Exposed by the Light

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Master of Fine Arts
In
Creative Writing: Fiction

by

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Exposed by the Light by Victor M Baeza, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Fine Arts: Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.

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Abstract

Young teen Xavier Travers is the focal point of this novella, as he gets the opportunity to reinvent himself when his family relocates but, following a dramatic injury, the start of Xavier’s high school career is derailed. When it leads to struggles with making and maintaining personal relationships, Xavier reaches out to a school counselor and Xavier begins making increasingly risky decisions until he finds himself unexpectedly plunged into an identity-breaking alternate reality. Only once he re-attains consciousness and agency does the entity possessing Xavier’s body splinter. Xavier’s awareness re-emerges, opening his eyes to the fact that he has been on the wrong side of an eternal conflict between good and evil. The shifts in narrative perspective and fantasy elements are meant to foreground this exploration of humanistic notions of vulnerability and social conformity, with the ending ultimately working to undercut the common trope of the resilient protagonist.
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Chapter 1: He Is

The droning, droning, droning on is interrupted by the soft, steady, almost whisper-like sound of paper being torn in secret. A silent re-murdering of tree, a re-tooling of notebook paper that aspired to be a sonnet or a diary entry or a picture of a bulbous, smiling mushroom person. The paper comes off in angles, in jagged edges and spear-like points. It is haphazardly rolled, then promptly chewed between carious teeth. It is a betrayal, the wadding of that paper, its saturating in spit, a weaponization.

This malice happens in a darkened corner of a science classroom, lights off so everyone can see the projector screen even though the sun still pierces through tall, slim windows and the overhead projector produces an image too small for half the class to read anyway. Still, some try. They try to grab at subjects and concepts lazily floated out there as the tenured and exhausted Mrs. Andrews carries on without regard for comprehension.

“Listen up, everyone,” he reminds, “that this will be on the final so you need to know this…”

The tenuous strands of half lives and moles and significant figures fall heavy as lead one Xavier’s ears. He slept fine, sure, but the lecture groans along and he’s not even sitting in the front couple rows so what’s stopping him from resting his chin and letting his stark neon-green eyes glaze over behind drooping eyelids? The words cloud
over, even the joke whispered among the kids sitting in front of him about “significant farters” doesn’t work Xavier out of the inertia of sleepiness.

When Xavier lets out a small laugh, just a small, almost-throat-clear sound to show he heard and appreciated the joke, he receives annoyed glances shot back at him before they go back to pretending to pay attention. Like the joke was meant to be exclusive. So, Xavier pulls off his horn-rimmed glasses and puts his head down into his folded arms and pretends like he’s sleeping so he can self-loathe quietly.

Just one more week.

Propping up a book and embracing sleep, Xavier starts to dream about a new start and a new world. He’s walking the halls of a Hollywood high school set, greeting everybody, and being greeted back by name… “Xavier Travers! Hey, Travers! Hellooo, Xavier?” The nauseous jerk of swerving back to consciousness grips Xavier by the chest as he looks up. Andrews is staring at him dead in the eye, stern but without conviction.

“Eyes ahead, young man. Book down, it’s not fooling anyone.”

As he tilts the five-pound monster of a hardback and it slips, with an ever-so-slight clack. It draws stifled laughter, and it cuts Xavier deep because the laughter is clearly at his expense. He chances a quick scan of the room and makes eye contact with a girl looking back from the third row and it’s the third time he’s accidentally caught her eye when she turns around and she probably thinks he’s a creep or something.
Xavier looks down again. Staring at the book, with a slight internal scream, he decides he’ll just not look up for the rest of class. Decides he’ll just keep his head down until the bell rings for summer and he never has to worry about this place again.

The body betrays, always.

The inside of Xavier’s nose starts to itch. It begs for a scratch that would doom Xavier to a lifetime of being misappropriated a nosepicker. As he goes to rub the back of his wrist against the front of his nose below the bridge, a jolt runs down his body. Panic floods Xavier’s chest and the tensing of his body seems to set off the stiffening between his legs even more. It has no reasoning, no motivation. It is like the reverse of a limb falling asleep from lack of blood flow, and this little boy has no recourse. He does not know his body is awakening to itself, only that nobody can know. As discretely as he can muster, Xavier hunches over. He shifts and resets his legs. His stocky frame means he usually wears looser clothes so he can feel comfortable.

He’s not totally sure it works but Xavier always bites the inside of his cheek or his upper lip. Xavier is no fan of pain, but this seems to be something that helps. He tries to bite hard enough it hurts and the distraction… at least, he thinks it helps. So he focuses on the pain and on biting even though it hurts.

When the spitball hits the back of Xavier’s head, the surprise of it makes Xavier flinch. He releases his bite and finds the twitch made his bite break the skin. He tastes a trickle of blood coming from his lip.

Xavier reaches back and touches the back of his head, already with a good idea of what he will find. When something comes out of his hair with the stroke of his hand
and his fingers come back wet, it confirms what he fears. His shoulders slump as Xavier raises his eyes to the ceiling. His whole body seems to arch and fall when he takes a deep breath, fighting back a scream and tears and the rising heartrate of fight or flight kicking into gear. A couple more spitballs puttle through the meditation, bouncing off his head.

Xavier can hear Nathaniel’s snubby, deep breaths as he steadies himself before each paper wad missile flies from an old fast food straw. Xavier lowers his head back toward the desk and unclenches his fists. It’s not like he could or would find Nathaniel after class, not like a fight would help anything. Xavier, head down, hugs himself around the midsection. He’s no fighter.

Almost muffled by the “fut” of each spitball, Xavier suddenly hears an angry whispered “Nathaniel!” behind him. Ears perked, Xavier hears the reply come back, still refusing to turn around and look Nathaniel in the eye.

“What? C’mon Chels,” Nathaniel says. Xavier imagines he says this with a caveman-ish smirk and elbowing, “it’s just Zay! He knows it’s all fun.” The last bit comes with a open-hand smack for emphasis, as Xavier’s shoulder abruptly feels on fire. He winces and shrinks from the hit some, but Xavier still keeps his eyes ahead and down. Chelsea lets out a sound somewhere between disbelief and disapproval. He’d never admit it but Chelsea is the only one who’s ever stuck up for him. The fact she never talked to him didn’t really matter to Xavier—she didn’t talk to anyone at all, and neither did he. Probably for different reasons, but still. He hated Andrews and Nathaniel and
Chem was the only subject he didn’t have at least a B+, but this had easily become his favorite class.

A beat later, the slightest thud sounds as Xavier subtly and abruptly jerks forward in his seat. Beat. Another light thwack, another strong jerking motion. The chair squeak-groans just so against the linoleum. The pace of the thuds quickens. It turns into a thump that begins to drown out the lecture. How Andrews fails to hear it over his own droning baffles Xavier, who closes his eyes and prays for intervention. The rocking stops abruptly.

Beat. A throat clears of phlegm. PTOOEY. Xavier sets his jaw, trying not to react. He instinctively reaches and touches the back of his head. A sticky wetness meets his hand. Xavier looks back to see Nathaniel trying to stifle his laughter. Chelsea turns to the wall to hide her reaction as Nathaniel feigns ignorance with upturned eyes while holding back laughter. Xavier looks to one, then the other. It is unclear whose face wounds him more to see. He blinks and their faces start to blur. Thinking he’s starting to tear up, Xavier looks back to the front of the class. He dabs at his face with his hands but feels no tears welling up. He rubs his eyes and the blurry vision starts to reorient itself, only to amass a headache. As his hands move from his eyes to his temple, Xavier looks down. His eyes grow wide as he starts to see vines, thorned green tendrils, start to come up onto the desk from the sides. He blinks twice and they dematerialize like dots after staring at the sun too long.

_No, no, no_…
Raising his hand but not waiting to be called on, Xavier asks to please use the restroom. Andrews simply nods, seemingly annoyed at the notion of someone missing out on the wisdom being imparted. Nathaniel stares at Xavier victoriously, as Xavier slinks out the door.

Xavier merely avoids all eye contact, eyes planted on the off-white marble tiles which pace the fast-walk toward sunlight.

The chattering continues, following Xavier until the door shuts at his back to muffle it. Xavier cannot seem to focus, the voices become disembodied. In a dark room where the only light is a creaky overhead projector, Xavier blinks and winces. Almost like he’s been staring at the sun for hours straight, the room glows bright, eradiated by a strange light. Looking around and even checking the light switches by the door, Xavier tries to make sense of the sensation.

_No, no, please God, no…_

Last time Xavier felt this sensation, 4 years ago now, it was on a stage. It was in front of a crowd. The doctors never figured it out, nobody knew what to call it. Xavier didn’t. All he knew was that it absolutely ruined his life. He speed-walked to the bathroom. An extended glance if he walked too slow would be disastrous. A teacher stopping him because he ran would be catastrophic. Dashing at last into the nearest restroom stall that doesn’t have a floater in the toilet so he can cry. He trembles with a futile anger. His self-talk eggs him on – useless, stupid… Idiot! Nocturnal infrared light flickers out of the corner of his eyes, the stall around Xavier not getting darker but greyer. Xavier grates at his eyes, slapping the side of his head.
“UGH”

Casually, gradually, everyone in that dark classroom resumes half-listening to a lecture on how to round decimals. Chelsea’s eyebrows have been furrowed since she watched Xavier turn the door handle to step outside, noticing his anxious hands and seeing Xavier’s lip starting to quiver. Nathaniel nudges Chelsea, trying to rope her in on his fun.

The bleariness of his eyes, accentuated by the harsh California sun, has Xavier stumbling as he pushes into the dim restroom. Xavier rushes clumsily into a stall, turning to flip the latch behind him, before brushing frantically at his crotch. Dry.

He never bothers to look into a mirror—truth told, Xavier avoids looking into mirrors as much as earthly possible. So, Xavier never notices it. In light of the mounting turmoil in that science classroom, teary-eyed Xavier makes his way head down to the middle stall of that boy’s bathroom and does not know his irises have transitioned from their lime-green. At first graying, they know look cloudy, cataract white. Tears flow from them, they receive outlines still but the amber lights and neutral tones evaporate from the walls of the boy’s room in Garvey Middle School. This all, only acutely visible to the young boy only aware of the tears puddling at his hands and rolling into ripples in the murky toilet bowl.

While in a bathroom stall, Xavier sits on the back of the toilet with his feet on the toilet seat, his every effort in focused on keeping the tears quiet, the echoes of a death yet to come crack against empty, daylit skies. In the unbridled shine of the California sun on a Friday afternoon in May, only in the stripe of shade cast by the flagpole can a
hint of an outline be perceived. As adults go on about their day, only the occasional young child chances to see it standing there, oblivious to what it might be. These children look on as they are led down the sidewalk or from behind car windows, bemused. When a tug at the arm or a parent’s supplication takes them on their way, these young minds and young eyes soon forget the figure that seems to be cloaked in technicolor thorns, standing sentinel on the front lawn of the middle school.

~

Xavier never turns back up in class, only coming out during the between-period break to retrieve his bag from the classroom. When he steps inside and sees it’s gone, he stifles a groan so Mr. Andrews, back turned, won’t notice him and ask where Xavier got off to.

Not that he even cares. Just wants to yell at me so no one else does the same thing.

Xavier walks staring straight down at his feet. Partly to assure himself nothing happened. That he’s fine and nobody even cares to notice and his pants are definitely dry. Xavier meets nobody’s eyes, and shrugs off any greetings for the rest of the day.

Two periods later, somebody walks into Xavier’s 7th period class from the office to announce that someone left a backpack belong to Xavier Travers in the office. Surprised, thankful after borrowing a pencil and paper last period, Xavier raises his hand and starts to walk to the tired-looking administrative assistant holding the bag aloft. She simply hands it to the nearest student before ducking back out the door and all that floats across Xavier’s mind as the bag makes its way across the classroom
assembly line-style to him in the front row is how. He opens it. It’s all there, plus a bag of skittles. How?

Xavier hangs around and then starts to take the long way out of his last class and to the front of the school, knowing it will make him miss the bus. He calls his mother from the office phone.

“Xavier, why you don’t ask someone to give you a ride?” Mariana Travers replies once she answers on the last ring before it goes to voicemail. She tries to tell him to ask someone in the office to get the bus to turn around or find a secretary who will take pity, but Xavier tells her he won’t do that and he’ll walk home. “Ayy, Xavier, well Hank took the car, I can no pick you up, what are you going to do?”

“I can just walk, mom.”

“You don’t have a friend whose parents can give you a ride or nothing?”

“I’ll just walk, mom, see you in a little bit. Be home soon.”

“Xavier, I just want to—”

“It’ll be fine. Bye.”

It was never really about asking, after all. Xavier wasn’t look for solutions, he didn’t want to have his mom fix it. Why would the bus turn around anyway, nobody cares if one person misses the bus.

Xavier walks home.

He cuts through the green, through the lawn where a soccer pitch, baseball outfield, and city league football field bleed into each other. The clippings from a recent mowing connect the whole of the pasture, like a wet haze eclipsing the sun on a cloudy
day. Thumbs tucked into backpack straps, eyes straight down, Xavier contemplates having to clean the white bottoms of his sneakers. With no technology to speak of, Xavier has nothing but his own thoughts to keep him company. He tries to focus on passing cars that streak by draped an unusual shade of blue or a house visible down a block that stands out from its neighbors with a salmon facade. At one point, the irrefutable fresh-mowed odor evolves into baked hints whispered by a bakery down the road. Xavier follows the trail with his nose and pauses to rest a hand on the rail, where the road runs above a bike path. Xavier thinks about the weirdness of an underground bike path. Xavier thinks about jumping.

Xavier keeps walking, and he thinks about this moment. How often has he made that same walk? What will that mean 30 years from now? Xavier focuses, focuses hard on the smells and the sounds of cars beating by like mechanical waves on a concrete beach and way even concrete can glint and gleam in the pastel blue-coated sunshine of that spring afternoon. Xavier focuses on remembering this exact moment, just to see if he can.

Xavier remembers the flickering technicolor of the bulb from class, tries to concentrate to make it happen again. He tries to squint and see if his hand will refract or prism at his will. But it doesn’t. It never does.

Xavier mentioned it to a doctor once.

_Sometimes I think I go colorblind for a second. Or like, I see all the colors at the same time?_ What would you even call it, Xavier wonders, angry that maybe the doctor never bothers to help since Xavier can’t even put the words together to explain what’s
wrong. Might as well have said he’s thirsty because he never drinks water, the doctor dismissed it so fast.

Xavier gets a headache from straining himself to force the trick, fixating on the contours and folds, the gradations in skin tone. He feels the slight jolt in his head of every step he takes, sneaker to concrete, like it’s muscle memory moving him down the familiar route home. When Xavier does chance to look ahead or behind, it is largely to check for other people who may be in the vicinity, someone who might start telling everyone else at school that Xavier is so stupid that he just stares at his hand the whole 30-minute walk home. Despite these quick glances, Xavier doesn’t notice, doesn’t realize that he is being watched as he makes his regular trek home. How many times has Xavier “missed” the bus? How long until the hint is received?

Shortly, Xavier passes by the quartet of the Ash, pine, palm, and orange trees guarding the neighboring quadplex, boarded window and all, and quietly slinks through the front door. Despite noting yellow light coming from the kitchen, and seeing swift-moving shadows playing in that light, Xavier wordlessly ducks around the unkempt foliage and decorations as he digs in his pocket for the house key. He greets nobody, quietly waiting in his room to be called for dinner. What’s it matter?

~

Xavier finishes his last bit of math homework for the year—take-home math final, way to go Mr. Burnside!—by the time a knock rattles the bedroom door.

“Xavier, are you home?”

“Yes!”
“Why you don’t say anything, come to eat!”

“Ohay!”

Xavier pulls out his science homework, knowing it’ll be a couple minutes before any of the food is actually ready.

Once the quiet dinner wraps up, Hank arriving and heading to the bedroom to change just as Xavier and Mariana are finishing, Xavier drops the paper towel with the squeezed lime and the tripe he can’t stomach into the empty plastic bowl. He is depositing that into the trash when Mariana asks from the table if Xavier has finished packing up his room yet.

“It’s just my clothes,” he replies without eye contact.

“Then help me in the living room,” Mariana directs, getting up to prepare a plate for Hank once she hears the bedroom door opening again.

“I have to do my homework.”

“Then help after.”

The move has been planned, it’s not news. Within a week of the funeral, Xavier’s mom wanted to get out of that house. Still, it’s an ongoing process. Xavier walks into his bedroom, which he has not started to pack up at all but how long can two posters, a photo frame, and an empty trophy case take to pack? Xavier slumps back into the plastic white chair and rests his elbows on the rectangle folding table he uses for a desk. He stopped telling his mom about the episodes. The last time she asked about it, something like two years ago, Xavier said he hadn’t felt anything strange for a while. Truth was Xavier had an episode at least once a month since 3rd grade. It all started
with that class treasurer speech. Not even fucking vice president, class treasurer! But standing in front of those grilling children’s faces, the nerves twitched and convulsed and Xavier thought he saw the grim reaper in the crowd before he had what doctors called a stress-induced seizure. Everyone gasped when he collapsed to the ground, but Xavier clearly remembers laughing. That, plus the nicknames, he figures he must have messed his pants up on that stage. They weren’t always that bad, the episodes. Sometimes just the headaches or squinting until Xavier’s eyes adjusted. Other times, it was a camp-out in the bathroom until his pants dried and Xavier could walk to the office to call home for a ride.

Maybe his mom knew. She had to, right? How many times did she pick him up smelling like a bathroom? Maybe she gave up too.

The walls are already bare in the hallways as Xavier walks leaves his room after an hour, and goes out into the living room where Mariana is bringing china plates out of their secluded spot in the kitchen cabinets. She sets down the stack of dishes like it’s a newborn and pats a stack of newspaper piled up next to where Xavier drops himself onto the floor, sitting cross-legged and slouched.

~

Though the thick, burgundy curtains still hang over the living room window, obscuring any glimpse of the outside world, Xavier knows the early onset of twilight is beginning to settle on the leaves and rooftops. Suddenly aware of the dramatic drop in temperature, the 30-degree difference between sweltering day and brisk evening one of the mainstays of Spring in the California Central Valley. A television rests on the floor,
centered between several divots in the carpet that hint at the former presence of furniture. A 50s Western movie Xavier does not recognize dances anachronistically in blacks and whites on the flat, OLED screen. Xavier makes an absurd face of disgust, to see its reflection on a dinner plate. He places it on newspaper, wraps it, and puts it into a box marked DISHES. Mariana walks into the room carrying another empty cardboard box. Xavier boxes his second newspaper-wrapped china plate when his mother, without eye contact, cuts the silence of the room.

“Xavier, be very careful.”

“Ama,” Xavier chuckles sardonically, “What’s the big deal? We just eat off paper plates anyway.” Xavier’s mom doesn’t seem to acknowledge this remark as she puts the box down.

Tucking a strand of her long hair behind her ear and picking up a plate, she says, “That’s not the point, Xavier. These plate are expensive, and delicate, and...” Marie stares at her own reflection in the plate. She runs her finger along a facial wrinkle and feels only cold.

Xavier does not hear her trail off into her thoughts and continues packing. Lately, all their conversations seem to end on the same place before trailing off.

What’s going on, Xavier, you seem upset all night. He throws a glance before giving a half-shrug, and deflects with a mumbled non-answer.

“Dime, Xavier.” None-answers will not be enough tonight.

But Xavier doesn’t want to talk. He wants to run. He puts the wrapped plate on top of the other inside the cardboard box. He thinks about just dropping it in but thinks
better. Instead, he throws himself back afterward, stretching out onto the beige cut pile carpeting. Xavier looks up and sees the popcorn ceiling, the whole house an off-white meant to stifle any hint that the house has been lived in for the 30 years it has existed. Like their house has magazine spread aspirations and there’s no room for baby puke-green walls or nail holes. Xavier wants to be sad that he’s not seeing certain people, but he is just desperate for the new start. Even just an hour down the freeway can change everything. But fresh starts hurt.

“I guess I just miss, Dad,” he manages finally. That’s usually enough of an answer, good enough to get everyone off his back.

“I know, Xavier,” comes the reply, punctuated with teeth-sucking, “Pero you don’t act like this before? What’s happening?”

Xavier continues to line each plate with paper, his exaggerated motions and paper crinkling almost meant to indicate that the silence is his answer. He glances over and Mariana seems to be lost in thought, holding a dish in her hands and focusing on the reflection.

“ Hey guys,” comes a voice from the other room, Where’s the newspaper?

Without looking up, both reply: “Over here!”

A man walks into the room and picks up half the stack of newspaper.

“Awesome. I’m going to wrap up your dolphins, hon.” He looks up from the stack and starts to step toward the door. Marie only stares into the plate, unresponsive.

“Honey?”

“That’s fine, sweetie,” Marie finally responds, “Thank you.”
Both boys look at her, frowning, then make eye contact with one another. Xavier looks down, angry and ashamed that they both might be thinking the same thing. The man smiles and walks a few steps so that he stands next to and over Xavier.

“Hey, Zay!”

“Hey, Hank.” His uniform of sneakers, sweatpants, and a muscle shirt has a purple and yellow color scheme to it.

“Go Lakers,” Hank says in explanation, noticing Xavier's glance at his clothes.

“Yeah.”

“Hey, have you given any thought to my offer?” Hank asks, squatting down to get closer to eye level with the sitting teenager. “It still stands, y’know.”

“I don’t know,” Xavier replies with a shrug and without eye contact. Hank places a hand on Xavier’s shoulder. The rustle of newspaper in Hank’s other hand makes Xavier feel like a leaf, rustling in the wind.

“Aww, c’mon. I spend all day whipping folks into shape. We can spend some quality time.” He brings his face close to Xavier’s, so that their foreheads almost collide, though Xavier still just looks up helplessly at Marie. “Sides, you’re gonna start high school soon. When we get to your new school, you can impress all the ladies!”

Hank starts to flex demonstratively, as if it’s his way of making his case. As he stares at his bicep, Xavier’s stare gains urgency. He fixates on his mother, but she does not awaken from her trance in the reflective gloss of the kaolin. She typically intervenes during this line of questioning, to spare Xavier the stress of shutting down Hank. Then,
with the grip from Hank’s paw not letting up on his shoulder, its unyielding tug all too
reminiscent for Xavier, it all clicks.

“Alright, fine. I’ll try it, I guess,” Xavier manages to say. The look of trepidation
still on Xavier’s face either does not phase or does not register for Hank, who has just
gotten a yes from his teenage stepson and now pats his shoulder emphatically.

This is a victory for Hank.

“Alright, that’s my man!” Hank stands back up and walks toward Mariana. Even
as he gives her a strong side-hug squeeze, content with the outcome of his interaction,
she barely registers the 6’3 frame standing over her. She awakens just enough to look
up and smile at Hank. With this, Hank walks out of the room, newspaper in tow.

“Mom, you can’t keep getting hung up on him.”

“I know,” replies Marie without looking at him, “I know. It’s just hard.”

“Yeah, well... You have Hank. And now, he wants to start acting like my dad... So
I need you to keep him busy.”

“What, you don’t want Hank to be your new dad?” Mariana smirks as she makes
the comment, but grimaces immediately after with the realization of what just passed
her lips.

“I don’t need a new dad,” Xavier snaps back, visibly shutting down.

“Oh, I know, sweetie. I—” Marie repeats herself, before pausing and letting out a
sigh. She bends her knees to get lower and places the china plate down on the
newspaper in front of Xavier. “It’s an adjustment for everyone, Xavier.”

Xavier and Marie both stop what they’re doing.
“I guess it’s good that I’m going to start working out.” He sighs, poking his stomach defeatedly, prompting Marie to place a hand on his shoulder. Hers is far more reassuring, gentler than Hank’s grip.

“Just remember none of that teenager stuff is more important than keeping your school.”

“Si, señora,” he chimes, picking a smile back up on both faces as he begins wrapping the plate.

“Ahh, don’t say like that! It makes me feel old.” Xavier walks over to take another plate from Mariana’s hands. She does not give it to him, but does not resist when he takes it. Mariana hugs her arms around herself and paces around the room. “Xavier, is something happen—”

“It’s fine, Mom. Really.”

“Well, ever since your father passed, I—”

“Mom! It’s fine.” Xavier finishes wrapping dishes, closes the box, and tapes it shut. He picks it up with a groan and carries it away. When he reaches the door, he tries to balance the box on one arm so he can get the doorknob. He does everything he can to not ask for help.

“Here, let me help,” Mariana says as the hurried, muffled steps pad toward across the door and Xavier. She turns the knob and backs out of the way, prompting Xavier to finish opening the door with his left foot.

It’ll be nice to get a new start, Xavier thinks to say, but does not as he walks wordlessly through the door. Mariana stands in the room alone.
Xavier walks down the hall and into the open garage door, where he sets down the box atop another as it gives a muffled rustling from within. Hoping to avoid anyone, Xavier sees a beanbag chair in the corner of the garage—it has fallen into disuse after being moved out of his room for a desk—and decides to fall back into it with a sigh. Xavier reads the Sharpied labels on all the boxes under the dim, single-bulbed light of the room and optimism creeps in.

Xavier doesn’t know, he couldn’t possibly, but his eyes recover their color like a saturation setting being dragged from one extreme to the other. He sinks into the seat, floating in aimless, ambling thoughts until light has finally stopped filtering in through the windows and cracks of the garage. It gets later and later, yet the home feels less and less tired.

“I mean, I’m leaving soon anyway, right?” Xavier says to nobody.

~

“Hey, Chelsea?” Xavier leads, his heart properly palpitating after anticipating this conversation for the past 3 class periods. He’s standing outside of chemistry, hoping to catch Chelsea before she eventually takes her assigned seat next to Russel and makes this conversation several times harder.

“Oh, hi Xavier,” she replies, looking up with a surprised smile. She stops walking in and leans against the wall.

“Oh, you know my name?”

“Yeah. We met at camp in 5th grade.”

“No, yeah, I remember. I just didn’t think you remembered.
“Well, we have this class together too, so.”

“Right, yeah.” Xavier feels everything go fuzzy. It’s a different kind of rush.

“So, what’s up?”

“Um, I was wondering if I can I sign your yearbook?”

“Oh, I um I didn’t really buy one.”

“Oh, okay,” Xavier replies, gripping his shoulder straps and bracing for her to re-shoulder her bag and hurriedly chuckle past him into class. Instead, she extends her hand and places it over his.

“Oh but um can I sign yours?” The question and touch—Xavier’s soul practically leaves his body. It’s everything in his body and being to maintain the eye contact, to not look at the hand over his own and melt into the dimpled concrete walkway.

“I… I don’t have one either,” he manages meekly with a half-smile.

“Oh,” Chelsea replies, withdrawing her hand and bending down to reach into her backpack on the floor.

“Yeah, my mom was so distracted with stuff, she’s been kinda scatter-brained, so when she missed the early purchase deadline and it was 40 bucks instead of 25, she said ‘what they think I’m made of money?’ and so I just didn’t get one which is fine because they’re lame and stuff, but I still wanted to see if you had one I could sign.”

“Haha, yeah, my dad doesn’t really buy me stuff like that either. I didn’t even bother asking,” she says, opening her backpack.

“Oh well. Sorry to bother you.” Xavier begins to pivot toward the door, praying nobody else heard that interaction.
“Wait, here!”

Chelsea yanks a piece of paper out of a spiral notebook. Xavier catches a glimpse of writing on the page exposed after she tears one out, but he bites back his curiosity. She scribbles something on the page, then hands it to him.

“Here you go. Have a great summer!... or whatever people write in yearbooks”

“Thanks um I owe you one then uh...” Xavier trails off as he hastily unhooks an arm to reach into his backpack. The hallway crowds are thoroughly thinned out by now, and Andrews peaks his head through the doorway to close the propped open door.

“Late bell’s about to ring, you two.” He closes the door upon saying it. Xavier turns to look at him, then back to Chelsea, who has already got her backpack slung over her right shoulder and started to walk past Xavier to get inside.

“It’s okay, Zay. I’ll just catch you on insta,” she says, elbow tapping his arm, “Chels, underscore, slays, 2k. And I’ll see you in high school, right?”

“Yeah,” Xavier musters, with a smile. *I need a phone*, he bemoans as he steps into the dark classroom.

~

In the course of the modified finals schedule, Xavier sees Chelsea one last time after their encounter outside of Andrews’ chem class. She doesn’t seem him as she steps into class while he’s standing in the hallway waving. It’s the last Xavier will see of her within the confines of Garvey Middle School.

The rest of the last week of school goes by quick—Xavier focuses on finals and trades his treasured Mewtwo card to switch seats and sit in the back of the class to
focus on the chemistry final and finishes middle school with his head-down and a 2.4 GPA intact. Passing.

It’s part of the deal Xavier makes with Mariana from the back seat of the family sedan after he finished coming down from the ecstasy of his conversation with Chelsea—*Mom, I need a phone, we’re going to a new place and I won’t know anyone and I need to make a good impression and make friends—*

“Ay, Xavier, why you asking me this for, you know we don’t have money for phone!”

“What about from selling the house? C’mon mom, I don’t get to stay in touch with any of my friends from here?”

“What friends, you don’t tell me about any friends?”

“UGH, mooooom!” Xavier feels the frustration of hitting a verbal landmine with Mariana, knowing he’ll be hearing about these “friends” and he won’t have an answer because he certainly doesn’t plan on bringing up Chelsea.

“Okay, mijo, we are going to Fresno next week to see Mimi. You can ask her.”

“What, why would she say yes? Ever since Dad left her everything, she hasn’t even talked to us! Why are we going anyway?”

“Xavier, why do you say like that? Do you call her?”

“No.”

“So how she talk to you if you don’t call?”

“Why are we going, anyway?”
“Because you said you don’t want to go to graduation and she said if she cannot go to her grandson graduation, then we have to go to her house to celebrate.”

“But I don’t want to celebrate, it’s just middle school. Nobody cares!”

“Mimi cares, Xavier. Just because you don’t care doesn’t mean you have to hate that other people care.”

~

The drive down the 99 is the single most immemorable thing Xavier can think of. It’s like a loading screen connecting the different, interesting parts of California. On the trips up and down freeway that meanders through miles of farmland, with only the occasional gas station or billboard to draw attention, Xavier often falls asleep leaned against the window of the backseat. Other times, Xavier just thinks. He thinks about all the lives he could be living. On the way to his Abuela Mireya’s house, he thinks about the last time he was on that stretch of road.

Everyone follows her finger, looking slightly left and forward. The shrubbery that punctuates the median blends into itself at their 70-plus miles per hour pace. If Mariana is pointing out anything other than trash littering the shoulder of the road, it is lost on her boys in the car. Husband and son’s eyes dart, lizard-like, grasping at the meaning of “that there.” Nobody speaks, all meaning found in their inquiring gazes.

“See?” she insists.

“What? See what”

“Those trees!” The indignation of having to explain collides with the bout of curiosity about to give way to eye rolls.
“What about the trees?” Xavier pushes. This is the first time in hours that his chin has not rested squarely in his palms. Not that he’s particularly amused.

“Look! It’s a palm tree and a pine tree.”

Again, no words materialize. Eyes settle upon their disappointing discovery, reminiscent of eye tests which seem interesting until the prize is seeing a single stippled digit. The punchline has not landed. Both audience members turn their eyes back to Mariana. The trees come and go. The moment passes, like the jackass in a sportscar several miles ago.

“So?”

“So...” Mariana turns around to face Xavier, somehow both eager and annoyed at explaining this landmark she has brought to everyone’s attention. Hank has already resumed staring straight ahead and losing himself to the monotony of the road. “When you see those two trees, it means you are crossing over. Palm tree is for South California, and pine for the North. We just pass the halfway point. We are officially NorCal!”

For a few seconds, only a glassy stare is all that meets the explanation. Eventually, a meager “whatever” escapes from the back seat. The driver’s seat remains quiet. It is Mariana’s turn to roll her eyes as she turns and faces back toward the windshield.

“Never mind, I guess!” she bemoans into her notebook as she pulls the pen from her hair, “I try to liven things up a little. Even if it is just with a couple of stupid trees,” She mumbles to herself about just wanting to talk like an actual family.
Xavier slouches down into a ball as the music he does not know belongs to Weezer continues to be suffocated by the imposing winds of valley air being cut into by a steady stream of traveling vehicles.

Nearly a year later, Xavier looks at the same pair of trees as they approach now from the opposite direction. Xavier remembers looking up the landmark when they got home from their last trip to Mimi’s house for a family get-together, not wanting to vocalize his mild curiosity. “Center of California” yields some information about a place called North Fork. A couple entries down the search engine, an article says the two trees are more a symbol than the real thing.

*What’s the point of making such a big deal if it’s basically a lie?*

They roll into Abuela Mimi’s house in the early afternoon, the humid heat in full effect. That’s why they can hear Mimi yell her hellos from an open window before she eventually stands behind the screen door to greet them on their way in. Mariana coaxes Xavier to go ahead. In his typical hunched, eyes-to-the-ground posture, Xavier doesn’t notice Hank give an apprehensive look at Mariana before they both tentatively trail Xavier.

“Vengan p’ acá, no voy a morder! I don’ bite.” She opens the door, embraces Xavier who returns the hug with a mumbled “hello.” The adults exchange ginger handshakes.

After she feeds him and comments on his recent growth, Xavier listens to his Abuela Mireya “Mimi” Travers talk for what feels like hours. Mariana and Hank camp out in the living room on the couch facing the TV. Mimi asks Xavier about school, about how
it’s gone and how it’s going and where it’ll end up. More than anything, though, she reminisces aloud—prompted and unprompted—about Xavier’s dad, Osmundo. About the fact that they lost him too soon. About the kind of man he was and would have been. About how tough life was without her only son, but my, Xavier’s mom certainly moved on fast.

“IT’s not like that, Abuela. My mom still misses Dad.”

“And what abou’ you, mijo, todavía no tienes novia.”

“No, we’re moving abuela, so I didn’t want to start having a girlfriend because I was going to leave.”

“Ay, sí, me dijo a mamá.”

Xavier remembers what Mariana said about Mimi and figures now is as good a time as any.

“I told my mom I needed a phone to talk to a girl I like but she said we don’t have money.”

“Ahh, sí?” Mimi acknowledges, interest piqued, “A girl, mijo?”

“Sí.”

“Is she pretty?”

“Yeah,” Xavier replies, smiling but wishing he was anywhere else in the world, “I think she’s pretty.”

“Mmm.” Mimi seems satisfied.

She reaches for Xavier’s hand with a wave, leaning forward. Xavier takes her hand as he gets on his feet, helping her do the same. Without releasing it, Mimi walks
him around the dining room table and into the kitchen. In the corner of the dilapidated, pastel-colored kitchen, Mimi releases Xavier’s hand and reaches for the toaster oven. Pushing it aside with both hands, she pulls back a vertical counter tile and reaches into an exposed opening. When he sees the tile moved, Xavier tries to hide his growing smile.

With something in hand, Mimi replaces the tile and puts the toaster oven back in its original spot. She turns back around and comes close to Xavier. She seems shorter as she whispers some insights, some more general life advice. Finally, she says:

“Ozzy left some money for you, mijo, he want it to be for you. This is some money, for you present, for graduated school and growing up to be a good student and a good son. Que Dios te bendiga, mijo.”

Xavier wants to say thank you, but he knows to just close things with a long, tight hug. Pocketing the money, Xavier smiles as they walk back to the living room where Mariana is holding a small cake and Hank dons a birthday cap and noisemaker combo. Mariana, for her party, wears swollen, bloodshot eyes. They all seem to coexist peacefully enough to enjoy dessert before everyone tires of the armistice and Hank gets up with a groan, Mariana mumbles an excuse to leave, and Xavier goes to hug Mimi one last time.

“Thank you, Mimi,” Xavier whispers.

They presently leave Mimi’s house and head into downtown Fresno for sushi, which it seems is what Hank has been holding out for all along. They eat like they hadn’t eaten at all at Mimi’s, and Hank has some drinks, so that Mariana has to drive when
they eventually filter back into the sedan under waning sunlight for the long trip home. The adults laugh and joke about the look of Mimi’s wallpaper and furniture, and there’s not a lot of quiet time between the two. Xavier finally takes the opportunity to withdraw the bills Mimi gave him from his pocket and he counts $1,500 before putting them back into his pocket rather than his wallet, which has the velcro strap that might draw attention. In the car, Xavier waits for some time to pass, waits for a pause in the conversation.

“Mom, why don’t you guys and Mimi get along?”

Xavier’s piping up seems to remind Hank that there’s someone in the back seat.

“Oh, Xavier, there’s something I wanted to ask you too, how’d you get those crazy eyes?”

“Hank!”

“What? It’s a legit question.”

“He gets them from his father, Hank. Obviously.”

“Mom, Dad’s hazel eyes plus your brown eyes don’t add up to lime green.”

“Are they contacts? C’mon, you can tell me!”

“Hank, stop!”

Some stares are exchanged in silence across the front seats and Xavier enjoys the heavy silence on the long ride home.

~

Xavier steps out of the air-conditioned sedan and into the oppressive swelter of the late-July sun. It’s not ideal but Hank’s availability window is only a couple hours in
the early afternoon this week because Hank says some old lady changed her time to accommodate for a bingo game or something. Xavier doesn’t complain, since Hank leaves the gym to pick up Xavier and go right back.

As hot as it is, Xavier wipes at his forehead as he crosses through the threshold while Hank holds it open.

“Dang, dude, save some sweat for the workout!”

Once they’re inside, Hank says he’s going to use the restroom and Xavier follows him into the locker room, stopping to put their bag away. Then, while Hank is in a stall, Xavier ambles into the restroom but just stops at the mirrors behind the sinks. It’s the first time Xavier really took the time to look at himself in the past month and a half since they started coming to the gym. Xavier cracks a bit of a smile, does a small bicep flex at himself, and starts pulling at his shirt. He notices that this shirt he bought when they first started coming to the gym together has started to feel loose. Xavier bunches the bottom of the shirt to pull it more taut to his midsection, when Hank steps out of the stall and walks to one of the sinks to wash his hands and Xavier quietly puts his hands back into his pockets. Xavier just now notices that his basketball shorts and t-shirt combo is the same color scheme as Hank’s sweatsuit: shades of black and gray, somehow both loose and form-fitting simultaneously, with matching running shoes.

The move was rough. There was shouting. A box of fragile dishes shattered when they were put down with anger, because they mistakenly went into a box labeled DISHES – PLASTIC. It is hard at first, all of it. Finally living in the same house as Hank. Dealing with the unfinished renovation on the apartment and staying in a hotel a few
days. It comes as something of a surprise to Xavier when the highlight of the summer before high school becomes leaving home to go to the gym. He learns the catharsis of breaking muscle down, and feeling it rebuild. Without telling Hank, Xavier goes on runs on his own while Hank is out training other people. Xavier makes sure to give himself enough time to get back home and cool down so he isn’t sweating by the time Hank gets home to pick him up. Anything to get out of the house at this point.

Mariana asks Xavier about the conversation he had with Mimi from time to time—she raised an eyebrow said he not only had enough for the phone’s activation fee, but for a couple months of cell service. Hank doesn’t seem to know. He probably would have made a joke about Xavier buying his own gym membership, even though bringing Xavier along as a guest is free on Hank’s.

Now, that phone buzzes with meme-sharing notifications inside the gym bag in a locker while Xavier breathes deeply as he struggles with a bench press. Xavier admitted to Chelsea that his parents—well, my mom and the guy she’s with—decided to move about an hour away. He is quick to follow up and ask if it’s still okay that they continue to talk. Xavier still has to force himself to wait to reply to her messages, which is tricky because she’s the only person he talks to. He even starts to browse social media and the internet for things to share with Chelsea, so he doesn’t come across as boring. The metal bar rises steadily, grinding into Xavier’s palms. With a groan of air escaping his lungs in finality, the bar plummets to Xavier’s chest.

“One more, Xavier, one more!” Xavier arches his body improperly, straining to leverage it up, but the bar does not budge from its painful spot across his sternum. After
several seconds of Xavier’s struggling, Hank lifts the bar from his chest with one hand. Xavier racks the weight on bench press and stands up. He lets out a frustrated grunt as he paces in the immediate vicinity.

“Alright,” Hank yells, punching Xavier on the chest, “Way to go Zay!” Turning Xavier to face the mirror, he points at different protruding veins. “Look at all the progress you made, huh? Just one month! Insane.”

Xavier’s face changes. He wants to be mad he was left sputtering for breath under a barbell. He wants to match Hank’s aggressive energy. A couple people glance their way, ears perked at another one of Hank’s over-the-top pep talks. Xavier, before, would have been acutely aware of this. He would have glued his eyes to the ground, maybe played off Hank’s enthusiasm or asked him to stop. Instead, Xavier cannot help but beam at the mirror, meeting his own neon eyes in the reflection as Hank grips Xavier by the shoulders, like he’s showing him off to himself. Hank’s hands on Xavier’s shoulders makes him acutely aware that he is slick with sweat.

Hank guides Xavier from there, parlaying the impromptu shoulder rub into a gentle, guiding shove. Hank leaves the weights racked on the barbell as he continues to praise Xavier’s progress. They simply walk together to the functional training area, which looks to Xavier like what he imagines a disco would have looked like, minus the weights and medicine balls laying around. Hank inspects a rack of resistance bands carefully as Xavier drinks from a bottle of ice water, cold to the point Xavier tries to wipe off the condensation on his shirt and finds it is already thoroughly soaked.
“Now, for this next one, you’re going to want to pay close attention to form, okay?”

Xavier puts the bottle down, and brings a hand to his forehead to wipe sweat away from his eyes. He ran a little longer this morning—Xavier’s enrollment day at high school is next week—so Xavier feels more exhausted than he would normally be at this point in the routine. Last time Xavier was this gassed, they were about 15 minutes into their first session and Hank chuckled as he encouraged Xavier’s attempts to stick with the routine. Still, as his endurance improves, Xavier knows from his time with Hank that the goal is to continue ramping up; leaving the gym without noodle arms or legs is a waste. Still, Xavier winces as he struggles to lift his arm, clearly exhausted and unsure how he’ll power through this last exercise. Hank hoists a kettlebell aloft, once again grunting the words “All right, Zay, how ya feeling?”

“I’m fine,” Xavier responds quickly, forcing a relaxed posture, “What’s next?”

“So, I like to call this move ‘laundry day.’”

“Why?”

“Because, you hang clean,” Hank answers, swinging the weight gingerly between his legs, before using momentum to lift weight to shoulder height, and above his head, “And you press.”

Xavier observes, stoic. Hank drops weight on floor, hard. He cannot suppress his grin.

“Get it? Like laundry?”
“So how many should I do?” Xavier asks, wiping sweat from eyes to avoid eye contact. Joking together is still something that eludes the duo.

“Oh, well, umm,” Hank begins, deflated, “Let’s say a set of 10 to start?” Picking up both their depleted water bottles, he shakes one as a gesture. Hank turns and walks to a water fountain 20 feet away.

Xavier wipes at his eyes again, and picks up a weight with the number 24 etched in thick white block characters. Xavier stands on the rubber mat, legs wide apart, mimicking Hank’s posture. He squats, careful not to bend his back, but also minding that his knees are behind his toes in the stance. His toes wriggle and writhe against the loose restrictions of nylon mesh shoes. Xavier shifts his weight to his front, onto his toes, then swings back onto his heels, before swinging back forward.

Hank stands at the water fountain and looks toward him, the weak stream of the fountain holding Hank hostage. Xavier lifts the weight to shoulder height. His face strains with effort. His body feels urgent, and muscles rush through the motions which are still new. Forgetting to adjust his grip properly, Xavier lifts the weight above his head. It’s a single motion, fluid but awkward. The kettlebell careens upward momentarily from the momentum of the lift. It is no longer within Xavier’s control, but instead swings as if on a tether. Xavier’s fingers lose their grip, the slickness and weight extracting it from his hands. The kettlebell presently does what it knows best, plummeting back down to earth.

Hank sees the ball strike Xavier in the back of his head and send him crumpling to the ground. The water bottle falls from his fingers, hitting the rubbery-matt floor and
landing on its side as water puddles around it. Before it hits the ground, though, Hank is already in stride and he yells Xavier’s name. By the time he kneels at Xavier’s side, the kettlebell has bounced off of the base of Xavier’s neck, making one more bounce on the ground nearby before coming to rest. Xavier simply lays face down in a heap, limbs splayed. His right arm twitches sporadically.

Xavier is unresponsive to his name being called, as well as to Hank nudging and shaking his limp arms.

A young man sprints over, having been in the vicinity and picked up on what was happening. He is no older than 20. He looks as panicked, as guilty, as Hank does.

“W- What happened?”

“Call 9-1-1! Xavier!”

~

Xavier doesn’t bother to turn on the lights or pull back the curtains. He wheels straight to his bed. Everything looks unfamiliar—Xavier is not sure whether it’s the time lapsed since he was last in the room or just the new angle he is seeing it from. Xavier’s legs press up against the side, he is not sure how hard. He reaches out an arm to brush the soft stretches of the comforter and blankets, feeling the familiar bedsheets and knowing that somewhere along his shin is the end of the mattress and the start of the wooden box spring but its coolness also does not register. Xavier frowns, then looks for his phone in the space between his right leg and the chair—he is working on not putting things in pants pockets anymore because they will be harder to get into. The words appear one letter at a time in a Google search bar, spelling “getting into bed paraplegic.”
Links and video thumbnails appear and Xavier’s thumb clumsily scrolls the list before going back to click on the first instructional video. Xavier leans back in his chair, staring at the screen. The person on screen talks too much. Xavier’s eyes start to wander around his room and he notices a piece of mail opened and sprawled on the table. Xavier notices other envelopes in a stack. Xavier turns the lights on, then goes to pick up the envelope from the floor. It takes a few tries. The envelope is marked Mullen High School. They are all opened, so Xavier picks up the letter and sees the logo printed on the envelope. It’s from his new high school.

“Welcome to Mullen,” “orientation date,” and “suggested materials.” Xavier reads all the letters, looking more and more exasperated. Xavier looks around the room. There are still a few open boxes. One has the word “CLOTHES - Xavier” crossed out and “BOOKS” written underneath. Xavier looks inside and sees a stack of eight dense books. He picks up the first, which reads “Geometry - A Comprehensive Guide,” and drops it back on the stack. Xavier pulls out a shirt that has Mullen High Musketeers written on the front. He looks inside and sees a matching pair of shorts. Xavier smirks at the shorts, and covers them by throwing the shirt back on top. Xavier turns the light back off. He pulls up to his bed correctly according to the what the nurses showed him and the video confirmed. It is trickier because his bed does not have handles like a hospital bed, and the chair is not particularly sturdy because they bought it second-hand, but Xavier pulls himself onto the bed. He rolls over with his head on a pillow, laying for a minute and trying to forget his own body. Then, he adjusts his leg with his hands.
This is Xavier’s first serious injury, but the disappointment of leaving a hospital with much left unanswered is familiar to him. Xavier’s eyes, as they flutter and close, look a tea green. They have gone between an ash grey and that pale, dull green in fluctuations since Xavier first became aware inside the ambulance. Still, nobody noticed. His screams, his imploring to Hank—why can’t I move?—pulled focus. Nobody notices, like Mariana does not notice as she peeks in through the partially open doorway throughout the night. Nobody notices Hank wake up every time Mariana wordlessly gets up out of bed, after fussing and kicking around for a few minutes, to go check on her son.

Nobody notices the invisible wreath of thorned vines expanding, draping across the shingles of the home and hanging over walls, windows, doorways. If oil slicks could be jagged and branching, that would be description for the growing mass enveloping the Travers home and nobody notices as reality continues to pull focus.

~

Xavier’s eyes jerk open from sleep and start to re-close, wanting to go back into their emptiness, but they suddenly jerk open as Xavier’s hand touches something. Warmth.

“No, no, no, no, no…”

He is laying on his side and props himself up on one arm bent to a right angle. He feels around, pulls back a blanket and feels around more. At this point, it is less about verifying and more about inspecting the damage, though there is denial still floating as Xavier strains his upper body to flip on a bedside lamp. He looks down at his
crotch, which pools with urine. He throws his head back onto the bed with an angry, belabored groan.

“Mom,” Xavier says firmly, somehow hoping she will not hear him and the problem will abate before she arrives. He waits a beat but resigns himself and, this time, bellows, “Mom!”

“What is it, Xavier?” comes the reply, delayed, from the other side of the bedroom door.

“I... the thing happened.”

Mariana enters the room and wordlessly begins the process of cleaning. Xavier hoists himself up on her shoulders when it comes time for her to transfer him into the seat. Xavier sees her deftly strip the bed, notices they had the foresight to put down a rubber pad, and sees Mariana strain on tip-toes to reach the clean bedding at the top of the closet.

She helps him get back into bed and he wants to say he can do it himself, wants to scream and yell to leave him alone, but that fire burns itself out and smolders by the time he is back in the bed. Just as Mariana turns to leave the room with a shoulder pat and tired smile, Xavier pipes up.

“I think I should wait to start school. At least until... I’m better.” He stares at the letter on the desk as he says it. Mariana stops in the doorway when he says this and, hand still on the doorhandle, searches his face for a second.

“I think so, too.”

“Thanks, mom.”
“Of course, mijo.”

Xavier does not know that he will ever sleep soundly again, else he risks waking in a puddle of himself again. He risks seeing his mother’s face when she opens the door and flips the lights. She looks so tired in that moment of realization. The jokes Hank makes as he changes a bedsheets for the first time in his life are innocuous.

“Maybe plastic sheets from now on! How ‘bout we invest in some diapers for a while? Sheesh, at least we know he’s drinking plenty of water!”

It seems like it takes everything in him for Xavier to wait, until Hank leaves with the sheets and Mariana lifts her hand from Xavier’s shoulder to follow Hank out and privately reprimand his insensitivity, before he breaks down. His rolling sobs fall quietly as he sits in the desk chair, recently showered and bruised on his thighs where he punches his legs during bouts of angry desperation.

Eventually, the day comes for Xavier to resume schooling. He looks over from his desk chair with a crane of his neck, timidly glancing at the sharp redness of the digital clock in the still-darkness of his bedroom. Quarter to five in the morning. He returns his gaze to an internet video of two men exaggeratedly eating foreign foods and vomiting at the slightest deviation from their normal diets. Xavier knows he has to be out of the house in three hours.

~

Xavier is waiting outside his front door. He is wearing the outfit he had chosen for his first day of new school. It feels loose in many places. The door opens and Mariana peeks out.
“Hi, sweetie. Are you sure you don’t want me to take you to school?”

“It’s fine, Mom,” Xavier replies not looking at Mariana.

“Are you sure? I mean, it’s your first day, and all...”

“I’m sure,” comes the terse reply, as if to indicate finality.

Xavier looks down at nothing in particular, simply wanting not to make eye contact. He dreads the possibility that Mariana will walk up behind him and push him down the driveway in front of his classmates.

A single leaf, standing out because it is one of the first golden brown flags to fly in the air in commemoration of Fall, flits lazily in front of Xavier. Instinctively, Xavier’s eyes track it rise and fall from his right to his left. Xavier feels no breeze, he notices, and watches the leaf with confusion. It catches on something before unseen wind pushes it around and beyond. Eyes refocusing, Xavier cannot pinpoint what it could have caught on in the lawn. It almost stopped, for a small moment, on nothing.

It interrupts Xavier’s text conversation with Chelsea, but not for long. Xavier returns to the chat and replies Yeah, some things you just don’t understand and can’t explain but you know they’re real. Chelsea agrees. She continues to tell Xavier all about how high school is going. She doesn’t know what happened. When Xavier looked at his phone for the first time in 2 weeks, her last message was just a follow-up question mark that was several days old. Xavier told her he had his phone taken away for that duration. This is the first time since that Chelsea responds readily and consistently since that excuse and apology.
The bus turns the corner of the street. Mariana has started to remind Xavier to call home if he has any kind of incident and Xavier immediately begins to wheel toward the curb, relieved to escape. The bus pulls up and the driver opens the double doors.

“You, uh, Xavier Travers?” is all the greeting Xavier receives.

“Yeah.”

“Sorry, kid. There’s no room.”

“Wha- What do you mean there’s no room?”

“When they told me you were joining the route, they didn’t tell me you had a chair,” the bus driver gestures as he speaks, first to Xavier, then to the back of the bus. “I only got room for one chair, and it’s already taken.”

The bus driver, an obese, middle-aged man in a simple uniform, offers an expression with pursed lips that conveys some unspoken apology.

“So how am I getting to school?”

“I can call in to have someone else pick you up,” the driver offers with a shrug, checking his watch despite having a digital clock on the dash, “But it would take about 30 minutes.”

“That’ll make me late,” Xavier offers meekly. The sense of dread has long-since reached his fingertips from his head.

“Sorry, kid,” the driver says now, matter-of-fact, with all the reconciliatory energy of an employee not willing or able to budge on protocol. “Call the school and let them know. They’ll figure it out.”

As the doors close, Mariana appears behind Xavier.
“Xavier, what happened? Why they didn’t let you on the bus?” Parental indignation is already seeping into her voice.

“There’s no room,” he replies, wheeling off the asphalt and onto the sidewalk proper.

“What do you mean there’s no room?” The answer has kicked her voice up another octave. “I-I- I can’t believe this! Those- those...”

Xavier is several feet down the sidewalk before long.

“Xavier, where are you going?” She is still processing the bus interaction when she realizes he is a full house away.

“I’m going to school,” Xavier says, barely audible from that distance and still not stopping.

“Xavier, don’t be ridiculous,” Mariana says as she starts after him, “I’m taking you to school.”

“I’m just gonna go, Mom.”

Mariana catches up to Xavier, takes the wheelchair by the wheels, and turns him around. Xavier yanks his hands from the wheels, friction burned from trying to push the wheels against the force Mariana exerts on it suddenly.

“OW! Mom, what the hell? Quit it!”

“Calmate, Xavier, I take you to school and then I give the bus driver a piece of my mind.”

“Mom, no!” Xavier brings his palms to his face, “God, can you not embarrass me on the first day?”
“Okay, listen,” Mariana says sternly, almost quietly, stopping the cart and bringing her face to Xavier’s, “I have had it. I have fucking had it, do you hear me?

“This has not been easy for anyone, Xavier, okay? You think I enjoy your time in the hospital? You need to stop thinking about yourself for a second, and…”

“Hey, is everything okay out here?” Hank shouts from the threshold of the front door.

“Bring me the keys!” Mariana turns and stares daggers at Hank. Hank’s smile vanishes, and he retreats into the house without a word. Mariana turns back around and starts wheeling the chair toward the driveway. Where the sedan once rested in between trips to the gym, an SUV has now taken up residence. Nobody said anything to Xavier about it. It would be a total surprise, save for the fact that Xavier overheard Hank bemoan the loss of his treasured Benz.

Now, Hank steps out with the remote fob, unlocking it himself before handing the keys to Mariana.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take him?”

“No.”

Knowing the stern yelling that is coming next, Xavier almost wishes Hank was the one taking him to school. Worst he could expect then are uncomfortable jokes and even more uncomfortable silence. Xavier goes to pull the back seat door open and sees a strap hanging low across the entry—seems they must have done some research on making it somewhat more accessible. Both sit in the car wordlessly.

“Mom, I…”
“Don’t say nothing, Xavier.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” she says almost a minute later.

~

Xavier wheels into the classroom, and it seems like class is already in session. The teacher stops her demonstration of a math formula to address the class.

“Okay everyone, we have a new student starting today. Can you tell us your name?”

Still looking around for somewhere to sit, Xavier’s eyes flickers with realization as he turns back toward her.

“Oh, umm... Yeah, my name is Xavier Travers. My family moved to town two months ago and I—"

“Thank you, Xavier. You can go ahead and pick out a desk.” Xavier scans the seats as everyone stares his way. He frowns.

“Oh, silly me. I’m sorry, that’s my mistake,” she says, the recognition of her insensitivity raising her voice an octave, “Here, why don’t you use this?” She asks without asking, and gestures to a long table, adjacent to the teacher’s desk.

“Pull out your textbook and join us on page 41, Mr. Travers.” Xavier takes this seat. He begins to skim to the page, and glances up. Several people are looking his way, and Xavier hears whispering. “Everybody, be quiet now. Save it for after class, people!”
Xavier shoves his face into his book. Whenever he decides to look toward his classmates, he catches some of them staring. He rubs his thigh with his hand, but still feels no sensation beyond something like ants wherever his hand rubs. Xavier slouches in his chair, as Mariana’s voice echoes in his mind; this hasn’t been easy for anyone...

stop thinking about yourself.

The bell rings, and jars Xavier out of his daydream. As the class empties of people, Xavier gathers his things slowly. He eyes the crowd, waiting for it to thin out so he can leave without bumping into anyone. He begins to leave the classroom.

“Enjoy your day, Mr. Travers!”

Thanks,” comes the surprised reply, “Ms.... Um...”

“I suppose I forgot to introduce myself. Mrs. Hirsch.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Hirsch.” Hirsch smiles at Xavier as he leaves the classroom. The hallways are still full of students going from one class to the next. Xavier struggles to get by. Sounds of people crying out follow Xavier as he inadvertently bumps into people or runs over their feet. Xavier, head still reeling from his interaction with Hirsch, keeps his head down as people continue to ignore him. He tries going faster to get out of the crowds. He turns a corner sharply.

“OW, you’ve struck me in my gluteal region!”

“Oh, sorry. I- wait, you’re what?”

“My gluteal region, is your hearing impaired? I— Oh. Well, not hearing impaired, I guess.”
“Yeah, no, um,” Xavier looks down at his chair and then back up, beginning to explain himself but seeing that the lanky, pock-marked face that Xavier recognizes from the class that just let out as already turned and started to walk away. Not much for introductions around here.

~

His second day at his new school, Xavier is waiting in the classroom as the bell rings to dismiss everyone for lunch. He has not yet become accustomed to his wheelchair in confined spaces, so he waits for the crowd to disperse before trying to leave. Someone makes eye contact and looks away as Xavier tries to smile. Public schools in the area seem to be built with same airy biscuit panels which line the ceiling. That is to say, the beige and brown which is only lightly mitigated in its visual torpor by a mild reprieve of pastel blue, seems to have been bleached by sun and superintendent of anything vaguely resembling inspiration.

Put a small hand to the walls running the lengths of path to construct a hallway, a path about 25 feet wide but with a square of dirt and obscenely uniform concrete slabs in its center which, on paper, would be called a basin and benches. Fingers feel the bite of the wall—Xavier is never sure if that is stone or paint he feels—and it is almost like the cement floor attempts to rise up, consuming the building before gravity and ossification render it inert so that it must once again sag.

Xavier pulls along the chair as close to the walls as possible, careful not to glance it with an elbow, yet cautious to avoid bumping into or obstructing others. He fancies himself an obstruction.
Between two squares exists a kind of flow separation; traffic on one side pours toward the cafeteria while students on the other are leaving toward grass fields and open air. In this median strip, Xavier waits out the crowds until it thins out enough for him to get through effectively: he has to allow himself space to make the turn and roll into the door head-on.

The door itself stands totally apart from the rest of the school’s design. Despite a couple knocks betraying that it is actually hollow, it seems to be the single most dense and solid object on campus. The double-doors are a deep, royal blue. They are outlined by metal door frames. Few doors on campus are double doors like the cafeteria’s, which open outward to reveal the additional framework of a single metal bar—some rounded square metal beam—which matches the outline of true brown. Maybe the metal holds color better. Maybe the school needs to repaint frequently to mask the carved-in names of student after student, layered on top of one another like fossils. Maybe it’s the ruddy brown of rust which pimples the door frame where it has been scratched or peeled, exposing metal to the elements.

Xavier wonders fleetingly why the door seems so dense. Why is the metal handle on the exterior merely a handle, with only the push bar on one side making it possible to open one? The thought does not detain him for long. As he waits for an opening in the flow of bodies, gauging position to ensure he does not get stuck like that time at the grocery store, he does not look up at the hydraulic press mechanism. He does not know that the bar every student of public school would recognize is actually known as a panic bar. He does not know—how could he know?—that in the eyes of designers and staff,
the doors of a school are the singular bastion against intruders, dangers, and the unthinkable. As he glides through cautiously, mere door jams holding the double doors open, Xavier is at once safer and more exposed than ever. He is in an immensely large room, surrounded on all sides by his peers.

Before long, Xavier manages to jerk his chair into the next straight line, jamming his finger on a protruding bolt and saying nothing as he makes his way to the front, scans his ID, and throws the food in the trash can on his way out of the cafeteria. He does this to the tune of indiscreet whispers and over-exasperated sighs. Xavier cannot quite discern if the hitch in stride was someone’s foot under-wheel or a handle jammed into ribs. Maybe it was his own anxious flinching.

Past those double doors, artificial light dissolves into clear, bright sky. The glare is harsh after the purile cafeteria, which relies on askance reflections of pure sun to keep the area fully lit. In the outside world, rules are different. No walls or roof are in play to so much as suggest subconsciously the need for restraint. The numbers, the freedom, the youth—it all runs wild just beyond the heavy brown frame. It amounts to an attack on the senses akin to a flashbang. I jerk of the head as eyes pinch shut becomes the reason a handle of the chair strikes the locking mechanism on the vertical beam between both doors. The metal whirring of the spinning piece sounds as Xavier muscles through the frame. Metal on metal, door meant to deny entry now half-heartedly resisting exit.

Frustration mounts with every jerk and stop of the chair. Futility pushes tears forth, but shame holds and dams them back. Xavier casts a glance to his left, partly to
test his returning vision and part to make sure nobody has made eye contact. Right now, nothing would kill him more.

To the right, a trio of seemingly random shipping containers form an L shape between them. Beyond that, a fence, a field, and freedom. Without much of a chance to clear the fence in his current condition, Xavier opts to retreat to the seclusion of the storage containers, hoping against all hope that nobody will be lurking there.

Any person familiar with high school logistics and layout will be well aware that any secluded sector of an American public high school will produce nothing particularly appealing to the mainstream. Outcasts to the outskirts is the general rule of thumb. What Xavier works out quickly enough is that this section of the school lends itself to secrecy. For that reason, though he does not know it, the illicit smokers have come and gone, long ago ousted by administrators policing substance abuse with the motivation of an administration fresh off a scandal. Any potheads, nicotine fiends, and vapers have long ago retreated to the less-frequented bathrooms, the poorly supervised library, or generally leave campus at every opportunity. The neanderthals, barbarians, and thugs who took over were also quickly dispersed thereafter by security guards told to make a point of patrolling these crevices of the school, following repeated reports of underclassmen abuse. Then came and went the rebels, rockers, goths, and K-pop fans, all removed from that location by fate or progress.

Now, as Xavier pulls up and peeks around the corner to see if anyone is present, first one, then the whole group of five turn and notice him. Xavier takes in the scene: amongst ash marks, hair dye stains, and various other unsavory remnants, there rests
on a small table a game board of some sort. Everyone has paper, drawn closely to their chests as if to withhold information. A beat strains between Xavier and these strangers as everyone is aware of one another. Xavier begins to open his mouth, to apologize for intruding and retreat somewhere further, where even the undesirables might not venture.

“Hi, what’s going on!” Xavier hears, without registering who says it.

“Oh, umm… Sorry, I—” Xavier is already retreating from his head from the corner he has just turned.

“Hey, I recognize you!”

“Wha—huh?” Xavier replies, pausing.

“Charlie, check it out!”

From behind a particularly tall sheet of paper, both a head and eyes rise together to figure what now holds the group’s attentions. The slender face is familiar to Xavier, yet he cannot figure where from.

“Hmm, yes, greetings outsider,” greets the almost-frail young man, who does not bother moving the hair from just above his eyes as he speaks, “Good tidings to you on this day, and welcome to our domain. Should you so wish, I would invite you to partake of all our world has to offer! I—”

He stops speaking, his chin lifting with the grandeur and gravitas of a character worlds away, and thus making eye contact now with Xavier. Recognition snaps him from the reverie.
“Oh-ho, gents, hold your steads, I daresay I recognize this traveler! What say you, sir, have you managed to find your bearings?”

Xavier can gather that he is being addressed. He even understands well enough the question, yet he doesn’t.

“Huh” is all he musters to say before the apparently rhetorical question gets its follow-up.

“You see, my compatriots, this is the wandering oaf who struck me in the gluteal area,” Charlie continues, “and rendered me unable to properly take my short rests for nigh a fortnight.” His head still tilts back, so that when he levies a finger at Xavier, both it and his chin point accusatorily.

The accusation kickstarts Xavier’s memory, and his eyebrows raise as he catches on.

“Oh, yeah, I—” Xavier starts, now fully rolling out from behind the corner of the shipping container and into their full line of sight. In this way, he tries to explain to the others what Marv seems to be getting at. “Sorry about the—your gluteal… area.”

Marv’s sharp chin juts out with the clenching of his jaw, but his eyebrows seem to raise in acknowledgement, not acceptance, of the apology.

“Oh, dude, he’s in a wheelchair,” one of the group blurts, reaffirming what everyone’s eyes were all fully capable of registering, “Marv, you didn’t say he’s in a wheelchair!”

“What difference does it make, monk?”
“I mean, I figured it was some big-ass dude like Trevor Pico that gave you the *Charlie Horse*. How did Stephen Hawking manage to get you so hard? What did Charlie do to ya, Hawking? Did he mouth off at you?”

“What, no,” Xavier quickly lets out, surprised and scared at the implication that he struck anyone intentionally. “I was just lost, and I—”

“And what?” demands Charlie, whose partially covered eyes seem to burn with meaning.

“Aaand… I guess I just… lashed out?” Xavier speaks slowly, gauging the reaction to the words as they come, “I just shouted… and swung… I guess I got a bit stronger because of the wheelchair, and I just… hit you.” He pantomimes a jab timidly. A smile of approval glimmers on Marv’s lips.

“See! I told you all. He struck a mighty blow and I chanced upon its heavy impact, like lightning in a field. I only just managed to collect myself and arrive to Calculus. Charlie looks at them all, then back to Xavier, and finally back on his large documents. Everyone else exchanges looks of general satisfaction with the interaction and returns to the game at hand. Xavier can only look on, dazed at the interaction.

“Well, dear traveler, weak and world-weary as you seem, please find repose amongst our group! Join me, Dungeon Master Charlemagne of Conquest, as we resume our journey,” Charlie leads, complete with theatrical hand flourishes that, because of the prolonged eye contact, Xavier takes to mean as an invitation for him directly. “Now, last we rejoined, our small caravan of adventurers encountered a sword mimic…”
Xavier sits and watches for the duration of the lunch period. Before the bell rings, somebody’s phone starts to buzz and chime and this seems to cue everyone to pack up. A minute later, the bell rings for the end of lunch and everyone is mostly packed up. Xavier is somehow both mystified and mortified at the familiarity they all have with this routine.

As Charlie seems to wait for everyone else to be cleaned up before the folds the legs of the table before folding the table itself in half and sliding it into the perfectly sized crevice at the bottom of the shipping container next to them. As he looks up and sees Xavier continuing to sit there without moving, Charlie smiles, stands up with a self-dusting motion, and shoulders his bag.

“We have come to make good use of our resources here. A well-oiled machine makes for successful voyages. Feel free to reunite with us tomorrow! I am contemplating introducing a vortex warp to the party’s repertoire,” Charlie says, leaning in to say the last bit like a secret both will keep.

“What, to play?”

“Ho, ho! Have you journeyed these Nine Realms before?”

“No, I haven’t played this whatever before.” Xavier somehow feels ashamed that he is only guessing at what he thinks Charlie is saying to him.

“Oh, not but a season’d adventurer would fare well in the vortex realm. Please, kind sir, I would invite your audience first. Only after you’ve witnessed and apprenticed would I advise braving the dangers of this world.”

“I should just watch?”
“Yes, I should hazard to say so. Your naiveté may prove more hindrance than help and I must advocate for the wellness of the whole of the party.”

“Um, sure. Tomorrow? At lunch?”

“Indeed, good sir. That will be the designated hour for our reconvene.”

“Yeah, okay,” Xavier shrugs, not mentioning he would be altogether lost for what to do during this free time otherwise. Charlie starts to walk past Xavier toward class, and Xavier is rotating his chair to follow, when Xavier’s stomach makes a sizeable grumble.

“Good. Grief! Was that your gut, man?”

“Yeah, I haven’t eaten yet today. I got cafeteria lunch, but it… fell.”

“Likely for the best, I assure you.” Charlie pivots his oversized backpack onto a single shoulder, withdrawing a bag of chips and offering it to Xavier. Xavier happily accepts the offering with an enthusiastic thank you.

Charlie smiles and waves as he heads on his way. Xavier squeezes and mashes the bag in his hands, popping the bag open on one end as the chips snap and crack into crumb. He straightens one side of the bag, pouring the bits of salted potato into his mouth quickly. Presently, he puts the bag beside himself and begins to roll to class.

Turning the corner around one building, Xavier is directly face-to-chest with a bearded man in all-black business casual. Surprised, Xavier starts to apologize and starts to maneuver around him as Xavier now hurries to beat the late bell.

“Hi, are you Xavier by any chance?” comes the reply, surprisingly dulcet and excited for what seemed like a chance encounter.
“Uh, yeah?”

“Great, hi, I was hoping to catch you on your way to class! My name is Eli.”

“Nice to meet you,” Xavier says, though he is already turning his chair to keep going to class.

“Don’t worry about being late, I told Simmons I was going to catch you before you walked in so you might be a bit late.” This gives Xavier pause, so he takes his hands off the wheels and stops to actually listen. “I just wanted to introduce myself and let you know I’m around. Was hoping you’d come my way but you didn’t yet so I came your way instead. If you ever wanna chill and do lunch together, maybe meet up before or after school, I’ve got an office in the main… well, office.”

“Okay, thanks.”

There is expectancy in the man’s posture and cadence, like he was expecting a bit more than that in a reply. Then, he catches himself.

“Okay, cool. Well, feel free to stop by,” Eli says, starting to step away now, “Appointment or walk-in, whatever’s fine. Be seeing ya!”

Xavier smiles and nods a wordless goodbye, then rolls into class a second after the late bell rings.

“You’re late, Mr. Xavier.”

“Oh, sorry Mr. Simmons, I was—”

“Don’t let it happen again.”

~
Xavier is unfamiliar with the mechanics of the current role-playing game the group plays currently, but he catches on that the fantasy and roleplay aspects of their game is a significant part of the experience to everyone involved. For Charlie more so than anyone else. Still, Xavier looks around and cannot help but feel judgmental of everyone circled around the playing surface. While their physical appearances and hygiene are varying degrees of disagreeable, it is that Xavier notices that they all seem to wear or use name brands. Xavier wonders how much their ornate dice sets, figurines, and accessories cost. Still, Xavier thinks as the bell rings and everyone packs up at the end of lunch period, it is nice to be included in something.

Weeks pass at status quo. Xavier becomes familiar with his new friends and learns the rules and backstory to the games they play. After listening for a couple sessions, Xavier’s character, Ojole, is woven into the story. Marvin “Marvolo” Sumpin coaches Xavier on how to operate the rules and improvise for everyone’s benefit.

Xavier speaks with his mother during a session of physical therapy. She puts the idea in his head to about looking into his former classmates. Xavier suffers a setback during rehab. He is denied the transition from wheelchair to crutches. Xavier sees the wheelchair and his situation as increasingly embarrassing, particularly as he thinks about the fact that he wanted to reach out to people he used to know while feeling confident about his progress.

The following day, Xavier lashes out at his friends as they attempt to introduce him to Magic The Gathering, implying he would be too cool for them if he weren’t in a wheelchair. Nobody reacts angrily in turn, some look somewhat despondent. Charlie
just tells Xavier to leave if he feels that way, remarking that Xavier is not the first person to think he’s better than them.

The next day, Xavier decides to visit Eli on a whim rather than see his friends, who he assumes are mad at him. Despite the mild weather outside, the office feels freezing cold. The guidance counselor vindicates Xavier, adding fuel to his indignation and frustrations. Xavier agrees to return for further counseling sessions.

Mariana sits Xavier down to tell him that she is happy he has not let everything going on affect school. Xavier chooses not to mention that he has managed to get by with minimal effort and what he believes to be pity on the part of his teachers. Xavier gets on his phone to send a text to Chelsea, and thank her for the flowers he found by his hospital bed with her name on them. He apologizes for lying earlier about why he did not reply for a couple weeks. She shrugs off the comments and lies that she did not have anything to do with them. Hurt and embarrassed by her response, Xavier ends the conversation abruptly and logs off.

The next day, speaking to the counselor, Xavier vents about the fact that nobody seems to like him: friends don’t want anything to do with him, his parents are too busy with their own issues or too guilty to feel like they are actually interested in Xavier’s life, and he has no romantic prospects because of his physical situation. Eli asks increasingly probing questions about Xavier’s upbringing: the fact that Xavier lost his father in a car accident, that Xavier dealt with bullying all throughout school to the point of considering suicide. Xavier asks how Eli knows all of this and he brandishes a thin manilla envelope, saying he’s been reading up on Xavier’s case file. When asked about
any religion practiced at home, Xavier just shrugs. In name only. Just like everyone else. Eli begins to broach the subject of giving in to a higher power, but Xavier becomes uncomfortable and leaves.

As he leaves, Xavier hears behind him that he is way more likely to regret doing nothing than doing something and having it turn out wrong. Mariana lets slip indirectly, on the drive home, that the costs of his care were a concern. It prompted Mariana to go back to working, which she only does while he’s at school because she still wants to be with him at home in case something happens. Xavier feels guilty that his injury holds others back as well.

At home that evening, Xavier decides to take heed of the counselor’s advice and reaches out to Chelsea again, to say that he wants to meet up in person to catch up. Chelsea declines. Xavier feels cold and shaky at the words on the screen when the dots appear on the screen. Then, another text bubble pops up and Chelsea asks if they can still keep talking via message. Xavier agrees, clinging to optimism. They message back and forth for nearly two hours. Xavier plays youtube videos in the background so that nobody will wonder what he is doing. Eventually, they agree to talk later. After ignoring it for several days, Xavier decides to open the ongoing group chat from the friends he has been ignoring for the past few days. Without reading any other messages, he drops in to apologize for what he said and for not stopping by for the past few days. Xavier asks if he can join them tomorrow at lunch. When there are no replies after a few minutes, Xavier starts to read some of the earlier messages he hadn’t read for fear that they would be angrily aimed at him. The last message from the group is the night after his
outburst. He sees that someone typed out a long message that read one of the group was institutionalized because they were caught by their mother preparing to commit suicide. Xavier reads it over and over as the screen blurs before him. The dizziness and distorted vision come and go. He eventually goes to his room to avoid being seen in that state, and falls asleep bawling. It’s the closest he’s been to a superstate-episode since the incident with Russel.

Xavier does not say anything to anyone, is in a fugue state through all his classes. At lunch, Xavier heads straight to the usual meet-up spot. When he turns the corner and they all see him, their collective gaze is initially full of anger. Xavier immediately begins to tear up all over again, but before he can say anything, Charlie has appeared behind him with some cafeteria food in-hand. He places his free hand on Xavier’s shoulder, asking if Xavier’s come to his senses. Xavier smiles but begins to tear up. Without waiting for him to speak, Charlie says the gang misses him and he’s welcome to rejoin.

With things seemingly improving, Xavier no-shows an appointment with his counselor and begins to get wrapped up in the daily interactions with his friends before going home to chat with Chelsea. He notices that she writes back erratically, and tries to not feel put off by it. One day, Xavier receives a text from an unknown number, which reads only “If you only knew the truth about her.”

Xavier starts to over-analyze his conversations with Chelsea, trying to find a pattern or reason for the fact that she will disappear from the conversation for as much as hours at a time. When Xavier falls asleep waiting for a message, only for the
notification sound to wake him to the sight of the phone dying, he decides to quietly go into the living room to use the family computer to reply because he can pull up the messaging app that way. This time, Mariana’s username registering as the last one logged in on a social media platform catches and holds Xavier’s attention. “If you only knew the truth about her.” Xavier clicks log in and the password auto-populates.

When the homepage loads, the newsfeed is largely family that Xavier has had no interaction with in years. Opening the messages, Xavier scrolls past Mariana’s conversations with Xavier, Hank, one of Xavier's Aunts, a chat titled “Widow Support Group,” and then Xavier sees his dad’s name. Gulping back fear, Xavier opens the conversation. The few most recent exchanges appear on the screen. Their gist is that Xavier’s father caught Mariana and Hank together. The exchange is dated for the last day that Xavier’s father was alive.

Chelsea reaches out the next morning to ask Xavier if he is interested in visiting her that weekend. Still in shock, Xavier simply replies “ok.” He says next to nothing leading up to that day. Xavier cannot stomach the idea of being stuck in a car with either of the adults who could take him to the address Chelsea provided, so he conspires to get a ride to Charlie’s house and they both get a ride from Charlie’s mother. Once at Charlie’s house, the boys give the address for the destination 35 minutes away and Charlie’s mother decides that she does not want to drive that far. She gives Charlie her credit card for incidentals, so get an Uber and go to Xavier’s hometown.

“I’m not so sure about this, man.”
Charlie rolls his eyes, adding “We’ve come thus far! No reason to quit now!” before he goes up the driveway. Unable to catch him, Xavier can only watch as Charlie knocks on the front door for him and then backs away from the door.

“Charlie,” Xavier, pulling up to the steps to the porch by this point, says expectantly. Charlie pauses before relenting wordlessly, then walks down the driveway and out of the line of sight, though not quite out of earshot.

Xavier looks on ahead, hopeful, yet somehow wishing nobody would answer the door. Heartbeat quickens in his chest, then nearly explodes when the door clicks, then creaks open. None other than Chelsea’s head appears in the space made by the partly open door, giving Xavier no option but to proceed.

There is recognition in her eyes, though it manifests slowly and in the wake of a sweeping glance to take him all in. He unconsciously wheels himself forward a few inches, bumping into the steps. He registers this action and becomes acutely aware of the chair. He feels so short in it all of a sudden, and it takes everything inside him not to try to force himself to stand up, because he knows it will only humiliate him further when he inevitably falls back down.

“H- Hi, Chelsea,” he starts weakly with a small hand gesture of salutation, “Hey, it’s me.”

“Uhm, hi Xavier, I—” Chelsea starts to say as she full opens the door to step out on the porch. She closes the door just enough to keep anyone from looking in without having to make a sound. “I wasn’t expecting you – I mean, you look different.”
Save for the wheelchair, Xavier does not think he looks any different than the last
day of middle school. The obvious exception being his current state. Chelsea, however,
looks almost entirely different. Where he had once only ever known her to dress in over-
sized and baggy layers, she was now wearing a form-fitting top and jeans. It occurs to
Xavier that she may have had the curves he sees now all along. He struggles to come
up with words.

“Yeah, sorry,” Xavier mutters, “I… You, you’re wearing make-up now?” The
observation is made without thinking or, rather, like Xavier is merely registering and
processing out loud.

Chelsea is wearing stark-red lipstick and eyeshadow with unmissably large black
eyelashes. Her dark hair is now an incrementally darker shade, nearly pitch black but
tinted with blue and almost all of it done up except for the flat stroke of bangs which
obscure sharp eyebrows. Only her left wrist is adorned with jewelry, though it is a
conglomerate of several bracelets going almost halfway up her forearm.

“Yeah,” is her response as she mirrors his looking away and reaches for her hair.
They both fear the other’s gaze, but do not realize.

Chelsea’s change in appearance mirrors the change she made years ago, opting
to stop having anything to do with bright or warm colors in favor of dark and stifling
hues. When Xavier turns up that Friday afternoon after their fifth grade class lets out,
and he stops by because she never showed for the usual game of kickball and doomed
Xavier to retreat into the outfield without anyone to talk to, he simply strolls into her
backyard. They are close like that. She is draped in a sweater that could belong to her dad it is so big.

“Your clothes look too big,” Xavier observes simply.

“Yeah,” she offers at the time. Xavier does not press the issue at the time, because she is clearly recovering after crying. He does not bring it back up when she continues dressing that way, and that proves to be the beginning of the quiet rift between them.

Here, again, she gives the answer of acknowledgement which stonewalls any explanation. She leans back on the doorframe as they both writhe in the agony of quiet.

“I brought you flowers,” Xavier finally manages. He withdraws them from the back of the chair.

“Wha”

“They’re from my mom,” Xavier adds quickly, smirking.

“Oh, my god,” Chelsea replies, visibly relieved. “Well… tell her I say thanks.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Are you-?”

Looking behind her, as if suddenly aware of danger, Chelsea says “hey um, Xavier, do you have, like, is that your car or something?”

Just like he did years ago, Xavier feels stonewalled in the presence of this young girl, who he imagines looking on at him unapologetically. This perceived steel gaze whittles him down.

“Yeaahh, it’s an Uber. I-”
“Who the hell’s at the door?” an adult male’s voice booms behind the door, somewhere unseen in the house. This seems to wake them both up as Chelsea closes the door quickly and moves across the porch.

“Hey, you wanna get outta here?” she asks, suddenly urgent, already beginning descending the two steps to where Xavier is seated.

“Hi, Chelsea!” Charlie’s voice cracks through the silence, as he pops into view.

“Oh, hi!” Chelsea is taken aback, though she doesn’t stop moving as she starts to descend the steps.

Charlie grabs hold of Xavier’s wheelchair as Xavier offers up the quick introduction. Very soon, they’re piling back into the Uber.

As they’re leaving, Xavier glances backward and sees a man step out onto the porch with a bottle of alcohol, stooping down and then straightening up to light a cigarette.

Once dropped off at the movie theater, Chelsea sees Xavier get into the wheelchair and seems to come out of the fugue state of her situation. They agree to skip the movie for Xavier’s sake and end up eating burgers at an outdoor dining area next to the theater. Xavier asks to get a sec, then goes into the theater. He re-emerges as the other two are sitting at a table outside with a bag of skittles. He looks meaningfully at Chelsea, but she simply seems confused and says she doesn’t like the candy.
Each takes turns asking a probing question and, after the sense they are all their own version of teen fugitive that day, they decide to confide in one another. Charlie admits to hating his privileged life, which left him isolated until he started an impromptu group of fantasy roleplayers at school. Charlie had tried to start a similar group in middle school and someone attempted to prank them by dropping fireworks from above as they met underneath a set of bleacher seats. When he attempted to put out the fire, Charlie suffered second degree burns across his body and missed graduation. Chelsea confesses to being in and out of foster care, though she is currently back at home with her abusive father and father’s girlfriend. Xavier tells them what he just learned about his parents. Tapping his wheelchair, he then says “And then there’s this piece of shit.” They are surprised when they check the time after noticing the sun has set. In the car ride home, Xavier and Chelsea are once again in the back seat while Charlie is in the passenger seat. She puts her head on Xavier’s shoulder as they approach her house. She wonders out loud if she really has to go home. If there is somewhere else she can go, someone else she can stay with. Xavier wants to invite her to go with him, or to stay with Charlie and his family. When he hesitates, she meets his eyes and pulls back. She gets out of the car in front of her home without saying a word. She does not go in as they pull away, and Xavier sees the golden brown and balding lawn has accumulated white and red cans that reflect the headlights of the car as they pull away.

The next day is Sunday, so Xavier is still at home when he gets several messages. Charlie is distraught because he is grounded for the excessive spending the day prior and his “toys” get thrown out. Chelsea sends cryptic messages about
understanding where they stand and trying to figure things out and wondering what anybody sees in her. Absorbed in these conversations, when Xavier is asked by Hank about what he got up to the day before and Xavier snaps back seemingly disproportionately after having been so quiet around the house for the past week, Mariana tells Xavier she is going to take his phone away. Xavier explodes, saying that Mariana already took his father away because she is the reason he is gone and the reason for everything wrong in Xavier’s life. Xavier hears Mariana and Hank lash out at one another in the living room after he retreats into his room. Hank leaves, the slam of the door being the last sound made in the house that day.

Xavier skips school the next day, largely because he does not want to ask or be asked about getting a ride. His friends stop responding, each seemingly wrapped up in their own situations. Xavier feels bleak, angry, hopeless. The knock on the door in the early afternoon is a surprise. Xavier figures it is Hank, who left without his keys. Ready to lay into him, to tell him to leave them alone, Xavier opens the door and Eli is standing there.
“Hi Xavier, how are you today,” Eli smiles out, like he’s not really expecting an answer, “Anybody home? I mean, besides you I guess right?” The same chesty, honey-soaked chuckle fills space on that small, plant covered patio.

No. Even though eye contact is usually hard, it feels weird to look at anything other than Eli’s eyes. The easy stance and grin—are his teeth whiter than usual?—it’s like he has a magnet for a face. What’s going on?

“Oh, I’m just here to see how you’re doing! Is everything okay, are you okay? Do you feel sick or unwell?”

No. I mean, yeah.

The grin deepens, like maybe Eli’s waiting for the pretense to fall away.

I mean, everything is kinda falling apart.

“I thought things were going great at school.”

School’s fine.

“Is it your friends? Or is it Chelsea?”

No, it’s… it’s my mom. It’s family stuff.

A knowing nod. Then, Eli asks, “Do you want me to fix it?” and it is such a weird response that the raised eyebrows are met with an understanding look.

Counselor says, “I can fix all this, Xavier. Do you mind if I come in?”

What do you mean you can fix it?
“I'll show you. It's all really easy. Can I come in?”

Eyes start to twitch and burn, like a windy dust has started running through the air. Hands, palms, come up to grind against eyes and rub out whatever irritant is at work, and a slight groan escapes from throat, when the nausea hits. It is a swell first, a lurch forward, then it recedes and right shoulder finds the door frame to help balance. Knees bend and only barely don't buckle. The impetus comes to try to force burning eyes open, for that sense of vision to restore balance and stability. Hunched over, already feeling the back-of-the-throat acidity of vomit creeping and building and punching, eyes peel open and come within inches of one of several potted plants. The leaves of this fern look sunbleached, even though they sit in the shade by the front door.

_Ugh._

“Xavier, can I please come in?”

_Wha-_ 

“I can fix this all. I can fix everything, Xavier. Let me in, and you can see the truth.”

Through squinted eyes, you look up. It must be the hallucinations again. Where everything always looks blurry or faded or grey, Mr. Eli looks stark white. Almost radiant. Leaning more heavily on the door frame, and a lurching weight seeping into bone, the overwhelming urge to fall into sleep careens in and out of focus like it’s swinging in a circle by a rope. But more than rest or relief, or Chelsea or friends, the buzzing, near-electric thought at the front of the mind is _what happened to Eli, why does he look like our china plates, what is going on?_
Uh, yeah. Yeah, come in. Please help me.

You’re sat there. The give of the bed, its lack of bounce somehow a source of insecurity. Even as you look across the small foyer-turned-guestroom, into unfamiliar eyes on a familiar face, the perch from a lawn chair in the corner feels like it towers over the full room. It pulls focus. It weighs down, tilts the axis of the room. It’s a black hole. Anxiety has never been much of a problem. Now, though, you find yourself fidgeting, hands rubbing together. When you catch them, pull them your sides, they quickly find their way to your mouth. The room has been silent for an eternity. You bite your nails, bite to the quick, pull at whatever skin protrudes. It fills the quiet, feeds it. It warps, bleeding the black hole.

He used to have hazel eyes. You knew that much, not that they ever really drew attention. Rich, warm, an invitation of normalcy and simplicity. You haven’t made eye contact since he walked in. As he stepped out of the sunlight of the backed-clay-colored patio, you saw the change. You’re sure. The change in his eyes.

Maybe it was a mistake. A hallucination, maybe. Maybe this, maybe. Maybe. Silence is unnatural.

It is forced, a suppression. Noise, entropy. Why are you shaking?

Quiet is the absence of noise. Silence is the desire to speak, damned. Dammed behind fear. Fear to speak something in existence. Fear to affirm, to materialize.
Remember that night? You were maybe seven when it happened and you didn’t know better so when a tree broke in the wind outside and a passerby cast a shadow onto a wall and a door creaked somewhere in the house, fear cocooned you in a blanket.

Fear that, if you look up or dare ask your question, the truth has to be confronted. The truth that your eyes looked into blank eyes. Pupil-less, iris-less. The eyes of a specter. Silence is hoping that you won’t look up, won’t meet the soft-smiled gaze that has been held steadily from the corner, and be met with emptiness.

You remember Abuela Mimi’s words better than you remember her. Like you could have heard these words second-hand. They stuck with you like a cousin’s bad taste in clothes or an uncle’s sloppy drinking – a character quirk, used as reference so your mom could identify someone at dinner. “Tio Benny who always ends up getting carried out of parties because he passed out drunk.” It is more like affectionate memory somehow detached from reality, and accompanied other comments that you might want to re-visit in hindsight. Comments like “don’t despair at night, if you aren’t going to rejoice in the day,” or “the fruit of a neighbor’s land is sweetened with community.” In this moment, the disembodied saying rings truer, louder – deafening. It was what Mimi said as she slid the bundle of money into your palm, almost pushing it into the seam where hand starts to become thumb. One saying puts a shudder in your spine:

Don't welcome evil into your home.

“So, Xavier, are you ever going to look at me?”
Your body, movement, will not stop. You wonder if he can see it, the involuntary convulsions in every muscle set, fully on edge. Every physical nerve is pushed on your body, triggering psychosis. Hands tremble, feet twitch. Calves shudder. Shoulders spasm, lips flutter. Is that a breeze? There were no windows opened.

There’s definitely a Windstream. It is piercing. Teeth-chattering. Like a sinus headache, internally sharp. Like breathing, being alive starts to feel acutely painful.

It is coming from him. It has to be. Eyes are darting, pupils like a ball on a half-pipe. Left-down-right-down. You can’t look up, there is something happening and you let evil in but if you don’t acknowledge it and say nothing and wait it out, then evil may give up and leave and you can say that evil never existed in the first place because evil footprints are made in sand. Written in water.

“Look at me.”

You look.

You look, and you lose. You pulled back the blankets in your bedroom alone in the night and Evil makes contact and Evil is real, so real. You look and you’ll never be able to say you didn’t look.

Tears well up, even as your hands go clammy, the warmth of these tears brimming flushes your face. Where did these tears come from? Not from sadness. Can tears be a reflex?

“I’m here… I’m here. For. You. To find out if you are ready.
Ready to stop hurting."

You’re stuck now. This faze. Your body forgets itself, everything devoid of movement. Eyes are fused to a face that rapidly loses its color. Any impression of blush, any clue that blood flows beneath the skin of his façade, is gone. The cheeks have sunken, cheekbones sharpened. He could be porcelain.

He could be dead. That would be so nice.

But his coldness has breath.

He could be a replica, an imitation of a man. Does he bleed? Is he bleeding? Is there a dark red puddling at his feet? Is this red?

Eyes burn and eye lids flicker but will not close – is this real, is this really him and did color ever really exist or are your eyes finally opening to truth that looks like a bad anaglyph 3D effect before blurring out of existence.

Is this what you brought on yourself, is this your fault?

When did you agree to this and not realize it?

“Just…” he cuts in, a sharp cut of meaning in the middle of a cloud, “Ask your question.”

“Question.” “Question.” The idea is tangible, you cling to it.

The pit in your throat hurts to swallow but you do, you do because you need this question to stay alive, to not be consumed: “What’s going to happen?”

“Before I can tell you, you…”
The pause, the facial ticks, everything clings to time like honey and drips from it until you wonder when time will finally run out of itself.

“… need to tell me you’re ready.”

~

Having never been under before, you wonder if that’s what the sensation is like. Mental electricity stunted by rubber limbs, with nowhere to go. The brain pleads with itself, bleeding perception into reality. The brain is chewing gum connected to a car battery, but it guesses stimuli into being. It presumes pattern until pattern becomes.

~

“Ready?” Have you ever seen him smile before? He smiles at your question, the straight whiteness of his teeth distracting. Focal. Where they always this sharply white.

“Are you ready? Are. You. Ready? For it to stop, for the pain to stop, for the troubles and worries and problems,” every word emanates from within your head, radiating outward like detonation, “And the pain to stop, you see… it is me. I am the one you’ve been speaking to, I know. I know you have been wondering.

You don’t respond, you don’t dare respond.

“I know you aren’t sire if I’m the same friend the same confidant you know. It’s me! But I’m done listening, I’m done suggesting. I am here to fix, to heal and destroy, to end the pain, but you? Are you… finally… ready?”

I…

“No, I’m not here to answer your questions!
We are here to act, you either trust me or you don’t, so answer me: yes or no.

Are you ready to end the suffering?”

Everything is light here.

You die for the first time. It is excruciating and slow. The first time is the hardest.

You die again. Quick. The next two are as well. The idea now is to get you used to it.

The torture is beyond comprehension. Soon, it becomes less about dying. It becomes more about killing yourself.

~

Xavier is picked up out of the car by Hank, who places him in a wheelchair.

“Y’know, you don’t have to do that Hank.”

Hank looks up, registering, but then looks back down. “Don’t mention it. It- It’s the least I can do, after... after—”

“Hank. Don’t do that,” Mariana chimes from the other side of the car.

“Hey,” Hank replies, perking up some, “Take a look at what we did while you were gone, Zay!” Where there were once stairs, a makeshift wheelchair ramp now leads to the garage door. The wood looks warped, and seems to generally consist of a large piece of plywood resting on increasingly larger blocks of wood.

“Wow, Hank,” comes the weak reply.

“I told you,” comments Mariana with her back to them as she walks to the front door.
“I know it’s not much. The one we ordered is supposed to be here in a couple days.” Hank looks at Mariana, who stands still in the threshold, not yet stepping inside. She turns and they make eye contact, before she goes back inside. Xavier notices and looks at Hank.

“Y- y’know, Zay. It’s the funniest thing. We completely forgot about setting the house up for, well, for you, and…” Hank stares at the door as he speaks. Xavier begins to wheel himself over to the ramp. “Now, now! C’mon, lemme help ya,” Hank urges, taking the wheelchair by the back two handles and almost catching Xavier’s fingers in the wheels.

“Hank… you don’t have to…” Hank ignores Xavier’s protests and pushes him up the ramp. They both hear a crack of splintering wood as Hank pushes Xavier into the house.

“Hey, so we made some food, Zay, if you want to join us.” Xavier is wheeling himself down the hallway when he hears this from the dining table.

“That’s okay. I’m just going to my room.”

“Aww, c’mon,” Hank complains, “Your mom made your favorites since you were coming back today, and—”

“I’m not really hungry. I just…” he begins to turn away, “I miss my room. Y’know?” Stopping himself from saying something else, Hank mouths “yeah,” smiles.

“Yeah, okay.

“Xavier turns and heads to his room. The fit in the hallway is narrow. Xavier arrives at the door with a sign that says “Xavier,” and turns the knob. The door opens
outward, hits his chair, and shuts again. Xavier struggles to navigate his chair and the
doors. Mariana appears from around from the corner.

“Here, sweetie. Let me—” Xaviar manages to open the door and get inside
before she can finish.

“I’m fine.” Xavier slams the door on Mariana. She walks away, distraught. She
encounters Hank, who is rushing in their direction.

“I heard a door slam.” Mariana walks past him without a word. Hank stands in the
hallway. Mariana walks out of sight and Hank drops his head.

~

As pain becomes normalized, perception of reality becomes distorted.
You are malleable. Your humanity shrinks into non-existence.
You are no longer you, spit back into the world----a vessel of a lighter world.
You are your directive. Your end goal is unclear, superfluous.
Vaguely aware of threat, you operate both in shadow and light.
You compromise the objective, are punished severely. Sense of
meaninglessness creeps in.

Nausea sweeps like a wave overhead and settles into the skin in pinpricks. This
feels familiar but it takes a long time to place why. Rather than shrink, you cease
resistance. The nausea swallows your stomach, and you have an asthma attack while
you dry heave with no equilibrium. You let the cosmic groan of disgust claim you until
you make out the face of a child. It multiplies, and they surround you as you spiral like a
county fair ride in reverse. A booming voice speaks into a microphone with the distinctive echoing that makes speech unintelligible.

Recognition flickers for a moment, then becomes a streak of lightning. It pierces sideways, through the ear, and runs down until every nerve feels on fire. Every limb is a tunnel of light and billowing smoke. The laughter and commotion of children recedes and mingles with a sound like bacon cooking.

Frustrations peak through. Humanity bristles against you deep down.

~

Did Eli ever exist. He had to because bodies do not come from nothing and memories are only ever lost, but never found. The pain is gone. Go to touch your legs, to wonder how long they have been there and working just fine. Your hand finds no knee, finds no thigh, but you recognize that it is not the body failing to meet itself because the kinetic will of the brain never found a hand to touch the leg in the first place.

*Is this kinesis? To will, therefore to be? Or is it death blooming into life?*

~

We relive them—every minute of

Being hunted by both sides of larger war.

Wake up to darkness. Unsure of what is happening. Yells and screams abound but even open eyes produce only darkness. Ask if blindness has come, but the answer is only more pain. Ask where you are. The answer is pain. Ask why. Pain. The repetition
of the pain, the recurring feeling of death allowing passage from that reality only to
reenter it, like quicksand that deposits its victim into a desert, only to flood and re-
become quicksand. Even the pattern, the repetition, becomes solace. Attempts at
agency wane, seeking understanding is only punished. Progressively, submission
comes and a sense of the self falls away. Finally, the quicksand swallows. Where it
spits out is firm. Coolness and firmness, where the left side has made impact.
The warmth, after a time, vibrates through the universe, the sky. Delineation of self
comes slowly, the skin becoming a boundary in the way it extends to meet the
resistance of a gel cocoon. Initially rubbery, the cocoon is reacting to light, heat,
become leathery. Then stiffening, a paper mâché. Strength begins to resonate in the
flexion of woven body, as if a sedimentary rock was learning to bend and reach and
explore. Warmth comes in from the outside. Understanding comes in the absence of
what was once understood. Blood no longer moves, the inertia of entropy no longer
combative.

Commands are not verbal, not like human dialogue is verbal, in that it is an
exchange and suggestion and interpretation. Command is vibration, a morse code
which triggers like spasm and cuts out as soon as it can manifest. Command is absolute.

Command: Assimilate.

Command: Poison.

Command: Conquer.

Command: Destroy.
Command: Obey.

Thought: When did everything become so grey?

“Go! Go, get help!” is the reply, with along with a finger pointing in no particular direction but away. “Go get help!”

There was a time lapse because you recall once standing on two feet in fatigue. Now, though, you fade in and out of consciousness due to the medicine and procedures. You must have come to before leaving your body again. It rotted while it waited for you. Even through the clouds and amid disconnected server room intakes, through the mental haze where the computer feels waterlogged in a flooded home, words manifest like pinpricks and it registers as external.

Maybe that’s what did it. That’s what survived you through the process was the arguing between Hank and Mariana, was the knowledge that reality does exist. It manifests again.

“He’s hurt Hank! He doesn’t need to do anything that could hurt him more.”

“For God’s sake, Mariana! He’s been wasting away in that room for three weeks.”

“He’s recovering, Hank. From the injury that you—”

“His classes started two days ago. And don’t you blame me for what happened. I was trying to help! Trying to get him out of the house and making a change for the better.” This is the most sincere Xavier has ever heard Hank. None of that “nice guy” crap that he tries so much. You wish you could appreciate the gesture, though the honesty made him wince acutely.

“Who said we needed a change for the better?”
“Are you- Are you serious? You both spend all your time wishing for Ozzy to come back.” At these words, there is a rush like an exhale and the speaking bodies are replaced by a finger being wagged at this, maybe even pointing accusatorily. “Well, guess what. He’s not coming back. And the sooner you deal with that, the sooner Xavier can too.”

With an inhale, a hallway articulates into view and Mariana crosses her arms and looks away. She is on the verge of tears but the world feels wet like she cried over you until it water-boarded and gave pneumonia. Suddenly, as if their bodies could yell, the other bodies in the room sharpen into existence and you feel veins constrict in the face while reddening at the thought of them being familiar with his situation. You close your eyes and wish they would leave. You do not realize how unphased the neighbors are, so surrounded by life and death. So familiar is the turmoil that that struggle evokes.

“I know what he meant to you, Mariana,” Hank tries, softly and with an arm draped gently around her, “Believe me, I do. I know that I have to try to live up to who he was. For Zay's sake. But it's not fair to you both to lose your lives waiting for him.” Mariana shakes him off and walks away, a single tear betraying her as it falls. “Wait, Mariana!”

Xavier turns away from the door, staring at the curtain. Staring at nothing.

Finally, Xavier wakens feeling cogent for what seems like the first time. He is alone in the room. He feels confined and anxious. Pulling back the blanket off himself, Xavier sees that he is only wearing a hospital gown. Xavier lifts himself into a seated position. The sutures strain and Xavier groans. He reaches for the tray of food, and
picks up a plastic fork. It is unclear if minutes pass or hours. Believing that he should be okay to walk, Xavier attempts to sit up but the motions feel incongruous with his mental commands. Suddenly conscious of the catheter, Xavier is surprised when nothing happens as he attempts to cross his legs at the ankles. With his hand, he shakes and prods the foot.

Noticing an unopened tray of food with a plastic-wrapped set of disposable cutlery, Xavier groans to clumsily lift his left hand, clawing at the fork before securely gripping it and jabbing first his thigh. The fork falls from hand and the first impulse is to try again, to force the body awake with violence, but the fork falls closer to the feet and no amount of straining brings the hand closer to the prongs. Each effort feels like a tearing. Every effort is a dammed river after a rain. Every effort seeks to unwrite reality. Nurses enter the room, heart monitor signaling to them to dispel your distress. First, two come in, each plunging a needle into your arm. Arms and shoulders sag with each injection. You are filling with sand, quickly collapsing into earth. More nurses come, each brandishing a needle. Each injects haphazardly and you wonder how to you will retain the sand tumbling into you with this many holes in your arms.

The weight reaches your eyes and words escaped you the whole time they opened you up and rearranged your spine like modern art, but you scream now. You scream that you will lose the sand.

In recognition of self, the command becomes external. Its shiver is felt. Command: Obey. The command is, for the first time, urgent. Thought: this is a body.
Earth holds the foot and the fusion of pedestal to monument, connects to spine, brain, electric fusion becoming soul. Life. Alive.

The name Xavier returns.

It is a flash, a moment of recognition. Like a breeze blew back the curtain just enough. Just enough that you know the curtain is there: the image of Chelsea blinks into that of a stranger. A stranger you know beyond doubt is Aubrey Corlass-Jones, a dissident in his time. He is a trouble-maker but, more than that, he antagonizes. His face is palmed under right hand’s grip—palm covering mouth and the interdigital fold between middle and index fingers press against his nose. Right leg comes forward—it can come forward—as you push his face back and down.

Cognitive dissonance snaps psyche. As Aubrey’s skull collides with earth and stone, you feel a splitting along the back of your head. It’s as though you just watched yourself die. It is a bleeding in, and eyes-closed darkness starts fade to glowing womb red. Relational existence triggers identity. Disavowal of objective creates identity. Clarity comes slowly, disintegrating products of the light.

“You just can’t wait to do, can you.” The guttural tone is uncanny, but a grip emerges through void-space and drags your bodilessness closer to the humidity pluming from a mouthpiece. “It’s been years, child. That which bends will never know rest. That which breaks will be made whole.”

/I...

Wrong.
Nausea sweeps like a wave overhead and settles into the skin in pinpricks. This feels

As quickly as control is retaken, sight is restored. The powers of another entity leave the body: hivemindedness, self-restoration, self-sustenance, and the opportunity not to exist. The unseen war emerges to the eye, the crackling of color against a new-growth grey.

An angel appears. “Do not be afraid.”
Chapter 3: I Am

Xavier’s sense of self is fully restored as he speaks to the angel, as the full spectrum of fear and emotion gives him a physical reaction akin to fever. He vomits. The angel is a Biblical angel, floating between forms, full of eyes and limbs. It is utterly pitch black. The angel begins to speak. Xavier learns that he welcomed evil into himself. The absence of color, pure whiteness, has shattered Xavier’s psyche. He cannot restore himself to the lustre possible in humans, will always be like pencil against plastic. But Xavier can restore what he has done to the world.

He alone can tap into the absence of color in order to destroy its damage on the world.

The beautiful begins to look dull in Xavier’s eyes as he continues to attempt to look at the angel straight on. A prism of colors seem to pour from the edges of its form, bleeding into the earth. Xavier asks what can be done. The angel touches an appendage to Xavier’s lips.

The world opens, Xavier realizing he had been nowhere this whole time but is now standing on a mountain range. Xavier touches a hand to the earth, which feels hollow below. Eaten. Xavier knows this, just like he knows that these hills and curvatures belong to the Santo Domingo area. Baja California. That knowledge is in his body. Xavier knows that he has a ways to go before he’ll be back home.
Still, he has never been here. Why here? The tug of the homes, the concrete cinderblock walls. The pockets of community, of civilization and infrastructure built from the inside out.

Xavier wonders about his family, wonders how much time has passed. He wonders about the path ahead, about having to cross a border without documents or possessions. More than anything, he wonders about the visions, the vignettes he sees in the back of his eyes. Too fast to see. Too hard to know.

The pull to walk, to keep moving, it wanes. His pace slows and he begins to look around more. It’s been hours on foot before Xavier takes proper inventory. In particular, he notices he walks unwatched, unobserved. He walks to someone preparing food. He manages to get out “no dinero” and is greeted with a snide, dismissive gesture. Here, at least, there is anonymity.

Before anyone even bothers to stop him, Xavier steps into San Ysidro. Everything is familiar, similar, but strange. Uncanny. It’s been hours on foot. A café off the main highway, a brightly decorated bit of brick wedged between a gas station and a liquor store – sign over the door in Spanish just like every other on the block – seems the best place to take a seat, a moment.

Xavier sits at a table a forearm’s length across. A breath. Another, deeper. And, for the first time, almost like he only just learned how to, Xavier meditates. He crosses
his legs, feet resting on the chair, and closes his eyes. It's a switch, a portal. Closed
eyes see light, and a voice comes through clear as the day.

“Speak.”

“I – what, what is thi-”

“Don’t be afraid.”

“Please. I don’t know what’s happening. I’m scared.”

“You have returned. You have pulled yourself from condemnation.”

“I got out? I escaped the darkness?”

“No. You escaped the light.”

Visions flash. They strobe and pulse, quickly. Xavier winces, he sees executions.

Theft. Extortion. The gamut of atrocities flies by. It might as well be a business
slideshows.

Xavier gasps, falls out of the trance like leaping out of the deep end of a pool.

Someone, a young man with a half-apron at his waist, stands at the other side of the
table.

“Ey, no puede estarse aplastado si no va ordenar algo, for customer only!”

Xavier looks down apologetically. He reaches into his pockets, to pull out an
empty pocket in supplication, but his hand comes away with a wad of bills.

He registers the cash in his hand, then looks up again. The waiter, the sharply-
tan complexion bordered by almost-certainly painted facial hair, cannot disguise the
pointed surprise.

“Café, porfa.”
As the you man retreats inside, Xavier takes stock. Chambre jeans worn half to death, a black shirt with almost as much hole as fabric. Not the outfit worn minutes ago. Taking in the surroundings, even the mural at Xavier’s side has changed from a warm background behind a Lele doll to a gradient blue behind a Mayan sun.

“What is happening?” Xavier blurts aloud.

“You’re so stupid, kid. Do I need to spell it out like everything else?”

“Wha? Where?”

Unlike the peaceful voice, this one is familiar. The source is likewise not to be found.

“Where are you? Where am I?”

The coffee comes. The coffee goes. As soon as the breakfast burrito arrives at the table, hunger seems to rediscover Xavier just like everything else. By the time the waiter checks in with a “how’s everything,” Xavier is finishing the dish and asks for a plate of chilaquiles. The coffee is refilled for the fifth time by the time Xavier drops money on the table and goes to get back up.

With each bite, the brain fog lifts little by little – was I just hungry this whole time? – and I look up from my feet to see stacks of empty cups and coffee mugs and food plates. I can’t lie, I don’t remember ever ordering seconds, much less crushing them. There’s not even ketchup packets anywhere, even though I see smears of red on one of the plates. Don’t tell me I ate the ketchup packets too!

The waiter walks over and I think I register something about giving him too much money.
“Keep it.” I am waving him off as I try to stand. I’m probably holding this table hostage, I have to get going. But, as I lean on the table to hoist myself up onto my feet, my left knee just slightly buckles. Both feet burn some too, like I was walking on the sun recently.

The young man, immediately pocketing the two bills I gave him, does not hide his inquiring gaze either, but I cannot even really begin to wonder how I’m going to explain. “Tired. Ah, cansado.” Do I know Spanish? Does he?

“Hay un hotel dos negocios pa’alla.” He points. This seems to satisfy, because he grabs the stack of plates with his empty hand and hurriedly turns inside conclusively. He might have a better idea than I do that I’m trouble. I want to wait for him, to ask if he recognizes me, but something tells me he will be waiting until I’m gone to collect the rest of the dishes.

So, without much to go on but the vague directions to a motel, I figure the plan is to get a short rest, then to keep moving. I step off the covered patio and am on the sidewalk, stepping in the direction indicated, and I figure now’s as good a time as any to take inventory. Digging through the pockets of these pants, which seem oddly like someone made jeans out of wool, I recover some more money. I didn’t bother to look carefully at what I slid to the waiter, but I have 14, $100 bills. Something’s off, though. They have the same info, but the man in the center used to look like an aged crash-test dummy. This guy looks refined, wisened. And the bill is rougher, and has a weird tint to it.
I close my eyes. The image comes to my mind almost as clear as if I was looking at it in my hand: the only time I saw a bill was in the old man’s hand, it was the note he’d received from the bank and he was fighting the cashier for not wanting to accept it. That was an awful memory, probably one of the only times I watched him sweat and I looked on cringing at him when I’m sure he was just concerned of being made to look a fool.

I don’t think I’ve ever called him “old man” like that before. Where did that come from?

The rest of my pockets yield a brushed metal lighter, a foldable pocketknife, a single bullet casing, and a pen. So if I’ve body-swapped someone, it was an edgelord in high school. Fun as these things might be, though, they do not give any information at all about where I am. Or who I am.

After passing a couple liquor stores/check cashing joints and a fortune-teller, I eventually approach the entrance to the motel office, facing the street corner with a façade and signage that was surely once bright and eye-catching. I can imagine the royal-blues and brick-reds in the lettering, behind what is now a battered teal and pink advertising NO VACANCY against an off-white scape. Pronounced enthusiasm brought back down to mediocrity’s baseline.

I figure the receptionist will give me a hard time, maybe ask why I assume I can get a room without a reservation, or what I need the room for, or even ask for ID. Having no real idea what I even look like, I try to at least straighten up and stroll in with some confidence.
The greeting of “Just one?” takes the wind out of my sails. I almost did a double take, because I got readier service than at the restaurant.

“Uh, yeah.” To be honest, she did give me a look-over and I think it had something to do with her wondering if I was going to be able to pony up for a night in this fine establishment.

“10 per hour, 50 a night, 50 extra for deposit.”

“Cash okay?”

“S’fine. 100 for deposit.” No blink in this one.

“Sure, here.”

One motion behind the counter takes the 2 bills and another puts the room key and change in front of me from below the table out of sight.

“Room 3, check out’s 10 sharp.”

A bed suddenly within reach, the fatigue sets into my eyes. I rub the left as I take the key and change with my right, mumbling a thank you as the gradiented periwinkle eyeshadow pulls me in. It draws focus, with the surrounding hazel eyes and baked age lines serving as mere reference points.

“Anything else?”

“No, thanks,” I let out with a wave, as if I was waiting on her to tell me something and wasn’t just stuck in a trance.

When I come to, I immediately feel congealed slobber on my left cheek but nothing else really registers over the banging on the door.
Everything tenses, and I’m standing on the bed naked as nature when the banging on the door resumes with a shout.

“It’s the manager, open the hell up! Checkout time was an hour ago, come on let’s go!”

The fight-or-flight leaves my body so fast, I practically let out a scream of rejoicing. Instead, I just roll my eyes at myself. Remembering myself, I crack the door open with just my exposed. With an apology and yesterday’s change extended through the gap, I ask for another night. He’s a bald man, shorter than I would have guessed for that kind of baritone and so I’m lowering my hand and gaze to his “pricier-than-the-rest-of-his-Miami-beach-outfit” shades when he swipes the bill.

“10 o’clock!”

“10 o’clock.” A wave that he doesn’t bother to see and I don’t bother to keep the door open for anyway.

I turn inside as the door rattles closed and the full-height mirror on the wall by the door catches my eye. Nothing else really registered last night. I knocked out so fast, I may as well have been shot in the head. Not even sure how I made it out of my clothes but I think that can be one mystery best saved for another day. But now, in the late-morning sun filtering through the cheap shades, this dead-mint green wallpaper sets off the cocoa skin that flexes unconsciously back at me. Whose body is this? Whose arms and chest… and legs?

I pose my reflection so that it looks defiantly back at me, like we both want an explanation. Well, don’t we? This isn’t a young boy’s body. Certainly, it’s a man’s body,
but… When I get closer, they’re still there. Two over-sized front teeth and those two lime-greens. Closer still, no, there’s more to them. They used to be almost totally one-note, but there’s shades of… chartreuse and jade and emerald. Like my eyes broke and got pieced back together. The cracks and creases around my eyes really complete that effect.

A dry cough interrupts that train, and I look around for just a second before I decide to just crane my neck in the bathroom sink and run the tap into my open mouth. Between rough swallows and long draws from that ever-so-slightly grey stream, I consider a bath. I think better of it though because I turn around and, after one good look around the room, just fall back onto the discolored white sheet that’s so thin, I can make out the periwinkle mattress underneath.

In the last moments that my brain can knock two brain cells together, I wonder out loud how long this otherworldly comedown is supposed to last. Will I always be this tired?

I wake up. I have no evidence to that fact, except that sometimes we just open our eyes in the night and know that this is the real-world. I’ve put it out of my head that I can even dream anymore; when my open eyes find nothing but total blackout, there’s no doubt this is existence.

The kind of darkness greets me where closed eyes or open, it does not matter. I turn my head but the neon-red strands of the digital clock do not greet me. The TV’s standby orange light has fled. I know my eyes are open, at least, because I feel my eye lids flutter against my palm as I groggily rub my right eye. Pupils swell and grow and,
eventually, a shadow’s outline manifests against the ink-dark room, faint enough that I question that I am seeing the figure looming over the bed and hunching ever so slightly to avoid touching the ceiling. Then, the words cut through clear as candlelight in the dark, filling the room.

“Be not afraid.

You, alone, cannot redeem this world. You, alone, can redeem yourself. And this world will be better for it.”

Finally, direction. But this being, this presence in front of me does something. My body starts to tremble almost immediately as it spoke, as if its meaning was meant to explode from my very bones. It occurs to me I’ve been laying down, propped up on my elbows, so I pull my legs into a crouch under me.

“What am I supposed to do?” I manage to utter, though I can hear my voice crack as I get the words out. I’m practically bowing, face looking down at where the bed would be.

Suddenly, a phone rings behind me and as my eyes dart to the phone, then back ahead, the room is empty and fully lit. I look back again and see 10:15 plainly demarked on newly awakened alarm clock. But no, there’s no way that was a dream!

Still in this hunched position, I twist and hop off the bed to pick up the ringing. The voice on the other end replies to my hello with a stern warning that it’s time to check out. I look down at myself and it probably makes more sense to get dressed than to spend any time on the phone arguing, just in case someone comes knocking again.
When he turns back, a being like a streak of black ink stands over the bed, hunched over Xavier so as to not hit the ceiling.

Xavier cannot muster a reaction, his heart imploded with fear.

“Be not afraid. Your body tells you to flee, I know. Not just from me. You face your future like earthbound spacecraft, evaporating as it hurtles through the atmosphere.”

It is the same initial instinct to move that compels Xavier, that spurs him to leave that motel room and follow the road yet again.

“What?”

“What? I know you humans love symbolism? That not do it for you?”

“No, I mean, like what do you mean a spaceship? I’m the spaceship? Is burning up a good or a bad thing?”

“Neither. Burning upon re-entry for a spaceship merely is. And the care with which it was crafted determines success.”

“But I wasn’t made for whatever this all is.”

“You were. You were made for everything from birth—made for today by yesterday, made for tomorrow by today. Right now.”

A reply bubbles in the back of Xavier’s throat when the flashing red lights of the digital alarm clock and the standby light for the tv flicker on. Light overflows behind the curtain and spills into the room.

In the light, the outline dissipates.
The voices never came back, and Xavier has not mustered the energy to ask. The walking seems like the ideal time to contemplate, but the blank “left, right, left” is all my body can muster.

The sun rises, burns the sky and scars into twilight. Several times over, this change Xavier manages to get back to the California central valley. Back to the easily-missed off-ramp, back down the road with a well marked “Keep Out” and the political flags and the toasted grass and Xavier starts feeling older. The flags have names Xavier doesn’t recognize. The grass has become overgrown, littered with trash in certain areas. The creaking in his bones tells Xavier that there is more going on than he can immediately see.

Xavier asks. There is no reply.

Xavier wonders about his family. He tries to remember people, places, things. Xavier walks around what he believed to be his hometown but he is desperately lost. He thinks about Chelsea and he gets an erection and a vision comes to him of sexual encounters that he cannot properly place or identify.

He cries as he collapses against the flagpole of an elementary school. The sun “Your body is betraying you. Your senses betray you.” The voice again. The serenity flows through Xavier’s sternum and out between his shoulder blades.

“Help me to understand.”

“You do not belong to this world.”

“An alternate universe?”
“You watch too many movies, child.” The peace dissipates. A dull burning invades Xavier, as if entering through his fingers and up his arms.

“What then?”

In harmony, both voices reply “A world of your own making.”

“Help me unmake it.”

“I did what I came to do. I cannot do for your world what needs to come from you.”

“I don’t want to do it. I don’t want to do anything. What if I mess up again?”

Xavier pushes on, eventually the pull finds him in his old neighborhood. His old street. His old home. The paint is a different shade of pale blue. The door is red instead of white. Still, it is certainly Xavier’s old home. So, when two men Xavier doesn’t recognize walk out of the home, a young girl bolting out just behind them, Xavier stands across the street. His face falls to his feet. A world of my own making. But there are others. There were others. A shudder runs up Xavier’s back, recalling. The hivemind. These memories, they must be inherited. Xavier turns, and walks on. He steps down the road, turning when it turns, once again only just aware of his feet moving under him. Chills were coming on, a come-down. Xavier leaned on light posts or chain-link at interval for stability.

Xavier stands in a liquor store, confused and unsure of what he should be looking for. He recognizes the bottle of Jack Daniels, which Chelsea’s father wielded the only time Xavier happened to see him.
Whatever happened then. Whatever Xavier turned into that wasn’t Xavier, it was invading his psyche. The weight of an eternal dichotomy groaned, waving and ebbing. He ambles about the streets, looking for direction before finally

“It can’t be me,” I say, taking a large draw from the bottle and seizing for a minute before retching. Through coughs, I’m pleading frantically. To God or Mom or anyone who’ll listen, “It’s got to be anybody but me.”

A sweep of nausea comes and goes, and I blame the stuff as I lift my head to take another drink when my vision flickers familiarly.

A heaving in my chest forces something up and I retch into the sewer drain by the sidewalk before looking up the see the sky world is once again acid-washed, except I see the color from the rooftops and lightposts bleeding into the sky.

“Anybody but me, please.”