-video movie starring Brad Pitt’s craggy face. I watch the boy eat my perfect flat sandwich. The boy examines each frame of the movie like a tiny piece of artwork. Maybe I

can stay on the couch, and the boy can teach me about movies. For a hazy second, I see my body packed with red salamanders, moving weakly in my arms, lining the walls of my stomach. Salamanders pressed dead and flat in my intestines. Maybe I can stay on the couch forever, the TV reaching out, the earth a poisoned hole underneath.

Joaquim

The TV is an old 18 inch and I have to lean and squint to see. Brad Pitt plays a master animal tracker the CIA hires to find a criminal. The criminal walks for boring days across flat mountains and rests in run-down towns. Brad Pitt's first a week, then a day, finally an hour behind. "Tell tale signs," Brad Pitt says, finding footprints and broken branches on the trail. While the criminal brings canned food into the woods, the tracker hunts rabbits with neat wire traps.

Brad Pitt paces across a cornfield, running past like a conveyor belt. He seems like a man ready to survive the end of the world. The criminal looks over one shoulder, wild eyes glowing, and Brad Pitt is standing between two cornstalks, leaning on a machete. Tom Johnson answers with a not-quite-laugh.

Tom

"You're really going to teach us to survive after the world ends," I see dim clouds of peanut butter on the boy's face.

"Yes," the couch sags under the collective weight of me and the boy. Brad Pitt leads the criminal, strong armed, to justice.

"If there is an apocalypse, we'll survive." I see the boy's t shirt, crumpled like a mountainous map. I hear the victorious pop song blaring, tinny, from the television. The boy pulls two feathers from a clay vase on the coffee table. He props one upright in his hair, like a TV Indian. The tip sways in the heaters' warm wind. "Want one?" he asks me, and I twist the stem between curls of hair. We sit, two TV Indians, straining to see justice projected on the screen. We will survive, I think. We will pull fish from golf course water traps. We'll dig burrows and curl up in the poisoned Earth.