

Babylon



or



Welcome HOME

I am fearful of something more than fear: it's something in the landscape surrounding the cities and smaller towns between here and the coast, something out there that feels so empty and it is not made of earth or muscle or fur; it's like a pocket of death but with no form other than the light one might cast upon its trail of fragments.

-David Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives

GO BACK TO THE PROJECTS YOU FUCKING NIGGER

Three jocks standing in the bed of a pick-up truck parked in the dull yellow of a synagogue parking lot. Alex and I squinted in the gloaming streetlights, trying to make sense of the epithets. Were they yelling at us? The whole world seemed empty, all four lanes of the Post Road silent with no cars. Just the throaty shouts of three jocks standing in the bed of a pick-up truck parked in the dull yellow of a synagogue parking lot. Alex, a light-skinned Columbian, put his hand to his mouth: 'I'm not black.'

The word 'empty' doesn't begin to describe the suburbs at one o'clock in the morning on a Tuesday. You never notice when you're in a car because the road is made for you. It's not only that there's nobody around, no clanging of steel shopping carts or revving of engines or boom of sub-woofers. Something about the streetlamps planted in the sidewalk, the yellow or is it orange? glow over everything, the darkness that isn't darkness at all. Like stepping into the background of a TV show without any of the action in the foreground. Like a TV set, that's it. There's something stagey about it. Without all the people pretending that it's real,

acting out the story, it's just a wooden set that belongs in a closet somewhere. Like someone forgot to pack it all down and put it away.

Most of my nightmares take place in this light. Like the one where I'm in my 30s and married to Gabby and we're fucking in our big adult bed under a huge skylight with a moon out and I don't come too fast. Afterwards, she falls asleep and I climb up onto the roof to look at the moon and smoke a butt. Then I'm in that empty orange glow looking down at the sound of my footsteps, and I'm wearing army boots. Am I in the army? I turn a corner and now I don't know where I am, I don't recognise the street. All brick buildings and dark orange streetlights. But the buildings are crumbling and bricks litter the tarmac and I hear footsteps, hundreds of feet. Then a bomb goes off and how did I not notice that I'm in a war zone? I need to take cover. Running back in the direction of home, but the streets are all different. Soldiers scuttle in formation past a pile of burning garbage. Nearby some civilians stare off into space in dirty armchairs. A cart is pushed past and lying on it is Melissa, encircling her baby brother in her arms. He is dead, this brother Melissa doesn't actually have, ash-faced and translucent like tracing paper. Melissa looks dead too. Her eyes don't see anything, but she's alive and in world-stopping pain. I shake Alex and Matt out of the armchairs and point to Melissa. Look, look, her brother is dead. They won't budge, but they weep like children.

I woke up in the same yellow light coming through the window but it was all silent. Silent and still. Because of course it was. Here in the suburbs, we were at least fifteen interstate exits away from catastrophe.

Matt only wore flip-flops, whatever the weather, and though we both liked jazz, we liked it differently. He wanted to play like Bud Powell, making a piano burst into flurries of not-quite-sane mathematics. I never wanted to play jazz. Or rather, I knew I couldn't so I didn't try. Even as a kid I knew that I could never have what I really wanted. I sensed intuitively the mystical underlying formula, that divine ratio that separates desire from gratification. All I could hope for was fin-

ding other people to watch the world burn.

'Let's go to the Rainbow Gathering,' Matt said. He wanted to begin the pursuit of happiness in earnest, like a good American. It sounded perfect. Almost heaven. At parties I would corner people and force them to give me their opinion about everything, in the broad sense of the word. I'd get fucked up on cheap beer and ecstasy, building up to a crescendo that involved taking off all my clothes, shouting through actual tears about how guys our age had a responsibility to America to stop marrying substitute mothers. With no clothes on, I could fire off figures of the children who had died of starvation in countries where food exports to the US were the bulk of their economy. Meanwhile, the Bush dynasty was trying to drag the whole country back into an Oedipal complex. The state, like God, was a stand-in daddy figure. Smash the state, I said, shivering and naked, before it smashes us.

Matt discovered the Rainbow Gathering through word of mouth. We sat in the pizzeria drinking grape soda and decided to find our people. At the bus station we bought two one-way Greyhound tickets to Butte, Montana. Fifty dollars. 'We'll get a ride back,' Matt assured me. 'All we need is stuff to trade. Like chocolate and cigarettes.' In a thrift store duffel bag we packed a few Hershey's bars and a carton of Marlboro Lights. Matt threw in a copy of The Tao of Pooh and I took an extra pair of socks. I asked about camping and he said, 'Don't worry, you'll see. People there just share everything. We'll find a camp with tents and stuff.'

You can map the cultural border of the tri-state area by the point at which people start calling soda 'pop'. A fellow bus passenger loaned me a pocket radio with a single earpiece, then got off in Ohio without asking for it back. I listened to the U2 song 'One', privately embarrassed because I liked it. We're one, but we're not the same. At Toledo, a guy who looked like us with green eyes and a lot of unwashed hair got on. We nodded to each other when he sat down.

'You guys going to the Rainbow Gathering?'

'Yeah.'

