

Clear

I was twenty four, I went to Chicago, Detroit, Berlin, I was always running, running. I felt a craving for noise that I could not explain. I wanted to rinse myself out with sound.

As a child I watched my mother boil Korean tonic soups made from chicken and ginseng in the dog days of summer. You fight the heat with heat, she said. The music I fled to was similar, scalding. We were always looking for cures.

I came from Durham, where my father washed cars and my mother drifted from church to church, indiscriminate in her hunger for God. We were nobody. They were somebody, maybe, but back then I slipped through the world like a void. In eleventh grade I walked to school and then stopped at the door. There was nothing for me there. I crossed the street to the Food Lion.

“Let’s have you in the back,” said the manager, “where you won’t need to talk to the customers.”

“OK,” I said, though I spoke with a drawl. I thought of myself as a ghost—colorless, unseeable. A year in, he paused and looked down at my nametag. Gabriel, he said, sounding surprised at the name.

I stocked the shelves, I went to church, I took home what I earned in fives and tens, tithing half to my parents and storing the rest in a cut off cereal box under my bed. At night I slept with the money beneath me, folded and impotent. I turned eighteen, nineteen, twenty, and then I let the years wheel past and around me. Once on my birthday my mother brought home a piece of paper with my name written on it that she had dipped in the holy water font. Keep everything safe, she said, folding it into my palm. She mixed her own kind of faith, taking scraps from different gods. But what did it matter? I had nothing to save.

When I left I took two pairs of shoes and a suitcase I had not used since I was six. I folded the money I owned up with my clothes, as I had seen my mother do for safekeeping—into my socks, my jean pockets, the collars of my shirts. I started to write a letter, but then I stopped. I had not even made a statement to myself. I felt like a flare had been lit in my chest. At the airport, I remembered the piece of paper. But I had no use for my name.

Outside I stood behind a woman in a parka, holding two girls against her to shield from the wind. All my life, the scent of going would smell as it did there on the tarmac—like cold, and gasoline.

Those twelve months were like dream walks, delusions. I followed kids I did not know to raves in worthless places—sewers, factory floors. I went to warehouses, I stalked the underground, I tore my clothes and shaved my head and threw my body around to the beat with Tiger Balm smeared over my lips in an impenetrable high. The days stumbled into each other. I slept in doorways and stairwells and subsisted on colors. I drank burnt coffee mixed with sugar and slapped myself to stay awake.

In Chicago I went to a room with no windows where people shook and fell to the rhythm as if worked by strings. In Detroit I stood on a factory ledge while a woman with a nail in her ear wept into my shoulder. Everywhere the walls spat back the music, a howl of Brillo pads and steel. Once I remembered a sermon, how God spoke to Job from out of a whirlwind. I always danced with my hands outstretched, silent, looking outwards.

In Berlin a man I hardly knew took me to the top floor of a building where kids bashed their heads until sunrise. The air was black and splintered with lights.

“You can’t get old out here,” he shouted to me. “If you get old, you’re just pathetic.” We banged our fists in the air, punching blind, punching nothing.

On the way down the elevator slid to a stop. It was packed so full I could feel the expanse of my chest against the others each time I took a breath. Next to me a girl with her bangs sheared across her forehead was puking into her hands.

Happy New Year, someone said behind me, and I blinked; it was 1994.

The firemen hauled us down by the cables. “Go home,” they yelled to us, and opened the doors into the blazing morning. I hitched a ride to the airport and asked to fly to New York City.

When I arrived there was still confetti in the streets. I took the subway from the airport and walked from Penn Station to Times Square, carrying my suitcase. The whole world felt off kilter, hungover and empty. As the sun came up I watched two old men sweep up the leftover revelry, with brooms as wide as their shoulders. It was the end of my wandering year.

I went over the river to Brooklyn and walked into a hotel and counted \$312 out of a rolled up sock. I gave it to a woman behind a desk in the lobby and said I needed to stay for maybe a month. I didn't know where to find another place—I had tumbled between non-homes and nowheres. I, I must have looked like a boy. She gave me a key marked for the fourth floor, hung on a piece of twine.

In the room there was a fold up bed with sheets that stank of salt and cigarettes. I lay down and slept through the day, and then through the night.

Downstairs a man in a felt jacket sold milk and old fruit. He had written Hot Sandwiches in white paint on the store window, but that was a lie—in the back he had wrapped up some ham on sliced

bread up in plastic. I walked to the counter with a box of cigarettes and said I could help carry boxes up from the basement.

“Open your own damn grocery store,” he said, looking me up and down, and I put the cigarettes back; I never smoked.

I took the train to Manhattan and walked from store to store, with my head down. Eventually the man behind the deli counter in a C-Town said I could speak to the manager. He came out from the back, a balding man carrying his gut in his jeans, and said, can you bag groceries? Can you clean floors? I nodded and said I could do everything.

“Where are you from?” he asked. I said I lived in a hotel in Brooklyn but I couldn’t remember the street.

He laughed and told me to come back tomorrow at five in the morning, to help open the store. When I came he handed me a box knife. I felt like a telescope folding back up, as if all my yesterdays had evaporated behind me. In the back two men in white undershirts were tearing the plastic off of crates of apples, with the radio tuned to a game.

The city plunged deeper into winter and at nights I took to jogging in the streets. I wore a tank top and jeans scissored off at the knees and flung myself across the city. It was like a purgatory, the cold in my veins. I pounded the streets as if carving myself into some unnamed but necessary shape. I went miles and miles, felt myself lean out. I grew empty and taut. When I ran the hours seemed to expand and collapse. Stride, stride. I counted my breaths and turned off my thoughts.

Just once, I dreamt of my parents. In the winter, my mother brewed separate teas to fix coughs and kidneys—when I woke up I was still telling her not to refill my glass. It was so ordinary, it hurt my chest. The next day when I ran past a pay phone I slowed. A woman stood there fumbling with her

coins. She had them counted out in little stacks on her palm. I'm waiting, she said, when she picked up the phone. I turned the corner.

In spring I bought books alphabetically off of a throwaways cart and took them home to my room, small enough to touch the walls when I spread out my arms. I didn't care what I read, I stockpiled thrillers and rags, I anesthetized myself with stories. For weeks I lived on canned beans and Ovaltine. Later I worked the deli counter and stole roast beef and ate it off of the paper in the backroom and took home molding peaches in my pockets and ate them standing up in the kitchen.

A man came through the sliding door – it was June, I was working a cashier shift until midnight. The air had turned woozy and thick. Next to the register I kept my latest book; I had *Vurt*, by Jeff Noon, propped open next to the sponge where I wet my fingers to take the bills. He was buying sixteen boxes of whole grain pasta and no sauce.

“Slacking on the job,” he said, but I closed the book.

“It's almost midnight,” I said. “The shift ends in five minutes.”

He looked at my name tag.

“Gabriel,” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “I'm from North Carolina.”

“I'm Damian,” he said. He was wearing a T-shirt with the sleeves torn off and carrying a gold spangled jacket. It was so hot, I thought, why bother with a jacket? When I finally held it for myself, I would notice, as I did not then, that the threads at the collar had started to come undone. It was something I could never have worn, ragged and radiant.

I scanned his many boxes again and again and placed them into a bag. He picked it up and turned back towards me.

Later, on other nights, we would invent more beautiful versions of this day for ourselves. Instead of a checkout we would whisper, we were on an island, a ferry. And even later, he would ask the same question he did then, but with his voice raised—who are you, Gabriel, and why are you here?

Once, in Berlin, I had watched a man in a two-story club tip over the railing into a waiting crowd. It was so lovely, I wanted a photograph. What I remember is how willing he looked, as if in a trance. And the way he fell forwards, deliberate and slow—his shoulders pulled back, almost lazy.

At his apartment Damian had six kinds of knives. They would become so familiar, but that night I walked from room to room, looking. He was twenty-eight years old and taught voice at a high school in Harlem. Summer break had begun yesterday. In the bathroom he had a navy blue toothbrush and soap that smelled like almonds and roses.

He lived ferociously. It was like being inside a Polaroid saturated until the colors bled through the frame. The world parted before him—in my memory we went through crowds at supermarkets, sidewalks; they swept to his sides like the sea. In ordinary places, like dance halls, the masses knew what to do with such electricity. When we entered – when he entered – he created circles around him. At a roller rink he strapped on old fashioned wheels and tore up the hall, arms flailing, thrashing his way around the ring. Even in pictures – I studied them afterwards, the bend of his neck. He stood in the back and pulled the focus around him, louche, uncaring in his intensity.

Everything was always incandescent, 100 percent. I saw him sing a song of his own creation to a little girl on the sidewalk who was humming, *When the Saints Go Marching In*. He brought me to parties held by friends of friends I had never met and dipped his cup in the punch and threw it in the face of the host and made her laugh. A small man in a convenience store looked too long when we walked in and was slow to the register; Damian came up to the counter and held up his money and ripped the dollar bills into pieces.

“Come on,” I said, laughing and terrified, but he said, I won't be fucking looked at like that. I thought he would crack down the middle with rage. Later that day he saw an ice cream store across the street and ran there through the traffic and ordered a cone with three scoops, all raisins and rum.

Looking back I am sure there are exceptions but it seemed total and complete to me then. I caught the current simply by dint of my nearness. It was like following a man who drew hidden spotlights from the dark. When I remember these months I always picture a river – how you can open your hands to let the water take hold, sweeping them forwards.

Summer nights, and we lay face up in a concrete lot where mosquitos came and took our blood. He filled ice trays in the freezer and brought them outside and popped the cubes in my mouth and told me to bite. In July we went to Ukranian restaurants in the East Village and he grasped my wrist above the table. We saw the sky lit up and shouted at the fireworks from beside a freeway, craning back our heads amidst the crowd.

I could not have dreamt of this place as a child, such beautiful anonymity. I wanted to tug it around us like a shroud. Until then I had moved from city to city like a furled umbrella, even oceans away from any face that I knew.

You're so flighty, he would say to me, sometimes; he cupped my body at the bus stop, and open spaces; he did not understand the impulse to duck.

“Stop,” I said, once, and pushed him away. We were waiting for the A train, carrying groceries, and he reached to my jeans and slipped in his hand in the place of a wallet. I could not explain myself, I felt stiff with fear. Besides us, an old woman held a little girl's hand. I could see a row of passerby across the train tracks, looking in all directions, mostly to each other. I took his hand from my pocket and placed it at his side. He looked up, startled, and I turned away.

“Sorry,” I said, “Sorry, I'm learning.”

I put his hand back in my pocket and we stood and the train came and we went home. For days, I would remember his face, like a premonition—bent in confusion, not even with hurt.

Once he asked me if I was happy with him. We were lying in bed and he was turned to the window, the moonlight freckling his skin. I did not even know what it meant to be asked. He was so free with himself, I thought he could eat up the world and spit it back out again. I would have rearranged my whole self around him. I had spent so much time making myself more compact, bundled up, like string wrapped around string.

“I don't understand,” I said, after a silence.

Still, he brought home gifts. When I came home from my shift I found them on the kitchen table. A tea kettle, dish cloths. Even paper napkins – these seemed like miracles to me, signs of a home. Sometimes I thought of bus rides, field trips, the accumulated journeys – directionless, chaste – of my own brief lifetime. I felt I had gathered up the tokens I had been given and cashed them in, but to what, I did not know.

I sang to him at night. This was all I had to offer. I lay in our bed and murmured hymns. Holy, holy, holy. He laughed and put his hand in my mouth, but I sang, be thou in my vision, and closed my eyes.

In August we stood on the table with the stereo on and ate cold chicken salad, which I hid beneath my C-Town apron, out of the package with our hands. He took my head and pulled me to him; we smelled of celery and garlic.

I had left the hotel long ago for a room in Bushwick, owned by two middle aged men whose number I found in the back of a newspaper. When I arrived there was only a mattress on the floor. It was like moving from one closet to another.

He thought it was funny when he saw it – a bed hemmed in by books. I packed all of them into boxes that I closed up with duct tape and on a weekend we carried them together on the subway back to Manhattan, pushing them one by one along the sidewalk. Afterwards we bought a bag of tangerines for dinner and sat with our backs to the stove and peeled them onto the kitchen floor. He was worn out from the moving and stretched onto my lap and closed his eyes. Our windows were thin; outside I could hear two girls laughing, the whistle of a siren. I reached down to him and touched his eyebrows. While he slept I held his head on my knees and matched his breaths. When he woke I rapped his body up and down with my knuckles. His knee caps, his collarbone. Pelvis. I lay my head to his chest. I wanted to hear the sharp of my hand against his ribcage. To know every part of him and sound him—like a bird checking for the hollow, a sculptor testing wood for the flaws.

That night I tried to explain to him what it was to speak in tongues.

“You get taken with the spirit,” I said at last. “It speaks for you.”

“But there is no spirit,” he said, shaking his head. “That makes no sense.”

We were sitting in the dark, our shoes still on.

“No, I know,” I said. “Maybe it’s all in your head, then. I don’t know.”

We made up our sheets, we showered and dressed, I felt the linen of his undershirt – silken, thin – between my fingers. When we lay down I tried again, to sketch it out with my hands. Here the aisle, the pews, the women stamping the narrows, men with combed hair and their eyes rolled back. I pounded his chest to say, the rifle fire of your heart, can you imagine how that feels? Waiting to be lifted from beneath your armpits with light. I wanted him to know the rolling moan, the harsh exhilaration, shot through with fear. I let out a guttural howl, to say, see? He flinched and then lay his hand on mine.

I said, “I know it’s not real, but haven’t you ever felt overtaken by anything?”

He was quiet. After a while, he said, yes, of course.

In the morning – sacraments. Coffee kettle, shower. I took the newspaper from the neighbors below and peeled back the plastic and read the passages aloud, trying to prod him to laughter, looking for rhymes. He fried eggs with the gas turned high; he burst the yolks and said, well, anyway, tip back your head. The gold running down our chins. I felt anointed. We used a spoon made for grapefruits. That was all he had. I had not yet unpacked. I left my boxes in the living room and all summer they would come between us. In an argument months down the line he would move through our shelf methodically, taking out all of my books. His hands full of our duplicates – extra Gatsby, extra Bidart. But that was in the future.

For weeks in the apartment I lived out of the suitcase, which I kept beside the bed. In the front pocket I kept necessities—a button-up shirt with a stain on the collar, my running shorts, a tape cassette from Chicago, toothpaste. My emergency stash, he called it.

“You’re a survivalist,” he said once at night. “Always ready to go.”

But this was not true, or I did not think of it this way. I knew how the ground could always roil beneath you. He had never left New York City. I felt like a stowaway, in the ship of a life too lucky to be my own.

When I was nine years old, I came back once from school and found my father sitting at the dining table. He pointed down the hall.

“Your mother is in the bathroom,” he said.

I went to the door and tried the handle, but she had locked it, so I went back to the kitchen. My father explained that they had gone to a park in the morning but my younger brother had fallen in the lake and drowned.

In later weeks my mother brought home paper pamphlets printed with psalms. Something had cracked inside her—before then she rarely left the house. She gathered them from different places, street corners and restaurants, and kept them clipped together in the drawer of her nightstand. I crept into her room and took them to read, alone, under my covers. They always promised a better way forwards. Over the year my father came home later and my mother came undone.

We tried so many versions of God. Once in a Catholic church basement a woman handed me a juice box and said, sweetie, your mother is stalked by demons. I was not sure this wasn’t true. Even before, my mother had always looked backwards, as if trying to resurrect the past. At night I imagined

her sorrow flowing from her chest and coming to stand beside her like a shadow, how they could waltz together in the dark.

Another time she took me to a black church in Edgemont. There was a new pastor, he had just moved in from Chicago. We sat in the back pews like an alien presence and I watched the other boys go up to the altar in their pressed clothes.

Before we left the pastor took me aside and asked me my name. His head was shaved and he was no more than thirty years old. I looked at his suit, his shoes, his hands.

We were so welcome in this place, he said. He thanked me for coming, but we never went back.

In other cities sometimes when I threw my hands up to the music I thought of a girl I saw when I was in high school, who rode the back of her own passion, howling on Sundays until she collapsed. Once I stood beside her as she fell to the floor and cracked her head against a pew, eyes glazing over into concussion. I hungered for what she had seen, though I could not understand it. Later I recognized her everywhere—in the German man who stood next to a concrete wall, screaming in joy; in the teenager with matted hair who floated from room to room, as if borne aloft by the beat.

In Berlin I thought of them often, that congregation. The pastor, waving his hands, saying, all of you are my flock.

He yelled to us, “Who are you?”

We said, “Your flock, your flock!”

I pictured them in every strobed room, those substitute cathedrals. There, as in childhood, I often stood to the side with my hands in the air, waiting.

September came, the air tight and clean. We were walking more than ten blocks from home, with no real destination.

“Take me to a mass,” Damian said to me.

“OK,” I said, and he turned, surprised.

We found a German church two blocks away, painted a brilliant red. Everything about it was unknown and still familiar to me – the cut of the stairs, the door, the arch of the entryway. I stood in the waiting space beyond the threshold and he stepped in.

Inside it was almost empty; it was late afternoon. There was no mass. A woman sat towards the back with her eyes closed. I could not tell if she was moving her lips, or simply breathing.

We walked close to the altar, we wet our hands in the holy water. I felt, though no one spoke, as if I had screamed into the quiet. After a while I took him to the pews and we sat with our heads down.

“Now what,” he whispered. “Is there something to say?”

I shook my head and folded my hands into my lap, then into his, feeling lightheaded and strange, as if I had brought him into the fold of my own longing.

On the way out we lit a candle to a saint I could not recognize. The wax fell into ash, our hands clasped together over the wick.

In the evening, while he slept, I sat up in the bed and carried my suitcase to the living room. I took one of the knives from the kitchen and slit open the tape from the boxes, stacking the books beside me on the floor. I brought the ones that I could to the shelves. The rest I piled against the wall, far enough from the radiator to avoid flames.

I took what I had out from the suitcase. It was packed too tightly, belts thrown together with things I did not even remember I had owned—shrunken sweaters, a tie. I held the cassette tape I had

bought after landing in Chicago, in a basement where I had looked around me at the lights and the bodies, unsure if I was truly there.

In the apartment in Bushwick, as I put books into boxes, he had bent to pick it up, looking surprised.

“It’s so angry,” he said. I thought about this and said no, it was just a different kind of noise.

I put the tape back, into the pocket of a raincoat. I would not see it again until years later, when I was throwing the coat out of someone else’s closet in California; by then I would not know where Damian lived, or how to find him, or even if he was still alive. And before that—it was not even autumn. The weeks were still shining and warm. Later, when we fought I would come to imagine that I was tending a child. That I needed to take it in and bathe it, spar with it. I imagined holding our littlest fights between us, rocking them in my arms, saying there, there, hush.

I would try to remember this night. How I felt as I unpacked, like I had come out of the sea and onto a sandbar.

There was so much of each other that was yet to be known.

When I finished with the suitcase I stood it in the corner of the room. I carried the clothing back to our bedroom and folded it into the dresser, watching him turn without waking, my hands peppery with the stale smell of mothballs. It lingered on the sheets. Days later I would take them to a coin-operated wash, feeling, as I threw the linens into the dryer, as if I were laundering away many months of my life like stains.

At the end of November, I brought him with me one night to climb a water tower. I chose, for him, the one I loved first and best – on a rooftop in Brooklyn, overlooking the bridge. I knew it from my first week in the city. I had seen it from the hotel, between the blinds. When I climbed it then it had been

snowing. The metal was bare and bit into my hands. From the topmost rung I saw the jagged line of the city, all those hopeful and beckoning lights. I have never come close, again, to that wild and simple ecstasy. I felt at once above and connected to the whole thing, as if tied to the city by strings pulled out from my chest. When I climbed back down my hands had gone white in the cold. I cut my thumb on a rung and the blood froze in the air.

I had never brought him here before. I kept it slipped away for myself, a reminder of those nameless days, stumbling and heady. I had been so scared and so free. When we stepped out of the subway I saw the old things, the hotel, the sandwich store, the Greek stall where an old man had given me a grape leaf stuffed with rice, and for a moment I hesitated – I had taken him somewhere too close to my heart. But even then I felt the ending, I think, the weeks ticking down beneath our feet. To bring him back was the least I could do. Like spreading my hands before him in offering, concession.

“This is it,” I said, pointing, and for once he followed. We walked between two billboards, the unchanged alleys, the unchanged doors. I took him to the apartment building and we went in through the back door, where the trash cans were lined against the fence, and I struck the handle as before with the heel of my palm and it lifted. It was all the same. You do not forget the places that forge you; you carry the familiarity in your hands. The elevator, which smelled of piss and lemon, the bell that rang at every floor. We went to the highest floor and I took his hand and brought him to a laundry room and pushed the hatch and pulled down the ladder and we clambered up and out into the air. That was the only time I have seen him really pause – when I stepped out beneath the tower, he hesitated at the rungs.

“Come on,” I said. This was what I had, as the measure of my life. Every ladder I had known, every rooftop, all the doors.

I was no stranger to abandoned places. I associated them with anarchy, noise. Here, clutching the rungs and leaned out over the edge – it reminded me of a canyon. The silence up top, as if drinking rarefied air. I could have swallowed the night whole. For once I pulled him to me. There was no one to see. After a while, I realized he was shivering.

“Are you cold?” I asked, worried. With my open hand I rubbed his ears, the sides of his arms.

“There’s no one up here,” he said, shaking his head. He was so rarely haunted, afraid of anything. But he gripped the rungs with both hands; he looked small and white with fear.

In our first weeks together we went to stores for no purpose. Drugstores, liquor shops, anywhere. Everything felt opulent, bountiful—all those bottles, honeys, razors and fruits. He took me to a department store and ran up and down the aisles, pulling clothes off the racks. He shoved his way past the doors and rang the dressing room bells. He went through those golden places with his arms flung wide, filling his arms, as if we were thrifting.

Even then I had understood how he was drawn to furs and gilded things. He wanted crowds, to be seen. I was drawn to the one who was drawn to gilded things. He was no good being alone.

From this height the cars moved slowly, like beaded nothings, pinpricks. I saw ourselves, fabulists, hungry and threadbare. This I could give us—the velvet of sky. The city strung out beneath us like a necklace. I felt I had sleepwalked my way towards such vastness. It spilled out in all directions and lay itself out before our feet. Until then I had always rushed towards the music. All the songs of my life – hymnals, bass drops, the crash of subway cars and sirens.

I swung my arm around him and pressed him to the ladder and took in the scent of his hair, the familiar detergent of our sheets. After this—in those days I could not see the future, not more than an

hour ahead. It was like driving down a highway with the windowpane fogged, like trying to part the curtain of a storm. What use was it to look? He warmed to my body and stilled. It was so quiet, I could have wept. For a moment we hung there, exalted.