

## Inventing Saigon

By Jason Leahey

His dreams were made of black and white newsreels. Tall grass flattening under the pressure of silent helicopter wings. Mental film stills of blood dripping on wide leaves. Cops swinging nightsticks like orchestra batons and the huddled masses grasping at chain link fences while dark green air ships lift up and away like apocalyptic pterodactyls.

And there was always fire. A naked little girl frozen in full run, arms outstretched like a bird trying to take off, her skin crispy black and mouth open in an unheard scream. Bald men in orange robes, stone-still inside full blazes. Night skies erupting in carnival colors as flames sucked up all the air and all the sound into giant tornadoes of heat.

He dreamed these pictures and feelings nearly every night – frozen in his memory for as long as he could remember, wordless, near abstract visions rising out of the murk and then sinking down again. He never pursued them while awake, he avoided the books and films – even the music. His only knowledge of "Paint it Black" came from his dad watching the opening credits to Tour of Duty on television and he immediately switched the radio when ever Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" came on. But the sights and sounds had found their way into his head somewhere, and they flickered behind his eyes every night until they were bulldozed away by the sight of his ceiling fan or his blue pillow case and the scream of the alarm clock. Then the routine would struggle to begin, his body creaking and his brain spitting like an old crankshaft car bitching until its motor warmed. He'd shit and he'd shower and he'd shave, eat a granola bar (maybe take a few hits to mellow out if the dreams had been bad) and step out onto Lincoln when the light was still gray, at the most pink, and walk to work.

It had taken the manager six months to give Justin the keys to the back door. For those first six months, Justin had found him waiting half-asleep by the door to the bakery at 5:15 in the morning, in Sebagos and a bathrobe, waiting to let him in before going back home to sleep some more before his official, 10:00 appearance. So for nearly five hours Justin was left alone among the ovens and cooling racks and dozens of clumps of butter and bags of flour. The grocery opened at 7:30 and the other employees started arriving about thirty minutes before but Justin tried to have the first batch of rolls and bagels out before many of them arrived. That way, he could stay in the back, kneading dough and listening to Pixies tapes, feeling the dry lumps become sticky as they squeezed between his fingers, leaving floury traces spread thin on his skin. Once the six-month trial period was over and he was given his own set of keys, he didn't have to see anyone from the time he went to sleep the night before until 10:00 when the manager showed up.

And then he'd be friendly because he was not an unfriendly guy. The manager was only around thirty so Justin could talk music with him and they'd shoot the shit about absolutely

nothing until Justin left at 1:00 feeling tired from not having done anything and pent up for not having said anything.

He might take a nap at home or read somewhere or go to Café Trieste to listen to the wannabe Beats who long ago missed the train but talked loud so that people could hear them drop names. Justin would try to sit near them, his headphones turned low so that their words would sift through the music and come through in fragments, and he'd hope they'd make him feel better about living when he did.

Sometimes it worked and he'd catch the bus home, momentarily marveling at the sun and how there were more crazies on the public transport here than anywhere else. And when he got home he might make outlines for himself of how the Seattle WTO incident could be milked into something larger or he'd just put on a Johnny Cash album and day dream of cultural earthquakes and God shifting his viewpoint and history being very aware of itself.

But generally the crusty Beats didn't make him feel anything. When that happened he'd walk through the neighborhoods, past Chinatown and Union Square or maybe hop onto one of the cable cars and ride until the conductor stopped and demanded two bucks. Then he'd get off.

On those afternoons, when there was no punch to life, no emotion or drama, he didn't think of anything. If Marco was home, Justin would walk to his place and they'd smoke or go to get drinks. Marco used up most of the conversation talking about which girl at which party he wanted to fuck and then they'd make some kind of tentative plans for the weekend and Marco would always swear that there'd be someone there he could hook up with.

When she dreamed – his eyes were always there. Wide and blue and still. Staring above whatever dreamscape played out behind her own eyes, a god's eyes observing, occasional twitches the only clue of distress. Beneath the gaze all manner of atrocities played out in her brain. Fathers raped daughters under black clouds and the rain that spilled from them melted landscapes like a Dali painting. Seas crushed ancient rocks into splinters while giants in red plaid suits clubbed baby seals over the head with briefcases and calculators.

But no images she saw could fully sum up that feeling. That feeling that made her wish she could claw her soul inside out, the explosion in the gut because she felt the need to scream but ripped open her mouth in silence and felt her teeth shatter as if pummeled with ball-peen hammers. Her ineffectual mouth hung open like the mouth of a dead fish, without feeling, not even bothering to suck the air in a useless bid for oxygen. And her skin would get clammy and pale and then flake off like scales and fall off into nothingness, glittering.

But she could always manage to bend her head up into the poison rain, feel her skin wash away and her exposed veins rip open and her gums bleed over her bottom lip – and stare into the eyes – still and sad but calm inside the torrent beneath them. They made her want to cry – to suck herself up inside their warmth and bundle up, the black tunnel vision that resulted leading not to anything brighter but just to something – a negation of the dream drama that could reaffirm why she was what she was and did what she did.

Inside them, she could see him fully – the true embodiment of the man – the visage that surpassed the dirty blond hair, tipped with pink, and the stubble. Down inside him where his gut bled into itself and it screamed a hoarse garble drowned in fuzzed out distortion and it was the sweetest, most comfortingly painful lullaby she'd ever heard and she felt alive beyond her mashed face and ruptured skin. There seemed to be a shift in importance, a feeling of meaning that she missed so much on the outside that her chest wanted to implode from the lack of weight.

And then the static hum and the walls of noise and cultural-out-of-bounds recognized in conceptual swaths of colors and the scrawny eyes from Aberdeen would fade from view and be replaced with the wake-up call of a morning show on the radio and the light outside filtering through the orange lens of the sliding glass window above the mattress. Then the routine would struggle to begin and she'd stumble to the bathroom after thumbing the off button on the radio and before she got into the shower she'd check herself for lumps and then turn off the bedroom light that had been on all night. Because she always slept with the light on.

Jackie had to catch the bus by 7:00 on Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays. The ride to the elementary school took a good hour and she always tried to be in the classroom at least twenty minutes before the first bell in case any of the kids wanted to talk. She only worked half days on Thursday and Friday because she had to be at the restaurant by three to prepare for the after work crowd.

But on glorious Mondays she could spend the whole day sitting in low, brightly colored plastic chairs and read to a revolving room of six-year-olds. She had taken them outside once to have class in the grass but the head of the department put a stop to that after a kid named Marisa jumped the fence the first time out and didn't come back to school for three days. There were four other former education majors that stayed on at the non-profit program after graduation, but Jackie managed to limit her contact with them. Randy taught the kids theatre; Peggy art; Ezekiel worked with books too, and Janice came in the afternoons to teach martial arts. Ezekiel would have been the only person Jackie could have talked shop with but she bailed on that relationship once it became apparent after two drinks that the guy was shamelessly foibling for indications that she would be a good girlfriend.

Since the non-profit, like every other of the hundreds in the city, paid shit, Jackie's days out of the classroom, and most evenings, were spent at Spaghetti Western carrying plates of eggs from the kitchen to the crippled wooden tables. The music played was okay so that made nearly everything bearable and she'd often drift off into semi-conscious sleepwalking while she shuttled plates back and forth. Pictures of Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, and David Lowry hung by the bathroom next to the collection of pastel colored sombreros and provided fuel for her dreaminess while she thought of working at school full time. Those kids – she could look in their eyes and predict where they'd go; who'd survive and who'd get AIDS and who'd become a gang Bangor and who'd be a slut. There were the ones who listened intently, asked questions, tried to hug her. She'd always hug them back, smelling that child odor that, at the best of times, reminded her of new puppy smell, and wonder if a male teacher could get away with public displays of affection towards students. But she could tell the ones that'd be smoking dope in two years and graduate to hard shit by an age when she only knew drugs through DARE programs. She could just tell, see the dissatisfaction in their eyes, the restlessness that asked about fathers and jobs and girlfriends,

and everything that they saw but couldn't comprehend. She'd tried to tell Ezekiel about it, check to see if he saw the same thing that one time they went out, but she didn't, couldn't, elaborate on what she saw.

She could never elaborate, couldn't explain herself, she felt. But she could look at the kids, into their eyes, and imagine who would die and in what ways and who would kill and in what ways. In total, only three of her kids had blue eyes, and only one of those had eyes so stark you couldn't ignore them. And she'd stare into Brendan Vladi's eyes as she turned the pages of a book or leaned over his desk and see a tennis shoe clad boy, with half his head splattered across a garage attic, and words like peace, love, and empathy didn't answer anything.

The Musée de Mechanique had no business having a French name. It was American to the core – even summed up America if you looked at it the right way. On the Northwest tip of the city, it sat up on the cliff above the abandoned salt baths – the city and the Bay being somewhere behind and the Pacific in front. The huge baths, which were natural rock pools, looked like craters, so far below that the people crawling along the tourist pathways were dolls exploring distinctly California-style ancient remains. Though a hundred years old at most, they were already gloriously decrepit memories of a time now known only through grainy, brown photos – photos of the baths under domes of frosted glass and iron lattice work. Women in full-body bathing suits and men in black swim caps swam through the natural salt water and floated under the man-made glass eggshell, suspended in between the worlds of man and Earth just as they were now suspended in time, captured on daguerreotypes and hung on the wall. Justin wondered if swimming in salt would turn you inside out like a slug. He wondered where Marco was.

There had been a ballroom too, where the afterthoughts of the Gay '90s spun themselves out in tuxes and elaborate dresses and gilded laughter. At its inception it was a 'leisure palace' of some sort with a smattering of amusements – turn of the century predecessors to video games – and wide enough for women with parasols to fit comfortably through. As the room kept collecting the newest and most advanced amusements, the room got more crowded. And then the Great War came and the resort probably thrived in the inter-war period and then World War II came along and fucked everything up again. Somewhere on the time line of pictures displayed on the wall, the roofs of the pools came down and the pools themselves became abandoned and the ballroom stopped hosting the best of swing or jazz or whatever and maybe a fire ravaged it. But the room kept collecting the amusements, immune to outside tragedies and realities, and eventually became the musee that Justin was now standing in front of and was filled to the brim leaving claustrophobic corridors for the inquisitive to pass through.

Before they had headed in, Marco rolled a quick joint and they had sat in the open windows in the Sunday sunshine and passed it back and forth over the roof.

"It's like a creepy-ass junk store."

Justin blew smoke rings upward, pursing his lips and sending the smoke up just in front of his nose. "Cool." He couldn't hear the people he saw exploring the abandoned pools far below. He couldn't even hear the white water that erupted around the mammoth rocks sitting just

off the coast. But he could see for miles. Which was a far cry from the cacophony he was now rolled up in, his brain fuzzy and sound registering like his head was wrapped in a blanket, concentrating on not freaking his shit and becoming the stoner guy who gets escorted out of public places. And then Marco had disappeared about as soon as they crossed the threshold and now he was staring at a gypsy fortuneteller encased in glass and trying to concentrate on what movie he was trying to remember.

It was Big that he was thinking of, he remembered. And as he stood pressing his nose against the glass, he fumbled for a dime and slipped it into the thin slot in the wooden stand that held the oracle and stared in cross-eyed amusement at the wooden creature creak its arms back and forth and nod its head and stare at him with a painted-on, blood-red scowl. His fortune dropped out of a chute below the coin slot. On thick, white cardboard, "Musée Mecanique/San Francisco/(415) 386-1170" on one side: "Assume a more peaceful disposition. You will last longer. Not only you, but those nearest you will be happier for it."

He thought the paper was thicker than it should have been. The carved figure had frozen in a sideways glance, its crinkled forehead bend downwards, eyes glaring up at him. His own eyes spasmed in their sockets, vibrated like a twitching limb, and he turned away from the box and faced the hazy pathway winding in front of him. He was sucked into the spectacle – all the nuances distinct but blurred at the same time – a shady whole comprised of stark details. Everything looked trapped in a perpetual twilight and he felt like he could take it all in at once but he knew he couldn't. He couldn't decide if he loved it or hated it – probably both. A gap between a '50s Superman video booth and a self playing piano opened up and he fell along it, finding himself on another path like the one before and wandering in what may have been circles, imagining himself and the flashing red lights reflecting in his eyes.

He turned through another gap in the maze and saw daylight. Justin could have been walking around for ten minutes or forty, he'd watched the Superman video at one point – Superman had gone to the center of the Earth and fought distinctly communistic monkey men – that was all he knew. The fact that his brain seemed to float closer to the surface than it had after they smoked made him lean towards the forty-minute assessment. The claustrophobia of the musée channeled out through a rear door – twice as small as the entrance – onto the final edge of the city. No one else walked out onto the stone outcrop that wrapped around the side of the building and Justin imagined they just kept circulating along the skinny arteries that ran rickshod through the mess of lights and whizzes and old oak wood cases, maybe trying to pop out of open doors and getting sucked back in, or maybe not.

It was cold outside, the whipping breeze a kick to his brain, which was dull with the heat from inside and the remnants of the pot. He saw that she had red hair – kind of an orange red but not in any sort of glaring, Opie type of way.

He wasn't going to speak to her and she certainly wasn't going to talk to him. But when he leaned up against the wall that closed the walkway off from the thirty-story drop below and closed his eyes and the wind caught his blond mop, she wondered what he was thinking about. Before he closed his eyes to avoid the glare of the 5:00 sun – he cast a sideways glance at her and he thought about Annie.

"This is the farthest out you can go in the city."

"Really." Justin opened his eyes, shielded them with his right hand, and looked at her.

"Yeah. Farthest west." She felt a little jumpy and directed her back gaze back towards the hug rocks off shore.

"So it's like the end of the world."

"Kind of."

"I mean, it's not really. I mean, Asia's over there somewhere, but..."

"Well on the maps it's always the farthest left you can go."

"On school maps, yeah. The end of the world," he concluded.

They grew quiet again and he played with his hair. He didn't need to look at a map to know this was the end of the country. You could feel the pull and as he stared up the coast where years of elements had battered the land into a twisting, 45-degree angle like a wave that shimmered in the heat, he felt like he could kind of understand Manifest Destiny.

She didn't need to see a map either. It couldn't be a coincidence that Vertigo was set here, right? Vertigo is the ability not to jump when your body tells you to and she could feel 3,000 miles of land behind her pushing stronger and stronger. Is that what California does? Make you want more even though you know to keep going means to fall?

"This your first time at the museum?"

"No." She forced herself to turn her head back towards him. "I actually come a lot." She couldn't get him to make eye contact.

"What's your favorite one?"

"One what?"

"Favorite game or amusement or whatever. In there." He jerked his head behind them and became re-aware of the white noise emanating from the open exit door.

"The French Revolution."

"I don't think I saw that one."

"It's the best."

Pause. An unawkward silence. Neither of them felt uneasy in the absence of conversation except to be worried about whether or not the other was uneasy. Jackie lit a cigarette and watched a kite, its controller hidden somewhere behind the musee, dip over the cliff and dangle, its string hung up on some sort of shrub she couldn't identify. Justin wondered if Normandy looked like this.

"Do you want to see it?" She flicked her nearly whole cigarette over the wall and watched its cherry flame up in the wind before snuffing out.

"Sure. See what."

"The French Revolution."

"Sure." Justin followed her back in through the exit, thought briefly about a Led Zeppelin album, and then the spectacle sucked him up again. He followed her blindly.

The French Revolution was near the front and Janice wondered if he'd get lost trailing behind. She threaded her way between screaming eight-year-olds and their fat mothers and geriatric couples quickly, on a mission. She was glad for the mission, no matter how small it was.

And then she stopped in front of it and he stopped too and there was another pause of unawkward silence until Justin took the initiative to fish in his pocket for a quarter. The box was beautifully old and scarred – some sort of hardwood stained reddish and set on four legs with an ancient money slot where you sit the quarter flat and push in. When Jackie took his quarter and pushed the slot in, he bent down with her and watched the small, red velvet curtain jitter upward. Behind it stood a miniature priest clad in a white robe, an executioner in a black hood, and a wooden guillotine hanging over a prostrate man, bent as if praying. Like the box itself, the contents were intricately carved and detailed - prehistoric, wooden GI Joes surpassing in class any modern toy. As the curtain jerked to a standstill, a twinkling music like a merry-go-round tune squeaked out of a hidden voice box and the tiny blade dropped dramatically and the teeny head plopped into the teeny basket beneath it. And the music kept tinkling and the head lay in the basket and a solid red painted neck stared out of the glass in front of it and the red velvet jittered back down.

"Shit."

"Cool, uh?" Jackie said before fidgeting back around and plowing back towards the exit. Justin followed, images of a small men, their eyes clenched at the moment the executioner's bullet penetrated his temple, flipping in his head.

She lit another cigarette and offered him one. He took it.

"What do you do?"

"I'm a baker."

"What do you bake." She knew it was an asinine question but she couldn't think of anything else to say and was afraid, for a reason she hadn't had time to process, of not talking.

"Bread, cakes, you know. How about you?"

"I'm a teacher sort of. I teach elementary school kids reading and writing. And I work at a restaurant."

"Which one?"

"Spaghetti Western."

"Oh." Awkward pause. "So you're a teacher, a writer."

"I write sometimes. I just like words, at least when they're on paper."

"Cool. Yeah, I like words too. Know what's a good word?"

"What?" She smiled quietly.

"Saigon."

"Saigon?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, why?"

"Well, because it's more than a place you know? Like, just say it, just the sounds. 'Sigh-gon.' 'Sigh-gon.' Just the sounds themselves make up more than a city, more than a time even." He was mildly aware that he was a least half talking with his hands, his arms flapping around and holding imaginary objects to make his point. But the sun was about halfway into the water now, and shadows kept twisting across the girl's face and he wanted to feel automatic weapons rattle his bones and grief wrack his heart. He wanted to talk and he didn't care about his arms.

"It's like fifteen years of an attitude wrapped into one word. You know, you can't say the word and not have images of helicopters and little kids crying and 18-year-old boys blown to shit and the whole country – this country – kind of hanging on the edge of something." He knew she was looking at him hard even though the light was playing tricks and he couldn't really see her face. He'd fucked up. But he didn't really care. "I don't know, I can't really say it right. Words can't do it."

"Words can't define words?"

"I guess not."

"Okay." Jackie lit another cigarette and started to inhale before even placing the filter to her lips. Got twice as much smoke inside you that way. "I see what you're saying, though."

"Yeah?"

"I think. Do you like the whole era or just the word or what?"

"I don't know. I mean, I wouldn't want to go to war – I don't even eat meat – and I guess I'm glad I'm not in immediate danger of getting my ass kicked by cops. But I can't help but feel like I missed out. I guess that's dumb." Awkward silence. "Can I bum a smoke?"

Jackie handed him one, felt the callus on his thumb as the cigarette passed from her hand to his. She murmured her lips up and down slightly in near silence, wanted to say something but couldn't form the thoughts. "Okay," she sputtered out.

"Okay?"

"Yeah, well, I mean I understand the whole thing about not being able to say what it means. See," she sucked in deeply and wondered what he smelled like, "that's why I'm into music so much."

"You're into music."

"So much. Because with songs you get words but you also get the guitar and the distortion and the intonation and it's all wrapped up together. It conveys shit that just words can't."

"Why are you a writing teacher, then?"

"I still love words. But, like, aren't there songs that say what you're saying about Saigon and they just do it so well, it makes total sense?"

"Yeah."

"And I think I understand what you were saying about the time period." She could feel her heart, wondered what her pulse was, thought about snorting coke in college, was talking so fast she wasn't aware of her brain forming thoughts, practically yelling, she thought. "It's like this, I don't know, emotional famine. At least there was something happening then, inside and outside. There were extremes."

"Exactly. And some of them sucked but that made the other stuff even better."

"Yes. Like, you know with the words thing when you can't say what you mean? That's why I love Nirvana. Because the words mean a lot but you don't really need to understand them. What he's saying, all the absence of extremes, the void of feeling that comes from wanting to

feel but not being able to take it, comes out better when you don't have the slightest fucking idea what he's saying. Just the sounds are enough."

"Like the sound 'Sigh-gon.'"

"Like Saigon."

Silence fell as quickly as it had evaporated minutes before. An unawkward silence again. Jackie didn't know what else to say and Justin was a bit scared to. He didn't feel as bad as he normally would have, after saying all that. And she felt a full feeling that she hadn't really felt since when she knew she was in love with Tim McFain in school. Not that she was in love with this new boy she'd just met at the Musée Mécanique, or anything, but she just felt like she'd gotten something out and, somehow, that made her feel like she had more in.

"I'm Jackie."

"Justin."

"Okay."

Unawkward silence. She lit another cigarette and he asked for one again, but there was only one left. So they shared it and she asked for his phone number and he wrote it on her hand as they walked towards the parking lot. Justin had to find Marco – was probably in the car smoking more – and Jackie had to get home. She used the same pen to write her number on the back of his hand.

Night had fully dropped by this point and the two front doors to the musee glowed red and yellow and brown. Looking inside from the outside, Justin thought it looked like tunnel vision; he could watch the years change and spread out in a funnel as the room went backwards, travelling from the wooden gypsy marionette who'd given him his future to Pole Position by the back door where he'd met Jackie.

They parted, shook hands, and he noticed that her hands shook like crazy, remembered that they had the entire forty or so minutes he'd known here. As he headed out towards the lot, she walked off to the left to catch the bus. And as she passed by the open doors again, she noticed Haley Nesoja sitting on a stool just inside, illuminated by the yellow light of a self-playing vitriola, cackling, her black junkie teeth dangling under swollen lips. She laughed and pointed at Jackie and laughed louder and hiccuped something about The Creation or some such bullshit and Jackie averted her eyes and quickened her pace towards the bus stop. The laughter followed her until the bus doors folded shut behind her.

They sat on his bed, listening to a GZA album until Justin felt his brain ache. A melody that was just left of The Exorcist theme. Marco was the one really into hip-hop; not that Justin had the money to buy a lot of albums anyway. They watched the news and listened to the rising toll of dead in Uganda and the GZA album played a sound clip stating that "A gun is made in America ever six minutes" while raps like septic honey melted out of the speakers.

"Did you know that insurance, on insurance, Viagra is covered but birth control pills aren't?"

Justin lolled his head towards the voice. "No."

"It's on the news."

"The Viagra insurance?"

"No the Uganda thing."

"What?"

"The, like, thousands of dead people in Uganda."

"Like a Jim Jones thing."

"Yeah," Marco replied

They'd walked home from the bar to watch Raiders of the Lost Ark but run into Haley Nesoja who was on something and laughing like a lunatic and slurring words about how she was going to "make a book or movie out of this shit."

"I saw the news today and there was this thing about a Chinese dude who killed some kids over thirty cents," Justin had said.

"Can go in the movie," Haley had answered.

Then they managed to walk quick enough to get past her and made it to Marco's to watch the film. Justin loved the movie, loved the heightened reality where the music picked up and hammered behind the reds and oranges of the scenes, standing against each other in rich contrast. But Marco got bored by the basket scene and wanted music. So out came the GZA album and out came the pipe – one of the nice glass ones that changes colors gradually as smoke passes through – and they added insult to the injury that was the \$55 tab they paid off at the bar.

"I met a girl, dude."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. At the museum video game joint on the cliff." Justin tipped his eyes down and jutted out his bottom jaw to exhale and tried to get a glimpse of his own teeth. "She was just really smart, you know. You could just tell, like see in her face, that she knew what was going on all around and knew how to deal with it."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know. This girl I met. Two days ago at the museum."

"Was she cool?"

"Yeah. She was smart." He wanted to call her, thought maybe that he should wait more but then let his excitement trample his apprehension. "Can I use your phone?"

"Sure."

Justin grabbed the phone off the charger and went into Marco's bathroom, pulling the door shut behind him tightly. He'd transferred her number from his hand to the back of an ATM slip two nights ago and he slipped the creased, near-translucent sheet out of his wallet.

"Hey. This is Justin. From the museum?"

"Yeah. How are you?" she asked over the line.

"Cool."

"Good."

Unawkward silence. "So, I was wondering if you, you know, wanted to go out on Friday."

"I'd like to. No shit. But I've got to work Friday."

"What about Thursday?"

"Work again."

"Okay. Yeah, well, look I'm don't want to bug you..."

"No," she yelped. "I really have to work. Sincerely. What about tonight?"

"Marco, this friend, he and I are going out to Kennedy's. Know Kennedy's?"

"No."

"The Irish pub curry place in North Beach?"

"No."

"Okay. Well, we're going out there and he's got a car so we could pick you up. About nine?"

"I'm not off work until 10:30. Tell me how to get there by bus and I'll meet up with you."

So Justin told her the directions, even figuring out which number bus to take, and then hung up. He walked back into the living room where Marco was staring out the window. "Dude, you care if Jackie comes?"

"Who?"

"Jackie. The smart chick I just told you about."

"You didn't tell me her name. Sure, whatever. Do I have to pick her up?"

She didn't really want to go to some bar. But she did want to see Justin. At the Musée, Jackie could tell by the red spiderweb lacing his eyes that he was high. Not that she had a problem with that. And he was cool, seemed smart in this abstract way.

But why bother? Why set yourself up to be disappointed? She jerked the toilet handle and stood up, shimmying her black jeans up around her ass. She found herself spending more and more time in the bathroom lately, just sitting on the john long after she'd finished, her elbows on her knees and her thick cheeks resting in her cupped hands. Marjorie, the last roommate who just took off with the Peace Corps, only mentioned it once or twice – made some reference to Jackie having 'alone time.'

Jackie supposed it could count as alone time. But she'd always thought of alone time as synonymous with reflection time. And she didn't really think when she sat in the bathroom, lighting matches and then flicking them between her legs into the fouled water before they singed her. But she didn't 'not think' either. Like the Musée, the bathroom was a vacuum. But unlike it, the determining trait was the lack of color and sound that characterized the musee. A void. A void where she would concentrate on abstract minutia like the disembodied contractions of her anus. She needed that time, she figured, not that she could put it into words.

She opened the bathroom door – closed out of the habit of having a roommate – and checked the clock above the oven. She had another ten minutes before she had to leave for work. Jackie knew she should appreciate any down time she had, take advantage, but the knowledge of another free ten minutes presented too much time for musing. She toyed with the idea of going back into the bathroom.

Instead, she found herself gravitating to the frameless futon mattress in the bedroom. The album on top of the pile was Public Enemy but the one under that was Sonic Youth's Daydream Nation. She put the disc on the black plastic tray– scattering rainbows as she pushed down on the black knob of the case and pulled up on the round edges of the disc – and watched it jerk backwards into the machine.

Fuzz filled the speakers and she slithered the black jeans off again before leaning up against the windowsill, her back towards the afternoon sun. She wore white cotton jockeys, Haynes, and she rested her left hand on her stomach, her thumb tracing the elastic band, the springy material sliding easily against her nail. She closed her eyes and drifted into the feedback

– sonic masturbation. She liked standing up now, liked to feel the underside of her ass rest on the sill and the crotch of her underwear grow wet. She rarely slid any fingers inside of herself, just let them trace the outline of her labia, brush by her clit. She liked the way the pressure seeped down to her knees while she stood, how they wanted to buckle but she wouldn't let them.

She traced the V-outline between her thighs and closed her eyes, trying to slip into the dreams. She thought of him in abstracts, a dream presence floating out of the feedback from the stereo. She always thought of Kurt when she masturbated, thought of his eyes and his fingers, shredding skin on guitar strings. And inevitably she thought about him dying. To say she was pissed about it didn't do it justice. Nor anything as self-conscious as abandonment. Nor sadness. There wasn't any one word that said it and she only rarely tried to explain anymore. She just let the waves hit her brain while she touched herself. She'd bought an import a few years back that had Courtney's epitaph on it, followed, of course, by Neil Young's "The Message." Sometimes she played the choked speech while she fucked herself and wondered if that indicated any sort of lesbian tendency.

She couldn't keep standing, felt like she could squeeze her underpants and watch juice roll out. Somewhere at the back of her skull, she knew she was running out of time, had to get to work. She staggered away from the sill, not daring to remove the two clenched fingers that whirled in tight circles over her clit, and flopped down on the bed. Lost notes squealed out of the noise in the speakers and picked up pace with the bass line. Her fingers circled quicker.

She had kept the Rolling Stone from when he died; had taken it throughout school and college and moving west. She never showed it to anyone because it was hers. The feelings were hers and she would not share. Which, she realized, was at odds with the victory-for-the-emotionally-downtrodden theme she linked all the dreams to. She knew she was a cliché. When she didn't feel like playing with herself but still needed a fix, she'd read the letters to the editor from that edition. Until about '96, they'd made her cry. No, weep. But now she just read them and dreamed. Once, in college, she'd allowed herself to be suckered into travelling down the coast to Miami Beach for spring break. Jocko-homo, white-capped boys with the cardboard cases from Budweiser jammed onto their heads like Dr. Seuss hats. Kids kissed and puked and kissed some more, fondling each other through bathing suits. Body shots on the beach while local teenagers wandered up and down hawking KB. A tour boat slithering just off the land, blasting Top 40 and the guys all screaming at the girls to "take it off" and how they cheerily responded or, if they didn't, were greeted with a chorus of "slut." And then "Smells Like Teen Spirit" came on and the jocko-homos flipped their shit and started smashing into each other in a mosh pit of well-tanned, well-groomed bodies. As good a reason as any for suicide, she figured.

She couldn't blame him, tried to blame them. She could feel the sweat from her ass and her wetness blend together in a puddle under her and she pushed her pelvis up into the air. Wanted to slide a finger, two, even a hand, inside her. But that'd be too easy. She pushed her thoughts back to out-of-tune violas and acoustic guitars and "umm-ummm's" from "Something in the Way" and clenched her vaginal muscles and felt his eyes stare into her and his cock slide into her and she felt like some sort of angel rising up in pure, beautiful horror, exploding in gold and red and she ground her teeth together and felt his sad smile on her lips. Whenever she came with his memory in her head, she felt her body ripple. More than it ever did with any other man.

She imagined his breath seeping into hers and his semen wash out her insides and she felt clean afterwards. Clean like it had meant something, had transcended something.

Marco had decided they needed a change of pace this evening and had driven to The Mission, ignoring Justin's inquiries. He had left the car running, double parked next to a Honda, and bounded inside, disappearing behind two large, green doors that swung inward like in some Western. Five minutes later he was back, accompanied by two small squares of thick, shiny paper folded carefully into themselves. Justin knew the score and felt so excited that he forgot to give Marco any more shit about ignoring him when he asked questions.

They didn't get to Kennedy's until 10:20 and Marco immediately headed for the handicapped bathroom while Justin went for the drinks, ordered two Guinness. The after work crowd was long gone and, it being a Wednesday night, the place wasn't exactly packed. Three or four clusters peopled the huge, three-roomed bar, one with half-filled plates stacked on the corner of the table, yellow rice crusting the edges. The room closest to the door was decorated by only two tables and then a pinball machine, an archaic Ms. Pacman, one of those expensive driving games where you sit in a plastic, cockpit-like seat, and a few shooting games. Justin set the beers and his over-shirt on one of the tables and retraced Marco's path to the bathroom.

He had already cut the lines; two thick trails on the top of the toilet tank, an old Sierra Club Card lying next to it.

"I saved you half the edge if you want it."

"Thanks." Justin picked the card off the top of toilet, squinted for the barely noticeable dust running along half of one edge, and traced his tongue along it, on both sides. Now it was time to play.

"What'd you do with the brew?"

"In the video game room. They got air hockey, dude."

"Cool." Marco loosely rolled a five dollar bill into a tube, bent down, nestled one end of the bill in his left nostril and pinched his right one closed, and snorted. Justin watched his head follow a short, slow path up the tank lid towards the wall and then continue up into the air, the five dollar bill pointing at the ceiling and Marco's neck muscles flexing as he sniffed hard like he was trying to suck all the air in the bathroom up into his sinuses. "Your turn."

Justin took the bill and bent down towards the straight line slanting across the hard, white, top. White powder on white ceramics.

"You owe me twenty bucks."

"How much did you get?" Justin paused above the coke, peering down the rolled edge of the green bill. He felt like he was looking through a fish-eye lens.

"This right here is like a third of one of those squares."

"Jesus."

"Yeah. I'll be outside." Marco started to slide the bolt lock to the right.

"What the fuck," Justin uttered calmly, concentrating on the powder that spread out miles away, following a projection from his nose, through the bill, and out across the toilet top. "Hold on for a sec."

"Sorry."

To be different, Justin pushed the bill up into his right nostril, forced his left one shut with a thrust of his forefinger, and imitated Marco's path forward towards the bathroom wall.

"Fuck, the drip. I need a beer."

Justin was frozen, his head thrown back, blond hair falling towards his shoulders, sweat already forming somewhere under the skin of his forehead. He felt the chalky mucous dribble down the back of his throat. "Yeah."

Behind him, Marco again tried for the lock.

"No, dude. One more line."

The lock slid back to the left again. "Okay."

And so Justin cut them this time, using an old school ID. Lines that seemed thick as worms, snaking off into the distance of the tank cover.

"Hurry up. Your girl is going to be here."

"Here. You can go first." Justin stepped back and handed Marco the bill that he had just re-rolled after licking. He looked in the mirror and thought of Russian Roulette and Christopher Walken. Emotional freefalls and moral ambiguities. He pushed a loose strand of blond hair back behind his ear.

"Your turn." He watched Marco vacuum up his second line of the evening before slipping the bolt on the door to the right.

"I'll just wait a few to come out."

"Whatever." Justin wanted to play video games. Ms. Pacman. He wished they had Pong. They had Pong at Stuffy's Subs when he was growing up and he remembered playing it while the Ollie North trials were on the TV mounted on the wall behind the counter. Peter something-

or-other from Boy Scouts had explained the Iran-Contra situation to him and he'd come home and asked Dad why he voted for Reagan.

He needed quarters, fished three crinkled bills out of his wallet and spent a good five minutes trying to get the humming machine to take up the pieces of paper and cough up coins. In that time Marco had slithered up to the air hockey table and leaned against it like a spic-Fonzi.

"Want to play?"

"Yeah. I got quarters." Justin bounded up to the other end of the plastic table and pushed two quarters in. A whisper of air pushed up through the pinpricks in the tabletop. He could feel the ends of his teeth, raw and stinging like icicles. He snorted. As soon as Marco dropped the yellow puck onto the white top and slammed it with the clunk of plastic on plastic, Justin was in it. Totally in it, not even aware of his sniffing and frantic nose wipings with the back of his free hand. He was all rock star internally, air hockey jockey externally. So totally in the zone that the hoots and "Score, motherfucker" just rocketed out of his mouth without consulting his brain. Such a slow rush that doesn't crash so long as you still have one and a half little paper packets left. He was on the top of his game – this important game. If pot was boredom in the muddy jungle, surrounded by a wet blanket of foliage, then coke was the rush of death, all frantic and instinctual and bloody.

"One left, bitch," Marco cackled through the hum of helicopters and the droning of The Doors. The puck careened towards Justin and he heard the pleasing thwap when his paddle returned it. And then a more distant thwap and Justin's eyes zeroed in on the piece of yellow plastic that skidded off the left side and bounded off the back of his paddle before clattering into the goal.

"Again?"

"No, man."

"Again. Come on. Again."

"No. I want to play one of the gun games."

"Okay. Can I have a quarter for the car game?"

Justin handed him the quarter and headed for the screen that glowed with skeletal aliens in stark red and yellow jump suits. The coin slot read "2 X 25" and he slipped two coins in before raising the gun towards the screen, planting his legs shoulder width apart, and clenching one eye shut. Mission One: The Air Bay.

He knew he was quick, could keep track of how many times he shot and then fire off screen to reload without missing any aliens. The target on the pink plastic gun he squinted down wasn't perfect but he pretended, focussing on the red bullseye on the screen that blinked when he was pointing for a direct hit. The aliens, more like mutant humans out of Evil Dead, he thought,

exploded on one direct hit. You couldn't blow off appendages like in the more modern games, but when you did get them they shattered. Like a grenade under the belly of a soldier who dove on top of it to save the squad. Or regiment or whatever.

"Dude, the car game needs 75 cents."

"Can you get me my beer?"

"The car game takes three quarters and I only have one."

"Get me my beer, over there on the table near my shirt, and then you can get the money."

Three dead aliens and a power-up later, Marco had lodged the Guinness into Justin's free hand and was digging in his jeans pocket for the money. "Jesus, man, you should see yourself."

Justin reloaded and popped an oil drum which exploded, taking out an army jeep. "What. Dude, don't fuck with me now."

"You're sweating like fucking Rocky."

And then he was gone, having gotten his fifty cents. Justin was painfully aware of the cramp in his trigger finger. A beer in his right hand, a pink gun in his left, and sweat collecting in his eyebrows before dripping over and on to his cheek, Justin flicked his forefinger back and forth so fast he doubted he'd ever pulled a trigger that fast before.

"Gonna get you," he hummed happily to himself, his mouth drawn tight in killer concentration and his blue eyes flitting from one side of the screen to the other, taking it all in at once. Somewhere behind him and to the left he could hear Marco chuckle and then curse and maybe yell "Whoooo" or some variation there of. The Southpark pinball machine three games to his right was manned by a mullet-sporting guy who could have been sixteen or thirty, a small beer gut pulling at the bottom of his Ozzy t-shirt.

"Justin?"

"What?"

"Justin. It's Jackie."

Justin shook himself and slipped the pink gun into its hard plastic holster that hung on the front of the machine. "Hey." He watched as digital fractals shattered the view screen and Game Over flashed in red. "Hey."

"I'm going to get a beer. You want anything?"

Sniffle. "No. I've got this one," he held up his left hand with a half-empty glass of inky drink in it.

"Okay." She disappeared into the next room as Justin sat down at the table.

Somebody put a Weezer song on the jukebox and he scanned the bar, watching three-quarters of the clientele plus most of the bar staff start to mouth the words to themselves. He'd like to be in a band like Weezer, just put out a really good album and then bail on music all together. Simply because you could; you could have the power to leave that behind. Sniffle. Getting nervous. Despite the coke that he could feel burning slow in his chest, he was losing the edge. What the fuck was he going to say to Jackie? Kind of wished he hadn't invited her. He pushed himself out of his seat and walked over to Marco, who was now watching the mullet guy bang on the pinball game.

"Marco?"

"Yeah."

"Jackie's here. So can you go to the handicapped bathroom and I'll meet you in a second?"

"Yeah."

Justin went back to the table and sat in the wicker chair just as Jackie rounded the corner, passed in front of the change machine, and sat down in the opposite chair.

"How you doing?"

"Cool." He wanted to take his pulse, just to see, but didn't. On edge like a bitch.

"What have you been up to today?"

"Not much. Listen, I'm going to run to the bathroom real quick. Be right back."

She said okay but he was already clear of the seat before the word was done. She watched him bounce out of the room and wondered why she'd come here. Weezer was on the radio. Poppy shit with nothing underneath all the fun. She'd kept her work outfit on, just a black skirt and dark purple tank top, and imagined her Hanes underneath the skirt and sprinkled with invisible salt, completely dry now but still saturated with the thoughts of him and the sonic boom that exploded behind her ears when she came. I don't believe that everything's dead, she thought to herself. I will not. I will enjoy this man's company.

And then Justin was back at the table, eyes on fire and staring at her intensely, a growing grin on his face. "Sorry."

"That's fine."

"Yeah, well. Anyway. I didn't have to work today and Marco just got fired so we just hung out."

"Yeah?"

"Just hung out. Smoked up. We did go to Red's for lunch."

"What's Red's?"

"I don't know. On the water, this coffee/burger joint. I saw a sea lion swimming around while we sat on the dock.

Awkward silence. "I've been thinking about what you said," she offered, "about Saigon."

"Really?" He sniffled, tried to discreetly wipe his nose with his napkin. The was good; she dug the word.

"Yes. I was just thinking about how words are just sounds, like, just phonetics."

"Okay."

"Kind of like music, like a language that gets put together and it can mean whatever you want."

"If you had to choose. Between music and words? Which one would it be?"

Unawkward silence. Jackie swigged her beer. Justin checked his pulse on his right wrist and thought of the Hanoi Hilton and how your pulse quickened under pain, under action.

"I'd keep the music. Because with music I can write the words in my head."

"Like how?"

"Well, if I have just words, I can't make music in my head. But if there's music I can make up the story."

"Example?"

"I don't know. Like when I was in Paris..."

"You were in Paris?"

"Yeah, I'm not from Frisco, from the East Coast. And in school over there, college, I went to Paris to study for a semester."

"Shit. Now that's someplace to go. Shit happens there I guess."

"No kidding. It was like being on a permanent vacation but with something interesting happening all the time."

"Not like here."

"Yeah. So anyway, I'm in Paris right before Christmas."

"What year?"

"I don't know, maybe three or four years ago. And so it's before Christmas and just so damn cold and windy. And I'm walking down the street and I pass this homeless woman sitting against a lamp post holding a dead baby."

"How do you know it was dead?"

Unawkward silence. "You just could tell, its eyes were cloudy and he was just kind of splayed out in her lap, stiff."

"Damn."

"Yeah. And the thing is, my point is, I can tell you about seeing the baby, I could even try to put it into words for myself, but it wouldn't really work, you know?"

"No."

"Words couldn't really sum up what I was thinking. The thoughts don't work in that kind of way."

"And music could?"

"Not specifically. But it'd come closer."

"Hmmmh." He was listening, but taking it in like a vacuum, sucking it all up but not being able to see, to remember, the specifics. Jesus fuck he was jumpy. "So you want to be a teacher?"

"I'd like to. And you, you're a cook, right?"

"A baker. It's cool I guess, I don't really have to deal with a lot of people so that's cool. And I don't know what else I could do. It's not really exciting but..."

"But what is?" The cackle came from a table a few feet away and they both looked at the same time. Haley Nesoja was sitting by herself, making the total number in the room three. Justin noticed for the first time that her eyes were almost completely black. Jackie noticed that she didn't have a bra on.

Haley chugged the rest of a Guinness, staring at them the whole time unblinking, and then stood up. "But really, what is? Write a fucking book or something."

And then she was gone, past the video games and behind a wall, probably to get another beer.

"I see her all the time, man," Jackie murmured, still looking at the vacated table."

"Me too. Like she's following me around. I think a guy told me that she's just some junkie that sleeps in the park, or that park at the Metreon, you know, that big Japanese entertainment center thing?"

"A junkie." Jackie stared, intrigued. She knew she wouldn't ever be a junkie, but she did frequently think of a Courtney Love quote that said something about how self-destruction could bring about empathy.

"See, I don't think my word stuff is that far from your music stuff."

"Maybe not."

"I've got this book, this photo collection of the 'Nam memorial wall in D.C..."

"Called The Wall. Yeah, I've seen it."

"Really?" He was sure his pulse quickened, regardless of drugs.

"It's a good book."

"It is. Well, I look at this, all these hand written notes and medals and teddy bears that mothers and girlfriends leave. And I guess it's true that they rise above being just words, just things. It just makes you want to weep, man. In this incredibly great way."

"I can see that."

"Not that it's like 'Saigon,' not that one, all encompassing term. But still."

Awkward silence.

"Still, it sums something up, doesn't it," she finished.

Unawkward silence. "Yeah."

Marco was back at the car game, having scrounged up quarters from some chick at the bar Justin assumed. Part of him wanted to leave, just get up without saying 'bye' and disappear.

And he had no idea why. To do it. You like this person, he thought. Do not, do not, do not fuck this up. He wanted more coke, wanted to be excited by this conversation.

"How do you know your friend?"

"Marco?" he asked, still thinking of lines across the toilet tank. "He just lived near me for a while. We kind of just started hanging out; somebody to party with."

Jackie pulled her chair up closer to the table and rested her elbows on the top, her chin perching on top of her two, clasped hands. "I want to tell you a quick story. Okay?"

"Sure, whatever."

"Okay. When I was in, like, my first or second year of college, I went back to my parents' for Christmas. And I spent the evening at a Bennigan's or something lame like that and just got completely trashed. This guy named Clarence was there, this guy who I'd gone to high school with and who, I guess, was hanging out with somebody I was there with, maybe. Anyway, he's pretty trashed too but I can't even see straight so I let him drive my car and we go over to my old school to run around on the football field or something. I don't know what the plan was, just to move and hang out somewhere. Probably fuck shit up."

"Sounds good."

"So we end up at school and in front of the main administrative building, just wrecked as all hell, and – somebody else was there but I can't figure out who the hell it would be – whoever that was, he and I picked up this big fucking garden statue, just some bullshit, Loew's Garden Shop concrete cupid or something, and threw it through the window."

Unawkward silence. "What was it like?"

"The whole big window just crumpled, almost folded. Like water and waves rolling over each other in slow motion."

"I could go for that now."

"I could go for that a lot of the time."

They sat in unawkward silence. Jackie stared at Justin and thought of Kurt and release and buzzsaw guitars and crying so much that you just fell asleep afterwards and didn't wake up for days. She thought of the slow build-up in the songs where you know the screaming and the horror are ready to begin but everything's still relatively quiet and then just jumps out at you like some beast looking to smash your head against the wall. And your brain liquefies and everything is over but somehow completely worth it because you got to understand something you never would again. How could this man in front of her be that?

Justin stared at her and sniffed and thought of napalm in the morning. This girl was cool, no question. But... He thought of a quote from the Wall book they'd been talking about: "Still don't know why. Think you guys may be better off. Strange." And another one where the notebook paper letter ended with "We just stand and look, not caring who sees us cry, just like no one cared who died." He wanted to cry for the namelessness that made the drama that was so real and now so gone. But also for all those old pictures, vets in jean jackets and helmets with "Peace" scrawled on the band in magic marker; the guys who didn't get into college so they had to blow people's heads to pulp and watch thatch and bamboo go up in flames while the jungle observes. All those people who just died for no reason and for all those who were alive now for no real reason. This person couldn't understand that. He couldn't understand that. Who the fuck could understand that; if you can't explain it, how can it exist? He looked at this woman in front of him, thought she knew things that others didn't. She was staring at her hands now, her beer barely touched and her fingers spread out flat on the table, long and thin and pale. He stood up.

"Listen, I have to go."

Awkward silence. "Yeah. I guess I do too. I have work in the morning."

"Marco," he called, "let's go. I'll be outside."

"I enjoyed our talks," Jackie said. She was standing up now, one hand still on the table and the other on her hip.

"Me too. Sincerely." He stuck out his hand and she paused for a split second, then took it too quickly. "Well, I'll see you around town. It's a small town, after all."

And she left. Dropped his hand, felt the his thick veins slide out of her grip and then the rush of air as the door opened and then the murkiness as it closed behind her, cutting off the orange light from inside. Maybe she'd go to the Musée; she didn't really have to work tomorrow so why not? Back East, they used to go to D.C. in the middle of the night and climb up on the Lincoln Memorial, sit in Abe's lap, and eat Ben and Jerry's and smoke blunts. Just being alive when the rest of the world was asleep or fucking or killing or making laws in the buildings that still glowed at the other end of the city. And thinking about him and what, if angels existed, he thought looking down. She probably would go. Probably.

By the time Justin finished two more beers, Marco still wasn't ready to go, having met some girl who promised E and blow back at her place. After declining the offer, Justin headed out into the night to walk home. He didn't want to deal with California-sex tonight, was even glad that he had to walk and didn't have to be shut up inside a car, a thick piece of webbing holding him down into his seat and pretending to make him safe. But he almost always felt safe. He was walking through North Beach at 1:30 in the morning and didn't feel the slightest apprehension, would relish even a dark shadow in an alleyway, the possibility of the adrenaline rushing into his brain while faceless silhouettes breathed hot down his neck.

An hour into the journey he realized that he wasn't going home, didn't want to go home, didn't know where he was going. But he kept walking, walking through every neighborhood,

each one as asleep as the next and the sky gradually lightening behind him as he made his way towards the Bay. And as the purple of the sky turned orange and then pink he found himself standing in front of the Metreon, a giant millennial structure of angled glass and spit-shiny metal. The top level was completely glass, wall-sized panes forced together side by side, and the new, dry, baby sun glinting off of it. Like the sparkle on the sight of a sniper's rifle.

He was tired, wanted to lie down and sleep and dream of his jungles and his lieutenant and playing soccer with a Vietcong head lying in the dust while Credence played over giant speakers lashed to limbless trees. He wanted the morning rush that was waking up about now somewhere else in the city to trample him under their collective, numbing feet. He wanted his pulse to throb out of his wrists and forehead and spill warm blood all over himself and the grass he now sat on.

And there was Haley. Sitting on a concrete bench and lining beaten soda cans up along the top of the chessboard park table, she was staring at him. Huge, vacant eyes like black holes pinned Justin to his seat and she smiled slow and wide and her jaws opened, mechanical jerkings of joints clogged with the grime of years. "It's your own fault," she said. "It's what you've made." Justin closed his eyes then and imagined the great helicopters taking off of the roof of the embassy while nameless and horrified hundreds beat at the fence and threw their infants at the departing soldiers. He smiled in his sleep at the sight of men vomiting blood and crying on the headless-neck of a buddy. From behind his eyelids he could feel the heat start to seep in and burn his retina, and he thought he heard Haley muttering. A cat screamed somewhere to his left. And then it was awkwardly silent.