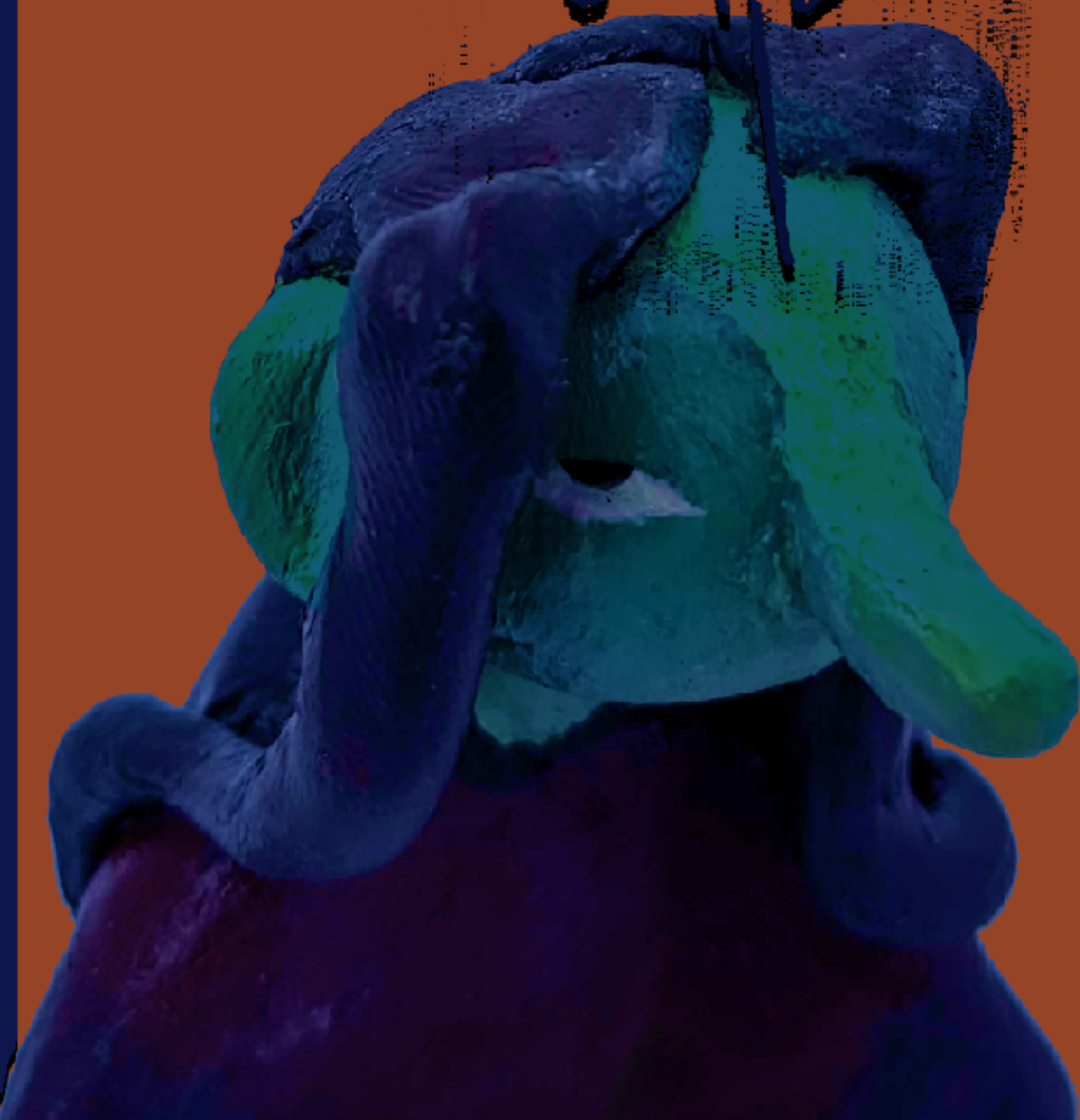


THE MURKIN COMPANION



LINDSAY DANE

+

Lucy

THANK YOU

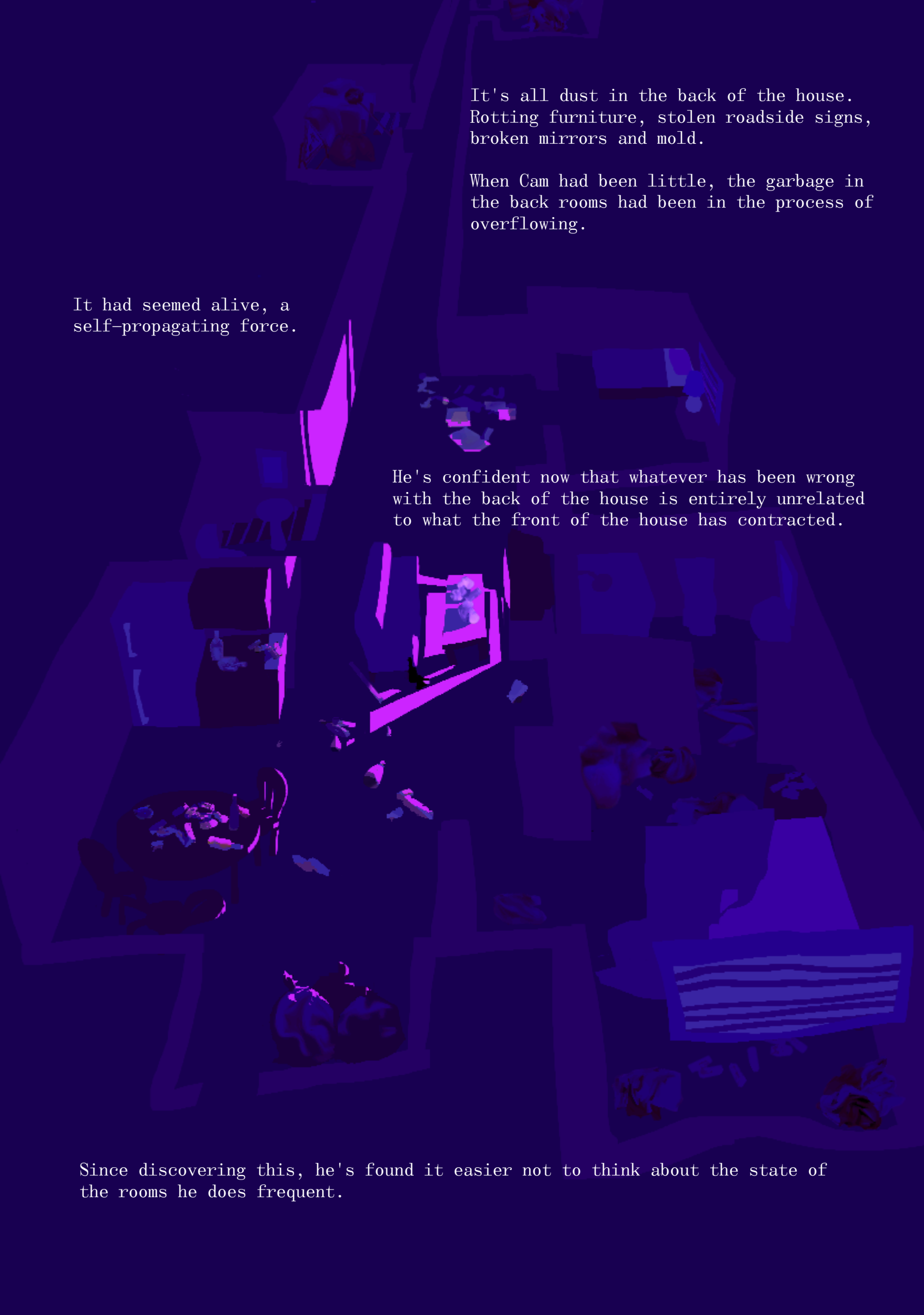
→ EVERYONE WHO
READ EARLY!

↓
BEVERAGE,
DEACON,
DELL, &
ESPECIALLY
HERBERT

↓
HERBERT AGAIN,
FOR THE SCULPTURE
ON THE COVER!

↓
FOR YOUR FEEDBACK &
ARTISAN CRITIQUES

↓
PEPPYK,
FOR NOT READING!



It's all dust in the back of the house.
Rotting furniture, stolen roadside signs,
broken mirrors and mold.

When Cam had been little, the garbage in
the back rooms had been in the process of
overflowing.

It had seemed alive, a
self-propagating force.

He's confident now that whatever has been wrong
with the back of the house is entirely unrelated
to what the front of the house has contracted.

Since discovering this, he's found it easier not to think about the state of
the rooms he does frequent.

It's disgusting in here, too.

The piles of garbage are fresh, the blinds are closed, and the air is stagnant.

Markus is chewing open-mouthed on a fistful of fries, but Cam's not bothered. There's a distant memory of a time when the sounds next to him on the couch would have driven him into a miserable frenzy, but that must have been when he was little.

It's hard to imagine being troubled by it now.

Cam's checked out at the moment, anyway.

The fuzzy TV screen light has been seeping through his half-shut eyelids for hours now.

He doesn't even know what's on.

"Gonna leave for work in a few here,"
Markus says, words muffled by the starchy mush in his mouth.
"You should get going soon too."

It might be the first time either of them has said anything today.

Cam blinks rapidly when he turns to look at his father.

"What?"

"You heard me. 'S been a few days already.
Don't want your mom getting worried."


The light from the TV flickers. Green to a sickly yellow. A beaming woman in a commercial waves from behind the glass.

Markus is transfixed, reaching out again for another handful of fries from the low table in front of the couch.

"...It's not even the weekend yet.
I don't think she cares that much."

Markus groans as he rises from the couch,
and Cam resists the urge to curl his lip.





"She acts like she don't care right now.
I don't want to hear from her tonight."

"She doesn't care at all."

"Uh huh."

Markus heads into the master bedroom, displacing
trash on the floor as he slouches across the room.


"Better be gone when I get back.
Gonna go get dressed."

He does not lock the door when he closes it.

Cam exhales quietly through his teeth and leans
across the couch, taking the remote from the arm-
rest furthest from him.

Turning the volume on the TV up a
few notches, his gaze stays fixed
on the shut door to Markus' room.

He gets to his feet, skulking around the pockmarked
living room table towards the dresser beside the TV.



When he slides open the top drawer, it barely makes a sound. Practiced. Socks, underwear, a few remotes and cords are clustered towards the front of the drawer. They don't even cover the bottom adequately enough to hide the thin bundles of envelopes in the back corner.

Cam pulls them to the front and opens the one on top.

It's mostly pictures he's seen before.

The copies in his mother's albums at home are in better shape, too.

Some of these have been cut, bent, scribbled over.

It's hard to feel more than mildly amused thinking about Markus, hunched over holding a marker, blacking out Lori's face and stuffing the evidence in the back of a drawer full of socks and junk in the middle of his living room.

Some of the pictures are of Markus, when he was younger. Younger than Cam now, in some.

There's not much novelty in them.

Cam's well past being interested in the concept of his parents as children.

Now, he passes idly over images of his father's childhood, which appears to have been comprised mostly of looking unaware of his surroundings and holding fish.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Cam snorts, mildly frustrated.

He puts the pictures back into the envelope and slides it to the back, pushing a wad of socks to the side.

Something in the clump of fabric clunks solidly against the side of the drawer.

He wraps his fingers around the cold, solid ridges of the gun's grip with casual familiarity as he pulls it from the drawer.

It's not what he was looking for, but he eyes it with interest. There's no magazine inserted.


With his free hand, Cam shunts about the contents of the drawer with renewed motivation until he finds it.

He holds it up in the dim light, prodding at the tip of the bullet at the top.

Markus spent a lot of time last year talking about reloading, making his own bullets.

He'd had big plans to set up a bench in the garage. Cam had mentioned it to Lori once, back when she would still ask how Markus was doing.

She'd laughed and said he was liable to blow himself up doing that.

A detailed illustration of a cluttered garage. In the center is a wooden workbench with a metal vise and a reloading press. To the left is a tall wooden cabinet with two doors, one of which is slightly ajar. On top of the cabinet are two bottles. To the right of the workbench is a long shelf with several boxes and containers. Below the shelf is a metal rolling cart with a wire mesh basket. On the floor, there are various items including a large black tire, a metal bucket, a cardboard box, and several pieces of debris. The lighting is dim, with a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling.

It seems like he's lost interest in it since then, or at least stopped talking about it after buying most of the equipment for it.

It's comforting to think that it might be untouched.

Getting shot at with a bullet Markus put together wasn't as frightening as the prospect of being the one firing it.

Cam's seen it sitting in the garage, though, and the bench is cleaner than the rest of the place.

Cam has never been allowed in the garage, and for the most part has little interest in being there.

But staying with Markus meant a lot of time alone,
and Cam is generally disinclined to honor his father's wishes.

He goes to snap the magazine into place
but thinks better of it, bending over to
turn the TV up again before gripping the
barrel with his left hand.

There is the clack of metal on metal
as he racks the gun, and then more
endless chatter from the TV.

Nothing comes skittering out of the
gun's chamber, and nothing stirs
behind Markus' door.

His hands are steady in urgency as he
puts the gun back in the drawer and
moves towards the kitchen.



It feels unlikely anything of interest will come of that.



The kitchen is similarly foul, but it's been fouler in recent memory.

Cam opens the fridge and stares in, only partially processing what's in front of him.

Expired sauces and nothing to put them on.

He peeks at the remains of a loaf of bread through the plastic wrapping.

The piece he pulls out is spotted with mold.

He holds it up to the white of the fridge lighting, tilts the slice lengthwise against the light, staring at the dark fuzzy patches forming along the crust.

They've visibly begun to protrude from the surface of the bread, and when he presses the tip of a finger into one, it compresses back down wetly.

He tears off the two darkest patches of the bread and stuffs them back into the bag with the rest of the loaf before closing the fridge door.



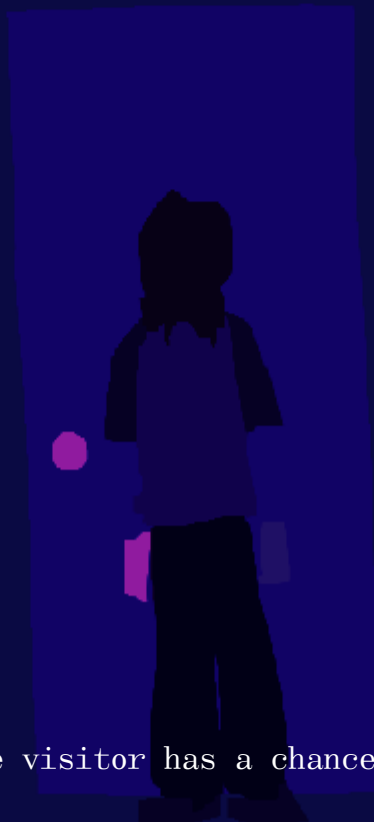
The front of the door is sparse, just a few old notes held up by plain magnets, the heavy, bare kind intended for use outdoors.



Cam squints at the sloppy writing as he eats his bread.

There's a knock at the door, light but distinct, and Cam knits his eyebrows.

He's not even sure what time it is.



In the time it takes him to amble across the kitchen to the door, there's another knock.

Cam swings the door open before the visitor has a chance to lower his hand from the door.



Nicely combed hair, collared shirts and ironed pants do nothing to make up for the childish softness in Lynn's face.

Some part of him, eternally, has only just gotten back home from Sunday school on a spring morning.

Cam leans against the inside of the door frame, leaving Lynn's line of sight into the house pointedly clear.

"Hey."

"Good afternoon, Cam.
How's it been over here?"

There's something uniquely irritating about the way he talks.

He probably had this cadence and these exact words in mind before he'd even knocked on the door.

"It's been fine," Cam shrugs.
"Same as usual, you know."

Lynn wrinkles his nose.
"The same as usual? Really?"

"Yeah, no, really,"
Cam drawls, rolling his eyes.

"I'm being completely serious. You can come in and talk to him, if you want. He's just like normal."

"Oh, no, I'm fine out here."

Cam watches him actually take a small step backwards onto the porch.

Life must be so incredibly difficult for Lynn.



"I just wanted to make sure you had something halfway decent to eat today."

"He's been feeding me."



Cam's voice, flat and droning, betrays nothing.

Lynn pretends not to notice, extending the tupperware he's brought with him out to Cam graciously.

"Yes," he says, a little pointedly. "I know."

Cam stares for a moment at the offering, and then back up at Lynn.

"It doesn't matter.
I'll just come home now. Save you a trip."

"What? Why?"



Exhaling through his nose, Cam barely graces Lynn's confusion with a shrug.

Turning, front door still open, he steps over to the end of the couch, leaning to pick up an open backpack at the foot of it. He takes a glance inside before zipping it closed.

There's not much he takes with him between his parents' houses. A few dirty changes of clothes are folded, neatly, at the bottom of the bag, crammed in with a notebook he doesn't write in and a smaller black bag for a camcorder.

He turns as he lifts the bag, throwing one strap over his shoulder as he pushes past Lynn through the front door and lets it shut behind him without locking it.

"Said Lori was getting worried."

Lynn makes a face as he follows Cam off the porch.

"Huh. I mean, I'm sure she is, but..."


"Yeah, that's what I thought.
It's whatever."

Lynn's car is parked on the curb,
just out of the way of the driveway.



It's so bright out it almost
physically hurts.

Cam keeps his eyes on the ground, finding the door's handle by instinct and pulling it a few times fruitlessly before Lynn unlocks the car.

The image shows the interior of a car from a passenger's perspective. A person with short, reddish-brown hair is in the driver's seat, seen from the back. Another person with dark hair is in the passenger seat, also seen from the back. The car's interior is dark, with a black dashboard and a rearview mirror. Outside the windshield, a snowy forest with bare trees is visible under a pale sky. The car appears to be parked or moving slowly.

Lynn waits until he's settled, backpack at his feet and seatbelt on, before handing him the tupperware over the console.

Cam stares up at him for a moment before accepting the food.

"You don't have to cook for me, you know."

Lynn starts the car.

"Well, of course I don't have to. But I like to, you need to eat. Even while you're here."



"You've got more to worry about than I do. I'm still going home, anyway. They cook."

"You were here for four days,"
Lynn says, crisply.

He enunciates every one-syllable word with intention, like he has to think about each of them. He's talked like this for as long as Cam can remember, as long as Cam has known him.

"Lori cooks. Your father doesn't."

"He orders food."

Lynn sighs, horselike, through his front teeth, pressing them lightly against his lower lip. His audible disdain inspires no relenting in Cam.

"It's fine. It's nice. It's quiet, we watch TV and shit. He plays video games. Normal stuff. I only come out here to relax, it's not about him."

"I could smell the inside of that house through the door frame, Cam. It's like a bad dream in there. What do you need to relax from?"

Cam shrugs and turns to stare out the window.

`Silence hangs over the car.

"They don't even cook anymore,"
Lynn murmurs, faintly.

Cam side eyes Lynn from the passenger seat as he trails off, watching the man adjust his grip on the steering wheel, holding it a little tighter now, maybe.



"...They cooked. They were cooking regularly. Lori was, anyway."

There's another uncomfortable silence, less prolonged than the last. When Lynn responds, his voice is tense.



"Was she?"

"Yeah. The first couple days, she made dinner like normal."

"I don't remember seeing that."

"You didn't. She stopped when you came here."

The car is quiet again while Lynn processes this. Cam hadn't bothered trying to phrase it delicately. He rarely did.

"She stopped?"

He's so visibly troubled by this that it's almost funny, Cam notices, staring straight at him from the passenger seat.

Surely he likes overthinking things.

He does it too frequently and too passionately for anything else to make sense.





"Yeah. Right in the middle of it. She was cooking the same afternoon you got here, and she stopped when I let you in."

Lynn adjusts his hands on the steering wheel, breathing deeply through his mouth. Cam wonders who taught him to do that when he's in distress. It's such a deliberate practice.


"I wish you'd told me that, Cam. If she doesn't want me staying, I understand, I can -"

"She doesn't 'not want you staying', man," Cam cuts him off in irritation. "She doesn't not want or want anything anymore, she's just there."

"Don't say that, Cam!" Lynn's eyes are wide, the pitch of his voice nearing a yelp. Cam does not spare him the dignity of a sidelong glance, but rolls his eyes without turning to face him.

"I'm not saying she's dead, or whatever. She's not. But it's true. Like, right now, it's true. Everyone's just there, now. They don't know they're alive."

Lynn doesn't rise to the provocation, pressing his lips together and gripping the steering wheel tighter. Cam presses on.



"It's fine, though.
It's not like most of them were
any better off before. Nothing's changed
that much. They're even still going to work
and shit at your place, right?
People in stores and schools and crap."

He pauses, tilting his head at an angle to pop his neck
as he lets his words sink in. Lynn offers no response
still, his gaze fixed on the road and his mouth tight.

"Nothing important's changed. This isn't that big a deal."

Cam stares up at the roof of the car idly.
There's a hole in the fabric above his seat, plastic of the roof exposed.

Lynn had overpaid for this car when he'd gotten it. Cam remembers: he had
heard Bill talking about it to Lori several years ago. Shouldn't have let
Lynn go to buy it alone, he'd heard him say. A private conversation in the
living room, an hour or so after Cam had typically gone upstairs for the
night.

It's the only time that anyone in the house talks about Lynn, now. These
conversations were typically brief and quite one-sided, which made sense.
Lori didn't have much to say about Lynn these days, but it made sense that
Bill wanted to talk to someone about the state of his son.

From the sound of it, he'd just paid the full asking price up-front. Cam
didn't catch, or can't remember, how much it had been, but Bill had made it
sound bad. It was an easy car to overprice, too. There's no way Lynn's
managed to get tear holes on the ceiling himself.

It's embarrassing to think about, but
Lynn has always been stupid like that.

Cam hasn't always felt this way about him,
but nothing stays the same forever.

He's staring at Cam now from the driver's seat with some reproach, lips pressed together. He's wise enough to Cam's behavior now to know that he's being goaded and honest enough to be affected by his stepbrother's words in spite of it.



He pulls the car out into the road without saying anything.



Bill and Lori's house lies forty minutes east down the long, straight road, away from Markus' filthy house on the edge of the woods.

The sky is claustrophobic orange, mottled with thin clouds that threaten no rain, and they make to drive into it.

When Bill and Lori had moved in together, they'd gone out of their way to get a house in a nice neighborhood. Somewhere decent for Cam and Lynn to grow up. It was fine, as far as Cam figured, but there were some things you just couldn't get away with there.

Some things, you were better off going to Markus' for.

"You want to pull over up there for me?"

Cam leans forward as they stop at one of the neighborhood's intersections, looking out the window and tapping the glass loudly. Lynn glances over at the stretch of road he's indicating to and wrinkles his nose.

"It's getting late," he says, leaning forward, foot still on the brake.

Cam is pointing at the road to the right of the crossroads they're idling at.

From the intersection, the pavement continues for a short distance before dropping off into a dirt path, which only extends another few yards before ceasing to be entirely. From there, there's a few feet of gravel and weeds, and a wall of trees too thick to see through.

"What do you need down there?"

"I just need to take care of something. Pretty sure I left some stuff out there."

"Out there? At the edge of the road, out there? Or in the trees, out there?"

"It'll only be a second."

Cam doesn't break eye contact, and Lynn buckles with ease.

He looks away first, turning right and rolling the car to a stop in the gravel at the end of the road. Cam's got his seatbelt undone before the car has fully stopped, slamming the door shut and stalking towards the treeline. He's still holding the food Lynn made him.

Lynn watches him go for a moment before getting out of the car himself. He stands with the driver's seat door open, fingertips of one hand still on the steering wheel.

"Cam!"

The boy doesn't look back at him.
He's already almost to the edge of the trees.



Lynn, frustrated at last, shuts the car door and runs after him.

It's not a long distance to catch up, and by the time Cam realizes that Lynn actually followed him, they're walking alongside each other.

Lynn is not inconvenienced enough by Cam's brisk pace to take any note of it.

Their frames contrast so dramatically with one another that Lynn need only take one step for every two Cam takes.



"How far in are you going to need to look?" he asks anxiously, hovering along at Cam's side like a herding animal.

"We've got the drive ahead, it's already getting late, Cam. And it's cold."

"Not very."

Cam doesn't look over at him when he speaks. It's something of a nuisance that Lynn's following him at all.

He glances down at Cam, eyes catching on the plastic container of food in Cam's hands, clutched near to his body. His knuckles are flushed.



They don't slow down once they're past the treeline,

Cam picks his way through the trees by memory, seemingly at random. Lynn has to duck to avoid some of the lower branches, choosing his footing a little more carefully as he moves to walk behind Cam.

The ground is less even here.


"Are you sure you don't want a jacket?"



"You can go get me one if you want," Cam says, walking a little faster,

"And I'll keep walking, and I'll be back out to the car by the time you get back to where we are now."

They walk in silence for a few more minutes before Lynn realizes that Cam had been exaggerating, at which point there was little reason to bother drawing attention to it.



When Cam stops, it's at the base of a tree unremarkable from the rest but for something quivering at the base of it.

It's easy to overlook at first, the thing in question having designed itself with the specific intent of being mistaken for the world around it, but once one part of it is made distinct from the brush and fallen leaves, the rest follows.

Legs into body, body into tail and head.

The thing gets to its feet, small and resentful.

Its right foreleg shakes with a vengeance as it stands, sustaining most of its weight on the other three.

The limb is gnarled and covered in enough foul dark crust that it's hard to make out the red of exposed tissue and blood.

Its head is swollen and unshapely, the lower portion of its snout so aggravated and puffy with infection that its gums and teeth are perpetually exposed, giving the impression of a silent, permanent snarl.

Lynn takes a few unsteady steps back as it rises, alarmed, and Cam drives an elbow into his ribs lightly, grabbing his upper arm to keep him in place.

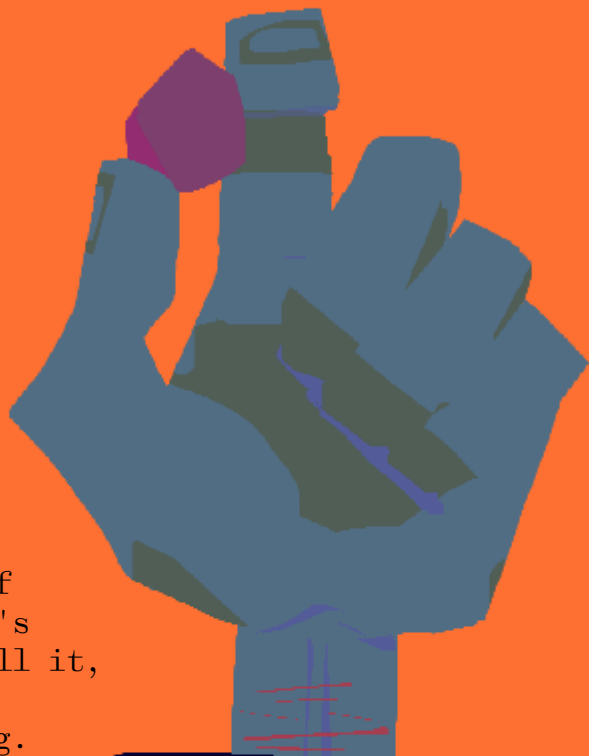
"Don't get her worked up," he hisses, pointing at the gangrenous front leg of the coyote. Following Cam's gesture, Lynn sees that the animal is held in place by the jaws of a spring trap.

It must have been here for days, at least – the ground around it is littered with chicken bones and feces.

Cam releases his grip on Lynn's arm, moving forward a few steps and paying no mind when the coyote snarls at him, gurgling and lethargic.

Opening the tupperware, Cam pokes at the contents with his bare fingers.

It's some kind of stir-fry, broccoli with chicken and rice. Some snap peas and bell pepper.



He pulls out a chunk of chicken to inspect. It's cold, and he can't smell it, but it's been visibly seasoned with something.

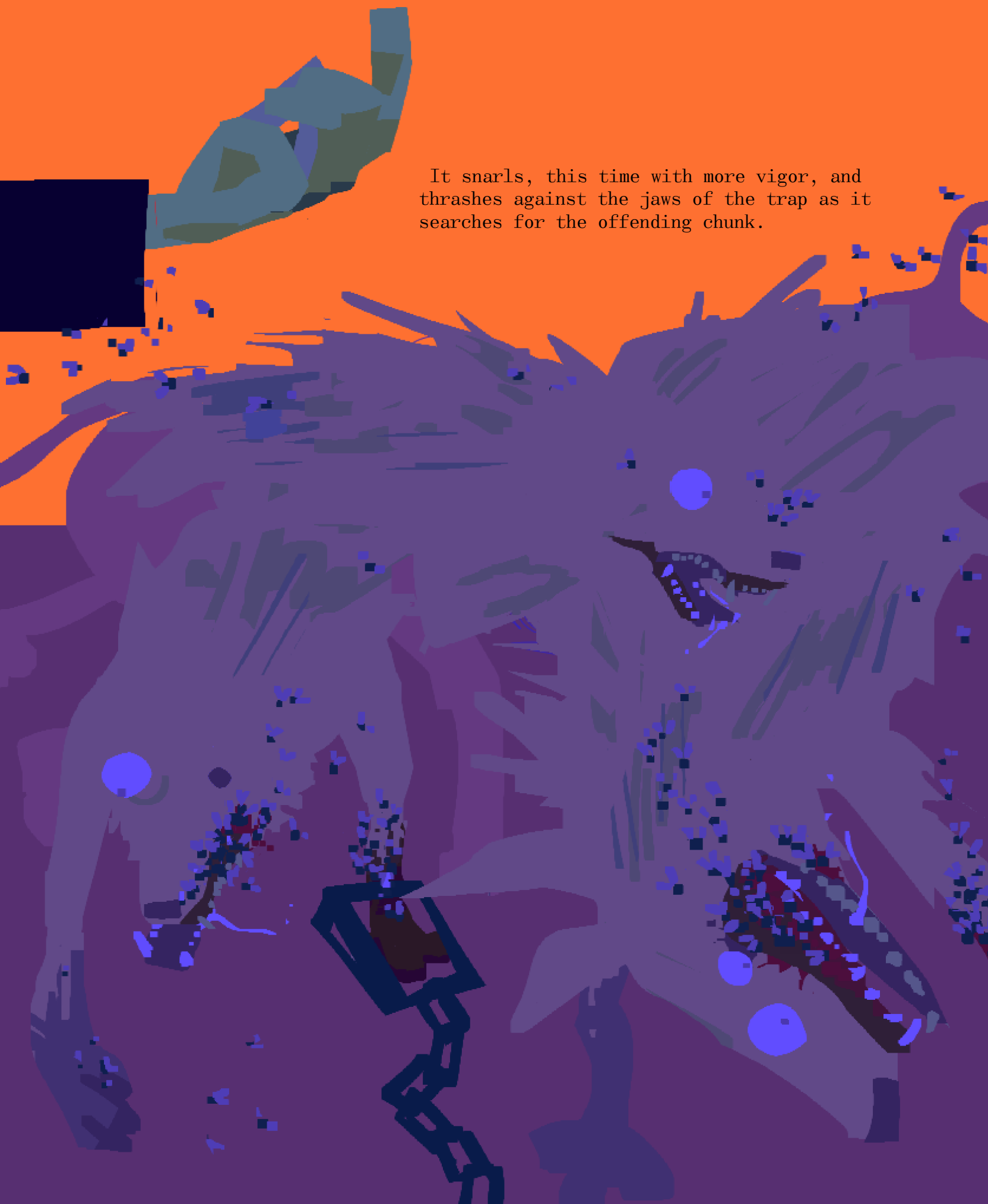


Lynn's not a bad cook.

He's too thoughtful to be.

Cam tosses the meat to the animal in front of him in a perfect arc, and it doesn't seem to perceive the gift at all until it's been struck in the face by it.

It snarls, this time with more vigor, and thrashes against the jaws of the trap as it searches for the offending chunk.



While the animal struggles to chew the meat through its inflammation, Cam is looking up at Lynn, watching the man react to what he's seeing. He's always appreciated how expressive Lynn is.

When they had been younger, living together, Lynn had been easy to read, even for a child. There had been something comforting in that at the time.

Now, though, it's mostly just entertaining.

Lynn's long, horsey features curl in disgust. His eyes are watering visibly.

He turns his gaze abruptly from the animal in front him to the boy next to him, grappling with what to say.

Cam stares beadily up at him.

"Did...is this, is this yours? Did you find this?"

Lynn sputters, still looking back and forth between Cam and the coyote.

"Well, it's not Markus'," Cam snorts.

"I set this one up when I got here over the weekend, and she's been in there...what, since Monday? At least that. They don't usually last that long, but this one's tough."



He doesn't look up at Lynn, speaking with premeditated casualness.

"Actually caught something up that way," he says, pointing vaguely north.
"Same day as this one. But it died a few days ago, and she's still kicking."

Lynn looks down, between Cam and the coyote, transfixed with worry.

"What happened to her face?"

"Happened while I was trying to see what she was. Was hoping she was male," Cam says.

"Been wanting to try castrating one."

"Castrating?!"

"Last month I got a few cats. They're fun, but they'd already been, you know," He makes a vague snipping motion with his free hand.

Cam's voice could almost be classified as mischievous, but his expression doesn't betray it.

He doesn't look back at Lynn as he speaks, watching the animal in front of him struggle to choke down the food.

Taking a few steps back, Lynn looks over at Cam, stricken.

"Cam, that's awful, that's...you shouldn't be doing this."

"They die on their own," Cam says, shrugging noncommittally.

His brief triumph at his stepbrother's speechlessness is fading. He pulls out a few more pieces of chicken and tosses them in the general direction of the animal.

"I'll be back at the house for the next week or so. She'll just starve or something out here."

"In the trap!"

"In my trap. We don't have to stay out here if you don't like it."

"You shouldn't be doing this at all!"

"I take pictures of them."

He says it quickly, cutting in before Lynn can say anything else. Lynn is stupefied.

"For that club I'm in. The school thing."

"What?"

He looks up at Lynn, unreadable, still mechanically picking out pieces of meat from the tupperware and tossing them to the coyote.



"They were just animals I got like this. Once they were dead I'd just prop them against and..."

He raises his hands to his face and closes one eye, miming taking a picture and grinning for a moment.



He drops the expression with such immediacy on making eye contact with Lynn that it seems to have been sarcastic.

"Cam, this is morbid."

Lynn looks desolate, older. By the look on his face right now he could be thirty, or at least his age. It occurs to Cam that seeing this might change how Lynn thinks about him in a way he can't go back on.

Cam is reasonably sure that, were he capable of feeling anything, he might feel a little bad about that. Lynn's always been sensitive.

"There's nothing...good about this for you, Cam. You're so young, you don't need to be spending time around...all this, around Markus, even. You're so sweet, Cam, you don't--"

Cam steps in front of Lynn, turning to face him, and Lynn cuts himself off before Cam even opens his mouth.



"I'm what? I'm sweet? I'm impressionable?" Cam leans forward, feinting as if to buck at Lynn, who almost actually takes a step backwards.

"Am I still young, too?"

"I don't mean...that you don't know what you're doing," he murmurs.

His voice is strangled, and he turns his head to the side, perpendicular to Cam, eyes darting in any direction but towards Cam, the tree, and the trapped animal.

"There's just...there's nothing good about doing this. For anyone. Of any age."

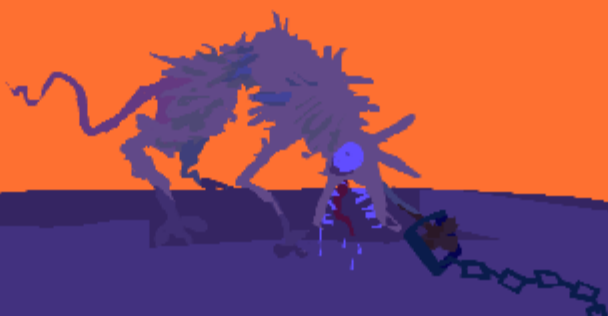
"Nothing good?" Cam says, sharp in his disbelief. "Really? You think?"

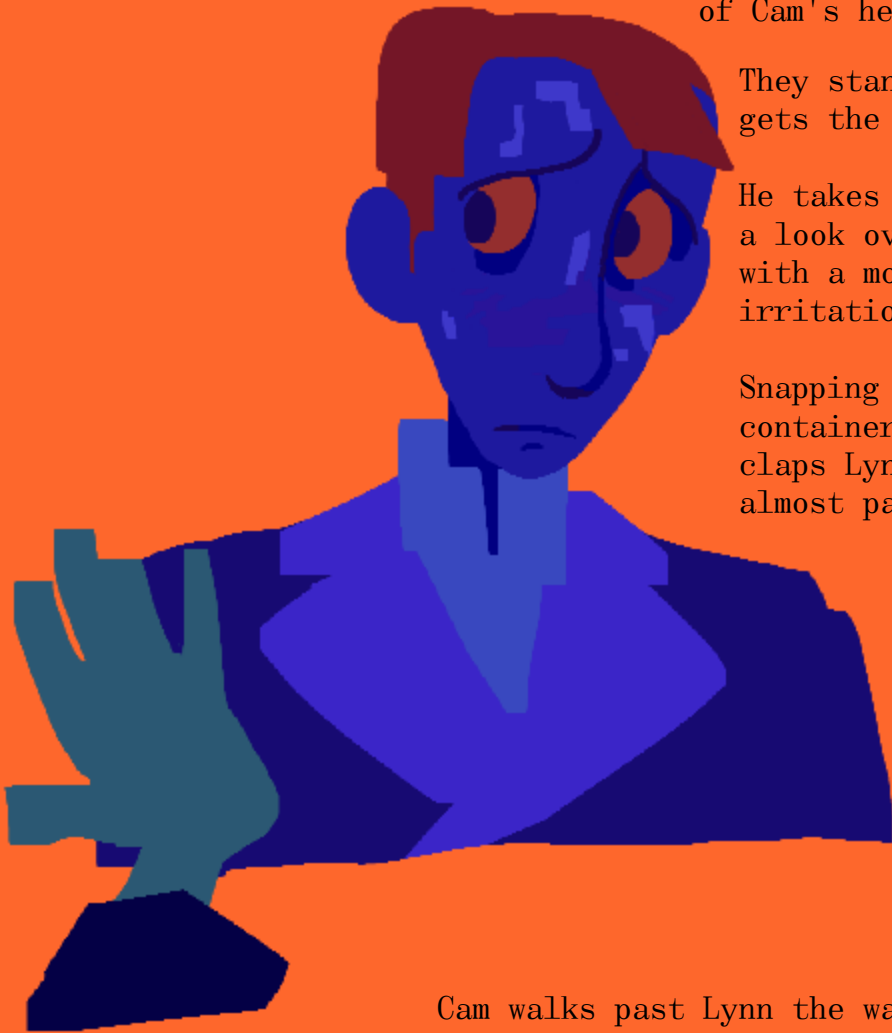
He pulls a piece of broccoli out of the tupperware as he leans closer to Lynn who, still avoiding eye contact, does not rise to the bait.

"Anything else you think about what's good for me?"

His voice is loud enough to turn heads, were there any around.

The coyote behind him flinches mid-chew and gags audibly in the ensuing silence.





Lynn stiffens, staring past the top of Cam's head into the trees.

They stand, toe to toe, for a moment, as Cam gets the non-response he's after.

He takes a step back, and when Lynn chances a look over at him, he's grinning lopsidedly with a mouthful of broccoli, not a trace of irritation in him.

Snapping the lid back on the plastic container, he raises his free hand and claps Lynn on the shoulder lightly in an almost paternal fashion.

"I'll keep it in mind."

Cam walks past Lynn the way they came without waiting to see his reaction.

It's a few seconds before he hears Lynn start after him.

He doesn't slow down.

He isn't mad at Lynn.


He can't remember the last time he was mad at Lynn.

Lynn is frustrating.

There's something about him, some deep-seated childishness, that makes Cam wild, the closest thing to mad that he imagines he can get.



Irritated, maybe.



It's amber out now, the sky clear and unmuddied. It's felt lower than usual, the last week or so. Cam's seen the sky during wildfires, but never anything like this. It shows no signs of relenting.

In some way he struggles to articulate to himself, it doesn't feel like he's outside right now.

It's still cold out, like it always is this time of year. He should have worn a coat.

Back in the trees, further than they had ventured this afternoon, there are two more traps Cam had set out when he had first arrived at Markus' property last week. One of these had, in the following days, ensnared a housecat that Cam had dispatched at his leisure.

He had checked the third trap after killing the cat, and found it empty.

On Wednesday night he had checked again, and the trap had been occupied.

The fleshy little body had to have been caught recently before Cam had come to find it. It was warm and squirming, wet blood pooling around it far in excess of the coyote or even the cat, its soft membranous skin having apparently ruptured on contact with the metal.



If it made sounds as it struggled, Cam does not remember now.

Lynn is following him at a slightly more respectable distance than he had going into the forest.



Cam reaches the car and gets in, reaching thoughtlessly for his seatbelt before letting his hand drop as he locks eyes with Lynn in front of the car.

There is something unrecognizable in his face.



Lynn drifts to the car like he's sleepwalking.
He starts the engine without a word.



Somewhere in the trees,
half-formed approximations
of limbs flex.

Thick, dark veins and
pulsing organs are clearly
visible through its skin.
They twitch and jump
beneath the torn membrane.

This is not the body Cam ruminates on as his
stepbrother drives him home, and it is not the
body he was hoping for when he had laid the trap.

He's still not sure why he left it alive when he found it.