

He walked like worried fire through the maze of the tall structures. He felt imposed upon by the illuminations on the structures, which cascaded its lurid colors over the stone like a mad painter. A glance up showed him they were large enough to see from the moon and every other galaxy. He forced his eyes on his shoes and watched them move like self-autonomous creatures that was void of influence. *Make it as approachable as possible.* He played with the word *influence* in his mouth and let it tumble inside until he saw her sharp eyes flash.

*I should have-* he saw a mannequin walking with a neutral colored coat that covered most of the small frame. Her demographic was in the young and impressionable ages that promised profit and hopeful brand expansions. Brown suede leather and oversized material. A leather bag with a large golden carrot on her fingers. A key customer: comfortable with spending money when it was promising and looking for something better at all times. The air sizzled like an electric current when she passed onto his skin. He stopped, he shut his filters tight and cursed and swore to God if he couldn't stop seeing everything like- he saw her glance his way but walk forward.

He considered youth as a unpredictable form of flames that could spread and obliterate everything or purge the earth from past follies. Flames that held in their doors to the key influence still shined bright, a brightness he remembered with melancholia and bitterness. *I will take this world by storm, I will be the force of new.* She was with him in his endeavor because *she* was the other half. The missing portion. The symmetrical piece of the milk to cereal, brand placement to athlete, account rep to accountee.

"Did you *see* her?" Turning to a fragment in the air, faceless but there in mind nonetheless. A continuous presence. Was it there? Doesn't matter. Consciousness or unconsciousness was not a priority for him so long as the product is in their hand and in their head. The senses were things of clay, he knew, pliable to his will. Control over a mass from his own "creative influence". Powerful, unwieldy and it could kill, he thought he knew. But didn't to the extent. No, the power of the object is that force. It coerces the senses and beckons meaning to garner a importance beyond itself and the one holding it and that act, that process of becoming something other than an object, life happens. Humans at their core, he knew, happened on that object: faith and irrational.

She was chewing gum, obviously. It's the morning and studies (which one? never known) show gum is chewed most in the morning, but what was it? The flavor? Was that the significance? "Perhaps that gum she was chewing was a new flavor never before experienced by her. Say, hypothetically of course, she woke up this morning and continued her routine as she does every morning. She rose from the same spot in her bed and sat on the same spot in her bed for the same amount of time every morning. Her eyes glaze over the floor as her mind swims with whatever it does in the morning, perhaps ranging from the previous night's dream to her plans for the day. The odd thing is it's the same every day for her so why fool yourself in making a plan? She will get up out of bed, brush her teeth, fix her hair, and get herself together, not particularly in that order. She eats breakfast with the same table and the same person at that table as she does every morning. They eat the same type of food; perhaps bacon, eggs, and toast this morning. They briefly greet each other as they always do and if anything of interest comes up they will briefly mention it but go right back to their devices in their hands or right beside the plate of food for the most convenient access with the forefinger. She leaves the place at the same as always and goes into the same car as always. Perhaps she's driving and realizes she needs some gas for this car she drives every day. Naturally, the nearest gas station she sees she pulls in and walks to pay the man at the front desk. While she is pulling out her payment method, she notices the gum right below her waist, ever so conveniently placed for her type to stumble upon. She sees the array of flavors and reaches for her usual in this scenario. But wait! Something crossed her mind at that moment and she instead reaches for a different flavor. She pays for it, walks to her car, drives to her occupation, walking on her way back to her car, she sees you, drives home, greets the husband using an electronic device and fucks him. What happened? She tried something different that was not her usual because

an unknown presence crossed her mind that made her purchase the new item. Was it the pretty packaging it came in? The way the reds mix in with the oranges are lovely, aren't they? It is much better than the blue attempting to mix with the purple. Shallows the attempt when the one sees through the ploy of putting one with one as opposed to letting be. Was it the smell that allured her? Doubtful. Her nose at that height was never near the wafting odors of all the flavors and delights around her. Maybe she just wanted to try something new. Possibly. Her thought was a reflection of what was happening at that very moment, her very self-conscious observing her own movement and deconstructing every action with a reason behind it. It was so quick and cataclysmic that she came to a conclusion affecting her entire being and way of thinking without even realizing it. Neurons shot all across her brain and the pre-emptive action raced down to those small fingers that was trembling above the cellophane wrapping. Millions upon millions of possibilities as to why she was where she was, why she was getting that exact package of gum she always gets darted through her psyche like a madman on a lose. Her entire history and placement within the known world leading up to this very moment of deciding new without thought. Breaking the norms of her own self without evaluation? Revolutionary, I say! Or perhaps she just chose whatever was closest to her tight hips." *Find the meaning. Where is it?*

It wouldn't respond to that notion. Never really did. He tried to discern a face upon that fragment but couldn't; it was a phantom, faceless and changing, but he could see it. Forming and massing and substantiating his theories by just existing. Invisible to those who haven't been where he has: the gray giants that surround him, holding dreams and complacency in every layer. It seemed to smile at him and invoke questions: Did he ever really have something to fill them with? What did his presence really do if nothing? *Where's the meaning?*

"Why would she want it anyway?" He spoke aloud. A shift away from what he felt seconds before. "What does it do for her? It causes unnecessary effort from your jaw to chomp like some steer and for what? For a stranger to have the ease of smelling winter mint while he opens his mouth to have the feeling reciprocated for the other..." That's how he met her: a woman holding a painting of a woman holding a stick of gum made of rainbows. "To catch their attention" she said when asked why. It was grey everywhere but that piece, so vibrant though. "She's eating the only thing that matters. The thing that will help her get that. I like it." So simple. Direct to the source with no unnecessary supplements of language. Forced attention from the consumer. He liked it too, in that moment with her. Her hands traced over the dark lines to show the curvature and best place to put words but he wasn't listening. Not fully. Rain clouds had formed outside, which caused the room to have little colored light. But he saw her colorize in front of him. It started at her fingers and spread through her body like a ripple, the colors of purpose and art. He watched it spread and he felt for her.

Feelings sell. Someone told him that once and he held it true, even today, walking through the cold streets. He could feel her lingering effects on his work that he walked under, inadvertent influence like drips of paint from another painter. Last week he paused from his walk, his walk to see the golden statue, to see his final piece of a man holding a product getting taken down. But it wasn't just any product. It was his last attempt to invoke that feeling in others he felt for her: a man looking upward, he standing on a cliff darkened of shape, staring at an opening in the sky that was orange and vibrant yellow, which revealed a face of perfection("an angel's", he called it) with the words *It's different with us*. The agency was confused, the product being presented an overcoat that was waterproof. His task: to highlight this feature in a unique way. His *impersonation* of the task: invoke the slumbering giant of passion inside the public with *his* perception of beauty.

It lasted a month before taken down and his severance was given shortly after.

He crossed a crosswalk and electrical giants sped by in front, only stopping for a light. Citizens shuffled with their oversized wear hanging over, making them appear smaller than they really were. Groups walked in unison toward one direction. Machines from the poles

beeped loudly for the walking to continue while the others across waited for their sound to occur. Those outside and walking rallied with one another silently, fighting the elements with heels and ties, all going to their own little corners of life. *Collaborative feelings embedded in products*. Notion that using something others used created a universal sensation or feeling. Example: a wedding ring. He wore it and he knew others wore it with the same mentality. No one told him it fades. *Collaborative feelings embedded in products (temporary)*.

Others sat indoors and divulged in more controlled settings: controlled intake, controlled temperature, and a controlled state of mind. Different lives at the moment, different directions. All the same environment.

He paused at the halfway point between the grey city to his left and the dense greenage to his right, where his eyes floated to a structure. In the middle of a large cemented area amongst the green foliage sat a golden figure. It seemed glow from the sun above, creating a contrast so vibrant from the bleak grey sidewalk it might as well have been the sun stationed on the ground. It was of a man holding a large stick at his side with his leg propped upon a log pointing straight. His hand was over his deepened brow, overlooking an invisible landscape. He held the stick tightly with the other, the golden veins clenched slightly.

He didn't know when it was erected, the origins behind it, or even its hidden purpose. It has just always been there, that odd monolith of man. But he enjoyed this statue. Thoroughly. He had golden eyes that seemed to gaze hopefully out despite its immortality. He thought it saw the true beauty underlying the things we touch and don't touch, the things we look at and see outside the peripherals. The intangible substances that seep over us all that shape our lives. A prophet with untouched sight.

The man wonders if the statue too had to suffer through the drawbacks of such a vision. The man saw it all clearly, in his eyes. It was clear and no one saw it. Not her. Not even her. *Perception shift: when the consumer's view of a brand or object changes due to outside forces or internal shifts of thought*. Another term coined by him after the fact. *When are you going back out to work? She would put the groceries down and smooth my hair and I would turn angry by her action. When they come to me and see what they have missed!*

In the corner of his room, he would sit and work to be the next Warhol, the "love child" ("I will be the...") of George Lois, the next invention, innovation, concept, art piece, creative outlet, self-destructive concept, all at once and nothing simultaneously, the sky being the limit and with it limitless disappointments, furious fits, arguments, shouts, sobbings, broken glasses, empty accounts, empty days and empty ways to fill the empty place that formed in his heart to the point where she saw him one day as a bottomless pit that sat in the corner room.

And she left quietly after one last attempt of peaceful rational was met with furious shouts of 'Never!'. He watched her leave and noticed the *Christian Louboutin's* glimmered beautifully in the dim light and he determined she was the perfect fit for the product.

When he was left alone the dark fragment edged its way into his peripherals. *A black speck of stress*. It stayed and grew to the shape of a person but when he turned to spot it would vanish, its existence forever on the sides. But he saw it and wasn't afraid. When he spoke aloud, tentatively and sadly, he realized it wouldn't judge and he kept doing it inside that empty room, speaking aloud with every thought and twisted fantasy aloud, and it would listen, that dark fragment. He couldn't see the shape but he believed it was some man made of shadows from the mind. He would catch glimpses of what he thought were shoulders, a leg, even a hat. But it was never definitive. When time went on, and the hot days progressed to the grey cold of autumn, and the light would become greyer, the dark fragment shaped more into a constant. The man's rants and furies were accepted quietly by the silhouette and he soon saw it as his only companion. He thought he even heard it laugh one day.

So as he stood in that empty space feeling an empty space, the black peripheral shifting slightly to appear at his shoulder, looking at that golden man with the golden stick looking out at the not golden world, he felt a rush of sadness. A swell of cold blue that filled him up. It told him the meaning may have left. His meaning, that is. There was a grey lens now over him and he could not see anything but in filters of grey, blue, and beige. He searched in his mind and could not find it, that meaning that usually shined and glimmered in color, whatever it was.

He thought of her again walking away on red heels. She was showing him the picture again with color shooting up her arm. The way she walked and fit in the world like a perfect puzzle. Moments and moments that stacked upward. It weighed him down. He looked up and saw an empty world in the shapes of large rectangles.

The tallest and closest one was near him. He swerved his head left and right to see the black on the peripherals but it dodged him. *Tell me. Tell me what to do.* The sky was so blue. The golden man shinned. *Objective meaning: false. Subjective meaning: temporary.* It flittered into his mind. Took hold rightfully.

He thanked it and stood. He then began walking toward the tallest and closest rectangle. He would walk to the top and quickly go to the bottom.

This boy known as Chris walks at a deliberate pace toward the break of familiar green pines and muddy, threaded trails. His head is down and he looks at his pace with ambivalence because he is reminded of his place in the town over. A ghost walking in and out of areas, not an actual person. Walking into a cafeteria and looking at the mountain of heads, he proceeds to a classroom. Entering a classroom of turned backs, he proceeds to the bathrooms.

He drifts and he knows he drifts. It's the dilemma. The dilemma he faces is the actual process of self-bettering to turn physical. *Confidence*. He hears the word from TV's and his parents at the dinner table but it's hard for Chris to feel confident. Why should he be? Even a ghost has other ghosts he may recognize. Chris can't maintain other ghosts.

So he walks on the trails in the hills behind the school during hour lunch period. He tells himself in the patches of silence it clears the head. It may.

Though his true reasoning lies in the sensation he feels in his stomach and tongue that he could only describe as *bitter*. It resonates and tastes foul for Chris, the constant reminder, so he leaves. Particularly today, the taste is almost unbearable. It's the first anniversary of the death of his sister. She died 1 year ago today when she filled her pockets with weights and jumped from a high bridge. His anchor, his touchstone he held high, was low in the water. His parents didn't speak of the death. Don't. Like it was a plague that would return if mentioned. Chris did once at dinner. 6 months after, after his mother picked at her plate with a full glass of wine and the father eating stubbornly, he asked why she had jumped into the water. The silence was the thing that stuck with Chris; it was like silence was created then, in that little room in the dim light. Even the house froze. His father gave a dry chuckle, looked at him from across with red eyes, and heaved 'because your mother and I killed her without knowing. We're doing it now'. His mother then stood and nearly stabbed her full glass of wine on Chris's father head. Bleeding profusely and sorely peeved, Chris's father called himself an ambulance and his mother floated up to her room, leaving Chris at the empty table with cold and almost blood-soaked food. No one spoke of the death since then.

The hardest fact was the lack of knowing after. She had left no note, memento, or hint as to why. When asked, he had no answer. No one did. And that cumulative familial obliviousness pressed them out of familiar inner circles. That and the darkness that began to ebb its way in.

It has pressed him out into the forest edge where he is now. Where he stops now. Chris considers heading back toward the building. 12:30 on the dot as the math teacher says and it's 12:20. He digs in his pockets and pulls out a slim yellow cylinder. He puts a pill in his mouth and drinks water from his bottle in his backpack. Looking back. The fog is coming in. The red ridges of the building could just be seen from his vantage point but not by much. He makes the decision to move forward deeper into the forest because the thought of walking back into that building made him tired. So he moved closer to being away from the building and being away from tired.

Chris walks parallel to the treeline. Muddy tracks and flickering anomalies lay in the brush at his right in overgrown bushes unseen. It was wet like that after rain. Water dripped from leaves above and soaked the tree bark to a dark brown. There's a hum in the air. It bounces and folds over the wetted landscape. In front of the trail, just 50 feet ahead, a thin layer of clouds falls on the trail and forest, turning the landscape into a haze-like reflection at an edge. Chris, observing the effect this light haze had on him, steps faster toward the white.

A fox emerges at the edge, sleek in wet from the brush by the edge. Chris pauses. The fox shakes its heavy fur then observes him with scorched irises. Chris felt the animal was like an old man observing a small child. He even thought he saw a smile from the fox. With a flick of its tail the creature enters from the edge inward. Chris considered the haze. He had not yet gone this far into the forest, always stopped at the edge, nearly exactly where the haze fell. But he was feeling a longing to go forward. Curiosity? Some subtle presence in the air pushing

him? He couldn't exact the reason. He only saw himself as a minor pioneer over this domain. It was all his to claim in this world. At least for now.

He ducks into the space of grey and blur and tries to follow the now fading silhouette of the wet fox. It's wet, he thought to himself. It is wet in the air, the dirt, and the forestry. But he feels held by nature. There was a familiarity, somewhere. In the air. In the droplets that hung everywhere. It was a blanket. He focuses on the creature. It walked on his path deftly, quietly, and aware of Chris. It did not dart into the sides nor look behind at the pacing boy behind but just followed its way with the knowledge he would follow.

And he does for many steps. Many more minutes predicted. Chris forgot about his watch on his wrist and the school at his back. He forgot about his ghost-presence, his pills, even the area he trekked. He may have transported to greened peaks of Alaska and he would not tell. The fox was his only occupation. Fox gradually held his attention in the continuous unbreaking pattern of the animal's stride. Fox held the boy's mind in the flick and the occasional gaze from behind. Because he counted on repetition and swaying of the creature was unconsciously therapeutic for Chris. The predictability in every swing, tap, twitch, and snap from the creature was constant. Soon the green life around him took on a shape of repetition too. The grass on either side of the Fox swayed with the steps and dripped in pattern. It glowed even slightly, a fluorescent green unnatural. And the canopy of trees bent over like a tunnel forming. Chris fell into the pattern without thinking, the first in a year. Predictability and pattern. Comfort from this hypnotic state.

Then the creature turns to the right suddenly. It goes through the brush, under the grass. Chris follows blindly and then he's at an edge of dirt. He tries to stop but the wet under makes him slip and he tumbles down the rocky dirt edge. The rocky dirt pricks, prods, and bites Chris as he stumbles and falls downward. He could feel the wet now all over him; on his face, on his clothes, in the form of dirty mud. The world was a blur, a streak of grey and green. His face is cold.

The tumble stops after a while. Down on grass now, he lie still but his body is buzzing. In front, by his right hand, a gold t glinted. He stares at the t, forgetting his body, feels his neck, feels only grit. He feels a familiar anxiety, cold and heavy in his stomach, like a wet stone, a feeling that has lingered for a year on him. He has worn his cross as instructed, prayed as told, and grieved as expected. And a year later, he felt the same. Ambivalent at what is after for her. It has grown, this unknowing, into a general lack of space within that churns. He tries to fill it in different ways but it is endless, he feels. His mind goes to a point when he was young with her. They were at a lake in the woods somewhere far away. Early in the morning, she woke him up with a grin and said 'let's go to the lake'. They tiptoed with towels away from the camp through a winding path and their thin white bodies were like ghosts already layered on the dark green of the woods. But when they got the edge of the lake, it was clear and steaming for them, like something had warmed the water just for the two. Chris saw the stars out still as white freckles. She had jumped in and he saw her body sink for a moment, saw her looking up at him from under with the surface disrupting her face.

Now he's here on the mud thinking of that image. Freezing her one second of sinking and imagining her in the water grave until waters are no longer water, as he often did without consent. He remembered when he asked his pastor on the Sunday after the death if those who die with purpose on purpose go to hell. Father Brian pressed his cross and said 'No one can know but those who do go that path'. No relief even from the spokesman of God. Did He send her down or did we? He sees her floating on the path downward where a figure of black waits---

Enough. Chris presses his eyes closed with the hopes of resisting the causality his mind follows. It often lead to more visceral fears for her and lately himself. Images and obscurities that frighten him, how the mind wanders into those dark recesses from just an image.

How long has he been lying there in the heavy mud? He glances at his watch, which is broken time. Too long? He ambles upward from his mud. The bog-like hill rose behind him and the top was hidden behind the fog, which was seeping now below and all around him like a leaked substance. Chris walks now away from area and deeper into the fog. No way of climbing to the top with the sleek mud and bruised body for the boy.

He meanders deeper into the fog, the unknown area, tired and heavy, looking out for the Fox, his silent companion, which was nowhere. The silence is encompassing. He thought he heard a sigh from somewhere, deeper to the right, in the abyss of fog, but it was no longer known. His body is battered, walking in the white sleet like something lost. Which is true. He walks for some time in a daze. The surrounding fog doesn't give any view or placement. What else is there to do but go forward, then?

So he does, the young boy. He does. And the fog that has been there slowly thins into strands of white, revealing an ocean that stretched on for infinity. The woods that he walked in cut off abruptly to a beach of jagged rocks holding tide pools large enough for multiple bodies. And the waves crashed heavily and released spray that made Chris stop in his tracks and realize where he was for the first time. He turns wildly behind him to see the trees gone, which dissipated the moment he turned like an eye trying to focus on floating protein. In their place were jagged rocks that lead to the base of a sandy cliff, which was brown with wet. He can't understand it. So stunned, he stands still and waits for this illusion to pass. A trick of the mind, perhaps, from the earlier fall. But no, after five minutes of standing still, the sting of salt in his nose and the feel of the wet on his skin was real.

It went on, the coastline, the jagged rocks of all sizes, for miles. Looking right, he saw the ocean was a grey hue, a kind rainy substance that was clear simultaneously. It churned and grumbled upon the rocks, the spray causing the pools all around. The sky now has an otherworldly quality, the clouds spiraling in small circles like whirlpools but maintaining ovals of light upon random spots in the ocean and rocks like blind picks of God. Walking cautiously, Chris sees the pools clearly. Some small, which held only small mollusks and rocks. Others large enough to jump in and see clearly at the bottom, where starfish, sea urchins, small fish, and other things floated or stay sedimentary. There was a hidden urge to dive into these pools so clear, a thin flame under the skin, flickering in the eye. An odd desire he didn't know why but to submerge himself completely. Feeling the water, it is warm, not cold, and inviting. Beckoning. But the shock was still prominent enough to not warrant the feelings too much. Rather, he stumbles in a daze forward, still unsure what now is real. The birds circling above in concentric circles, are they real or figments? Maybe even the distant oval of yellow floating, glimmering behind the clouds, is it just a poked hole through a canopy? Because Chris doesn't believe anything now; this should not be, this environment, he thinks. His schools is inland, nearest ocean memories away.

And yet he walks. This land that should not be but is here for him, despite himself.

He pauses. In the distance, upon a jagged rock, is the wet Fox. It stares at him with a humanlike expression, sitting as a red flame upon a canvas of grey and black. Chris feels a rush of familiarity for the animal followed by a confusion of the very feeling. He begins treading toward the animal, maneuvering on the slippery rocks, grunting and whimpering out of fear. At fifty feet away, the Fox turns and makes its way away from him, downward the other side of some slope. He yells at the animal to wait with the assumption it can hear him, and picks his pace up to reckless running. Slipping, scrambling, grunting, pricking over the sleek rocks, looking forward at the spot where the Fox once was, ignoring now the spray, the pain in his hands, the wet of the world.

And he arrives at the peak of the small mound and below, he sees the Fox at a large tidal pool. It faces away from him. Looking in and away from the boy.

Chris eagerly climbs down to the side of the Fox, pauses at the edge, taken aback by the circumference. The tidal pool is larger somehow, the size of small meteorite. The Fox barely registers his presence. Chris carefully kneels down by the Fox.

He glances at the creature's eyes. They are calm, contemplative. Humanlike in their pondering. The irises now have a form of swirling clouds. Scarlet red shifting in between the miniature chasms that flow into the Fox. It is glued to the tide pool.

Turning now to the pool, Chris sees the extent. Portions of the tide pool go deep below, fading into a crimson hue of blue, while there are portions shallower and easy to touch. The sea life flowed swiftly like dreamlike fragments caught in watery ripples. Starfish that hug the wall, crab that scittered underneath, fish of all kind swirling in pods and releasing suddenly like chaotic fragments. It was clear and glassy, easy to see everything from up here.

At his feet, on the edge of the tide pool, is a large thing undefined at first. A massive sea anemone at first glance. Chris peers down and sees the tentacles drifting like strands of hair, endless and beautiful. But the colors are shifting along the cnidarian inconsistently, vibrant and strange. A moment bright pink, the next heavy purple. The tentacles flow calmly despite the color shifts. Chris could not stop looking, so alluring it was. Caught in an act of cross-specimen hypnotism. In the middle a small hole opened. Chris, unconsciously, places his hand in the water. Warm on his skin, hardly noticeable. Uses his finger to slowly reach down toward the hole. Barely above the surface of the creature. The colors were inviting him, shifting now to yellow, blue, salmon, laying on the senses like a wet ball of dough. Dreamlike upon Chris. Subconscious images emerging of lakes that held no bottoms, his sister and he free falling downward from clouds that smiled, this ocean enveloping him, and the Fox standing fully in a human form.

He places his finger in the hole and feels a gesticular warmth that holds him for a moment. Then the spell is broken with a slight pain on the fingertip. It causes Chris to gasp and shoot away from the edge. He sees his fingertip is clean, no sort of entrance or break of skin. Below the sea anemone's color subdues to a continuous salmon, a permanent color. The Fox, once beside the boy, now edges its way away toward the other side of the tide pool.

Eager to keep it nearby, Chris steps toward the creature's path but falls suddenly. A rush of blood seeps into his head. A cold, clammy sensation takes hold. He feels faint on the ground by the tide pool.

Hunching over, he looks down at his hand and sees ripples from under the skin. It weaves and reverberates across his arms like earthly tremors. On the top skin emerges mixed variants of colors and fluids, some flowing and swirling like a born snake, others jagged and violent. And each type was a different color: black, turquoise, yellow, violet, they varied in form and aesthetic. All composed differently, emerging from his body like spirits. A laugh of induced panic escapes him as he watches his feelingless skin erupt from the budding substances. Some stretches over his skin while others dart or spurt. He thinks he is becoming a ghost finally. That death has now come for him from within.

They sprout and spread over his arm like wildfire on drybush. It encompasses his pores and every inch of skin in seconds. His body is composed of it and only it, the substances. Ghostlike becoming reality. But he feels nothing except slight nausea. He is terrified however. Tries to get up but falls again, the swirling unknown substances taking form in force. Swaying like a mind of its own, the substances moving in their own pattern and unique way. Tentacles lost in the current of waters. He is panicking, losing himself, his presence. The hole inside is deep and crusted with fear. He cannot see when his eyes are open. So he closes them and pictures the pastor permissionless, unclear, looking down at him from his oak chair, unable to say an answer. His family sits across from him with holes inside as well, their eyes vacant with stone lining the pupils. His father bleeding out from his head while his mother is unmoved. His father walking out the door quietly into the night looking for salvation.



Then he sees his sister under that distorted surface of water looking up. He cannot do anything but stare as she sinks and waits for her rise that will never come. He can feel tears on his face. Hot despite the chaos on his skin. Wet on ghostflesh. Wondering what he could have done. What he could have said to save her from that surface, that distortion. His mind runs amok while he tries to grapple it. Glimpses of her in images from the surface in another time: walking through a street chewing gum, sitting upon a sandy dune with the moon closeby, punching a boy who talked about him to her. These aspects acted in a series of moments in time, sporadic, unconforming, separate from him, somewhere else. Not him now but a different him...

He lies on the ground curled into himself.

Amidst the sound of the chaotic movement on his skin, Chris hears a shift from across. Subtle but enough to remind him other life is here.

He looks up, peers past the blossoming substance, and sees the red Fox watching him from across the tide pool. Even from where he lie he could see the red flow from the eyes. It was observing him, he could feel. He thinks he can see the mouth moving, as if speaking to him. The sounds that came were only the ocean in the distance.

He stands like an awakened giant and begins walking toward the Fox. The red eyes. But there is no pain on his skin and the substances are calmer. There is a light flame under his skin and a budding strength. It wants to burst. An uncontrollable feeling that urges him to bound faster toward the Fox. He does and he is gliding over the slippery rocks like a phantom; he is focused and secure in his footing over the terrain.

He rounds the corner of the tide pool and he sees the Fox pacing away from him but it looks over its shoulder like it is watching. Chris follows and images are surfacing in his mind with each step unconsciously. A force, unknown in nature, tells him to allow the images unfiltered. It flitters in his mind, rubbing over the crevices, tingling the inner workings to a tickle or a sensation. He opens it, allowing it to come forth, and when they come in, they are vivid in nature. Her features are prominent, nearly touching him, her blazed brown eyes lined with wry and a knowing. She smiles with the environment around her, flexing outward like everywhere is her home, the nature abiding her presence. And so crisp the memory, he is now by the lake. He still sees her under the surface, that moment frozen in time. But now, now it progresses after the image. It makes him stop suddenly upon a hill overlooking a million tide pools, indefinite ocean, and the red Fox now by his feet looking up with a similar knowing.

What came after the submersion was her breaking the surface, the rupture of the distorted surface, she flipping her hair in a highlighted arc over to catch the glowing light behind and she turned and laughed for him to join and he did. He dived in and when he emerged, he saw her swimming toward the middle of the large lake, her pale body like bleached driftwood. He didn't know what she was swimming toward. Something in the distance, under the water in the depths below perhaps. But he remembered she swam with excitement, her laughter carrying through the trees of that quiet morning, and he wanted to follow her to wherever that was. He wanted to feel that seeping over the water like a sweet flu.

He's crying on that hill when the images subsided. The substances shimmers over his skin like waiting fire, the Fox watching him patiently. The sky is opening for the sun and the tide pools glitters like beached stars. In the distance the curvature of the beach made it appear infinite. Chris wipes and walks down the slope to a nearby tide pool. He cleanses his face and feels the salt drip over the substances. He looks out at the ocean folding into itself, the light bouncing over endless ripples that spread out in all directions. Non-linear by all accounts. He thinks he could see an island in the distance, a small speck that was rising to the heavens, but he doesn't know.

He turns and begins walking down the beach of rocks and tide pools with the ocean at his side and the red Fox walking quietly behind him like an infinite wanderer.