

# New Fiction from Damion Meyer: "Reverse Process"

Five days ago at morning PT, Nate wasn't in formation. Everyone assumed he was at sick call, and we did our workout without him. But when he didn't show up for first formation after breakfast, tensions rose. He hadn't checked in at sick call, he wasn't assigned to any special details, and his roommate Specialist DiNofrio said he didn't remember seeing him after the previous afternoon.

"Check his room," Sergeant Martinez told us.

Dino and I followed Specialist Remington across the quad from the company building to the barracks. Remy was on CQ, so he was responsible for the large ring of key dupes. At five-one, he looked like a kid playing soldier. With the four-inch key ring jingling at his belt, he looked like a soldier playing janitor. I smiled briefly at the thought, but then we were in the barracks, up the steps, and at Nate and Dino's room. Dino opened the outer door with his key, and after a full minute of searching the ring, Remy found the right dupe and unlocked the inner door to Nate's room.

The room was clean and organized, and at first nothing seemed amiss. His bed was made, the floor was free of clutter, and his TA-50 gear was stacked neatly in the closet. He hadn't packed his duffels yet, but we weren't leaving for a few weeks. Plenty of time to get ready.

"Anything missing?" Remy asked.

Dino shrugged mechanically. He was always so stiff, like he was on guard duty every second he was awake. Being a good five inches taller than my six-one, it made him look a little like Frankenstein's monster. "I don't know," he said, "I didn't really come in all that much. He was closer to Winch than me."

"How 'bout it, Winch?"

I felt around the room with my eyes, not sure what I should be looking for. All of his stuff appeared to be there; there were plenty of clothes in his drawers and on the hangers in his closet. Even his cell phone was there, resting in the charging cradle on top of his dresser. I was about to say that nothing seemed wrong, but then I opened the drawer of the nightstand next to the bed.

"He's gone," I said. I pulled the key ring out of the drawer, with the keys to the room, his duffel padlocks, and the lock for his Humvee's cargo compartment.

"What?" Dino said.

"Car key's missing." The car I sold him. The car he said he just wanted so he could get around when he was by himself. The ugly piece of shit sedan that I made even uglier with the orange spray paint that he took off my hands for fifty bucks just a week earlier like he was doing me a favor.

When we returned to the company area, Sergeant Martinez reacted poorly to my suspicions. "What the holy fuck, Alpha team?" His bellow reverberated from the walls of the squad room. The rest of second squad discreetly slipped out of the room, leaving me, Dino, and Remy to face his wrath alone. "We're in the desert in three goddamn weeks, and you let him go AWOL?" He looked at us, his eyes moving from one face to the next hungrily, the eyes of a predator.

"Any ideas where he'd go?" His eyes settled on me, and he gave me a look like he wouldn't be happy no matter what answer I gave him. I looked at Remy and Dino, but they were intent on staring at anything but me or our squad leader. Alone against the world, I could only shake my head in reply.

He drew in close and bent down eye to eye with me. "Find him," he said. "You're team leader, Sergeant, this is your job. Find

your soldier and bring him back." Then he pushed past me and out of the room.

Now, as I reach the set of three small concrete steps that lead up to the front door of Nate's mom's house, it opens, and she comes out and stands on the porch. She's a short woman, but she's almost as wide as she is tall, an imposing presence there on the stoop, blocking my way. She's breathing heavily and her face is an angry pink, though I can't tell if it's due to anger or a lack of exercise for the last fifty years. She folds her arms over the massive shelf of her bosom and says, "What do you want, Winch?"

"Looking for Nate," I say.

"He's on post."

"No, he's gone a few days now."

"Don't know nothing 'bout that," she says. "Last time I heard from him, y'all were getting ready to leave."

I take a step toward her, relishing in the crunch of a particularly dry leaf under my left boot. "So he hasn't called you?" I ask.

She doesn't answer, just looks over my shoulder and says, "What the hell are they doing?"

I turn around and see Remy and Dino standing next to the car. They're both smoking and Dino is doing his best to block Remy from hitting him in the nuts with the back of his hand, David annoying Goliath. Remy must get a shot past Dino's defense, maybe taps the tip, because Dino suddenly turns and punches Remy above his right eye, knocking the cigarette out of his mouth and down his shirt. Remy laughs as he puts one hand to his head and pulls the shirt away from his body, billowing it to allow the butt to fall to the ground. Probably best to turn the conversation away from their stupidity. I turn back to

Mrs. Browning and say, "I don't allow smoking in my car."



"Uh huh," she says. "What do you want with Nate?"

An incoming call sets my phone vibrating in my pants pocket. The buzz is loud and annoying, but the phone is semi-new and I'm still not sure how to silence it without pulling it out. I do my best to ignore it and say, "We're leaving in less than a month."

"Think I don't know that?"

"I know you do, I'm just saying he needs to come back before we leave."

She pushes her arms away from her chest and flings them in my direction. Her face left pink and is rounding the bases toward a deep magenta. "Maybe he doesn't want to go back anymore," she says. "Maybe he did enough time and wants to stay home now."

"It's not up to him. He's gonna be in even bigger trouble."

"Yeah, well maybe that's okay. If he's in jail, he don't have to go back."

"No," I say, shaking my head, "they'll just send him over like nothing happened, and when he gets back, then they'll send him

to jail. And while he's over there, they might decide to garnish his wages. I know he helps you out whenever he can." We both look at the fading house, note its chipped paint and worn siding, the piece of cardboard duct taped over the broken basement window. Her eyes tremble a bit, and I know that I've reached the part of her that could help me. I hate doing this, hate laying guilt on her. If she were my mom, I'd be completely ashamed. But she's not my mom, and this is the only thing I can do. It doesn't last long, though, as she quickly closes me off.

She says, "He's not here, I haven't heard from him, and I want you to leave him alone." Then she turns and begins to retreat back into the house.

Before she closes the door completely, I say, "If you do hear from him, could you tell him to call me?" As the lock clicks, I wonder if she heard me.

Back in the car, I pull my phone out of my pocket and see I missed a call from my mom. I delete the notification and toss the phone into the console next to my seat. Later. I can't deal with her right now. I've got my own shit to worry about.

Dino says, "No luck?"

I just shake my head. "What's with the grab-ass?"

"Just messing around," Remy says, holding an unopened Sprite up to his new shiner.

Anything to keep the mind off what's coming.

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When I tell Sergeant Martinez that we haven't found Nate yet, he says, "What the fuck, Winch," and walks away, his fists clenching and releasing. Hopefully it's not my throat he's imagining crushing between his fingers.

The three of us sit against the wall at the back of the squad room. I feel like we're marshaling our energy for another mission. What we're doing isn't difficult, but it's exhausting, just trying to put ourselves into Nate's shoes and think about how to find him. I wish that he'd call, say, "Hey, Winch, how's it going?" like we just saw each other this morning.

Then I'd say "Been better, been worse," and we'd all have a good laugh and he'd come back and we'd be able to continue getting ready to deploy. But my phone remains silent in my pocket, and we remain silent in our chairs.

Other members of third platoon walk past the door and look in on us, spectators viewing the massive blunder that has been my week. I hear my name, Nate's name, other things. "Fucking second squad," someone murmurs.

Lunch time rolls around and Remy and Dino want to go get something. I tell them I'm good and watch them leave. Food won't help me right now. Sometimes lunch gets in the way. But then I remember how I met Nate at lunchtime in this very room, three years previous.

I was fresh out of Basic, didn't know anyone. Sergeant Martinez showed me around the company area, led me from office to office, introduced me to anyone he could find. Faces and names blurred together and I got lost trying to keep up with what my new squad leader was telling me. I was sure it was important, but nothing was penetrating.

He left me in the squad room filling out forms and reading field manuals and SOPs. I said hello to people who came in, told them who I was, where I was from. Some were cordial, some were indifferent. I was the new guy, the fresh meat, the cherry. I hadn't been anywhere with these guys, and they didn't know me.

At lunch, three specialists came in and sat at one of the

other tables. None of them looked at me, or acknowledged my presence. They were having a heated discussion about action movies and who their favorite actors were and for what reason. At one point, someone said something that I agreed with, and I tried joining into the conversation, attempted to make a friend or two, but they simply looked at me for a moment before continuing their discussion without me. I felt like a cricket in the corner, an annoyance that was easy to ignore.

Movement at the door caught my attention, and I saw another soldier motioning to me to come over. I got up and passed the three soldiers and their conversation and met the PFC with Browning on his name tape. "Yeah?" I said, not expecting much after my previous encounter.

He leaned in and said softly, "Fuck those bitches."

I wasn't entirely sure what he was talking about, and I'm guessing my face said so.

He nodded to the three at the table and said, "Don't worry about them, they're assholes. If you don't have a tab, you're nothing to them."

"What?"

"Look at their shoulders."

I looked, and sure enough, all three had Ranger tabs at the tops of their left sleeves.

He pulled me out of the room and walked away down the hall, with me following close behind him. "I call them tab toadies," he said. "They hate it, but I don't give a shit. If they want to do something about it, they can fucking try it. I choked out Stephenson last year in combatives training, and I know I'm a better boxer than Mitchell."

I hadn't said anything yet. "You haven't said anything yet," he said.

"Thanks?" I managed to get out.

"No problem, that's what I'm here for." He reached his hand across his body as we walked. "Name's Browning, Nate. One each."

I shook his hand. "One each?"

"Yeah, like in an inventory, you know, 'Cot, four each, rucksack, three each, Browning, one each.'" I must have still looked confused. "Don't worry about it," he said. "You doing okay?"

"It's all a little much."

"Been better, right?"

"Yeah."

He nodded. "But it's been worse, too, I bet."

"I guess," I said. We walked out of the building. "Where we going?"

"Lunch. You like sushi?"

"Um, yeah?"

"Too bad, we're getting burgers." He walked faster, and I did my best to keep up. And that was what we did for a while. He'd move fast and I'd try and keep up. I learned a lot from Nate about a lot of things, and it helped me to get better at my job, become a better soldier, a sergeant, a team leader. Eventually I was the one moving fast, staying in the lead, though he never tried to keep up. Nate's pace was whatever he chose, not what was chosen for him.

We went to war together, bled together, lost friends together. Both of our fathers died within months of each other, and we each comforted the other's mother. Nate got married before our first deployment and I was his best man. He got a divorce



after we got back, and I was there with him in the bowling alley, throwing balls down the lane at stand-in ex-wives, ten at a time, all wearing white. Both of us had the other's back. I knew I could count on him for anything, because I would do anything for him if he needed it.

Sergeant Martinez comes back into the room and towers over me. "Find your guy yet?"

"No, sergeant."

"Sitting here's probably not the best use of your time, then, is it?"

"No, sergeant." I stand up and walk to the door, but he stops me.

"The CO wants the car brought in when you find Browning, for the report. Go." He makes a shooing gesture with his hands, and I leave.

My phone buzzes in my pocket again. A text: "Come by for lunch, if you want. Luv u, mom." I realize I can eat, so I leave the building and send a text to Remy and Dino saying I'll meet them later to continue the search.

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I yell hello as I enter my mom's house, but she doesn't answer. It's noon and the washing machine and dryer are running downstairs. My mom has done laundry every Friday at noon since I've known her. The smell of fabric softener wends its way through the vents in the basement, filling the house with lavender. Every time I come here, I'm reminded of how nothing in the barracks smells this nice.

I'm rummaging in the fridge when Mom comes up the stairs, an overflowing basket of freshly washed towels balanced on her hip. "Here," I say, and take the basket from her and set it on the kitchen counter.

"Thanks, sweetie." She pulls a washcloth out of the basket and blots her forehead and the back of her neck. She's going through menopause and recently she's been breaking out into cold sweats at random moments. She's just in her forties, too young for this, I think. I wonder if it's because of me. I know it is.

She says, "So what's new?" and smiles, but the strain around her eyes tell me that it's forced, that she's not happy. I don't want to upset her, but I can't lie to her. It's not how I was raised. I tell her all about Nate disappearing and my search for him.

"Can't say I'm surprised," she says. "You've all been through so much, I can't imagine going back would be something you'd all be willing to do."

"Yeah, but if anyone were going to quit out, I just wouldn't have pegged it to be Nate."

"Why, because he's so masculine and strong?"

"No, it's not that, it's just—" I break off. What was my reasoning? Just because he said he was ready to go back, and he was jumping up and down when we got our orders? Did I actually expect him to be completely truthful about his feelings? I have nothing, so I say nothing.

"You could do it, too, you know," she says quietly.

I must have been zoning out, because I'm not sure what she means, and I tell her so.

She doesn't look at me when she says, "You could leave, like Nate. Find somewhere to hole up 'til the deployment's over."

"No, I can't."

Her face goes stern, like it did when I got in trouble as a child. "Why not?" she says, hands on her hips.

I don't know what to say. Emotions and reasons and excuses jumble around in my head, like a load of clothes in the dryer, round and round. "It wouldn't be fair."

"Fair to who?"

"To everyone."

"It'd be fair to me."

"I mean everyone else," I say. "All the other guys."

"What do they have to do with it?" Her voice is starting to take on a plaintive pitch.

Crying isn't too far off, but I can't stop now.

"It wouldn't be fair that I've been over there twice now, and nothing happened to me, and everyone else is coming back with scars and missing limbs and PTSD, and I've seen the same shit and I'm completely normal, and I don't know why. Why don't I get to be in pain like them? I don't know how to help them because I can't understand them. I need to understand!" I can't keep it together and I start to sob. I think she is going to cry, but I beat her to it and collapse into her arms. She's a foot shorter than I am, and a hundred pounds lighter, but she supports my weight easily. She was made to support my weight. It's what she does.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I ignore it and let myself be held. I try to imagine the insistent buzzing as white noise, like what I might have heard in the womb. Something to calm me, to protect me against the noise of the outside world. Except this noise is the outside world, and I don't have the option to ignore it any more. I pull the phone out and through the glossy blur of my tears I see Nate's mom's number on the screen. I take a deep, shuddery breath to try and rid myself of emotion, and press the answer button.

Her voice full of defeat and sorrow, Nate's mom says, "Winch,

I know where he is."

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When we arrive at the Browning family cabin fifteen miles into the country, the sun is sinking wearily below the horizon. The first thing I see is the car out front, that ugly piece of shit that I was glad to get rid of, not knowing what was going to happen. I'm still not sure why I bought it in the first place except that it was only three hundred bucks and I needed a car right away. I also don't know why I thought it would be a good idea to spray-paint the fenders and roof orange, causing it to resemble an Iraqi taxicab. I park in front of it and block it in. I don't expect Nate to try and run, but I'm not taking any chances. The three of us get out of my car and slowly approach the cabin in a wedge. None of us are armed, and we're in the middle of the US, but we can't turn it off, that need to do what we were trained to do, to cover each other's asses.

The front door to the cabin yawns open to greet us. I step up onto the decaying wood porch and the smell of gunpowder hits me immediately. It's not a smell that you mistake for something else, especially in our line of work. I should hope for the best, that he was just out hunting, or he shot a wolf that wandered into the cabin, or he was spinning a gun on his finger like in the movies and it went off, harmlessly putting a round in the ceiling. But really, I know what I'm going to find. I pull my phone out of my pocket as I step through the doorway, because I know that in three seconds I'm going to be dialing 9-1-1. His mom thirty seconds later.

Except I don't, because Nate isn't dead. He's sitting in an armchair that might once have been covered in some sort of floral print but now looks to be suffering from a combination of mange, fungal infestation, and dry-rot. Next to the chair is a cheap folding TV tray, which holds half a six-pack, a pair of sunglasses, and a Beretta 9mm. Nate's fingers drum

lazily along the pistol's slide, as though he's unaware of what it is, but I know that he can grab it in a heartbeat and do whatever he wants with it. I wave Remy and Dino off before they can enter the cabin, and they retreat back onto the porch and out into the gravel driveway. Now I'm alone with the guy with the gun. Smart move.

I look around the single room of the cabin. Not much in the way of furniture: an Army-issue cot on the opposite wall from Nate, a small rattan table, and the firewood rack. A handful of bullet holes trace a line in the floor in front of the fireplace and up the wall next to it. An empty beer can is in the fireplace with a matching hole through it. A second can is across the room, and though I can't see a hole, I know it's there. We don't really miss that often.

Nate's looked better. He's wearing the pants to his uniform, but just a white tank top. He doesn't look like he's shaved or even bathed the whole time he's been gone.

"How's it goin'?" is the only thing I can think to say.

"Not bad, you?" he says.

"Been better, been worse," I say. The third-platoon mantra sounds hollow in my ears, but I can't not say it. I need something to be normal here. Every second that the sun withdraws from the sky, Nate's face pulls a little bit more darkness from the air, like he's a photo being reverse-processed back into a negative. I motion toward the fresh wounds in the floor and wall. "Target practice?"

He shrugs slightly, or else the fading light is playing tricks. "Just fucking around."

I nod. "Yeah."

"What do you want, Winch?"

"I'm here for you."

"To bring me back."

I shake my head. "I'm here for you," I say again.

His fingers stop drumming on the pistol's slide. He picks it up, but he doesn't point it at me. "I'm not going back."

"Don't care. I'm here to make sure you don't do anything stupid."

He lifts the pistol to his head, scratches his temple with the tip of the barrel, almost lazily. "Can't really see you stopping me."

"Maybe not," I say. I motion at the cot behind me. "Can I sit down?" He waggles an affirmative with the pistol, and I walk over to the cot and sit down. The canvas thrums as it stretches under my weight, the metal frame squeaks at the joints.

We just sit for a minute. There's no need for words at this point. My eyes move from Nate's face to the Beretta. He stares out the window next to the front door. I can hear Remy and Dino shuffling on the gravel outside. The smell of their cigarettes floats into the cabin with the darkness.

"Goddamn, I need a smoke," Nate says.

"Remy or Dino'll probably spot you."

"Tell 'em to bring me one."

I just shake my head.

I see pain in his eyes, sadness. He holds out his gun hand, palm up. "You think this is for you guys?" He sounds hurt, like I've betrayed him.

I say, "No," and I mean it. It's clear that he isn't planning to shoot me or Remy or Dino, that there is only one possible target in this room. "Give me the gun, Nate."

He shakes his head and pulls the gun back to himself. He cradles it against his chest. "Just leave me alone."

I stand up and take a step toward him. "Not gonna happen." I take another step. "Give me the gun."

He points it at my chest, the first direct threat he's offered since I came in, but we both know that it's a bluff. I take another step. "You won't shoot me." Just a few more.

He puts the gun to his head and pulls back the hammer. "I don't have to shoot you to stop you," he says. Now I do stop walking. I can't be sure this is a bluff. Nate's always been unpredictable. "Get out," he says.

"Why?"

"You don't want to see this."

I say, "There won't be anything to see. Give me the gun."

"Fuck off."

"Give me the gun." I take a hesitant step forward.

He yells, "Go away!"

"You know I can't." I cock my head and shout, "Remy, Dino, get in here." When the mismatch twins walk through the door, I say to Nate, "Now we're all here. You got something to show us, or are you going to give me the gun?"

His arm trembles, but he doesn't lower the gun. I take a more confident step toward him and put out my hand. "Nate," I say in a soft voice. "It's okay."

I'm not arguing now, I'm soothing, providing white noise against the world.

Another step. "We're here to help."

I'm three feet from him. I reach out and put my hand on his, on the gun. I don't pull at it, because neither the gun nor the decision to let go are mine to take. "We're here beside you." Remy puts a hand on Nate's left shoulder, Dino a hand on his right.

"You're here with us."

His arm drops. I slip the gun out of his hand and into my waistband as we all put our arms around him, and he around us. Four against the world.

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Outside we stand in a circle, all of us smoking. I hate cigarettes, but right now it doesn't matter. The other guys laugh at my hacking coughs, pat me on the back like I'm choking. It feels like I'm choking. I drop the cigarette and crush it against the gravel, my part done. Nate takes a long drag from his, and his face lights up red from the fiery ember before he flicks the butt toward the cabin and turns away. His gear is packed up in the trunk of the ugly-mobile, and we're ready to head back to post.

"Who's taking which car?" Nate asks.

"Yeah," Dino says, "I'm not riding in the dumpster cab."

Remy nods in assent.

"Can't we just leave it here?" Nate asks.

I shake my head. "CO wants it for the report."

"You gonna get in trouble for giving it to me?"

I shrug and say, "Fuck 'em." We both smile. "You and me in the shitbox," I say, "Remy and Dino, you're in my car, right behind us." They look overjoyed at this and I throw Dino the keys. As they get in the car, I say, "But no fucking smoking."



They smile and close their doors. The stereo blares past the closed windows. They better not blow out my speakers.

"This really is an ugly fucking car," Nate says from the passenger seat once we're in and ready to go.

I put the car in drive. "Sure is."

We drive away from the cabin, a two-car convoy. The road winds around and through the small hills and ravines. It's slower going in the dark. I intermittently lose Dino and Remy in the mirror behind me as we curve along, hugging the guardrail that sits between us and a twenty foot drop. Then they're back for a minute or two until another curve separates them from my vision again.

"So what's gonna happen when we get back?" Nate says.

"Don't know. You weren't gone that long, they'll probably just dock your pay."

He doesn't say anything, just looks out the window.

"And Sergeant Martinez will want me to smoke the shit out of you."

He turns back to me and smiles. "If that's the worst that happens to me, I'll be happy." I smile, too, but I don't say anything. We both know the worst for Nate will be going back. I hope he understands that he won't be alone, that he'll have all of us with him. That slogan from a few years back is bullshit. Each of us isn't an army of one. We're all an army of brothers.

"So, seriously, what were you thinking with the paint job?"

I'm about to answer, when I notice something in the rear-view. I can't be sure what it is yet, so I slow down.

"The orange is all streaky. You could have at least used more

than one coat.”

There it is again. A glow in the mirror, Remy’s face lit up red. “They’re fucking smoking.”

“What?” Nate turns to look out the back window, so he doesn’t warn me about the whitetail buck that pops out from the trees in front of us on our left. I see it in my peripheral vision first, so I over-correct in surprise. I yank the wheel to the left, which sends the rear of the car fishtailing to the right. I spin the wheel the other way to compensate, but it’s not enough and we simply drift along the asphalt, missing the buck by inches and hitting the curving guardrail broadside at thirty miles an hour.

The guardrail holds, but it can’t stop the momentum of the car. We spin over the rail and roll down the hill. We’re both wearing our seatbelts, so we just dangle in the artificial antigravity as the world turns around us. I hear the car’s repeated impacts with the ground, but it’s muffled, drowned out by the heartbeat in my ears and the screaming. It sounds like I’m screaming with Nate’s voice, or maybe he’s using mine. Maybe the car is screaming, in anger or pain. It doesn’t matter. I try and count how many revolutions the car makes, but I lose count at a million.

With a sickening crunch, we stop suddenly at the bottom of the ravine, right-side up. Nate and I just sit still, looking out the windshield. I can hear yelling above us. Remy and Dino. Are we all right? Eventually Nate and I look at each other, but neither of us knows what to say. Finally, he shrugs his shoulders and says, “Huh,” and gives a small snort of laughter.

He’s in shock. I watch as he opens his car door and hops out, apparently undamaged by our descent. He has to be in shock, massive blood loss is blocking the pain receptors. He doesn’t know he’s only got a few more seconds of consciousness. But he

doesn't fall down. I don't see any blood. Maybe he's not the one in shock. I try to open my door, but it doesn't budge. It's me, I'm the one hurt. I'm paralyzed on my left side, and I can't do anything.

No. I can move my arms and legs, I can feel them. The door isn't opening because it's blocked by the large oak tree that we came to rest against. I unclick my seatbelt, slide across the seat, and fall out of Nate's open door onto the ground. Jagged rocks cut my hands as I land. I make it my feet, my legs wobbly, and lean against the car. Looking down at my body, and patting myself with my hands, I find no injuries. I'm okay. Nate's okay. Everything's okay.

Nate runs over and hugs me, laughing.

"Why are we okay?" I ask when I get my voice back.

"Who knows?" Nate looks up and I follow his gaze to see Remy and Dino picking their way down the hill. The road is twenty feet above us. We probably only turned over twice during the fall. Nate releases me and walks around the car, inspecting it like he's a claims adjuster. He kicks the tires and checks the glass in the side-view mirrors, both of which, somehow, survived the roll.

Remy and Dino make it into the ravine and come rushing over. "Are you okay?" Remy asks, his eyes saucers in the moonlight.

I punch him in the face, probably pretty close to where Dino hit him earlier. "Been better, been worse," I say.

He looks angry at first, but his face softens and I think he understands why I hit him. Dino points at Remy and laughs. Then Nate comes up, smiling, and knees Dino in the nuts. "Been better, been worse," Nate says. Dino groans at his feet, but the rest of us smile. None of this matters.

Nate picks up a softball-sized piece of granite and throws it

through the rear passenger window of the shit-mobile. He finds a larger rock and smashes it down on the windshield once, twice, three times. With the third hit, he starts to laugh uncontrollably. He leaves the rock on the hood and searches for one even larger, laughing the whole time.

Remy, Dino, and I just look at each other, two of us in pain. Remy shrugs and picks up a rock of his own and chucks it at the passenger mirror. The mirror casing explodes. Dino pulls a knife out of his pocket and begins deflating the tires. Remy and Dino also begin laughing, echoing Nate's loud mirth at this wanton demolition.

I watch them destroy the car, smash the glass, dent the body panels, tear the upholstery. I close my eyes and listen to the crunch of rock against metal and feel myself relax. Laughter and destruction fill my body and wall me off from the rest of the world. Right now, there is nothing but us and the car, a group of men wrecking something that used to have meaning. I don't know how long this will last.