Clovis looked down at the bloated body a few feet below him on the riprap. It looked just like him, but it was covered in those stupid painted tattoos and bright scarf and decaying flowers. A net loosely tied the body to a piece of driftwood shaped like a surfboard, and with that came the refuse and waste of the first rain after a drought, wrapped over the body like a blanket, still dangling in the ocean.

Just how did it end up here, in front of him?

And why did he feel like crying?

“Clovis, are you there?” His friend, Suzanne, stepped next to him, surfboard tucked under her arm – a plan for the day that seemed stupid, now. “Clovis, is there...”

Turning away, he scowled. “Just a body.”

She looked down at it. “Jesus! Wait, why does it look like you? But, like, you from a year ago? At fourteen?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. It looks stupid, anyway.” He looked away. There was too much color in that body, like watercolors painted its skin, but there was a time he painted his, wasn’t there?

Her hand brushed at her cheek. “Clovis, are you okay?”

He stared at the mouth of the Los Angeles river, a waterway filled with the city’s grime and regrets – with his – and with so much plastic and trash that a few machines had been called in to clean it up. A chilly wind thrust the odor at him.

“Of course I’m okay.”

Suzanne sighed. “Well... well, if we’re going to stand around here, the least we should do is get someone to clean up the body. ID it and bring it back and stuff. God, this kid looks like an art piece.”
“Don’t call him that.”

“Why not?”

“You know why.”

He saw her glance across the channel, towards the Chancellor’s office, only five miles west of the university dream that his parents shoved onto him, where he took college courses barely as a teen. Her hand brushed across her hair. “It’s about them, isn’t it?”

He didn’t need to say anything to confirm it.

Staring out, a few pieces of ruined cardboard and fallen trees floated out of the river, wandered out to sea. Some landed next to the body like lost ghosts autopsying the shame of Los Angeles.

Clovis stared at her surfboard, the short one he’d picked out for her, that he’d seen her dance across the waves with. “Suzanne, you know I don't surf anymore. Why are you even going today?” Her hair was still dry. Was she planning to go later? “Especially after the first rain?”

She sighed. “I just wanted to see you again. To check if you’re alive.”

“I am alive.”

“You’re not, Clovis! You’re as dead as that kid down there.”

“I’m breathing.” He faced her. “Isn’t that enough?”

“But what happened to everything you loved? Surfing? Art?”

“I grew up.” He sat down on the grass, ran his hands through the dew, somehow warmer than his cold hands. “I grew up, like what my parents told me, and I threw everything into the river. Every. Last. Thing. Don’t you remember? Unlike that kid down there.” He could feel his voice quiver, and as his gaze drifted to the body, at the same flowers, same paint, same scarf, all
swallowed by the sins of Los Angeles water, he could feel his sobs choked in his throat. Automatically, he rose.

It was only a matter of time before the machines finished clearing the river’s mouth, when all that water would break free and the river would start flowing again and would surge down and sweep away that body and he and Suzanne would forget about it too, wouldn’t they, just like any other body in the city?

He felt himself falling.

Suzanne grabbed his arm and pulled him back up. “Clovis— oh, Jesus you’re cold. Be careful, you almost walked off of the riprap.”

There it was. Jagged rocks, made to break the surf as it surged upward, keep the city above water so that it wouldn’t drown, but if it did, wouldn’t it finally be clean?

“Clovis, can you please look at me?”

His eyes were drawn to the body. It was staring at Suzanne.

Lifeless.

He glanced away. “He looks even more stupid up close.”

“Clovis, for God’s sake, stop insulting a dead body, especially one that looks like you. You sound like your parents.”

A chill rippled through him. Everything he said, he felt like his parents were just puppeting him to say it.

Across the channel, the machines whirred as they scooped out more trash. The whole pile-up was starting to move again as water snaked and loosened each and every crack.

He walked away from Suzanne.

“Where are you going?”
“Home.” His voice was barely audible.

“What are you gonna do at home? I mean, can’t we at least talk?”

“Homework.” His eyes drifted to the body, halfway to Suzanne. “Study, stuff like that, because what else is there for me, Suzanne? It’s not like I can do anything else, you know, unlike you, who actually has this freedom to do fun things and be a normal teenager and...”

The waves moved the body. The machines whirred.

“Suzanne, why are we still friends?”

“I mean, I’m still here, and...” She sighed. He could imagine her little nervous tics: glancing away, free hand at her chin, then brushing her cheek, then combing her hair.

“Clovis, don’t you want to still be friends?”

The dam of Los Angeles’s trash was breaking.

He couldn’t say it, how much he wanted to be “here” with her, to have anyone like her in his life as his friend. If he opened his mouth one more time, he’d cry, he’d sob, he’d heave, he’d fall apart at the seams, and then Suzanne would see how pathetic he was, how much he couldn’t open his mouth, say what he want, and then what?

The sound of water trickling. Him walking.

“Clovis, come back.”

Him running, water running. Water rushing, rushing, rushing, him running, running, running, till the beats of his step were gone, till he felt like the cold water out there was cresting into a tube around him, like all those days so long ago when the sea and painting and flowers were once his love, when Suzanne was by his side, when he was on his board.

But neither was here, were they?

“Clovis!”
The river cried as it hit its critical mass, as all of its trash, its water, its refuse, its grime, surged outwards, as it swept the body back out to sea.

To rest.

And his tears surged as he rose his head from the concrete path, as the years fell like a river, as Suzanne hurried to his side.

His arms rose.

She took him up.

Pulled him into a hug.

As she always had.

As she always would.