

HYMN CALIFORNIA

adam gnade

part 1 of 12



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PRINTED *by Eberhardt Press, Portland, Oregon in*  
THE UNITED STATES *of* AMERICA

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## CHAPTER ONE

### HOME

We chose it for the light and for the windows and because it had an orange tree in the backyard. You could see it from the bedroom and when we were deathly sick and hung over I would crawl out of bed and bring back a T-shirt load of oranges to eat.

“Vitamin C,” I’d say, and she’d groan and roll over into her pillow, her hair a mess of curls.

The place was never clean but it was never filthy either. There were clothes in great colorful, humid, sweaty heaps, sometimes so high you couldn’t shut the bedroom door. There were books too, stacks spilling off shelves and onto the floor, piles up against walls, irregular mismatched spines like the strata of slate rock.

Sometimes the bed was made and when it was the place looked and felt more like home than anywhere I’d ever lived.

It was a two-house, two-duplex housing complex and it had a watch dog named Chompers that lived in the courtyard on a chain.

It had white walls, dark wood paneling, blonde hardwoods humming with warmth, floors glowing with the ancient ghost-steps and laughter of families who’d lived in its boxy rooms for the past 85 years. (Immigrants, bank employees, Portuguese fisherman, Navy officers, grocery clerks, sad UCSD college girls alone and scared in 1960 a million miles from home ... I imagined all this and closed my eyes on quiet afternoons and tried to hear their sounds.)

“It’s small, but this place has a good feel,” she said the day we moved in.

“I think we made the right choice.”

On days when the weather was right, in fall afternoons or late summer evenings with clean sea smell coming up from the coast, the sunset through the front windows turned the living room a dusky crimson.

It was a quiet place, but it was also a place where doors were slammed, where fights echoed into the night, and where she had panic attacks in the bedroom closet—big anxiety over money or lust, usually the lack of one or the other or both. Noise or quiet. Polarities. No middle ground. Which was how we lived at the time; in Southern California, in San Diego, in Golden Hill, in the lazy stasis of not doing a damn thing.

A few months before we moved into the new place, two planes hit the towers in New York and we watched it on TV at her mom’s place across town; we didn’t get off the couch for days.

After that, nothing seemed as important as being together. So we did just that. We hardly left each other’s side.

“I keep thinking about the people holding hands and jumping out of the buildings,” she would say as we sat up in bed at night. There wasn’t much I could say. In my mind I watched them fall, hurtling down the length of the burning towers, hands held tight until they disappeared from view.

On Sunday afternoons, the Mexicans across the way would throw great potlucks, birthday parties, or barbeques, and we’d sit at the window and watch and listen to their loud music and Frances would say, “This is good,” and smile and sometimes cry

and her eyes would shine sad, clear, and deep green.

Every few weeks, late at night, the bedroom would flash with light and police helicopters would circle overhead, looking for someone. The neighbors would stand out in the courtyard, laughing, shouting in Spanish while we watched from the big wood-frame window by our bed.

The day Jahi Turner disappeared from the park by our house was the same—helicopters, police lights, sirens, neighbors milling around outside, laughing and talking.

It was a year filled with kidnappings, some of them ending in discarded bodies (one left in the desert, a young girl burned unrecognizable by gasoline). Some were recovered, and those made us feel good again. But mostly, they were just gone.

## **GOLDEN HILL, FLY BY**

Life under the flight path. Sunny and hot for weeks at a time and empty sky, wide empty sky. Let's all get drunk, cut the sleeves off our T-shirts, and sit around the living room. "So and so gave so and so a bag of coke they found on the bathroom floor at Scolari's for his birthday." There is nothing wrong with this. Kids come over tripping on Robitussin and see shimmering snakeskin patterns in the shadows of our bookcase. There is nothing wrong with this. "Let's throw a party and keep the booze in a pup tent in the backyard so nobody else gets it." There is nothing wrong with this. "I can't believe he does heroin. I never thought I'd know anybody that does heroin." There is nothing wrong with this.

## **ATTEMPT**

"James ... you know Leroy Harris, right?" Ben Frank asked over the phone, his voice shaky.

It was 10 a.m. and I was at work, burnt out tired at a job writing news stories for a wire service.

"Yeah, why?"

At the time, working a dull 9-to-5 job, I was sinking into a place I never thought I'd go: responsibility. Ben Frank, as full of freedom as I was misguided duty, was always asking me to do things that made me feel inconvenienced. Grumpy, selfish, and old before my time, I was hesitant. Sure I knew Leroy, I loved the guy, but what? Did he need a ride somewhere? Did he need some place to stay for a few days? Was he broke? Maybe he wanted some money.

"He died last night."

Everything stopped inside me. My guts lurched then stood still. And then I noticed my heart, beating hard and fast, smacking against my chest wall.

"Leroy? *What?*"

"He died last night. Leroy did. I'm ... I'm getting a bunch of his friends together at Gelato ... tonight if you want to come."

Two days earlier Leroy Harris sat in my living room, quiet, legs crossed at the knees, hands folded in his lap.

In my living room he was high and, 48 hours later, he would die even higher while Burger King employees pounded on the locked bathroom door, shouting,

“Open up! Open up!”

Leroy Harris was one point of a triangle. In six months his best friend would drink himself to death from grief. In six more the kid who gave Leroy his final shot would leave the same way as Leroy. Triangle life. Triangle hospital rooms. Triangle death.

The three of them gone, my friends began to tell each other “I love you” earnestly before they’d part ways. At bars, parties, street corners in Golden Hill and North Park. “I love you, James. Don’t be such a stranger.” “I love you too. I’ll give you a call this weekend.”

Two days. 48 hours. Six months. These are all important numbers to remember. There is magic in numbers and in triangles. And attempts at magic. Attempts to bring back the dead. Attempts to remember, to find immortality and, in that, seize victory in proving everyone wrong.

“Who wants to live forever?” we say with bravado, but we’re fooling ourselves. We want and need desperately to keep moving ahead and endless in our path. Death happens to other people. If you pretend something isn’t true long enough, maybe it won’t happen.

I attempt to pull Leroy Harris from the earth before his body falls slack and loose and goes to worms. I write stories about him then turn those stories into songs. I sit in a noisy, beef-stew-scented poor-folk apartment in Lakeside with Frances’ ex-boyfriend Dale O’Malley and chant these stories into a microphone. I try to sing them but it comes out as talking. Everyone sings different. I’m not singing at all.

Dale, who looks like a big, gentle, sad lumberjack with blonde hair, knit cap, and beard, rolls the tape, plugs his guitar into a box and lets it hum. He and I drink wine together and I sit on the floor with the microphone and hold a séance for Leroy. We call this séance an album.

Attempts can be pure or they can throb and blister ugly with selfish agenda. Attempts can sail you across seas and conquer strange new lands, or they can leave you beat to hell on the rocks, torn open and leaking your warmth into the sea.

And in great red billows my blood turned the water cloudy from below and slick on the surface. There, the sea took me. There, I failed.

## **SHIV SHIV SHAKE**

Stayed up all night killing ants with a wet wash cloth and staring out the window, out into black, and black lines of ants through the kitchen door, lines down across linoleum lines, and up into sink lines, and across tile lines. They came creeping over sidewalk cement, through weeds in the courtyard, beneath the door jamb, and Frankie told me, “You just killed Candice the ant and Bob the ant and his sister Julia the ant and their neighbor” and so on and so forth to which I laughed and said, “Don’t you start with me.”

Golden Hill is kiddie pools in the neighbor’s yard, midsummer, and one last passenger plane east west to Lindbergh Field tarmac. Golden Hill is living rooms, bedrooms, sheets pulled off the bed, is fashion magazines spilled out onto the floor, is cats stretching through hardwood apartments, is going home finally at 4 a.m., the party over, the stories told, arm in arm with your girl, wine drunk, good and sopped.

# HYMN

Another house and another year.

Your séance album of talking-songs says, “This is how San Diego is” and everyone says, “Yes, it is how San Diego is” and they buy you slugs of rum from the bar and invite you to see their bands and art shows for free. You and her start a magazine and everyone says, “Yes, this is how it is” and the city opens right up, an open whale’s maw, a door wide open, a garden gate ajar and you say, “This is us” and everyone says, “It’s us too.”

But you jump out of your skin when you’re sober. Even when things are going well it feels wrong. The refrigerator hums all night until it’s a siren. The lights are too bright. You breathe too slow, too level. You’re thinking too much—or not enough. You work too much or you haven’t done anything in months.

So you watch NBC news, now in a haze of whiskey at 5 a.m., the sun rising purple through tan plastic blinds.

Winter in San Diego. Train cars blasted with pipe-bombs and a boy clutching his girl as her small body goes cold. She looks just like your girl . . . the camera comes in close, her body shakes hard, and then she’s gone.

“I just watched that girl die,” you think.

## SUNDOWN AND TORPEDOES

We sat cross-legged on the hardwood floors of a dusty Victorian house tucked back in the narrow, hilly streets north of the harbor. Andrew made garlic bread and pizza with soy cheese and artichoke hearts. (He'd dumpstered three bags of artichokes behind Safeway and brought them to us, triumphant.) Ben Frank showed up late with a jug of warm, poisonous-tasting wine. And everyone had stories.

At dusk, the sunset's light came into the room and turned the walls and curtains a deep maroon with golden highlights. It was a rich earthy sunset, a mild late-summer dusk as bright as fire, the kind of sunset you take for granted living in San Diego. But tonight we were calm, clear-minded, and appreciated things like the grapey slash of color in the sky, or the taste of slop red wine, or the company of friends and the stories they told. We were so poor it made us feel scooped out and hollow and we rushed to fill ourselves back up again. We could be alone and burn ourselves out with ennui, or we could huddle together and seek comfort in friendly faces and talk ourselves sane again.

Ben Frank had just returned from a big cross-country trip on the Greyhound. Riding with a fake Ameri-Pass, he rumbled into town ready to see the people he'd missed and to relax a while before the hell-raising began; this get together was in his honor.

Ben Frank's stories came first. They were joyous stompers full of exhilarating danger, heavy drugs, and life-threatening situations he always seemed to duck out from under at the last possible minute, right before the hammer fell and ended everything once and for all. He was Peter Pan, he was a wild spectacle, and he was immortal.

My turn to talk came after the folk record on the turntable played twice, and after I'd taken down enough of Ben Frank's burgundy to feel packed in soft cotton and cushioned from self-doubt.

"So, it's World War II and my grandfather enlists in the Navy. He's 18," I said.

"Too young," whispered Andrew, bearded, his eyes full and sparkling and sad.

"Yeah, too young ... way too young. But, so, he enlists and he kind of likes the Navy. He's got a lot of friends on the ship and he feels some kind of ... sense of duty after Pearl Harbor. Everybody did, y'know? But as much as he likes being on the ship, he wants to be a submariner. He wants to be on subs."

"Can you blame him?" said Ben Frank, dead serious.

"So he's in port and he finds out there's a spot available on one of the subs. They offer it to him and everything's cool but the problem is his best friend Gary is up for the spot too. They'd both requested sub duty, y'know, they were both just *obsessed* with being submariners. Now, since this is the 1940s and things were different back then they decide to flip a coin for it. Heads, my grandpa gets sub duty. Tails, it goes to Gary. Flip. Catch. Tails. That's it. My grandpa loses and Gary's all set to sneak up on the Japanese and fuck their shit up, right? So that night they put on nice new Hawaiian shirts and white slacks and they go out and get destroyed drunk. They hit the bars, flirt with girls, act crazy, and even—like all the war movies—they make plans to find each other after the war and go into business together. At this point, they're like brothers."

"Gary ships out a couple days later and as the weeks roll go by my grandpa gets

word of the sub's missions ... their victories and adventures and *man* is he fuckin' jealous. He starts to resent Gary and thinks maybe he should've taken the initiative. There had to have been *something* he could've done. But instead he has to sit back and watch Gary become a hero. Then, three months after the coin toss, Gary's sub is sunk and everybody dies."

"Man ..." said Andrew, shaking his head.

No one else said anything. We all sat facing each other, the house suddenly silent and colder, the mood robbed of its casual, easy vibe. Panicking, and in hopes of bringing everyone back up, I quickly changed the subject and told a story I'd heard somewhere about Gary Busey doing something mindless and pretty soon Andrew started his stories and they were good and happy and they went long into the night.

Leaving the party and closing the front door behind me, I saw that someone had circled a tiny dead mouse on the porch boards in Sharpie ink, outlined like a homicide. I stepped over it and stomped down the wood steps to my car.

## **LA TO SANTA BARBARA**

At the Santa Barbara harbor we sit dockside and watch black water moving under the moonlight.

In LA traffic, heading here, Paul drove and I slept in the passenger seat and dreamt of Howard Hughes, gone crazy and gone crazy again in dreamy California evenings, when the palm trees blew gentle in the canyons and the jitters took him deeper and ground his finger bones into rock dust.

O' Howard Hughes, you are one of us, walking in Kleenex box shoes and staring at endless prime rib on white plates and slashing your sheets with three inch toenails, thick and butter yellow and curving into the earth 'til they are roots and you're rooted.

Howard Hughes, you've done the big sleep but we still see you in movies. Where are your makeup artists and black-haired starlets? Where are your airlines and big industry? Where are your sparkling freedom visions? Do you dream in death while I dream of you? Who keeps you alive, Howard Hughes? Who tells you that we'll all live forever one day? I see you in silhouette and you're pale and sweating in your dark Hollywood suit. The Black Dahlia grins big and Walt Disney's a putrid corpse.

Woke up sweaty with talk radio droning and saw cars and cars and cars in traffic lines, endless traffic lines stretching like shiny, colorful tiles up the 5 Freeway.

Six hours later, Santa Barbara late night harbor. Roller-skating girl wearing headphones glides past on the sea walk, jaundice lit and busty in short shorts under street light. Paul snubs out his cigarette and points at her, "*Id* hit it."

## **RICH PEOPLE**

At Panchita's Bakery, we stand in front of the pastry racks and stare at them through the glass. A week ago we sold CDs and borrowed money to pay rent. This means no money until the 15th, but we don't care. We are living paycheck to paycheck, giving everything we earn to the mysterious demon-gods of capitalism.

"What do we have?" asks Frankie, holding my hand, fixated on the rows of bright-

ly-colored sweet rolls in front of her.

“Buck fifty.”

“We’re rich.”

“We are.”

The best thing about Panchita’s, the tiny Mexican bakery a block from our house, is when we’re here we *are* rich. Big sweet loaves of bolillo and torta bread for ten cents—day-old, but still good. Sugared conchas rolls (in six flavors) and custard-filled pastries for a quarter.

“Just get Superman to roll up that pan dulce tray like a burrito and I’ll eat the whole thing,” I say.

“I’ll smash all those custard rolls into one giant custard roll the size of a basketball and slam dunk it into my mouth,” says Frankie.

Her arm wraps around my waist and she pulls me closer.

“The smell of this place is making me dizzy it’s so good,” she whispers as we breathe in pure sugar and fresh-baked dough.

“It’s good to be rich,” I say.

Last night we spent our last \$20 on wine and gas for the car. Slaves to the gas tank. Slaves to the paycheck. Slaves to the bill collectors. But the wine was to blot all that out, to kick our captors in the ass and spend the next eight good hours not thinking about bounced checks and piles of overdue utility bills. Tomorrow the debt collectors could come with guns and shoot our walls full of holes, but put a couple bottles of wine in us and we are the king and queen of everything.

We woke up late this morning and I searched the house for spare change while Frankie went through the cupboards to see if anything was edible. I found a handful of pennies and a dime in a mason jar on the bookcase and a couple nickels in the couch, but the big score was the quarter hid just under the refrigerator, nestled in dust bunnies and cat hair.

We take a tray of conchas and bolillo bread to the register and it looks like a feast. The bolillos are brave little fat bulls that will keep us warm and awake and the conchas are pink and yellow and blue gemstones.

The change is 20 cents. We walk out into the sunshine. We are unstoppable.