

DRAW

Every day after me and Grandad sit on the porch and eat fried green tomatoes, my cousin teaches me how to draw. He makes dashed lines in the shapes of skyscrapers, men with gold chains, girls with big breasts. I connect the dashes until the picture is complete. My cousin tells me to get a new sheet of paper and draw what I just traced. I do. He says, You need to work on your buildings but you draw some good titties.

Grandma is in the living room. She usually smells like cottage cheese. But today she smells like chitlins. I eat so much vinegar with my chitlins my lips turn white. Grandma lights a long cigarette and stabs herself in the stomach with needles. She says it's insulin. She listens to a gospel song and sings, I'm coming up on the rough side of the mountain. My cousin says, She plays that goddamn song every day. She does. I like it. I ignore him and keep drawing titties.

The next day after me and Grandad sit on the porch and eat fried green tomatoes, my cousin gives me another lesson. He makes dashed lines in the shapes of a man with a knife, a woman in a bathtub, a keyhole. I don't want to trace these shapes. He grabs my hand and makes me. He tells me to get a new sheet of paper and draw what I just traced. I don't. He grabs my hand again. He says, You need to work on your stab wounds.

I run through the house crying. I want to tell Grandma but she's stabbing herself in the stomach. I run outside and tell Grandad. He stops playing cards with his friends and takes me in the garden. Here, he says, have a little wine. I need

to tell you something. Grandad explains. When your cousin was five he saw some shit that messed him up. So don't worry too much about it, he been drawing that shit for years. Grandad tells his friends, Card game cancelled—gotta fry some tomatoes for my boy here. See you suckas tomorrow, and dont forget my goddamn money nigga.

My cousin is an artist. He says, You draw some good knives but you still need to work on your stab wounds. Lemme get one of them tomatoes. Check out my new Air Jordans. You need to learn how to rap. She plays that goddamn song every day.

COLOR

In class I sit behind Rhonda. She always raises her hand. I get to stare at her arm. I kick the back of her seat so she can turn around. I can look at the side of her face. I keep going to the pencil sharpener in the front so I can look at her eyes when I walk back.

I draw two pictures the same. One for me, one for Rhonda. I draw us holding hands in front of a house. Out of the chimney comes smoke shaped like hearts. A big puffy apple tree beside the house. On the tree is a heart with our initials. I start to color. Rhonda first. Hair yellow. Skin peach. I give Rhonda the picture. She smiles.

I run up the steps to my house with the picture flapping. My mom looks but don't say nothing. She shows my stepdad and says, Look at this shit. What the fuck, my stepdad says. He shoves a black crayon into my hand. His fat hand grabs mine and makes me color over Rhonda's yellow hair. Same to her face with a brown crayon. He says, Now thats better. My mom says, Shonuff is.

MEDDLING KIDS

The cable is off again. Me and my sister turn the knob to all thirteen channels, nothing but static. I aint playing Barbies with you, she says, cuz last time you made He-Man beat up Barbie. Good, I say, I dont wanna play that stupid shit anyway. Well, she says, I'll just pretend to watch teevee. Thats stupid, I say.

My sister sits in front of the teevee. The static is loud. She leans in and says, Zoinks. I sit next to her, What are you watching. None of your bees wax, she says. She starts singing, We got some work to do now. Can I watch too, I say. Okay, she says, but only if you be Shaggy and Scooby, and I'll be the smart ones.

She puts her hands on the steering wheel and says, Gang, we're almost to West Virginia. The mayor called us to investigate a couple of monsters thats been scaring kids all over town. I say, Ruh-roh, Raggy. My sister goes on, Lets split up and look for clues. Velma and Daphne, come with me. Shag and Scoob, start at the cemetery. I chatter my teeth and say, Ruh-roh, not the remeter. My sister says, Gang, we found some clues. We followed a little ugly boy a pretty girl into a house. We spotted the monsters when they chased the boy and girl out of the house yelling, I'll give you something to cry for. So gang, heres the plan. My sister whispers something in my ear I can't understand. Then she says, Got it Shaggy and Scoob. Zoinks, I say.

Okay gang, my sister says, we will rescue the kids from the house. But first we gotta sneak in and set up booby traps. My sister stops to think. Okay, she says, I got it now. We

will go in and let the monsters see us rescuing the kids. Then they will chase us. Scoob, while theyre chasing us I want you to take this rope and trip them. I say, No way Fred. My sister goes into the kitchen and comes back with a cracker and says, How about a Scooby snack. She throws the cracker in the air and I try to catch it in my mouth but it falls on the floor. I pick it up and eat it. She goes on, After Scoob trips them with the rope, there will be oil and banana peels on the ground and they will slide down a ramp into a dumpster filled with nails and rats and barb wire. And thats when we will take they masks off.

We run through the house saying Zoinks and Yikes. We jump on the couch and dive off. We stick our heads around a corner and run in place. We run in and out of closets. My sister says, Now, Scoob. I put the jump rope in my mouth and dive in front of the door. My sister says, Whooaa—slippy-slip, down the ramp they go. She makes the deep voice of the monsters, Why is these rats bitin my ass—Who put barb wire in this goddamn dumpster. My sister grabs a baseball bat and opens the trashcan. She says, These monsters look like our mom and stepdad. C'mon Shaggy, take them goddamn masks off.

HAPPY LITTLE TREES

Bob Ross is on. He has paint. I don't. First I grind flowers with a rock but it don't work. I chew and chew dandelions. Spit mixes into yellow paste. I chew grass. I chew mulberries. I chew wild onions. They don't make color so I swallow. Tingles back of the neck and waters my eyes. Chew coal. Chew red clay. Chew what a grasshopper chews. I chew a grasshopper. Crunchy, then juice squirts to back of throat. The paste is chunky brown green white. Lick off hand and chew until smooth. Open jar, chew lightning bugs. Wait till night when they light, then rip off the ass, smear it on my face.

HEAVY D

I'm trying to teach my sister a song I recorded off the radio. Listen real close, I say, One two, tell me what you got—let me slip my coin inside your slot and hit the jackpot.

One two, she says, tell me something about coins and a jackpot.

Goddammit, I say, you got it wrong—its not that hard.

Shut up, she says, this is stupid. Why do I need to learn this anyway.

Cuz its important like the Pledge of Allegiance.

I know the chorus, she says, Now that we found love what are we gonna doo.

That aint enough, I say. You gotta learn the whole thing.

Why. Since you already know it, you rap and I sing.

No. What if I cant talk one day. And if you dont know it, then who will.

Okay, she says, just go slow next time.

I rap the first two lines. She gets it. I add more. She gets that. After an hour she gets the last lines: I'm not quite sure of what is going down, but I'm feeling hunky-dory bout this thing that I found. I rewind the tape and we rap the song three times perfect.

She says, If you actually found love what would you do with it.

Thats a stupid question.

No it aint, she says. Just answer it. What would you do with love.

DUST

My mom and stepdad have a baby so we move in with my stepdad's mama. The house is built on the side of a hill. The house is leaning. The house has a kitchen floor that is slanted with the tops of nails pushing through brown linoleum. The house has a basement with a coal furnace. The house is white with two bedrooms upstairs, a bedroom and kitchen and living room downstairs. My mom and stepdad and the baby sleep in the living room. LaShawn and Jamar are my stepdad's niece and nephew. They sleep in the bed with my stepdad's mama in the bedroom on the first floor. In the same room me and my sister sleep on the floor. Nobody sleeps upstairs.

When I put coal on the fire before bed a rat waddles along the wooden beams and stops to look down at me. Now while I'm trying to sleep I hear the rat scratching and chewing wood under the floor.

At five my stepdad yells to wake me to put coal on the fire. He says I didn't fix it good enough last night at one. He says if I fixed it good enough I could sleep till five-thirty. I walk outside and go to the basement. I shovel two buckets of ashes from the bottom of the furnace and dump them over the hill. Then I fill seven buckets of coal and dump three on the fire so it will last until I come from school.

Me and my sister, and LaShawn and Jamar, come from school. My stepdad yells because the fire went out. He said he and his mama and the baby was cold all day. That I was trying to freeze them to death. LaShawn and Jamar ask me why can't I fix the fire right. My mom tells me I better get my

shit together. I go to the basement and the fire is out. I put too much coal on and smothered it. I need to build a new fire.

There's an old house next door where I get dry wood. With the axe I chop brittle walls, Kick through walls, chop up the floor. Awake the rats. Their nest is tangled straw, sticks, and dry leaves. In it is chewed up Bible pages. Empty can of pot-
ted meat. Cracked pork chop bones. Half-eaten Barbie head.

At five the next morning I put three buckets of coal on the fire so it will last until I come from school.