I stopped watching television about twelve years ago when shows like Jerry Springer and Cops seemed entertaining to everyone but me. My friends would laugh at the on-screen mockery of destitution, violence, and the ticks of strung-out addicts, but I never could. These days I don’t subscribe to cable and only sometimes, early in the morning before the news comes on, I’ll watch an old black-and-white or a western film that fades in and out of digital reception on my flat screen. I catch glimpses of shootouts and the masked heroes of the 1940s and then the still, deserted landscapes of the American Old West. As I strain to catch scenes between a disconnection, I begin to think about the way the whole set, actors and all, seem so secluded out there—unaware of any other place in the world—and then about my childhood friend.

Down that old road, where the sun-soaked fields rippled up toward the sky, we were just two kids growing up in an old gold rush town. As I think about it now, we may have even lived in the Old West, because I remember your grandfather’s dandy mustache and the way he wore that cowboy hat while working in his yard. His horses were the only ones I’ve ever known to drink beer straight from the bottle. And we drank them too, persuading their cold, foamy lathers down our throats as they erupted from our bottlenecks, saluting the days away. Finished up, we’d grasp our hands and bounce a while on a consigned tire and sweep a place on the ground to spin our emptied bottles.

Our houses weren’t much for playing indoors, so we’d take to driving some rusted metal carcass abandoned in the yard, pretending we were headed off to a big city. Yes, it must have been where all those western films were made because I remember people always screaming and yelling and shooting, and that whenever I’d sleepover at your grandpa’s house, I would stare for hours at shelves of antique bottles—glass stallions, mustangs and horseshoes—that all hung behind a bar that
I'm sure said SALOON.

The levees built after the hydraulic mining of the California gold rush were our daily refuge. Whatever floods they kept out, they detained that whole town of cowboys, pushers and outlaws, and I sat with you looking down on all of it, the whole town, clouded in dust in that thick, sweltering heat that never let up. I couldn't see from the hill back then, the connotations of things like “trash” or “coon” or “dope.” Only the heat waves as they billowed from the shaking tracks—our coins, piping hot, flattened so remarkably by the BNSF.

My memories of our childhood reel on like a movie, some old western film, where my friend and I only exist in a place of barbed-wire fences and cardboard cutouts of villains and sheriffs. He'd probably say it wasn't a movie, that we've still got the scars and bottle caps to prove it. He'd swear the whole town is in color now and that all the bad guys are gone, that the sheriffs have all gone home. Still, every now and then, I cross a railroad track or drive past a run-down neighborhood that somehow echoes our Wild West and it hollers out to me from the side of the road. I journey across a trail of memories until I spot some old house all boarded up CONDEMNED and I remind myself that no one lives there anymore.