Robert Burns Wrote to a Mouse
by Michi Chu

The summer that I was getting over being a junior in high school, John Steinbeck killed my best friend.

I’m not talking about some axe murderer coincidentally named John Steinbeck, but rather Mr. Grapes of Wrath himself. Born in 1902 in Salinas, California, a big fan of the passive voice. He went to Stanford University to study whales and fishy things, but didn’t graduate. While all my classmates were looking at colleges, Stanford University included, I chilled with tombstones.

The cemetery is a fifteen minute walk from my house, more if you stop by the Starbucks’ for pricey American coffee trying to be anything other than American, I resent Starbucks because calling a small a tall just doesn’t make sense to me. Last time I checked, “Grande” means not medium, and “Venti” could mean sheep urine for all I care. In cases where size matters, like, say, food, boobs, dicks, basketball players you can’t just call a small something other than that. As a guy who was called “midget” all his life, I’ve only thought about this as much as you would expect me to. Piss me off.

In the cemetery, the way it used to be is that we liked to read epitaphs. Like the mnemonic that Mr. Churches, our Honors Chem teacher, taught us: “There was a little chemist, A chemist he is no more, Far what he thought was H2O was H2SO4.”

I’ve always gotten sulfuric acid right on every test. Did you hear the one about the hypochondriac? His read: “I told you I was sick!” Most people can’t appreciate such grave humor. That’s why their tombstones could just bore you to death: “Here lies blah blah, devoted husband, brother, missed by all,” all referring to whoever it was that he knew, all who’ll eventually end up in the ground, most likely with equally boring tombstones.

Okay, horrible humor, I know. He would have hit me for that. When we used to come here together, we would pick out all the people that either were born or died on our birthdays. I liked the children’s graves, stone cherubs and angels - he liked the couples’ graves, saying, “He couldn’t even get away from her in death.”

I’ve got this book of cheesy old jokes. Some of them I mean really old, President Hoover references and saying “swell fella,” humor that relies on puns and word play and not a single shit, tit, dick, or ass. Mr. Jones asking the waiter what the fly is doing in his soup. And it has this epitaph section - we knew most of them by heart.

We found some of the names mentioned, or at least some of the last names, and even now when I pass the graves I always recite out loud without thinking the way I still mumble Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost from the verses they made me memorize in Catholic school.

Thomas Pynchon 1930-1965:

"Reader if cash thou art
In want of any
Dig 6 feet deep
And thou wilt find a Penny."

To Mister Lester Moore, I say:

"Here lies Lester Moore.
Four shots
From a .44
No Les
No More."

To anybody named Anna, I always think:

"Here lies the body of our Anna
Done to death by a banana
But the sin of the thing that made her go."

When I get to the stone that says Herbert, I don’t say anything at all. I try to say “hello”, but it sounds stupid and wrong, and we never really said “hello” to each other, except accidentally, when we picked up the phone.

"Yes,” just doesn’t feel right, not here, not anymore. Hay is for horses, my second grade teacher always said.

(And what do gay horses say? “Haaaaaaaayyyyy"

Just beyond the cemetery is the town beach, sharing the same patch of trees and long shadows. We used to hang our swimming trunks from the giant stone cross that stands in the sun, like the blue and black boxes of Christ. I used to, and still do, wonder what would happen if a tsunami swept in from the ocean, tall as city skyscrapers, and crashed, and fooled all the graves, washing all the corpses out to sea. There’s an image for you: the flotsam and jetsam of bodies and bones. Of course, the water at the town beach is not the ocean but rather just a lake. The only time something like that would happen is during a hurricane. And then, and only then, the
ground would be littered with coffin driftwood.

On a nice day, the sunlight spills like yellow-paint water over all the trees and runs like egg-yolk down the sides of headstones, and it's quiet as a Church, quiet as, aha, the grave. What I like is how quiet it is. It's not exactly a popular hang-out spot; no mourning widows in black here, not even the Goth kids from school that sleep at Hot Topic and listen to snitty nu-metal bands like Slipknot and System of a Down. Good thing too, I wouldn't want to see the grass littered with Budweiser cans and those black clove cigarette stubs, like Goth kid droppings. I guess it's not to my credit that we used to go here to get high. I had this idea, fucking ridiculous, really, that it was communing with spirits, because I read somewhere about those ancient priestesses that would eat strange herbs and have hallucinations and call them prophecies. He used to say, "shut the fuck up and quit hogging the bowl!" and also, "prophets were the best businessmen."

I know it's funny how much time I spend here, tip-toeing around graves. When I was younger, I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming the dubious fortress of my home. I always got really quiet when we drove near a cemetery, and I would shush everybody else in the car, too. I was convinced that dead people were sleeping in the ground, and any noise, especially those coming from small loud children, would wake them. To humor me, my parents turned down the volume on their cassette tape of old Chinese music, which, like all parents' music, was intolerable and impossible to understand. I was terrified of dead people bursting through the earth and chasing me down like zombie dogs, swarming t
doing hanging around me.

I hung out with them because I had to. It reminds me of George's line in Of Mice and Men: "Course Lennie's a God damn nuisance most of the time, but you get used to goin' around with a guy an' you can't get rid of him."

I never forgot any of my lines. Fucking Steinbeck.

After it happened, Josh asked, "Do you still have that video?"

"Jeez," I said. "Who doesn't have a copy of that video?"

"Well, the guys and I were thinking that maybe... we could get them together and burn them, you know? Like a kind of ritual."

I looked at him, hated him now even more than ever - his Pillsbury Doughboy complexion, washed out features. "What are you, fucking retarded?" I mean honestly. Losers.

"Look, I just thought we should get together. Say what's the point," I asked him, "when the person's already dead?"

James, I noted, looked like he was about to cry again. Pussy.

Kyle said, "Iky, Dule. It's okay," and tried to put a hand on my shoulder.

I walked away, because really, who wants to be around weak shit like that.

Let's rewind the tape to sophomore year.

Fourth period, September day, right before lunch. "Hey, Chow," Max had said to me.

And I asked, "What, did Josh's parents find the creepy cartoon porn on his computer?"

"Better," Max replied, and I wondered, what could possibly be better than seeing our friends suffer.

He dangled something glinting from between thumb and index finger, and when they clinked together it made the same sound loose change for candy does.

"Introducing," he paused for dramatic effect, "the Maxmobile." His mom's station wagon waited calmly in the school parking lot, the Tang-colored chassis scratched and dented from years of bad driving. I let out a low whistle, grinned when he said, "ain't she a beaut?"

We climbed into the hot leather-lined interior, like raw dough into an oven, and Max turned to me and asked, "Well, where do you wanna go first?"

"New York, New York," I said, "It's a hell of a town." But really, I meant to the beach, because it was unusually warm that fall, and that is where we ended up anyway.

We spent a lot of time at the beach. That's where I put the gun to Max's head.

I think about how we used to get drunk with Chianti and vodka stolen from his mom's liquor cabinet and scramble to the top of the lifeguard chair, the rungs so slippery, and I never remembered the chair being so rubbery or so dizzy or high. The sand was so far away beneath us. We could have died then.

And this one time - I was so stoned - and Max had his back to me. I saw everything in details and symbols, his arms were so corded with muscle, striated muscle they call it, and the back of his neck was somehow tanned, a little freckled - how, I don't know, he's pretty pale, not like me, and his hair was in need of a trim and I could see where the strands curled into the curve of his car. Something burned inside of me and I wanted to do something and I couldn't, like every nerve was doing jumping jacks and vibrations were humming through my toes, over and through all the surfaces of my skin, epidermis dermis subcutaneous just like in Bio, plucking them just like I abused my violin in the lessons Mom forced me to take.

God, I was so stoned.

I'm a friendly drunk, I feel warm inside and affectionate. Four or five drinks in my system and I'm the type who slurs stupid sentimental shit like, "You're my best friend, I love youuuuu so much. Love. Love." "Good God, man," Max would say to me, "adolescence is hard enough without you being a fucking nut job on me."

We mmed there, of course, at the beach. Afterwards we stripped down to our boxers and jumped into the water, cool and sweet, murky when it got deep. I always swam faster but he never got tired. When I got home, I kept on finding sand in uncomfortable places and I just had pockets and pockets filled with sand that poured out onto my bathroom floor.

I should burn that video. Really I should. But I can't let go of it, when I don't have anything of his. His mom tried to give me his Playstation 2 but I didn't want it.

He was so good with everything. He always picked up games on the first try. It was like the game programmers had wired a spare copy into his mind while they were at it. I don't want to sit around all afternoons trying to beat his high score.

Truth was, Max had been kept back one year in kindergarten. "What'd you do," I'd ask, "fail naptime? Sing C-B-A-D-F-E-G?" The truth was that his
parents were concerned with "does not play well with other children" and "overly aggressive tendencies" that were in the teacher comments on one report card section.

We gave each other points for using SAT words in every day speech.

Max called me Chow Mein. From anybody else I would have gotten mad, would have thought racist, would have thought about when I was little and I sang, "Me Chinese, me not dumb" without even knowing what it meant, but somehow from him it was okay.

Retard, is what everybody said, towards the end of the year. Not even anything clever but just stuff like, " retard," or, "Dingdard" or "that's Maxtarded."

Children are vicious.

Like that one time, when I had a cold and was in class without tissues. I had been sniffing all day and then I suddenly sneezed and I tried to cover my nose but there was snot goopy yellow mucus in little drops all over my desk and dripping out from between my fingers and just slime all over my face.

From then on I was Snot face. Or MucusMan. The Goo Factory. They were especially fond of horribly clever things like, "Don't worry, Bobby, It's not a problem." And this went on for two years because somehow, where immature humor is concerned, the funniness of the joke is directly proportional to the number of times that it's repeated.

Things I don't really remember come back to me now, the way they always called Paul a girl and one day he just started crying, and everybody laughed, and he went home early and never came back again. Girls get called fat and ugly all the time and they starve themselves, heard that Kelly Hallsen always puked in the bathroom after lunch. Everybody tells Josh he'll never get laid but he doesn't care, he's got a base of porn stars, real and animated, right on his hard drive. They sing "Kyle's mom has got it going on" but he's more concerned with his Jedi powers. James gets called faggot but he just keeps on talking about awesome cars and guns, Ferraris and Colt Pistols and Berettas and Peacemakers, fucking cool guns.

Good God, man, I want to say to Max, life is hard without you out and a pussy on me.

I don't know when it started, but he was just so much more of everything and I wanted to be more.

Bobby Chou is an easy enough name to be saddled with. My biggest problem was my size. I was a Munchkin amongst Tin Men. I was quiet. Kind of shy, I guess, unpopular in the way that smart kids are doomed to be and no one ever picked me first for basketball. Or kickball. Or baseball, for that matter. Not even volleyball.

I didn't have many friends in my old school (and by "not many" I mean even less than that), small and isolated, and then I moved, and Max wasGoliath. I wanted to have that strength in my corner, that Hercules, Clark Kent in ripped jeans and stupid t-shirts that read stuff like "FBI: Female Body Inspector" and "I Put the Sexy in Dyslexia". Eighth grade, and I was really into comic books: we could be a crime solving, crime fighting, criminal mastermind, megalomaniac duos: Batman and Robin, Holmes and Watson, Bonnie to my Clyde, Pinky to my The Brain. When we got older he wore lots of plaid shirts, and I told him it was very Canadian lumberjack.

I stood for high school which stands for humiliation. Even in 10th grade, the girls were taller than I was.

"To Chinky, balls drop yet?" Certain people were fond of saying. I have to admit that this was pretty funny, but only about the first fifty times or so. After that, it got a little old for me.

The clever comeback I finally came up with was, "why, d'ya wanna lick them?" Of course, I never had the balls to actually say this.

I would have sold my soul for two, three inches, or ten pounds, even. I pruned every day to reach at least a hundred ten pounds. I spent an entire summer biking to the local GNC, scarfing down protein shakes and Powerbars, trying to stomach milk glasses full of raw eggs. I ran until my fogged up, and then I ran some more. I'd motivate myself, I would chant, "Pump that iron, work that hod, you're gonna be a pimpin' god."

Depressingly, it didn't happen.

One time Max found me in the basement struggling to bench press 70 lbs, called it my "dry anal-rapeagc" face, and to his credit, never mentioned it again. Of course he wouldn't have understood - he was effortlessly strong, didn't even consider how his very hands were deadly weapons. If I had that kind of power, no one would fuck with me. I'd administer tragedies like Ritalin prescriptions. I wondered if he worked out at home, in his own basement or in his room, straining and sweaty. I know he didn't get those bulging arms from button-mashing, or just wrist-exercise. Excessive masturbation doesn't build as much muscle as it should, and it leaves you with not much more than a chafed penis. Josh and his tentacle-rape porn can attest to that.

We went to the mall. We hung out at the arcade. We played video games with each other at home and when we went out we'd play video games. Max
always creamed me in Halo but I beat him at Scrabble. In all the times between the gaming we were sometimes at the beach but mostly in the ear.

Retard is a really generic insult if you think of it, really, like calling someone stupidhead or poopypants in kindergarten, like how any chick will cry if you call her fat or ugly or both. We always preferred a more creative, psychologically damaging route. Only retards call people “retard.”

At night when I am not sleeping (I think), I hear it, sometimes, and I think that they might be talking to me. Which is ridiculous, of course, me being Asian and good at math, and good at everything that doesn’t involve actually going outside. I never got called retard, just “nerd”, “dark”, “loser”, and the occasional “chee ching chong.”

f had so many Certificates of Merit that my wall looked like a kitchen floor covered with newspaper to soak up puppy piddle. I was so smart. Or as my parents put it, “so scc-maht.”

But I can’t help but wonder, if I’m so smart, why don’t I know anything.

My parents got a dog to replace me when I went away to college. They let me name him, Herbert, and they say it, Hahbaht, so that on his vet records, the receptionist always writes down “Harvard”, where I got rejected from.

In lectures it’s too easy not to listen to the professor. I can never sit still or pay attention to anything other than how the mole on his forehead be skin cancer. My hands are always busy in class. I taught myself to twirl a pen really quickly, a move that Josh (our yellow-fevered friend) called, with a tone of awe, “that Asian thing you do.”

I cannot abide loose I sit in class and I tie the cords of my hoodie, I sit next to the window and tie up the Venetian blinds. I can’t look at things that dangle, not anymore.

There’s an epitaph that reads: Remember man, as you walk by. As you are now, so once was I. As I am now, so shall you be. Remember this and follow me.

To which someone scrawled the reply:: To follow you I’ll not be content How do I know which way you want. The funeral was so ridick. It was so ridick that it was one of those situations where Max would say, “hey, can we get some dick over here?" But of course you don’t try to get dick in Church. Well, not unless you’re a Catholic priest, which is funny to me, being an ex-altar boy, but Father Sullivan never did anything like that to us. I’ve never been here before. I didn’t think that Max even went to Church.

Max looked so weird in the suit that his mom picked out, huge, like a log, and yet so small, a wooden box built around him, like it could contain him, and I really couldn’t see and at the same time I could really see the rope burns around his throat. Fucking John Stenbeck. If he had jumped in front of a train his parents would never have been able to have an open casket. I thought about iron rails slick with blood and a crow flying away with a blue, blue eyeball and it was too much, so I stuffed a bunch of Altoids into my mouth instead. It burned, but it wasn’t that “curiously strong” like the hulking Swiss men on the commercials would have you believe.

It’s times like that that I wanted to say, “Can you hear me God, it’s me, Bobby,” but that reference is about a girl her period, which is so gross. I don’t know how girls do it: puberty for me was hard enough without suddenly bleeding out from my crotch one day.

I said to me, “Everything will be okay in the end” and I had to crunch more mints between my teeth to keep myself from screaming, and pictured him in the coffin instead.

When my uncle died, of course I was at his funeral, and where they buried him they put up a nag instead of a tombstone. The entire cemetery was this ocean rippling over and under with American growing like Howers, all in a row. It looked like a park or a golf course. and I on expecting someone to shout FORE!

James cried a lot at the funeral. He wouldn’t stop crying. He wouldn’t shut the fuck up. What a fag. Lots of people were there, family and stuff and kids from school that we didn’t even know, and everybody was crying these big fat tears that dripped the way blood does from holy statues. They call those statues miracles, but I don’t see how they could possibly help anybody. There was no blood, except for all of it rushing down and turning his hands red and pooling in his legs and waist who knows how long until they found him, I didn’t see it, thank God, but –

No one laughed when they read his full name, which is printed, in a
really ugly way, on the program. The background is of a mountain sunset, the mountains melting into a lake.

Everybody seems to forget that according to Christianity, or at least according to what Father Collins preached in Church, people like Max go to Hell.

I comfort myself with: "Here lies an atheist, All dressed up and no place to go."

There are so many ways we could have died. Driving home after drinking, weaving on the quiet, winding streets — out in the boondocks where there are no lights, just trees.

"The funny thing about life is that anybody can die at any moment," Max said.

"How is that for the punchline."

"Well, the sad don't."

Mrs. Dingle gave him his sense of humor. "You're adopted," she would tell him, every time he did something that she didn't like. But then the phone was crying, and I couldn't stop laughing, not because it was funny, but because if I stopped I would puke all my guts out worse than the time we both got food poisoning from those oysters that we got from the Fish Pier for half price. I wanted them to tell me it was just a jack-off session gone horribly wrong, an accident, his pants down around his legs, the pathetic pale puddles of dead spooge here and there — disturbing, yes, but something that I could forgive. This theory doesn't hold up; he left a note. Goddammit.

"I think, that to kill you have to do it in a badass way," Max declared. "Like, if I ever committed suicide, I'd want to throw myself in front of train." I would say either the cemetery or the weed made us morbid, but we were near neither.

"A train?" I asked him. I listened to the white leather crinkle whenever we shifted. We were driving not because we had some to go, but because we couldn't stay in this place.

"Fuck yeah, a train. Create a giant mess when you go, make the front page of the newspaper, and traumatize a hell of a lot of people in the process."

"That's pretty badass," I approved, "I think I'd go for a gun to my head. I'll paint the walls with my brains."

"You should stand in front of a canvas before you do it and call it art. I'd buy it," he suggested.

"I could call up the Metropolitan beforehand and make it a performance piece," I said.

"Now that — that there is a great idea. Too bad guns are kinda easy, though. Quick and efficient."

I was slightly offended. I thought a gun was pretty fucking manly. "Well, maybe I'll run myself through with one of the swords from my living room," I offered.

"Well, if you're going to do that, you might as well seppuku," Max pointed out.

"Did you know that it takes two seppuku?"

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah — one person to disembowel himself, but he has to have a best friend, like a second, to chop off his head in case he wusses out — to save him from dishonoring himself."

"Well, I'll ask you to do that for me," Max said, "but I think you're too short to actually reach my head."

"That's okay," I told him cheerfully, "I'll just hack your knees off. You could bleed to death from the severed arteries."

"You're a true friend, Chow Fun. Promise me if you kill yourself, you'll do it in a manly way," he said to me.

"I promise," I said, vowing never to slit my wrists in a bathtub or O.D. on pills in bed, or any other sort of flowery, girly forms of suicide.

In his mom's orange station wagon, blasting Clear Channel alt rock, going 60 mph down 30 mph roads, we were übermensch with iron veins.

The first day of senior year, Fred Boyd in my year bumped into me coming out of class, sharp shoulder into me, and he said, "Watch, it, retard."

I gave him one hell of a bloody nose, the kind that drips all over the floor while the guy's still standing there, going "uh?" Fucking beautiful.

Got pulled to the principal's office for it. Of course I never would have done this before Max left, but there's only one of me now.

"Emotional duress" is what my guidance counselor called it. "Intolerance for stupidity," is what I call it.

What the fuck do guidance counselors know, outside of which schools to to and they're not even all that Accordi'HT to her, the five stages of death and dying are: denial, anger, and then, finally, acceptance. I'm a nonconformist, of
course, and did not go through any of these.

I’m not in denial about any of what happened. I’m not angry at him, I haven’t been for a long time, I won’t ask God to bring him back. It’s not like you can just say, “Dear God, if you bring my friend back from the dead I will build several churches in your honor. And give up searching the Internet for porn when my parents are asleep.” There’s nothing that I can offer God, if he does exist, if he’s all powerful, that He just can’t take from me.

Kyle offered to do a Druid Resurrection Ritual, and I wanted to ask, “Did Druid Rituals ever bring your Dad back?” but I didn’t. I just told him, “no thanks.” He should know better, having watched Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Pet Sematary.

I’m not depressed. I don’t do teenage angst. I don’t believe in it. I will not accept that Max is gone. Who the hell made up these stages anyway? One of my pet peeves is when stupid people pretend to be smart. Piss me off.

Steinbeck took away from me. “A guy needs somebody-to be near him. A guy goes nuts if he ain’t got nobody. Don’t make no difference who the guy is, long’s he’s with you. I tell ya, I tell ya a guy gets too lonly an’ he gets sick.” Crooks says this on page 80 of Of Mice and Men. We had to get Vanesh, who’s Indian, to play him, because in the book he’s supposed to be black, and we didn’t have any black friends.

We had done Hal together “Can’t hang out tonight, busy making Hal my bitch”, we’d say. Fortunately or Unfortunately, Hal is not the name of anyone we know, but rather Honors American Lit. It was there that I met my current arch-nemesis.

“Let’s make a movie,” Max had said. “It’ll be genius, you’ll see.” I was going to be George, he would be Lennie. It was perfect – me “small and dark of face”, Max John Hancock signature-huge. Of course, George wasn’t exactly Asian, but we had to take some artistic liberties with the piece. After all, they’ve always made movies with a white Jesus.

We borrowed my dad’s heavy, clunky camera that he bought in the early 90’s to make home videos of my first steps, my first solid food, my first word, to send to the relatives back in China. We still have some of those tapes, but I’m sure most of them have been taped over by the Superbowl.

For one of the final scenes, where George shoots Lennie – oops, spoiler – we used his dad’s handgun as a prop. His dad kept it by the nightstand, except the master bedroom is so far away from the rest of the house that whatever thief they had would have made off with the flat-screen TV before he even woke up. Of course, we live in such a small, middle-of-nowhere nothing town that the police reports consist of “suspicious teenager seen loitering for twenty minutes on Pine St.” and “Cat stuck in tree”. You can see a lot of cops at Starbucks, ordering Venti lattes. “Dog Found After Lost for Eight Days” made the front page of the Town Crier, and the article ran for two days.

James gave the tape to the Came-dog, our English teacher, who showed it in class.

It was all over school the next day, and everybody was laughing, and everybody called him a retard, day in and day out, retard this and retard that and that was that.

The article about Max must have run for ten days, at least. I always knew that one day he’d be the talk of the town.

People worry about not being able to say everything you want to a person before you leave them. What if your mom got into a car accident and your last memory was of fighting with her over Frosted Flakes. The last thing I said to him was, “You can suck my dick.”

This is one of those things you can’t forget.

This was because he had said to me, “Dude, no one cares what you think.” Imagine someone leaving you forever and your last words to them are “suck my dick”. This could either be very bad or very good, depending on how you look at it.

For me, he’s ruined those three words forever. It’s like every time you say, “I love you” the object of your affection cheats on you and then steals all your lucky shirts, even the plaid ones.

I wish I were good with words teachers used to call me ‘eloquent’ - but really, I’m awkward, I’m only good at bullshitting English papers.

The note read:

Hey Chaw fun,

I would’ve let you pull the trigger but we both know that Dad never bought bullets for that gun. Sorry. Sorry. So sorry. Cholly.

And that’s all she wrote.

He had signed it with a giant cursive M. It looked like how the McDonald’s logo would look if they suddenly decided to cater to upper-crust socialites. The period that followed it was about the size and shape of a
smushed gnat.

Max, being the type of person you stayed away from at parties, the type who called themselves things like "the PUNisher" and said things like "if I for e'ery pun I shed I'd tie me to a punny shed", loved that old joke book.

I'd go, "Y'know Robert Burns wrote, 'To a Mouse'."

And then he'd go, quick as a twit, "Well, did be get a reply?"

I never liked that poem, you know. Never got past memorizing the first two lines. I mean, hell, I don't speak Scottish couldn't even sit through Braveheart, and she actually had killed in it.

When I was in kindergarten, I used to imagine that I had died tragically at that very tender age, and the entire class made a field trip to my grave and sobbed and wailed and said over and over again how sorry they were for the horrible way they treated me. Yeah, even in kindergarten. No one really takes field trips in high school.

In college, nobody gets enough sleep. We brag to each other about how long we've stayed up, or when was the last time we slept, competing to see who is the most miserable, or the most stressed. Hands down, I've got them all beat. I don't think anyone is better at not sleeping than I am.

I lie awake at night in bed and I slosh and I shake, and I never knew the hard dormitory mattress could be so rubbery or so watery my roommate never seems to have a problem with it, though, at least not when he home freshmen to luck. I wonder if it's just because it's a foreign bed, but beds must be joining forces and collectively raging against me, some sort of Universal Mattress Alliance, because it's been happening at home, too.

When I do sleep, I dream. Sometimes I don't remember. I know a lot of it is me killing myself, and Max watching. There's this really fucking weird one where I'm strung up by my dick, and my body weight and make it eventually rip off and I'm bleeding from my crotch and everywhere and the ocean is very blue and it crashes into the cemetery, and all over the beach the driftwood is railroad spikes. I don't have to wonder what Freud would have to say about that.

"Why the fuck does it matter so much what other people think?" I asked him. "Fuck them. Fuck it all. I think Awesome. I mean, you're really... I don't know how to... What I mean is, like, I... I really -

you're my best friend. Oh, fuck it. Just forget it."

"Just shut up, dude. No one cares what you think."

I should have said more. Or not anything at all.

"Well, fuck you too! You can suck my dick..."

It was one of those before knowing moments, it happens first and then you know later-on account of him always being so fast, you see, and so carelessly strong. We had been sitting in the car together, not drunk, not high. We had no excuses. We were parked outside of my house and although it was 1 am at least, the lights were still on and I could see my mom's shadow disappear from the upstairs window where she had been watching for his car to pull into the driveway. And the moon looked frothy like whipped egg white, the gear shift got stuck between us, hard and it hurt, the leather first jabbing into my side and later it hurt on my stomach, the muscles shifted under my hands the way I thought they would, warm and wet and no poison here but what a burn, his big teeth meeting teeth, lips, tongue, big hands fast but not awkward, no, definitely couldn't say that, later tasting bitter and weird and gross but kind of awesome, him desperate, me fevered, sweaty, it was sudden it happened though it couldn't it shouldn't oh fuck what was that.

I picked my glasses off the floor, he zipped up his ripped jeans, and there were no words. I watched his car roll backwards out of the driveway. When I laid down that night my bed rolled and tossed me in waves like a black storm over the ocean and I felt nauseous but I tried to be strong.

He became hard after he died, because he did it by rope. Gravity pulls on all the blood from the upper half of your body, and since your legs are already full of blood, it fills the erectile tissue of your gIVIng you a hard-on. This is called a death erection, also known as "angel lust". These are things I don't want to know, but I can't un-know. Force equals mass times acceleration, Isaac Newton named gravity but he considered never getting married to be his greatest accomplishment, Napoleon met his Waterloo on June 18, 1815, Robert L. Heilbroner wrote a book about economic theorists called "The Worldly Philosophers", but that I always thought was "A World Full of Lobsters" - even the teacher laughed at me.

Sometimes I lay awake at night and I think, "What if I'd let him beat me at Scrabble?" or what if I had told him, "You were right, peruse does mean to read thoroughly, and loads of people confuse it with 'to browse';" or maybe I should have called him a genius more, or what if it was something else entirely, something I shouldn't have said. What if I had or what if I
hadn't done all those things that I wanted to do. You were right, I want to tell him. You were right, you were right. I don't know what else I want to tell him because neither God nor Kyle's Druid rituals can bring him back, not even if I build several churches in their honor.

I don't know if Max liked mice all that much, or even rabbits. I took the new dog to see him the other day, and I made sure Herb didn't pin on his grave. I also got new goldfish, but fish are only interesting to marine biologists and the creepy, and Max always thought that swimming around in your own filth was grossly unsanitary. Herb is a good dog. He rescued me from hypothermia when I had fallen asleep on the grass, licking my face when it got cold and dark. If Max came back as undead, he'd probably be a zombie or Frankenstein or something, you don't really see fucking huge vampires.

For days, weeks, afterwards I wanted to dig him up, just to make sure they didn't bury him alive, because he looked so peaceful and he looked so good, even in that dorky suit, even with his messy dark hair combed and parted neatly, looking like an ass, and I wanted to I wanted to—

How do I describe this falling, shame-like feeling?

There's this distinct feeling, of say, wanting more, wanting too much, maybe masturbating in the dark to something horrible the whole time saying, "I'm so fucked up. I'm so fucking up."

The grass on top of his grave is kind of crushed in the shape of me. It's not like that, I promise, and luck you if you think I'm of a pussy to cry. Piss me off.

These days I can still watch the video, and I can't help but think, "Wow, this really is retarded."

There are things that are unknown, that I wish I could know. All the things we said to each other the day before, the climax of the story, the borders of which states we would have pissed on during that cross-country road trip together we always said that we'd take, how many times we would have joked on his twenty-first birthday, the shape of his hand in the dark, and then... and then, all those other things besides. In the dark, how did he close his eyes, they were blue like the sky which is polluted sometimes. When I close my eyes I can't see it, and I don't know anything.

What I do know is that there are just some things in life that, like John Steinbeck, oft go away. Fucking John Steinbeck. Gang aft agley. Fucking Scottish. To protect myself, I always have spare change.

Soda now costs a dollar twenty-five.