1391 Midway Parkway | New and selected stories

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NEW AND SELECTED STORIES

by

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for the degree of
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"These prayers are the constant road across the wilderness."

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When Walker pulls their car off to the side of the highway and gets out, he just stares for a while at the auto yard. The yard seems to stretch all the way to the San Juan range. Heaped up cars, gutted torsos, abandoned wheel wells, scattered engine parts, and pieces of machinery consume the lot. Acres of quiet land covered in a blanket of automobile remains.

Walker takes a light reading of the auto yard with his Nikon. The sun presses hard against the wide lot and the autos smolder red. It's at sunset. The mountains form a dark blue curving backdrop, giving the wreck yard, momentarily, a sharp outline.

Jolene watches him hold the camera, then looks out over the wide expanse of automobile carnage, and at the mountains.
She walks from the car to across the road to where there are horses, young mares that run along a fence line. Jolene watches as the taller mare chases down the other and forces her to turn. Their hooves tremble the earth as they come by.

Walker leans low to take the photograph of the curving driveway, flecked by hub caps, that leads to a small mobile home. The blue of a television burns the curtains. Above the home hangs a rusted sign which reads: Clements' Salvage Co. He catches the lower half of the letters in the frame and clicks the shutter.

He walks along the fence a ways and listens to the wind as it whistles through the cars. He thinks about photographing Jolene with the horses but it is getting too dark now. The San Juans are turning deep purple as the sun dips low, the yard capturing the last of the light in the chrome and glass that singes orange and then peels away. He would have to remember to come back the next day to photograph it all, when it would still be light enough: All that gnarled metal against smooth stone and sky.

"It's getting dark," Jolene yells. "Could we please go soon?"

"Soon," Walker says.

Jolene crosses the highway looking both ways even though they haven't seen another vehicle since they broke the border between Utah and Colorado. The stream of tourists had trailed off steadily the farther they got from Moab. And now, near
Cortez at Clements' Salvage Co., the highway was empty.

Jolene stands near Walker. "Get your picture?" she asks.

"Hard to say."

"No light, huh? Too bad we didn't come by earlier. It's getting cold."

"I know. We'll go."

He stares at the field a while longer, while the lot slowly disappears car by car and the distant lights of Cortez begin to dance.

"It's different than I thought it would be," says Jolene as they drive through the heart of Cortez. They pass, slowly, the scattering of fast food restaurants that freckle the edges, and the small hotels, and Jolene watches the colorful light of these places slide across her hands and lap.

"I expected to see Montezuma's men laying dead or something," she says. "I was thinking of the man, not the town."

"It's funny," says Walker. "I kept thinking of that song 'Cortez the Killer.' Remember that?"

"Song?"

"'He came dancing across the water with his galleons and guns, looking for the New World and the palace of the sun.'" Walker pulls the car over and slows it by a pay phone. "Neil Young."
"I don't remember."

"From the 'Zuma' album. The one with all the scratchy drawings on the cover. I've been rolling that song over in my head since the first mileage sign to Cortez. I was trying to remember the ending. It goes from being a song about Cortez the killer to being about a girl Neil Young is in love with, or can't find, or something. Or maybe the girl can't find him. I don't remember."

Walker is reaching for the directory that hangs beneath the pay phone.

"Let's just pick a motel, Walker," says Jolene. "Forget about calling. None looked that crowded and I'm too tired to care, really. Just pick one out of the blue."

Jolene feels a tired ache in her shoulders and neck and wants to be in bed somewhere, asleep. Her face feels warm.

They pull back onto the strip and wade slowly past the motels as they try to remember one from the next. He steers the car, instead, into the lot of an Indian jewelry store which is still open. For days they've been stopping at places like this one, searching for a turquoise ring for her.

"We'll just try this place," says Walker.

"It's okay. We can look tomorrow."

"Let's just try," he says.

The store is wide, with high ceilings, and brightly lit by bare fluorescent bulbs. Walker and Jolene wander past cases jammed with Indian jewelry: silver and turquoise rings,
bracelets, necklaces, belt buckles, and bolo ties. There are sand paintings, bleached steer skulls, and Ute Indian pottery with painted scenes of lightning storms. There's too much to look over, so Walker and Jolene head back to the car after a quick look around.

"I'm too tired to even look for a hotel," Jolene says. She buries herself in her side of the car, lays back with her head toward the window, and watches her breath form soft clouds against the glass.

"'And I know she's living there,'" Walker speaks low. "'And she loves me to this day. I still can't remember where or how I lost my way.'"

She turns her head toward him.

"Nothing," he says. "Just the ending to that song."

Walker pulls the car off at a motel with a pulsating vacancy sign, and he and Jolene ask for a room with a view of the mountains. They all face that way, they're told and are handed a key as Walker signs the register.

The motel room is rinsed in a green glow the shimmers off of the neon cactus from Taco Time across the street. The floors are yellow tile, and crocheted wall hangings adorn the walls. A huge television, held in place by chains that run through the ceiling, consumes a corner of the room.

The room's view captures part of the San Juan range. It's hard to tell exactly where the mountains begin and end, and most of the view consists instead of scattered refuse.
collected in a field. There's an overturned washing machine, balled up scrap metal, and an old Chevy Impala. But beyond all that, beyond the cluttered field, they can see the dark curve of the mountains.

Sometimes he wishes he could talk to her about losing his brother. Everything swells up inside and bursts inward when he tries. Jolene lost her father three years earlier, just after she and Walker met. Walker watched while it happened. Watched her sadness turn inward, too. But they hardly knew each other then. Their skin was softer to each other. He imagined that he was able to swoop down deep within her sorrow and carry some of it away, purely because of the newness of their love. Walker feels as if nothing can touch his sadness. A heavy stone resting in still water. Nothing can show him the way home, lift him toward warmth, toward light.

Like everything else lately, their summer road trip had consisted mostly of wanderings: Denver, Boulder, Grand Junction, Moab, and now Cortez. They hadn't stayed long in any of these places. It had been habit for them, since early into their relationship, to take a road trip during summer. The first year was northern Michigan, the next was Thunder Bay, and this year they flew out to Colorado to visit Walker's father and his father's new wife and then borrowed one of their cars and wandered. Wherever we go, we go, they said. So they wandered.
They were both aware of the silence of this trip, the restrained moves. Sometimes it got painful. Still they held hands. Still they made love. And still they drove on, silently observing the worn and stoic terrain of the Southwest as it stretched out across the windshield and shaved away in layers.

They wrote out postcards. Hers say, "Hi, Monica. In southern Colorado now. Strange hotels ever since we left. One had a pre-birth of Christ wallpaper motif. Explain later."; "Miss you, Ali. It's late. We're in Cortez. Beautiful drive. Lovely terrain. Taking plenty of pictures. It's hot."; and "Mom -- be home soon. Everything's fine." His say, "D.W. -- Jolene and I have kidnapped an American baby and are heading to Mexico to exchange it for pesos and some of those crazy blankets you can get so cheap there. Maybe a statue of a guy in sombrero taking a siesta, too."; "Jim -- Quit calling my apartment. I'm in Colorado. Sober up."; and "Dad -- Went to Utah. Now in Cortez. Maybe New Mexico tomorrow. Something I have to talk to you about when we get back. Jolene says hi."

They are writing out postcards in silence while nibbling on Cheez-it crackers, the box they bought at an Amoco in Crescent Junction, Utah, and snacked from sporadically as they drove past the startling severe landscape of Arches National Park.
There's a movie on television, now, with Rosanna Arquette who's an actress Walker has fallen in love with, but Jolene notices he isn't watching. The air conditioner drowns out the sound anyway. Jolene listens to it whir. She puts the postcards away and just listens.

"I'm falling asleep again. Can we forget about dinner?"

"Sure. We'll have two breakfasts tomorrow."

"What time is it?" she asks.

"Can't be late. News hasn't come on yet. Must still be early, Cortez time."

Jolene washes her face in the bathroom with apricot soap she's brought from home. It's a grainy soap she that she works into her pores and then rinses over and over again. She removes her contact lenses, washes them, and then she swallows her pill. She thinks about taking a bath, but she's tired enough as it is.

Jolene tugs at her suitcase, removes a small, blue jewelry box -- the purple heart medal, and sets it near her bedside.

"Remind me not to forget this tomorrow morning," she says.

She strips to her Jocky briefs and climbs into bed. The sheets feel cool. And even though they are stiff and smell of Hi-Lex, she feels refreshed lying there between clean sheets. She feels as though she could sleep for days.
Walker never tells her about it, but sometimes when Jolene isn't around, he'll take the medal, the purple heart, in his hands and hold it until it's warm. It's the medal that her grandfather earned in the second world war, after his knee was destroyed by enemy mortar. The medal was passed down to Jolene's father and, before he died, it was given to Jolene. That's when she told Walker she knew her father would die soon, when she was given the medal. Since then, she's slept with it by her bedside.

Walker likes to hold the medal because it's so much a part of her. It's the part of her they won't speak about. The quiet part. A quiet part. He also thinks about how the medal symbolizes bravery and injury, and, more than anything else, loss. Originally it signified loss of bone, and then of life, of a father's life. She keeps her loss at her bedside, thinks Walker, guarding it, keeping it so. And mine's deep down below, where no one can see it. Hers is more solid, like the medal. Mine's something else: Shapes in darkness.

Jolene lies in bed and listens to the air conditioner as it burns; softly burns and sounds like whispers. "Listen to this, listen to this." It all comes by in a hush; something faded, alluring, "Listen to this."

She slips, then, on the strip of thin neon and the color goes broken: Shards of color; fast, loud, flowing glass of color. She's near the door; leans into the frame; pushes the
color, and the dust picks up outside. She thinks she should find him because it's growing late.

She watches the stream of cars from the doorway, across the interstate: The red tail lights; a field of fire. She feels that she and Walker should go now, fast now, but he's still not there.

"Darling," she tries but the wind scatters her voice.

He's standing there, by the auto yard again; the broken down cars. He is wading through the metal. He's slow about it. There are all these cars, and she comes toward him: Something pulling now.

"Are you going with me?" she says and the words fall away. He is watching her. Maybe he smiles; she can't tell. It's something he does with his face.

"I'm going to stand here and watch," he says. A wind pulls. "Watch the rust until it bleeds through and finds its way to the soil. Watch it until it sleeps."

All around them there is sound.

Jolene hears the door and sees his form in the frame. The room is dark. Walker shuts the door softly behind him.

She feels as though she had only been asleep for a moment. The television is still soundlessly glowing: Gray static illuminating the walls.

"Where did you go?" she asks him.

He is holding a paper bag at his side. He hands it to
her and she removes the bottle of tequila.

"The terrain reminded them about it," says Walker. "The
doggies had cried about it, and the posse had eyed it, stole
it, and lost the contents of it, along with a few hundred
brain cells along the way. And still they felt worse. They
had all agreed they felt worse from the effort."

There he was, not making sense again, she thinks,
smiling. There he was speaking in tongues. For a moment she
imagines it was him, the old him, before things changed. She
watches his face and thinks about that. About how loss can
change the shape, the lines in a face.

"I shouldn't have woken you," he says. "I should have
tipped past the guard. Shhhh. Go back to sleep."

"It's okay," Jolene says. "You want to stay up and
drink, we can."

"I drove down to that jewelry store and told the woman
she had too many items, too full a store. Told her that's why
she didn't sell anything. Your eyes get tired looking at all
that jewelry. I told her to box the lot of it up, display
merely a dozen pieces and price them each six times as high.
She would double her sales. I told her to pick out a ring for
you, to put it on a shelf all by itself and we'd be by
tomorrow."

She is laughing. "You didn't, really."

"I did that. You don't believe I did that?"

"Not even close."
"Or maybe I just went straight to the liquor store and bought the first bottle of tequila that met my eyes. I don't remember. Either way, it was a remarkable night. Look at that." He holds the bottle up near the blue haze of the television screen. "Look at the way the light bends through."

"It'll bend your mind some, too, darling," she says.

"That's the point, I guess. Strain it past the vortex webbing of the brain, blurring distance up into the farther reaches of consciousness."

"Unconsciousness," she corrects.

"To be or not to be." He rubs his hands in circles on her stomach. "Ahh, there's the rub."

She laughs again and grabs his hand. "I miss you," sometimes," she says. "Sometimes."

Walker squints. "Miss me?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"When we're away. Wherever we are when we're not together."

"We're mostly together."

"Not actually," she says and there's silence.

"You sleep," he says. "I'm going to watch the moon."

"Let me come," she says. She pulls away the sheets. "For a while, anyway."

Walker notices Jolene is watching her reflection glide by the
row of motel windows as he carries her past and she tells him it fills her with a sense of freedom: Watching her near naked body pass through these windows where strangers lie sleeping. Walker carries her in his arms to keep her from stepping on broken glass or rusted metal. They move past scattered cans, a bicycle frame, mattress springs, and a rusted out Kenmore washing machine. When they come to the Chevy Impala, Walker sets Jolene on the hood and checks the interior. It looks pretty clean.

"It'll be like being at the drive-in movies in a stolen car," he says.

They sit close in the front seat and watch the dark, sharp silhouette of the San Juans. The moon is directly above them, dipping into the windshield. All around them the sounds of night flow like running water.

They drink the tequila. Walker likes the way it feels on his lips, and the way it singes his throat just barely. He feels it glide into his stomach. He and Jolene are silent. The warm wind sifts through the open windows.

"You don't suppose that radio works, do you?" she asks.

"This car doesn't even have an engine, probably," he answers. "It's been gutted. Probably it's been sitting this way for years."

He wonders if he'll want to come back in the morning to photograph the car. He wonders about the contrast, whether it's as sharp as the wreck yard they stopped at earlier: All
that broken down metal surrounded by nearly untouched beauty.

He's been taking plenty of photos on this trip, stopping the car intermittently to see how something looks through the Nikon lens. He'll study several angles and either shoot film or wander away. He's been shooting black and white only, high speed, lots of grain. And always he looks for plenty of shadow.

They watch the moon slowly sink across the cracked windshield. The moon tugs slight clouds across the fragmented glass on its descent. Walker holds the bottle of tequila under his leather jacket, against his chest, and tries to describe to Jolene the cover of a Paul McCartney album, but she can't picture it.

"He wore this scruffy beard, and I'm certain Linda took the photograph. He had his child tucked, just like this, tucked like this bottle beneath his leather jacket. This tiny, furry little head poking out. You don't remember?"

"Not really."

"When I saw that photo, I'm like fifteen, and I remember thinking, yeah, I want to have children like that. Children I can cradle in my leather jacket paunch. Small, warm, soft packages with little voices, open eyes, and tiny hands. I want one of those, too."

"Will you ever feel that way, again?" she asks.

Walker takes the bottle in his hands. "You mean replace
this docile tequila baby with one that owns demands? Wouldn't that be a sightless barter on my part?"

"You don't want that, ever?"

"Not ever," he says. "The way things feel now, not ever."

Jolene lays her head down on Walker's lap. "I still think about them. About what our children would look like if we ever had them," she says. "They'd probably be dark and quiet. Full of joy and energy around the right people. Probably they would have beautiful voices. I keep thinking that. I have no idea why."

Walker continues to see the image of his brother as a child. Remembers the blue eyes, the soft hair, the long eyelashes, and the feel of his hands on Walker's shoulders. He remembers his brother's face, frozen in time: A wide smile, the wrinkled nose. He imagines the soft image of black and white photographs of that face. It holds still, the image. It keeps holding still. He remembers how his brother would always be running: Fast across the lawn of their home on Midway Parkway, fast up the front steps, and through the door that slammed like thunder. But when Walker concentrates on that moving image, the image of his brother running, he loses it in a blur.

"There's all this other stuff to consider first," Walker says. "Before we're ready for children. There's your purple heart. There's mine that's blue. And there's all that
stretches in between."

They are both still. In the distance, a train whistle sounds sporadically, and a low humming thunder of the train moving down the distant rails.

"You'll let go," Jolene says. Her voice is soft, as though she's afraid it'll be the wrong thing to say. "Not mostly, darling, but enough. You'll let go enough to be without him. You'll see. You will."

Walker leans over and kisses her temple. Her face is moist. He draws his finger across her tears and kisses her again.

"That's not it," says Walker. "That's not just it. I only wish it was, but it's not."

He walks out from the car, out into the field toward the dark wall of mountains. The wind pulls at his shirt and he walks into the breeze, closing his eyes, as it cools his face dry. He can still hear the sound of the distant train.

Walker comes to an abandoned refrigerator and pries it open. He rests the tequila bottle on the shelf and closes the door. He leans up against the refrigerator and looks up at the stars and at the mountains and wishes that he was somewhere in between.

After a while he hears Jolene's voice and sees the outline of her form moving slowly towards him, her darkened, naked form. She holds her arms tightly across her chest and waits.
"It's colder, now," she says. "Could we go back inside?"
And she waits for the answer, as if he might be ready.
Adam's band had busted up. It happened only hours ago, after their van blew a gasket in the Great Salt Lake Desert near Lucin, Utah, and left him, Donny, and Dunce stranded along a vacant County Road 30. It was dusk now. The sky was purple. But Adam couldn't be sure. Vision wasn't so simple. Neither was color. At the moment, the only certainty Adam knew was that he was suffering badly from dehydration. The sand in his mouth and the way his bones felt on fire proved it.

The band had been together five years. The Jesus In-Laws. Adam had founded them. Himself on guitar, Donny on bass, Dunce on drums. They met as dorm mates freshman year at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. They quit college and Dunce shaved his head when the band caught on locally and found a promotor. Punk was big in the Midwest, then. In some
places. College towns. A year after touring, they cut an album. A slight cult following formed. Their third album, though produced in Milwaukee in a basement studio, was reviewed in *Rolling Stone*. But the albums hardly sold. Mostly the band toured, played bars and the occasional gymnasium, and talked about a future when they would headline at civic centers and colosseums. That was before Laurie, Donny's girlfriend, died. Before the rest went from bad to worse.

Two hours stranded in the desert had been their final limitation. They busted their instruments and equipment into pieces, punched holes through the VW windshield to make the statement clear: no longer could the three of them function as a unit.

Adam walked away alone. He walked north and prayed for the distant sound of automobiles. None came.

Presently, he knelt. He pressed the heals of his hands into his eye sockets, bowed his head, and waited for the phosphorescent circus blazing across his eyelids to quiet.

He kept thinking about Idiot, the band's German Shepherd pup he had left with Dunce and Donny back at the van. He was hoping they took the animal with them and shared their water. The image of Idiot's carcass being picked clean by moon crazed coyotes haunted him.

With that vision, Adam swore he heard Idiot's mournful whimper reply in the distance. Adam stood still and waited,
his body leaning, and the breeze ran shivers along his spine. They had a gig half finished in Milwaukee and were taking a break when the news reached them that Laurie was dead. A phone call from her mother five hours after the accident was received by Dunce. He hung the receiver on the cradle and tried to decipher aloud to Donny and Adam. The three of them were messed up just enough on PCP laced cocaine to make the news that much more ugly.

Adam felt a shrug of shiver pull at his skin, and he struggled to catch his breath.

Laurie had been easing through an intersection in Racine on her way to the concert. The light was green. And a Chevy Suburban hurtled through, plowed into Laurie's civic, broadside, and cleaved it in half against a telephone pole. It was simple. Over before it began.

Donny and Laurie first met in Madison. They were lovers for a year before the band formed. She followed them on tour when she could and often participated in the Jesus In-Laws' drug drenched version of Russian roulette. After all the fry they sucked down, the hallucinogens, the Jim Beam, the heroin, the meth, after the 2 a.m. balance contests on Holiday Inn ledges, the high dives into hotel pools from the third floor, the chicken fights with semi on dark highways, it seemed odd Laurie's death would result from such a mild danger. An ending to a very bad joke. She was dead at the scene.

"I'm sorry, Donny," said Dunce. "I don't know what else
to say. I would have let you talk to her mother but she thought I was you. She sounded delirious, so I decided not to confuse the issue. Fuck."

"Forget it," said Donny. "You did well." Donny showed little emotion. He even grinned slightly.

Adam began to tremble and braced himself against a door frame. "What the hell is this?" he said. "Is anyone listening to this?"

"What I'm telling you." Dunce ran his hand across his forehead several times. "I don't fucking know how else to say it."

"That's fine." Donny held Dunce's face. "You did fine. I understand. Laurie's dead. What else is there to say?"

"Something. Anything," said Adam. The three of them sat in silence a long while. Donny broke the seal on a pint bottle of Jack Daniels, and they passed it until it was dry.

"Funny thing," Donny said, finally. "Laurie used to always believe in miracles. Make any sense to you?"

"I'll let the manager know we won't be doing a final set," said Adam. Dunce nodded.

"What happened to your show biz spirit, chief?" said Donny.

"We don't owe anything here."

Donny changed t-shirts and towed off his face. He placed his hand on Adam's chest and pushed him slowly against
the wall. "I'm the only one here who knows what this means," he said. "It's my toddler here, okay? I don't want to hear her name again." Donny grabbed his bass and headed toward the stage.

Adam wandered out through the rear exit, stood between two parked cars and threw up. He sat on the asphalt, cried, and dented huge welts into the hub caps of the cars with his fists. It occurred to Adam it had been the nearest he had gotten to praying in a long while.

On your way home you find yourself standing at the edge of a frozen lake trying to balance all this. You walk to the center and watch the moon and stars and the darkness beyond them. You think about what it was you started out to do and whisper promises into this thick, cold night where no one will hear them.

You feel the burning, again, in your gut. Hot tears cut lines down your face, but for what? Laurie's dead. It happened only a day ago, and you saw the blood stained vinyl seats and the busted windows of her Honda to believe it. As if you hadn't before. As if you thought you would see Donny and her down at the loading dock, their arms wound tightly around one another's necks. As if her voice called your name like wind through trees. You remember the warm burn and her soft kisses, so soft they hurt. You remember what you said to her and how she didn't look away. You remember she held your
You stand at the center of this frozen lake, across the house of your father where the lights go off window by window. You think about the broken promises your parents made to one another, the holes busted through sheet rock, and about the letters sent from your little brother after they divorced, none of which you answered. You think about your parents' voices in the dead of night, your little brother's heartbeat, his whispers: 'Deaden the blows. Can something please deaden the blows?'

You think about yourself as a child, how you ran away from home down to the end of the street to where there were concrete lions along a driveway. Their backs were covered in a green moss and you'd climb on top, straddle the cold backs of concrete lions, your saddle shoes tucked beneath their bellies so you wouldn't fall when they ran. And your father would come to you and caress the back of your head with his soft hands until you were ready to follow him back inside. 'Storm coming, dad,' you'd say, 'Big storm coming.' He'd nod and say he knew.

You watch the moon, now. Your breath fogs past it. No matter how far back you reach, you still can't determine the roots to this sorrow. Nor to the rage. Nor to the fear. The streets are always littered with a twisted string of broken glass like beaten down stars on pavement. Children will always run barefoot across all this, chasing at something, the
arches of their feet as soft as their souls, as soft as baby tears.

Laurie was the one who told you about this. She used to tell you how a cavern angel pressed his fingers against your lips and left a cleft when you were born. 'Don't tell what you know,' the angel told you. It's why we remember nothing from where we came. 'Don't tell what you know.'

After a show in Saginaw, Dunce chewed up an acid tablet a groupie gave him, swallowed three percodans with four fingers of Bacardi rum, and ingested a paper bag full of Final Net fumes. An hour later, he was admitted to Saginaw County Medical Center, his skin blue.

Donny, alone, had rushed Dunce to emergency. Adam and Laurie had been away from the hotel at a movie and didn't find out about the incident until their return hours after. "Dunce is fucking with death. We're at the hospital, seeing what can be done about it. Donny," read the note, hand written by the hotel desk clerk.

Adam and Laurie found Donny in the intensive care unit's waiting room, the television burning Tom and Jerry cartoons across its screen. Donny filled Adam and Laurie in on Dunce's condition as a hard thunderstorm shook the windows from outside.

"The doctor asked me if I thought it was a suicide attempt," said Donny. "What crazed motherf*ck would commit
suicide by trying to swallow his own tongue? How could I answer the guy by saying Dunce was probably just bored?"

"Is everything going to be okay, though?" asked Adam.

"There was some danger of brain damage for a while," said Donny. "Like Dunce needs any more of that. This is a man who wouldn't eat peaches until his early teens because he thought they were mammals. Looks like he got enough oxygen, though. He'll have a hell of a hangover, I'm guessing, but they say he's out of the woods."

Dazed, Adam rode the elevator to the lobby and wandered out into the storm. Slivers of lightning stripped from the dark sky and flashed against the tall building. Adam stood near a bronze statue of a red cross volunteer nurse and let the rain soak through his clothes.

Laurie had followed him. "Where are you going?" she screamed. She held her arms across her chest and leaned into the statue, out of the wind. Her long, dark hair blew across her face.

"No where," he said.

"What is it, then?"

"This is my fault."

"No, Adam."

"I started this god damned thing. And it's me who keeps pushing it. I wonder constantly if it's a good idea." Adam's teeth chattered. "Christ, if anything were to happen to Dunce."
"Nothing did," said Laurie, her face torn dark from bleeding mascara and eye shadow. She ran her hand across her face, and her fingers turned black. "Let's go back in, now."

Adam walked a few paces from the statue and knelt. His body shook.

"It was an accident, Adam," said Laurie. She came toward him. "Like the band is an accident. Like Donny and I are an accident. Like what happened between you and me was an accident. That's all there is, Adam. One after the other. Can't you just live with that for the moment?"

Adam balled his fists. "I'll try." he said, and his face clenched.

"There's this," said Laurie. She took Adam's hand and led it up under her shirt. She held his head beneath her chin. "But there's only so much time for this."

Adam was lying on his back, against the grayish white, sodium parched earth of Utah. He was watching the pattern of telephone wire, following the dark lines cut across sky, thinking how odd it was telephone wire strung across the desert. Barely a sign of civilization but for the empty road, the busted down van, and telephone wire stretched over cross shaped poles.

"Lucin, Utah," yelled Dunce from his perch atop the van. "Say, isn't that the name of the anti-Christ?"

"Lucifer," called Adam. "But close enough."
Donny stood at the side of the road, pissing in a ditch. He zipped up his jeans, leaned over to pick up a bleached bone and tossed it across the dry land. Idiot pranced after it, came trotting back with it clenched in his teeth.

"Don't overwork the dog," said Adam. "It's the fucking desert, for Christ sakes."

"I didn't mean for him to fetch it," said Donny. He wrestled the bone from Idiot's jaws.

"I got an idea," said Dunce, standing now. He had wrapped his plaid shirt around his bald head to protect it from the sun. "Since none of us knows a thing about fixing cars, it's not likely the wisdom is going to come to us as we sit here. If the van's not any good to us, let's toss a lighter in the gas tank. Maybe an airplane will spot the burning wreck from over head."

Donny and Adam had turned toward Dunce, shielding the sunlight with their hands.

"Dunce," said Adam, "do you see any airplanes overhead?"

"By the time we do, it could be too late," he answered. "We're in the Great Salt Lake Desert, Dunce. It ain't exactly JFK International."

"Maybe you have better ideas," said Dunce.

Donny threw the bone again and Idiot chased after, the animal's tongue white with saliva hanging along the side of his face as he ran.

"God damn it," yelled Adam. "Let the fucking dog be."
Just then, Idiot froze, yards short of the bone. The dog stared down something in the distance, something unseen to the others. Idiot lowered his head and snarled, baring his white teeth. He took slow steps sideways and back. Nothing surfaced but the liquid shimmer of heat that rose in waves over the earth.

"What is it?" yelled Dunce.

"Sees something, I guess," said Donny.

"Idiot, what the hell is it, boy?" yelled Dunce.

Adam walked toward the dog. He came up behind the animal, pressed his thumbs between Idiot's arching shoulder blades and squeezed. "Sorry old boy," he said. "The ghosts out this way are mine. Been watching them all morning move across in sheets. Scram."

He pulled Idiot around by the scruff of the neck. The dog yelped once and scampered back toward the van with his tail between his legs. "Fucking desert heat," muttered Adam as he followed. "Dog ought to keep to shade."

The day after Laurie died, after Adam had sobered up, after Dunce had calmed down, and after Donny was good and tranquilized, Adam borrowed the bouncer's Plymouth against a gram of clean cocaine and drove all the way to Saint Cloud, to the lake of his father's house and where his little brother still lived.

It was November. He parked the Plymouth on the opposite
side of the ice covered lake and walked across. Midway, he stood amidst the ice-fishing houses and stared at the moon and then at his father's house. It was past midnight. All the lights but one had been shut out.

It had been two years since he had been home. "Benjie," he whispered, rapping lightly against the window. "Wake up, Benjie. It's Adam."

His little brother cracked the window. Adam could barely see Benjie's face through the darkness.

"Adam," said Benjie. "That you?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing here?"

"Wanted to see you. How's my little brother?"

"Let me go unlock the door." Benjie's breath clouded through the window screen when it met the cold. "We'll be quiet because I think dad's sleeping."

"No," said Adam. He wiped his sleeve across his face. "I don't have much time. I've got to get back to Milwaukee to get this guy's car back."

"That's an eight hour drive, Adam."

"I know. Just came from there."

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes."

"You sure?"

"Yes." Adam could see his little brother was wearing an Edmonton Oilers hockey jersey for pajamas. It was the jersey
Adam had sent from Canada when the Jesus In-Laws played there a year ago.

"What's wrong?" said Benjie.

"I love you, you little brat. You know that?"

"Yes. Adam, what's wrong?"

"How's Dad?"

"Tired. He works too much. He's getting married again this summer. Will you be there?"

"I'll try."

"Try hard, Adam. I don't want to sit through this one alone."

"Okey dokey."

"How's the band?"

"I got this idea," said Adam, "to string up the guitars with barbed wire and bathe the drums in battery acid and play a stream of Sinatra ballads. They wouldn't do it. It was as pristine a vision we've come across yet. The audiences don't listen anymore, either. Just dance. Not even hard. Screaming doesn't work. I'm thinking about packing a Smith and Wesson. Maybe pistol whip them into paying attention."

"I got the lyrics you sent to the new songs you wrote," said Benjie.

"I forgot I sent those."

"They're good. I've got them up on my walls, mostly. I really like the one about the razor blade lovers. The man and woman who carve hearts on each other's chests and bathe each
other in ocean water before saying goodbye."

  "I'm glad you like that one, Benjie."

  "Don't they even listen to that one?"

  "No."

  "But you play it anyway?"

  "We did. We won't anymore."

  "What's wrong, Adam?"

  "Nothing."

  "When are you going to come home for longer?"

  "I don't know. I have to go now, okay?"

  "Let me at least come out to say goodbye."

  "No, Benjie. You'll wake Dad. Here, just put your hand up against the screen."

  "Why?"

  "I want to see how much you've grown."

  "I'm in junior high, now. My hands don't show a year's growth, Adam."

  "Yes they do." Adam placed his open palm against the screen. "Just place it over mine."

  Benjie reached out towards Adam's hand and placed his own hand against his brother's on the screen. Benjie's hand was only slightly smaller in size than Adam's.

  "You're the only person in the world I trust," said Adam. "I miss you."

  "Goodbye, Adam."

  "Goodbye, Ben."
Adam crossed the lake to the Plymouth without looking back. He revved the engine and headed toward the freeway.

"We shouldn't be doing this," said Adam.

Adam was holding Laurie's naked breasts. She and Adam were sitting in the convertible she helped him hot-wire at the Howard Johnson's. They've parked in an abandoned drive-in movie theater lot along the interstate. It was late at night, and the half moon turned Laurie's bare shoulders blue.

"I know we shouldn't," she said. "Then don't."

With his thumbs, he pressed lightly against her soft nipples and they hardened. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

"But why will you?" he asked.

"You always seem sad. That's probably part of it. I want to because of how sad you are."

"Isn't Donny sad, too?"

"He's mostly angry," she said. "But with you I wonder if I could kiss it all away."

She leaned into him, kissed him slowly up his neck and turned her tongue lightly around the whorls of his ear. He pulled her body toward him and watched the distant stream of headlights from the freeway before closing his eyes.

When the Fender Stratocaster was splintered up good through the broken windshield of the van, Adam knew it was over.
Gone. The Jesus In-Laws would not be resurrected from their self induced crucifixion as easily as their namesake. The statement had been made, the damage done.

Adam leaned up over the hot hood of the van, his hands bloody from when he hastily retrieved the Fender through the broken windshield to hurtle it a second time. Rivulets of sweat trickled off his face, and he was worried the desert heat was inching toward the point of having the last laugh.

Dunce shuffled through the twisted and gnarled metal of his drum set, picked up a set of cymbals, and cradled them. He walked out into the desert field, paused, and hurled them. They kicked up a cloud of dirt as they landed.

"Makes the motion final," said Donny. "A pretty moment for the three of us."

"If requests are in order," said Adam, "I wouldn't mind if you buttoned your lip some, Don."

Dunce stared down his distant cymbals. Idiot ran toward them, sniffed some, whimpered once, and loped off toward the van. Donny sat next to Idiot in the shade and massaged the panting dog's neck.

"If I were you, Adam," said Donny. "I'd bandage up those hands. Vultures and all. You might stir up a feeding frenzy none of us is capable of fending off."

"So be it," said Adam.

Adam knew Utah was a mistake from the start. They were heading from a gig in Elko, Nevada to another in Cheyenne,
Wyoming and it was Adam's ignored suggestion they go around Utah rather than through it. The severe philosophies of the Mormon religion set his teeth on edge. That coupled with the fact they had painted the words: The Jesus In-Laws Save Aluminum Cans, the title of their first album, in orange neon across one side of the van, made travel through remote areas chancy.

Adam wrapped his hands in torn t-shirts he found in the back of the van. He studied the smashed windshield and the litter of instruments and sound equipment. "This is the way we feel about it, then," he said.

"For now," said Donny.

Adam nodded. "Sun's about to sink away. Probably a good time to walk toward Highway 30 and see if we can't thumb something down. It's about ten or fifteen miles back."

"You go," said Donny. "Maybe Dunce and I will continue south."

"South?"

"Seems unforgivable to get this close to the Bonneville Salt Flats and not see them. Speed endurance records there, you know."

"It's probably another forty miles, Donny. Hasn't been a car passed through all day."

"If the band's busted up, you're going to have to get used to the idea of a separate peace. There are no more shared itineraries."
"Fair enough," said Adam. He glanced out at Dunce who stood in the field, still, in continued awe of his distorted drum set. "Tell Dunce I said goodbye. I don't have the stamina."

Donny nodded. Adam turned, and walked.

"One more thing," said Donny. Adam stopped. "How do you know you couldn't have won her? I've always wondered. How do you know how much you lost by not having guts enough to try?"

Adam turned and stared. He felt light headed. Couldn't see Donny clearly. The low sun blinded his vision. "You can't be sure I could have," he said, holding his hand over his eyes.

"At least it won't eat away at me, anymore, like it will at you," said Donny. "Hasta luego, Poncho. Muchas gracias para la fiesta."

Adam turned. The farther he got from the van, the harder he concentrated on holding back the tears. Bloody hands were bad enough. Now this. Mostly it hurt to walk.

What do you remember from the beginning? Do you remember the very first night the idea came to you? burned you like a blade? You were swimming across the lake at your father's. It was October, and it snowed. The water was cold, but you weren't bothered by it because the moon was so full. It sifted in and out of clouds, and you watched the snow fall through its muted light and melt across the dark surface of
lake. The world was pretty. And sad. Your body trembled when you stood. Trembled as you thought through the vision that came to you between the shivers.

And do you remember the aftermath? Do you remember the songs, note for note? Do you remember the applause that sounded like screams, like rage? And do you remember when there was silence? Do you remember the time, the waiting, the needle and syringe? Do you remember what was black and what was blue? Do you remember the way Laurie's hair fell across your face and how you watched the stars bleed through it? Do you remember the warmth of her breath against your neck?

Do you still wonder what brought you this way? Was it ever possible to turn back? What was it about the sound the snow made when it fell on that dark October night? 

Adam waited. Again he heard the mournful whimper, Idiot's distant howl. He wasn't sure from which direction. He took a step. His head was throbbing now, and raw thirst burned his throat. He whispered aloud, "Be sure, be sure..."

Again the cry sounded, long and hurt. "Idiot," Adam tried to yell but merely coughed. He ran a ways.

This could only be wind, thought Adam. Or not even. He pressed his hands against his eyelids and the colors danced faster. Crazed blotches of orange and purple. His condition seemed too severe to make judgements, his senses and instincts mauled badly by exposure. He knew that. A strange ringing
filled his ears. How could he sift out a single cry from a
distant dog from within all that?

And under what circumstances would Idiot have strayed
from the others? It was twelve miles from the van and who
knows how much farther in the other direction Donny and Dunce
had walked? Why would Idiot have turned?

"Idiot," he tried once more.

Just then, Adam saw a flash reflect against a telephone
pole. A flicker that ran the length of wire. Adam turned.
Approaching him were a distant set of headlights pricking the
horizon, growing fuller. As they bloomed in the darkness,
Adam could tell they were larger than automobile headlights.
A bus or semi, maybe. A pale skin of their illumination
washed across his hands.

Adam moved to the shoulder. "Idiot," he tried to yell.
The call strangled and burned in his chest. "Idiot." Adam
turned from the direction of the approaching semi and searched
the light for Idiot's form, eyes, teeth. Something would have
to show, he thought. Something must be there.

Adam knew he should have turned, then. Should have
flailed his arms and caught the attention of the driver for
certain. Should have run out into the center of the road.
Something. He knew the wait for another oncoming vehicle
could last hours more, or long enough to break his strength.

But he froze.

The semi thundered by. And Adam watched the slow pull of
darkness swallow up the terrain once again. He watched the tail lights chase into the distance. Soon all that was left were the hazed stars and the sound of his own breath.

Adam fell to his knees. The gentle desert wind sounded like whispers. Laurie's voice whispering: 'Hush. Hush. Don't tell what you know. Don't tell what you know. Don't you tell what you know... And remember nothing from where you came.'

He leaned forward, pressed his lips against the earth, and wept.
"It's hard to know where we are now. Try this. Close your eyes for a very long while. Close them tight. And open them just barely." Andrew turned from his seat in front of the canoe to illustrate to Chris and his father. "Because of the rain it's hard to tell. Which is lake and which is sky."

They had been fishing nearly all day. Mostly they had done so in silence. It was cold and they had been fighting the wind. They would steer the canoe far into the northern end of Kelly Lake and then watch as the terrain slipped by too quickly, and they ended up in the southern neck in what seemed like moments. When the rain settled in, softly at first, the three of them slipped gore-tex parkas on over their sweaters. When the rain fell harder, they each bowed their heads as if in prayer. It was practiced reaction, learned response from
having spent so many late autumn camping trips as a family in
the boundary waters canoe area in Northern Minnesota.

"Which is lake and which is sky? You get lost," Andrew
went on. "You forget about horizon lines. It's lake and sky
at once."

Chris turned toward his father. His father's face was
hidden underneath a protruding parka hood and all Chris could
see was his father's wide smile. The things Andrew said had
always made his father and brothers wonder. Mostly they just
shook their heads. Since Andrew had graduated from college a
year and a half ago as a studio arts major, he had given up
painting almost completely. He had stated creating art all
through college had exhausted him. Chris guessed Andrew saved
his abstractions for conversation now, rather than for canvas.

"It's like if you concentrate on a horizon line long
enough pretty soon it's gone. Distance transposes."

"Couldn't you try to concentrate instead on fish?" said
Chris. "Which is the hook and which is the fish. And then
haul one in so we can get back to camp."

Andrew turned toward Chris as if to reply and just then
his fishing rod quivered and bent toward the lake. "Christ,"
said Andrew. "Jesus Christ." He stared at the rod's movement
and sat still.

"Well pull it in then," said Chris. "For Christ sakes,
pull it in."

Chris and his father dropped their fishing rods and
searched the canoe for a net. Chris found a package of netting in the tackle box and tried to remove it from its plastic package.

They were, the three of them, doing their best to hold back their laughter, the three of them finding it funny one of them had actually hooked a fish, and what appeared to be a sizable fish. Maybe it was because their solitude had been abruptly shattered by the presence of the catch. They weren't alone anymore. And there was this frantic moment because of it. It seemed funny.

Andrew pulled at the line fiercely, wildly cranking the reel and stabilizing the wide arc of the rod.

Their father leaned toward Chris and helped help him with the netting. He sliced the plastic packaging with his Swiss army knife but caught the blade in the netting. Chris and his father caught each other's expression in a glance and nearly doubled over. Andrew's continued swearing didn't make it any easier. He made it sound as though the fish was pulling him, tearing him away from his home, and not the other way around.

Chris gave up on the netting and placed it back in the tackle box. He leaned gingerly over the canoe edge with his arm extended, ready to help Andrew haul in the catch when it got near enough to the surface. Their father sat silently in the rear of the canoe, watching and waiting.

Chris saw it for a second, beneath the surface of the lake: a dark shape, bending. It roiled against the water and
its bright underbelly flashed and then disappeared. Chris waited for Andrew to bring it close to the surface again. He leaned farther out the boat. When it surfaced, Chris took hold of the line just above the Lindy rig with one hand and held the underside of the fish in the other. It struggled against his grip. Then Chris lay the catch, a large northern pike, in the canoe belly and the three of them just stared.

It was a beautiful fish, long and dark. And its eyes were very clear. For a brief moment the northern went completely still, as though it was in as much awe as they were. Its only movement was the rhythmic opening and closing of its gills.

Until then, they had forgotten about the cold wind and drizzle that had blanketed the lake and made them talk about heading back to camp. They had spent the last two days on the lake with their lines in the water, the three of them silent for the most part, and until Andrew had hooked the northern there had been nothing to distract their thoughts. Only a few tugs of a line every now and again. But for the most part, silence.

Mostly Chris had thought about the certain moments, stories that belonged to the trips of the past on the same lake. He was sure his brother and father were embracing memory too. He knew though they hadn't stated it, that's what this trip was about. They each knew.

Memory became vivid, here. Chris knew of no where else
in the world where as much silence fell as in the boundary waters. Crisp silence. You could hear your own voice echo across the lake and back. The slightest movements would resound.

Chris remembered easily the stories that had since become legend, part of the family lore. The time he and Andrew and Mitch were out on the lake, practicing their casting with hookless lures, and a small, black bear approached the camp, was perhaps the most famous. Dad tried to fend the animal way from their duffle bag which was full of food. He tried jabbing at the bear with an aluminum fishing rod canister. The bear swatted the canister away, bending it into the shape of a boomerang, and Dad retreated into the lake where he watched the animal devour most of their food supply and then lope off into the woods. You did what? the ranger had said later, making it clear they hadn't handled the situation in a manner suitable of outdoorsmen. There was the time, too, when their mother had come along and it snowed for most of the trip. Mother refused to leave the tent, except for meals, for the entire four days, making it clear she would not be a willing participant in any future trip plans. Chris also remembered when he and Andrew tipped the canoe after trying to beach it on a large rock a ways from shore. It was early November and cold. They wore three sweaters apiece and nearly drowned in the water logged fabric, nearly sank like stones. Their father ran into the lake and swam out to them while
Mitch stood on the shore shouting orders. Hang on to the boat, boys. Dad, swim faster. Swim. Andrew and Chris felt completely ashamed and the seriousness on their father's face and his firm grip on their shoulders nearly scared them into tears. He scooped the boys up out of the water, placed them on the rock, and then retrieved the drifting canoe.

Chris remembered seeing it on his father's face then, the same look that paralyzed his face years later in the hospital room in Los Angeles when he told them, This is all my fault. Somehow it's my fault. It was the look of astonishment, of total awe. Mitch was dying. And this was the one time his father couldn't reach deep into the icy lake as he had done countless times before, into his son's desperate moment, and pull a shoulder or arm through the surface. Mitch had made it too complicated that time. He had left nothing to grasp.

It was as if they were all watching Mitch slowly drown in that hospital room. And it was all they could do, only to watch. Watch until the slight movement of his fingers and eyelids were the only signs that he was still with them.

They held onto him still. Clutching his hand. Waiting. Hoping for something. And feeling the grip grow weaker, less there by the hour, and knowing that Mitch was falling away.

Chris remembered what Andrew had said that final day in the hospital room, about it being the last time they would be together as a family. Never had the word, family, seemed so heavy, nor meant so much. And there it was, inches from being
shattered like glass. We won't be this family anymore, Andrew said. They circled the bed and held hands, Mitch's too, though he was now very far away, and far far from holding the presence he normally held in the company of the five of them. Chris remembered the way his father had bowed his head and tried to answer Andrew, then. He had to pause several times as if to catch his breath. He said he and their mother had three boys. And he said they would always have three boys. We will always be this family, he said. Their mother broke from their grip and bent over to kiss Mitch's forehead. Chris and Andrew glanced at each other and looked down and away.

Without Mitch here this time, the silence of Kelly Lake made those memories clear to Chris and until Andrew had spoken of lake and sky, until he had hooked the northern, there was little to disturb those thoughts.

Chris wrestled the hook from the northern's mouth. It had taken deep in its throat and there was blood. But it was a beautiful fish, shiny and strong. And now that they had brought it up out of the lake, none of them knew what to do about it. The three of them stared at the northern while Chris held it by its lower jaw. And during the excitement of the catch, without them noticing this time, the wind had blown their canoe completely across the lake.

Two nights before Mitch died, Chris and his father stood together on the deck of the house Mitch rented in Hollywood
Hills. Stretched out below them and wrapping around their vision like a scarf was a thick rise of lights. The lights of Los Angeles. Lights so thick and scattered you thought you were seeing a giant reflection of the night sky on fire. The streams of lights flooding La Cienega Boulevard and Melrose Avenue were like meteor showers. It almost looks pretty, said Chris's father. Maybe if you squint real hard you could believe this was something other than it is. Something lucid, dazzling even.

Chris wanted to blame Mitch's death on something, too. And maybe this city did have something to do with it. Mitch was so far away from home here. He would never again come home. There would never again be the boisterous appearance he made at Christmas, rattling the windows when he came through the door and shouted for them all to hear: he was home. Mitch was home. After all the promises he made about being too busy to get home for the holidays, there he would be. The rumble of laughter that erupted when he saw them, the firm hold. No more. Mitch would never again come home. This distant city would hold him away forever.

But Chris couldn't as easily find a way to blame the loss of his brother on any particular thing. Not the disease, not the city, not the lifestyle, not the chances that were probably taken. Chances would always be taken. Gains and losses were aimless outcomes. A family can build the strongest of foundations for their house and still only be one
sudden wind away from seeing their rafters splinter. Obvious scenes raced through Chris's mind while he stared out at the lights of Los Angeles. The winter when Andrew's saucer shaped snow toboggan spun out of control and plowed into an oak tree, splitting Andrew's lip wide open. How red the blood looked in the snow. And when Chris's father was cutting fire wood with the chain saw and struck a nail and the saw kicked back at him, inches from his forehead. And when a drunken driver ran a red light and just nicked the tail lights of Chris's mother's Honda before spinning towards the ditch. The safety net is a thin one; inevitably something will fall through.

"It's not the same. Nothing's the same anymore, ever," said Andrew. The three of them were sitting near the fire at camp, now. It had taken them nearly two hours to cook the northern Andrew had caught, their fire not hot enough, not enough coals, when they first placed the fillets on the griddle. Now it was night and the fire cast angular, long shadows on the tent and into the trees. "Maybe we should think about trying another lake next time," Andrew said. "Maybe even tomorrow."

Andrew stood for a while and then wandered off into the darkness, toward the lake.

Their father had been telling the story about the time he brought Mitch up North for the first time, when Andrew and Chris were still too young to go along, and Mitch wandered off with a fishing rod while his father pitched the tent. Mitch
came back an hour later with a huge walleye in his arms. In the oddest of moments, Mitch was capable of doing something utterly astonishing.

It was the first time on this trip any of them had talked about Mitch. Since his death, they went through phases when it was an open discussion, when they would talk for hours about him, laugh until tears fell, and then fall deep into the furniture, a sofa or chair, immobilized from the energy of remembering. And there were other times when no words could be spoken at all. The first Christmas after his death. Don't, don't let's talk about him now, said Andrew then, and he laced up his boots and walked out into the snow. Chris and his mother stood at the window and watched, watched Andrew walk to the end of the drive, climb into the bed of the pick-up truck, and sit with his head leaned back, staring up into the night sky and the snow that fell.

Each moment could turn them into one of many directions. Outside the family they felt themselves lost with their sorrow, hiding it, keeping it close. Together, they could each find a moment to unfurl it a little, loosen the knot. But invariably they would still get stranded somehow, nearly as lost. One would wander away, and another would follow, never too close, but making sure. They would all try very hard to make sure of something.

Down by the lake now, Chris watched Andrew swim out. A huge moon hung low and dipped into the towering pines in the
horizon. The lake was still. Chris watched Andrew a while and then stripped off his clothes, and he stepped into the water. The lake felt cold, and he wondered how Andrew could bare it. Chris walked slowly in the water, trailing his fingers across the surface as he moved. It was all rock beneath him.

Chris turned and saw his father near the camp, his tall silhouette back lit by the coals of the fire. He wondered what his father saw then, watching Chris and Andrew, two forms, one following the other off into the distance, blanketed by the light of the low moon. Chris knew his father had learned to adjust his vision in moments like this one, to focus on the pattern he was used to, familiar with. He had found such perception possible. Change was malleable.

His boys. There he was, watching the movement of the lake, the ripples, his three boys had made, the oldest son already blurred from vision, already out of view, but still slicing out patterns, the ripples, that move silently towards shore.
HELIUM BUNNIES

I woke to all that was left of Niki in our studio: her smudged prints of pernod on an empty glass set near the mattress. It was true: I was not yet accustomed to her absence. It hurt to see them, the ghosts of her fingertips and lips, weeks old now.

I don't remember ever telling her to leave. I think I simply muttered something about being bored. The rest was up to her.

She had lived here, in this studio near Lake and Hennipen, since I met her. She was a runaway. Fifteen years old. Then she wore Iron Maiden t-shirts with the sleeves double rolled, her teeth cut on Heavy Metal. The cross over was easy for her. She trusted the world I showed her. Enough to let go of what she knew.
Mostly I remember a certain taste: bitter sambuca and Niki's come. Sensations, too: the sweet push of Demerol as it strokes the bloodstream. It kisses your eyes in a whisper. Then burns like kerosene.

That first winter, Niki would fuck me with her navy pea coat undone. Her tousled hair fell over her eyes. And across her face would be this expression of "Can you compete with this?" which she would break down into soft murmurs of "What more can we take? What more can we take? What more?"

Since Niki left, images of those times permeate like photographs slowly blooming in a bath of Kodak dektol developer. Poses gently swell to the surface from paper to liquid.

The night before, I kept dreaming of the time we both slept beneath the sheets of insulation Niki had torn from the construction across the street. Fiberglass lesions swelled her skin. I had told her the insulation was a bad idea. She thought the color pretty. Like cotton candy.

"What's this?" she had said, waking. "This."

"Insulation, Niki," I had said.

"Hurts," she said, pulling it free.

"Told you," I had said.

Niki had to bathe in calamine lotion to quiet the burn. I at least had the good sense to sleep with my clothes on. Only my neck was raw. And the edges of my ears.

In the time spent without her, I tried to sift through
what was real and what imagined. Sometimes it's not easy.
You get lost in the decipher between the soft kisses and the
teeth gnashing. At least, I do.

I took that glass by the mattress and washed it, washed
Niki's smudged prints away so there was nothing but glass and
sheen. It helped a little. And for a while I slept.

I woke and phoned Blade. He had some time to kill before he
was due at work, ringing gas receipts at Speedy Stop in Hugo.
We drove to some pasture land near the St. Croix Valley.
Thought the peace would do us both good. We stretched across
a couple hay bales and ripped open a twelve pack of
Hauenstein.

It was one of those afternoons the sky rolls clouds
across. Indian Summer. You pop open beers, lick up the foam,
and breathe it all in: the wind, the sun, the distance, the
give of earth. Easy. You try to pretend it doesn't feel like
hell.

A dozen cows wandered near us, mulched grass and stared.

"Jerseys, I think, Ryan," said Blade. "Not Holsteins but
Jerseys. I think you can tell by their teeth."

"You ever see cows up in the mountains?" I asked. "They
look like stones or hedges or something. Minnesota cows are
different. More like abandoned appliances."

"Whatever," said Blade. "Still, these are Jerseys."

One of them, Jersey or not, took a whiz in front of us.
Steam rose.

There was silence a while and I asked Blade if he wanted to smash foreheads together.

"Forget it," he said.

"One solid one. Been too long since the last."

"You call for one, and we'll be doing them off and on all day. I need to be at work."

Blade and I stopped slam dancing at concerts a long while back. Somewhere the trend had evolved into nothing more than disco with hostility. Movement without pain. Even when it got fierce it failed to arouse. I missed that. I missed the early days when you could dive in and bloody some lip.

"You're not making any of this easy," I said. "Falling to the wayside. I'm standing here on the plains all by myself, somber as hell, trying like a demon to sod bust the American Dream. It's not a task to risk in isolation. I'm desperate for a side-kick. Grab a fucking reign and ride, boy. Dance down the juke box with me. Smash it to pieces."

Blade drained his beer and scrunched the can up good. He liked listening to the crush of metal. "Either way," he said, "punk's dead. Worn thin. Nothing left to look over our shoulders at but broken bottles and bones. You should know it by now."

A stem of hay itched the back of my neck. I stood and shook my jacket. "We could paint these cows with neon spray," I said. "Or color them with Crayolas."
"Performance art, too. Just a memory."

"I don't think it qualifies as performance art if you change something around. You have to act it out. Otherwise, it's conceptual." I told him this though I knew he was right. Anarchy had been gut shot all around, even in the more disparate reaches of culture. Yoko Ono had married one of the Beatles, for Christ sakes. Before, though, before it was good. Back when Elvis Costello was still disgusted and not yet amused. Before Sid Vicious had given into methadone maintenance and everything else lost its momentum.

Attrition catches up with the sharpest of visions. It's easy.

"Niki always asked me if I love her true," I said. "It's how she said it and it made me feel god damned anxious."

There was silence.

"Say, Blade," I said. "Do you love me true?"

Blade lifted his shirt and exposed his left nipple. Another cow pissed. "Forget about it," he said. "It works itself out."

You couldn't hear much but distant cars on the highway.

I dropped Blade at Speedy Stop and drove his Rambler back to Lake and Hennipen. The idle had been set too low and I had to keep the car over accelerated at every intersection.

I knew it was likely a waste of time, but something kept me looking for Niki just the same.
I always started at Urban Outfitters. Niki used to work there.

I scoured both levels. No sign. The store sold mostly punk, new wave garb to those who still wanted to strike a pose: Fuego Shoes, Doc Martens, barbed wire bangles. They did a brisk business to the rich who'd drive in from Edina to mirror their favorite fashions from MTV. Niki would palm what we needed for rent from the till.

When we broke up, I guess she decided to quit. No one there had heard from her.

I walked over to the Uptown Theater and across the street to the bus bench we used to hang at. We used to spend entire evenings there, me, Blade, and later, Niki, too. We would jeer at the well to do suburbanites in their BMWs and Wagoneers -- just tense them up. If things went slow, someone would pocket a can of Final Net from Snyders and we'd find a paper bag and make the best of it.

We just killed time. It was easy. And familiar.

Slowly those times and the neighborhood fell to pieces. As near as I could tell, it all began to decline when Calhoun Square went up across from the Uptown. Pay per hour parking. Credit card shopping. Outdoor cafe eating with a view of the angry. That's how they sold it. Soon, we were over run by week-end rebels with cans of spray paint in their fists in Madonna t-shirts.

The indulgence of fashion caused us casualty. but so did
the chemicals. Alison and Edie were two of the originals and sucked up enough methamphetamine they couldn't remember their names. It was our first discovery of how nasty a hang-over neural damage could be. Ken Craycheck -- we called him Dolt -- wound up in Stillwater prison after sledge hammering a half dozen vending machines outside Rainbow Foods, looting change and Snickers bars. It was his fourth arrest. Nef Miller got a bad touch of serum hepatitis and moved back with his parents. Blade got a job. Niki just left. Me, I only stood still long enough to try to piece together what had happened.

Something had to hurt badly to get us to this place. I guess it just hurt worse once we got there.

I paced the block. I kept my eyes open. I passed Mohawk after Mohawk near the intersection, none of whom I recognized, and felt just about as abandoned as Jesus.

I must have fallen asleep. I was to pick up Blade after his shift. Suddenly it was dark and the phone was screaming off the cradle.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "I'll be there in a while."

"There's a situation," said Blade. "You'll need to know."

I could sense a trace of panic in his voice between slurred syllables.

"Sort of been busting into the Grain Belt in the store's cooler," he said.
"Oh?"

Then it got worse. He'd been giving petroleum away without charge for the last hour. "A desperate experiment in whimsy," he said. "Not much left from the effort but remorse, however."

I was beginning to wake up.

"The till is short by a couple hundred bucks," Blade said. "Near as I can tell."

It was then Blade suggested we fake a hold up. Pretend we had one.

"Okey dokey," I said.

"Ryan?" Blade asked.

"Yes?"

"Wear dark clothing."

"Whatever," I said.

By the time I made it to Hugo, Blade had managed to shut down operations. I pulled the Rambler around back. It occurred to me almost immediately, however, Blade had made tracks too deep to bury.

I found him covered in a heap of cash register receipts that spiraled from the counter. Worse, he had continued to drink and left the store lights at full throttle. How many curious passersby had already gotten an eyeful?

"You anywhere close?" I asked.

"I got the decimal points all screwed up a while. I can't tell what I've added or voided. The total is still off
by two hundred nineteen, but I'm not sure whether we're over or under."

He braced his arms, both, against the counter. He looked ready for a fall.

"Don't suppose we could convince your boss not only did the hold-up guy clean out the till," I said, "but he also stuck around long enough to squirrel up the register receipts."

"On what grounds would that take place, Ryan?"

"I'm running it past you now because when you're sober it won't look half as pretty a suggestion."

"Christ, Ryan." He sloped over the counter.

"I'm just going to douse the house lights, okay?" I shut most of them off. Just left the florescent bulb's over the Coke cooler burning.

"I need this job," said Blade.

"We could torch the place," I tried. "A fire and a good wind ought to settle the account."

"Good Christ," said Blade. "It's over, already. What the hell was I thinking? We're too old to be pulling this shit."

"It was a pretty attempt," I said. "If it matters." I tore open a bag of Chipahoyys and munched a few down.

"I mean it," said Blade. His face was a drenched, mottled mess. A snot bubble bloomed in one of his nostrils. "Time to grow up. Fucking pathetic."
Blade gathered the receipts, balled them, and tossed the clump in the trash bin. He wiped his face with his sleeve and wandered down the aisles of the store retrieving strewn Grain Belt cans.

"I spent last night listening to Iggy Pop's new album on the car radio," I said. "I kept the garage door shut tight and the engine running a long while after it ended. Now this." I nibbled down a few more Chipahoys and thought about it. "All this isolation will kick you where it hurts."

"Fuck that anymore," yelled Blade. He slammed an empty Grain Belt can. "I'm sorry as hell it fell apart, too. I was there. I remember what it felt like. We pushed the limits, so what? Sooner or later, Ryan, we're going to have to lace up our boots like the rest of the school children and walk to where the busses are waiting."

"Why?" I asked. "There's still room for something. Something maybe quite good."

"I have electricity bills to pay, Ryan."

"Well, Jeez, there's a valid defense," I said. "And here I thought we made a good team. Like gin and vermouth. Like Huck Sawyer and Tom Finn."

"Huck Sawyer and Tom Finn?"

"String us up some plastic milk jugs and float her down the Mississippi. We'll stop at riverside residences with Unicef jars and collect gobs of money under false pretenses."

He swept the floors. "You're grasping at straws," he
said and resumed his usual close-out duties. I didn't have the heart to tell him, no matter what, future employment at Speedy Stop would hardly be offered after tonight.

He sat beside me. His eyes were wet. "I'm not sure there ever was a purpose, Ryan," he said. "I shut my eyes. I ran alongside you. But I never knew what it was we were trying to prove. What did it consist of?"

"Layers," I said.

"Fuck layers. Layers of what?"

"Shreds, then."

"Of what? Tell me, Ryan. Tell me all this wasn't much more than some severe fashion statement."

I was afraid, though, it was. For those who fell away. And for those who hung on for the sake of hanging on. Somehow the point had lost its teeth. Blade knew. But I still had faith. Or something.

"If you will look at this without judgment," I said. "If you will look upon us without judgment. It was really simple. And we weren't the first to try. We just tried harder than most."

Blade began to giggle. I did, too. He picked up a loaf of white bread and twisted it good. "You should listen to yourself sometime," he said. "Niki loved the fuck out of you. Like no one could. What you asked from her and from the world, you never gave first. You never looked upon anything without judgment. Not ever. Starting with Niki. Not ever."
I took a breath, waited for Blade to wander away, then shut my eyes tight. Maybe I needed some time.

Blade tossed his Speedy Stop keys on the counter and scribbled off an apologetic I.O.U. note to his manager. Then he paused.

"I'm going to drop you at William's Pub," he said. "You'll want to go. The Buzzcocks are gigging tonight."

"So?" I said. I didn't much care.

"Niki'll be there," he said. "She'll be there with someone else. But she'll be there."

We walked to the car in silence.

I don't know how Blade knew, but he did. I recognized her shoes at first. In Gary Murdock's Trans Am parked outside William's Pub, her shoes were pressed up against the fogged windows. They were the ruby slippers, like the ones Dorothy wore in Oz but with rusted razor blades glued along their sides. I knew they were Niki's. All I could see were those shoes and her bare ankles and picturing the rest sent my heart on a murmur. Wicked fibrillations that shiver straight to the bone.

I had pretty much rammed my head through the windshield of Murdock's Trans Am before Niki and loverboy spilled out in pieces. I went and kicked the headlights all to hell and was heading for the tails. Lucky as sin I was wearing my Tony Lamas.
Niki's face flushed auburn. Her dark lipstick was smeared across as though she were a child who recently devoured the better of a jelly doughnut. Her chest heaved, but she didn't utter a word. I just stared.

Murdock got between us, gave Niki a look, turned like a ballet dancer doing a badly rehearsed pirouette and dug his fingers into my thorax. He shoved me against the hood of his car and hesitated. That's when I came up hard against his forehead, Chicago Bears style, and his legs lost balance.

"What the hell, Niki," I said. "Who are you trying to punish more? Me, or you? Gary Murdock for Christ sakes." Murdock was a lizard faced frat boy dating one of Niki's friends. Not much there but very white teeth.

He returned to his feet and had my arm up my back and was twisting. It was a move fierce enough to tell me this wasn't going to be a fleeting confrontation.

Niki wasn't his from the start. He saw that. Why not pull out all the stops and hope you walk away with something for the effort?

He kicked my legs out from under me and held my face against the pavement. "You see this glass, asshole? All these bits and fragments? We're staying right here until you Scotch tape every one of them back together and give me back my headlights."

I tried getting a good look at Niki but couldn't. Murdock threw his face in front of mine again. A large dab of
saliva clung to his chin.

"What this means, Gary," I said, "is you've no practice at deciphering faint praise."

I got lucky then and six guys rushed Murdock and drove him to the pavement. They thought I was someone else, a friend of theirs. I had my hair dyed black, cropped close at the sides. From a distance, the resemblance to one out of every ten punkers in Minneapolis was easy.

When they realized I wasn't who they thought I was, they went ahead with Murdock anyway. A fair call.

I grabbed Niki's tiny hand, and we fled across the intersection toward her VW. We ended up, twelve hours later, in Wausau, Wisconsin as the sun broke the skin of the horizon.

I raced her up the Wausau courthouse steps and pricks of sweat tickled the curve of my spine as Niki lunged for the door. To my dismay, we got in without an appointment.

When the justice asked us if we wanted to exchange our own vows, I said, "Well, I do take Niki, here, to honor and obey and all that. I promise to be true blue. And if forever love hurts as much as it's hurting me now, we've got one painful highway to thumb down, the two of us."

We rented a room at Travel Lodge and poured Wild Turkey over each other's bodies in the bathtub. In some places it stung.

Later, I remember Niki standing naked near the window
with the shades drawn. Cars slowed past intermittently. And she said, "I read where Debra Winger said there's nothing sexier in the world than being completely naked except for a wedding band."

I told her, "I don't think there's anything sexier in the world than a naked woman with matching Mohawks."

She removed her ring and studied it. We had bought it at a Montgomery Wards in Wausau, but it was sterling silver.

"I've got to tell you, Niki," I said. "It smarted like hell, seeing your muff through the windshield of Gary Murdock's Trans Am. Niki's muff under glass. Looked like a runaway hamster on a field of snow. And I kept thinking: if he touches that jewel, everything's over."

I wonder, still, if there's ever enough distance to outrun these sorrows.

Past 5 a.m., when I still couldn't sleep, I ran the bathroom tap and wandered back to bed. White noise. Maybe it would blind me into sleep, drown out Niki's heavy R.E.M. breathing and the obtuse sounds that came through the hotel room walls and ceiling.

I stared up at the ceiling and watched the pattern of headlights arc across as cars passed outside. And I watched through the window the fat wedge of moon and pieces of night until a stray memory of childhood pulled me toward sleep.

I was six, maybe. My mother took my older brother and me
to the community center. Around Easter. There was this person dressed in a rabbit costume and you were supposed to sit on the rabbit's lap while a photo was snapped, like what's done with mall Santas. Afterwards, my brother and I were given bunny shaped helium balloons; mine red, his blue.

I took that balloon by the string and told myself I'd never let it go. I loved the fuck out of that helium bunny. On the drive home, I just watched its bulbous ears bounce against the ceiling of the car, the bunny engaged in a strange but gleeful dance the rise and dip of pavement gave way to.

I walked into my bedroom later and let go of the string. An accident. Or worse: a curious tempt of fate. The balloon drifted toward the ceiling, lit against the spackle, exploded, and showered the room with bunny latex shrapnel. Gone.

My brother, one room over, heard me bawl like an infant. He nudged open my door, slipped gingerly into my room, the shuffle of his sneakers the only sound. Without so much as a wink, he handed me his balloon bunny still whole. I will never forget that gesture. And I'll never forget how I felt afterwards. I took that string from my brother's tiny hand, watched him turn and silently walk out my room, his head bobbing down the length of hallway. No matter that my guts were torn when I saw that first bunny explode, when my brother handed me his, I felt much worse.

Here, I watched Niki's face pressed into the white hotel pillow, my young bride, her eyelids in a worn clench, her
mouth shaped in a slight o like the mouths of Christmas ornament carollers.

What if having her felt worse than not having her at all? Or what if what we had done felt too much like compromise? Suppose we had held onto the thorn and thrown away the rose.

I crossed my fingers and waited for the pull of sleep.

On the way home from our honeymoon, Niki and I stopped off at the mall. We wanted a newlywed photo session. Something like Niki wrapped naked in cellophane in the display window of the Rosedale Mall Daytons.

We hid away in a restroom with a family sized roll of Seran Wrap and a Polaroid camera until the store went dark.

Niki and I meandered our way by flashlight to the display window facing the mall. Without uttering a word, Niki disrobed. She stood in the housewares department when I saw her dark, naked form move past waffle irons and Mr. Coffees. She noticed my awe and picked up a couple plastic spatulas, held them beneath her breasts, and lifted. I wondered, then, if the concept of matrimony wasn't a damned pristine one after all.

In the window display, she stood very still. I began at the ankles with the cellophane and wrapped slowly up her body. The plastic fogged some where it covered her skin. I wrapped just past her shoulders, tucked the sheet securely, positioned two mannequins behind her and stepped back to shoot film.
"I thought this was going to be a family portrait," said Niki. "Husband and wife."

"You know we can't," I told her. "How would we click the shudder? Let's just first do a series of the blushing bride, alone." I shot a photo and the flash burned across Niki's form an instant, set the display brightly, and then dark shapes and colors blurred my vision.

"It's not what I had in mind, Ryan. Forget this. I'm not sure I can breathe."

The photograph slid from the camera and Niki's image slowly seared from the chemical fog. "I didn't wrap your face, Niki," I said. "Of course you can breathe."

"Not my skin. My skin won't be able to breathe. Plus that flash was damned bright. Let's just call it quits." She bent her knees and knelt.

"Keep still," I said. "We just got this thing started."

"Uh uh." She twisted her torso but the cellophane hadn't begun to unravel. "Unwrap me, god damn it."

"Niki, calm down." I snapped a second photo. "We waited an hour for this." The photograph fell to the floor.

"It was a mistake." Niki arched her back and began a slow, backward crawl. "Get a knife and cut this stuff away." I could see pills of sweat collect across her forehead. I snapped another photo.

"Damn it, Ryan. Stop it!" Niki yelled. "It's not working. It's not."
"You see, Niki," I said. "This was precisely what I was worried about. You and I getting married. Just another couple bickering at the mall. A moment ago I was in love with you."

"That doesn't exactly make me swoon," she said. "You love me when I'm being something I'm not: fourteen years old."

"Niki, don't say that."

"Just unwrap me."

From the other end of the mall voices echoed and we each turned. Two streams of flashlight twisted and crossed and the frantic thunder of running footsteps followed. Niki's eyes got large; her mouth fell open. On impulse I snatched one last photo of her and had the strange feeling it may have been the pose I was after from the start. I set the photo carefully in my pocket.

"The curtain may be falling here. Seems like," I said. She was very still. "Get me the hell out of this," she said, slowly and deliberately as though these might be the final words she had time for.

In a cyclonic rush, I thought about all Niki and I had been through: our frantic relationship, the flippant wedding, and now this -- an after hours mall bondage photo session soon to be foreshortened by the evil wrath of the authorities. I thought about the rest, too. All the rage. All the debris. I remembered the Christmas Eve when I held razor blades in my
fists at the end of my parents' drive and clenched. Niki stood at my side, barely trembling, watching with me the pattern form in the snow, the dark cloud. And I remembered how she gently wrapped my hands in towels on the drive home.

About the survival of love, I had learned one truth: you had better be wide awake.

I wanted to tell Niki I was certain we do not want what our parents wanted. Our lives to that point had proven it. But of what we do want, I wanted to tell her, I'm clueless.

Instead, I muttered some incoherent statement about how in Kenya, baby elephants who have seen their parents poached by hunters cry and scream in their sleep. "I guess it's only natural to react specifically to the world we witness," I said. "Us with elephant nightmares as thick as pea soup."

Outside the mall, Niki wore only a leather police jacket leant her by one of the officers and pulled it tightly across her chest. Her bare knee caps convulsed, overwhelmed by either cold or fear or anger.

She wandered near the window of the patrol car. I lifted my wrists so she could see the handcuffs. "It's drama, if that's what you wanted," she said.

Over her shoulder, I could see a group of officers passing Niki's nude polaroids to one another, cat smiles cut from ear to ear. I had a pretty good idea that evidence would be smudged some with fingerprints before it made its way to court.
"Truth is," she said, "I'm not certain I ever knew what you wanted. I didn't think it mattered until recently. I wonder if you know what that means."

"Niki," I said, "I think I'm old enough to know what bygones are."

I wanted to tell her I was sorry. But there was really nothing left to say. We had forced something pretty enough at the start into a sharp corner. She bit her lip until it turned white to prove it.

She said, "I prayed for us. I used to pray for us."

"I know," I said. "I guess there's only so much patience in the world."

There was this, too: the Halloween night, what must be years ago, in the tavern doorway.

It had just started to snow. Cold winds tear our eyes, and Niki and I duck into a doorway of J.D. Hoights, a small bar in the warehouse district of downtown Minneapolis, near the river. We had been to a party a few blocks away, and Niki is costumed in a wedding gown, something she bought at Ragstock for fifteen bucks. She had spray painted a red, neon cross over the bust and had hemmed the skirt so it fell just short of the knees. Underneath, she wore black biker boots.

On a dare, I hike Niki's dress up and strip off her panties.

"Anarchist sex," she says as she undoes my belt. "In the
doorway of the fashionable. So happy Halloween."

"This time let's go slow," I say.

I lift Niki and she straddles my waist with her bare legs. The cold wind sears my flesh raw, a numb burn, but Niki feels warm, soft. I hold her close, rock her gently against the bricks. Something full swells in my throat, catches. I cradle my face in the curve of Niki's neck and peering through the frosted window of the bar, I notice the color and scene indoors for the first time.

Fulí, the bar is animated by patrons in lavish costumes. I make out a tall man dressed as a whore, in garter belts and red satin, a woman in a tutu and slippers, a person dressed in a blue serge suit and rubber Richard Nixon mask, a lit cigarette dangling from the latex lips, and a woman dressed all in silver, with streams of tin foil pulling against the movement of her arms. There are others, too, I can't make out as quickly, weaving past one another, blurring each other's expression and costume into an agitated sweep of performance. None notice us beyond the glass.

Niki begins to hum, then. Atonal, at first, and in slight, hurt pushes of voice. I feel the vibration of her throat against my cheek. She presses her fingers into my shoulders.

Looking into the bar, again, I notice a child. He isn't costumed as the others are and sits alone at a corner table staring at Niki and me. He's the only one. When our eyes
meet, and he realizes I have noticed him, he brushes his dark bangs across his forehead slowly and continues to watch us. He looks familiar, sad in a way I recognize, but I'm not sure.

Near the end, before Niki comes, a stream of motorcyclists flood the street, twenty or so Harleys. They're heading out, probably, from Bunker's, the biker bar four blocks down Washington. Each of the cyclists is covered in a white sheet. Like ghosts. Their tires draw dark lines down the snow covered street.

As the final ghost moves past, Niki lets her head fall and laughs. I laugh, too. I glance through the window once more to see if the child will laugh with us. I think that he will. But his expression doesn't change. He's still. He's watching. The room is full of movement and gesture but for him.

I stop, then, hold Niki still. Her expression changes, grows taut all of a sudden; her mouth parts slightly; her eyes clench. Her skin is drenched from the red neon lettering that runs over the doorway. It's a red that seeps into the creases of her lips and blues them, swells them darkly, a red that bleeds into the lines of her face.

I tremble when I see the tears run down her face, staining the neon, and I pull her toward me and listen. All there is is the sigh of wind past the doorway, the droning singe of neon, and Niki's soft breath in my ear.
She sinks beneath the surface, thinks Michael, because she's safest beneath the surface. It's nearly soundless there. Seamless texture. Simple.

Michael stands naked at the end of the dock. He and Kate have come to the lake place, property they were given as a wedding present from her father, an acre and half of meadow, one hundred feet of beach front. After six years, the dock, oak slats that run the length of frame and 4x4 posts, has been the only improvement they've made with the property.

There was a time when they nearly sold the land. An offer came by a neighbor across the lake. Michael's hardware store, then, was showing marginal profit. And Kate had just cut her hours with the travel agency so she could spend more time with Jeffery, their six year old, and take a night course
at a local community college. They waited out three consecutively handsome offers, hesitated, but turned each of them down. The lake property meant too much. Kate’s father had died two years into their marriage. And this was the most private place she knew of where she could swim in solitude.

Michael sits, dips his legs into the water, and watches her. Her darkened head bobs rhythmically, rises and falls, as she swims a slow breast stroke. The moon is huge.

"Kate," says Michael, "I was hoping we could talk."

Kate treads water. She draws a few strokes toward the dock. "First let's swim a little," she says. "Water feels good." She swims a crawl a ways out and dives under the surface again, her straight, pointed legs the last to disappear.

This is the side of her that attracted him to start with. He remembers how intriguing it was: her silence, the careful, practiced moves she made when they ice skated at the Highland park rink on an early date. At first they skated together, hands held tightly, and they laughed as they came to a turn, the centrifugal force pulling Kate strong against Michael’s grip until they were even again, skating together. But it was after Michael sat rink side, relacing his skates, when he noticed Kate skating alone, consumed by her own concentration. She skated slow, clean figure eights. And she practiced slow spins, drawing her bent, extended leg in as she gained momentum. Every push of muscle, each turn of her body was
focused and sure.

She was alone, then. In another world. And Michael could only watch.

It happened other times too: when they took walks together through woods and she would sketch wild flowers into her note pad, or when he took her sailing on his father's x-boat and she lay on the bow, beside the fluttering jib sail and watched the current roil against the hull while trailing her fingertips, or sometimes when they made love. She'd sink completely into some other place, absorbed by something Michael could not touch nor be fully a part of.

He tried asking her father about it once. It was the evening of the fourth of July and Kate and Michael stopped by her parents' after taking Jeffery, who was then one, to fireworks. It was hot still, a humid night thick with air and mosquitoes. Kate insisted she take a quick dip in her parents' backyard swimming pool while Michael watched the baby. He cradled Jeffery on the back porch, a bug light sputtering ceaselessly off to his side, while Kate's father whittled at an oblong chunk of pine with a buck knife, the curled shavings landing on the toes of his leather slippers.

Kate bounced high off the diving board, arced, her arms forward, torso bent, and she knifed into the water with hardly a splash. For a long while she disappeared. The waning ripples of her dive were the only noticeable movement in the darkened pool.
Michael asked Kate's father then, "Do you know anything about the Little Mermaid? In Denmark?"

"The statue?" her father answered.

"Kate says she wants to go see it. Someday. The memorial to Hans Christian Andersen." He rocked Jeffery softly in the curve of his arm. Michael turned to Kate's father whose face was backlit by the chartruese phosphorescence of the bug light. "The story must mean a lot to her," said Michael.

Kate's father smiled. "When we first had the pool put in," he said. "Kate would always be the first one up in the mornings, swimming. At age seven, she was the most wrinkled kid on the block."

Kate surfaced in the pool and swam careless patterns, short, pushes of movement along the edge of the pool.

"Have you read the story?" asked her father.

"Yes," said Michael.

There was silence. Michael thought about the relationship between Kate and her father, then, too. He knew it was strong, something altogether unspoken. But the way they both looked at certain things together was so similar, so concentrated: the flight of a wren, the nearing of a rainstorm. She and her father seemed very much alike, in step with their surroundings, at the same level of peace. This, another world Michael could only glimpse at from the outside, another part of her he couldn't reach past.
Now Kate swims toward him at the end of the lake dock. She wrings her long, dark hair and lets it fall to her shoulders. "Talk about what?" says Kate. She sinks again until the water touches her chin.

"Us," says Michael. "Where we are now." Michael wants to say something simple, something quirky: the kind of thing he usually says to get her to laugh or beam, something like 'How did I get all these mermaid fin prints across my heart?' or 'I'll race you to the moon if you wait for the tide to go out so I can get a head start running.' But instead he is serious. "Are you in love with him?" he says.

"Him?"

"Or it. Or whatever. Whatever it is that's pulling you away from us."

"Me," says Kate and she disappears into the dark water, again, pushing ripples along the shoreline.

"It's the warmness of water, this love. It has the warmness and the softness of water," she says.

"Yes," he says and runs his hand slowly along her waist, rests it on the faint, oval birthmark and he expects her skin to be warmer there for some reason. "Sometimes it's just hard to trust," he says. "Completely."

She leans forward, her face close to his; her soft hair darkens the light. "You have to," she says. "You have to let go." Her voice is soft, almost a whisper. Her eyes hold him
"You wonder how deep it goes," he says. "And whether you can get back to the surface."

She doesn't look away. She moves her body slowly. "Let go," she says. "This is how you let go."

While Jeffery plays with a N.A.S.A. replica moon buggy steering column, Kate wanders away. Michael follows. The three of them are at the Saint Paul Science museum. They've taken Jeffery because of the grizzly bear exhibit. Jeffery's curiosity of wild bears has intensified recently. He collects picture books and post cards sent by friends of Kate and Michael from places such as White Fish, Montana, Shoshone, Wyoming, Kodiak, Alaska, and Duluth, Minnesota. Photographs of grizzlies, brown bears, and black bear cubs, all posed benignly, some stretched out in trees, others licking the pads of their paws.

Kate stations herself in front of a digitizer machine, a large computer screen with attached camera. "We worked these in the geography course I took," she says. "It's used to break down a composition graphically through the use of computer digitization."

Michael looks on. The monitor scans a map of the North Shore of Lake Superior, from Tofte to Lutsen, freezes a section and then enlarges the area again and again until the image is broken down into green and blue graphic fragments.
"The spatial analysis course you took," says Michael. He glances at Jeffery and sees the boy is still engrossed with the moon buggy steering column. But now another boy stands behind Jeffery, seemingly anxious to get a chance to play astronaut.

"It's a way to break down place," says Kate. "Or any given composition." She presses a button and a black and white image of herself and Michael appears. Their sudden pose surprises Michael. His serious expression seems overly sad, overly telling. Kate is smiling, proud for having jarred Michael's reaction. "Now watch," she says and she presses another button and their image freezes, turns blue with patches of orange and yellow swimming across. Slowly the composition enlarges and breaks up into digitized components, Kate's blue, frozen face hovering for a moment across the screen then flooding it. "Let's show Jeffery how he'd look as a computerized map," she says and turns to fetch him while Michael watches the fading composition of color.

After their pass through the grizzly display -- an array of taxidermist models, huge animals with glazed, marble eyes and yellowed fangs exposed by permanent snarls, video taped testimony of grizzly attack victims, and automated slide presentations of grizzly land management practices Yellowstone National Park -- Kate and Michael take Jeffery through the Minnesota natural resources display on another level. Jeffery drags his feet while Kate tugs his elbow. The boy is tired.
now from the constant stare of grizzly bear eyes, the staccato chatter of video terminals, and Michael's patient but unwanted attempts to explain terms such as "natural selection," "hibernation," and "extinction."

Kate tries to recapture Jeffery's curiosity by showing him an illustrated display of deforestation of northern Minnesota. "See how the soil has changed, Jeffery," she says while stretching her hand out, combing it through a photograph of altered terrain. "Wind erosion has changed the quality of the soil," she continues. "Trees take from the soil their nutrients to grow. But they also protect that soil and nurture it. They sustain each other naturally," she says.

Michael watches her explain this to their son, moved for a moment by the loving way she pats his hair, smooths it across his forehead, her eyes large as she explains wind erosion to him, expressing, sharing her own natural curiosity of the world and paring it down into simple language. Michael finds himself leaning in, trusting the tone of her voice, finds himself wanting to hear her explain more, as though she held all the secrets of the complicated world and could ease them forth in a voice as soft as breath.

He wonders if he'll ever be able to explain how much in awe he is of her.

On the drive home, the three of them are silent. Jeffery sleeps in the back seat. Kate turns toward her window. The intermittent illumination of street lights rolls across their
still bodies. And in the silence, Michael wonders to himself how the world would feel if he were to lose Kate. For a while he is clueless but a sharp kick of panic swells. That night he's kept awake by the continual image of Kate's blue face falling across the museum digitizer machine in sheets. And he listens to the rhythm of her breathing, afraid to move or he'll wake her, as she softly sighs in her sleep.

"You could get lost in this," he says and she nods. She runs her hands down his chest, lightly, as though afraid of the warmth or the touch. It's the lightness of this he's afraid of. Afraid they will fall away from one another unless they hold each other hard.

"You need to let the ease of it take over," she says. Her eyes hold and hold. He looks away.

When Michael first came to Kate with the news of wanting to take over his uncle's hardware store in Scandia, Kate seemed doubtful. She was just then three months pregnant and wasn't ready for another change, another uncertain future investment.

Michael talked about it as if it were destiny. "Things are falling into place, Kate," he said. "We can make it our own. Arrange the store how we want, a family operation, like stores like that used to be."

This, thought Kate, about a silly hardware store. A silly hardware store in the middle of nowhere.
But soon Kate couldn't help but feel a similar enthusiasm. Michael had a way of making it infectious. They spent the evenings planning: nails would be stored in huge, metal bins that customers would scoop from; they'd keep the worn floors just as they were, not changing a scuff mark; they'd take down the old, ugly brown and yellow sign out front and hang, instead, the name in simple neon lettering with a neon skill saw beneath with rotating blade.

Kate barely had time to consider where their lives were heading, this man she had married, the store they owned, the child they were hoping to raise. It was mostly a blur. Had been since she met Michael at Como Park the late, autumn afternoon she was walking along the lake pathway and Michael approached with a huge cardboard box. He smiled at her, funny, as if he felt awkward about carting around such a large box. "A turtle," Michael said, laughing a little. "I found this turtle by my apartment building. It has newspaper glued to its back. She and Michael set it in the lake gently and watched it paddle away.

They talked some, walked, philosophized on the significance of misplaced turtles, and soon found their way back at her parents' home, sipping lemon aide by the pool, listening to her mother tell assorted stories about high school proms, proms Kate informed Michael later her mom never attended.

Michael told Kate weeks later he knew they'd be together.
He told her he felt in many ways they had known one another all their lives. And he told her he saw something in her eyes that scared him. Something more strong than he completely understood nor trusted.

Kate agreed. She had fallen deeply. It was easy to do with someone who could be so kind to abandoned, newspapered turtles as to drive six miles from his apartment to set them free. Already she saw the arc of her life and Michael stood near the center.

"I haven't taken time," Kate tells Michael now as they sit up in bed, the lights shut out, a soft rain outside. "I haven't taken time to see where I wanted to be. It was always where do I want to be with you. Or where do you want to be."

Michael is silent a while. Scared. He's not sure what Kate means, wants. "We can take time now, Kate. Just tell me where you want to start."

"Me," says Kate. "I have to start. I have to look alone."

She touches him lightly on the shoulder, lights her fingers through his hair. "You are a wonderful part of my life," she says. "But there are other parts, too. Parts and places I think maybe I lost. I'm sad without them. And maybe I'll always be sad unless I look."

Michael is silent. He moves from the bed to the window then down the hallway to Jeffery's room where he nudges open the door and peers in, watches for a while the constellation
shaped patterns of glow in the dark stars that Kate has glued across the boy's ceiling. He wanders back to their bedroom, stands in the doorway. "I want what you want, Kate. I do. But what if what you want doesn't include me? We have a life here we started."

Kate is silent. Michael waits, sighs, then moves back to the window where he watches the rain fall on the dark lawn outside.

About to begin again, he takes her hand. For a while he rests it in his hand, brushes the curve of each knuckle with his thumb. "I'm wondering what you see when your eyes are closed," he says. "I'm wondering if you still see me."

She takes her hand from his and brushes the hair from her face. Everything is still.

Kate has her arm locked around the banister. Two pieces from an American Tourister set of luggage sit beside her feet at the base of the stairway and she continues to repeat three words: "I don't know," over and over. The words grow softer as she chants them, and she works them down to barely a whisper. She is crying.

Michael stands across the room from her, near the fireplace. His hands are weaved together behind his neck, and he closes his eyes as Kate repeats her indecision.

He thinks about the project she told him about two days
earlier, the one she was working on for her new geography course concerning sustainable development in rural Latin America. Sustainable development. She had told him what it meant and sounded so excited as she explained about the careful and necessary balance between resource and progress in the natural world. He remembered hoping this new class would enrich her enough to quiet whatever turbulence she felt inside.

Sustainable development. The words held steady in his mind as he watched Kate, her head turned now. Spatial analysis.

"We'll see," says Kate. "Just we'll see. Okay?"

Michael nods. "Okay," he says. He turns to the fireplace mantle. He takes a picture frame and holds it, caressing the veneered wood with his thumb. It's a black and white photograph, many years old, of a young couple. Kate's grandparents soon after their migration from Denmark. They stand next to one another in the photograph on a windy boulevard in a city, probably Minneapolis. Their gaze into the camera lens is steady.

Michael notices the resemblance between Kate and her grandmother; it's apparent in the plumpness of her grandmother's cheeks and in the way her feet are set apart, the shape of a wide V. Michael also notices, despite the couple's lack of physical contact, a softness to their look, a trust, a stillness. Something shared. They are standing
side by side. Life bustles beyond them, a street vendor moving his cart, a taxi cab, the blur of a newspaper carried by wind. But this couple seems patient, intent on allowing their image be preserved no matter the variance, the minor shifts in scenic detail of their immediate world.

"Kate," says Michael.

Kate waits a moment then answers, "Yes?"

"Nothing," he says. He waits. "Everything," he says. He sets the photograph on the mantle, sees a trace of Kate's reflection in the glass, her arms across her chest, her gaze still.

"We'll see," she says again. "Just we'll see."

"Be soft," she says and he nods. All there is is softness now, he thinks. He listens to her breath, feels it against the curve of his shoulder and neck. All there is is softness. The weight of this. The weight of her. The weight of this room.

He hears wind through trees outside and sees that she is crying.

Kate and Michael meet in Stillwater. They've done this once every other week since their separation. Usually they have tea at a restaurant that overlooks the St. Croix River.

Now they are walking along the shoreline. The horizon is overcast, the water purple, the sky leaden. A brisk,
September wind is at their backs. They hold hands.

A ferry comes to the draw bridge. They watch the traffic halt on either end, the bridge slowly rise, and the ferry pass through.

"I have something for you," Michael says. He takes a folded sheet of construction paper from his leather flight jacket pocket. He unfolds it. It's a chalk drawing, a mermaid with long, dark hair and green blue aqua skin. She floats in a bath of indigo. "From Jeffery. It's his first attempt at impressionism, I think."

Kate smiles and tries not to cry. She takes the drawing in her hands. "It's nice," she says. "I read him that story last week. I guess he liked it, too."

"Guess so," says Michael. The wind pushes Kate's hair across her face and she draws it back with her fingers. She studies her son's drawing, lost a while. And Michael wants to tell her everything: how he misses her, how he recognizes more of her in Jeffery each day -- her laugh, her tentative gestures, the fullness of her eyes when Michael finally got a boxed kite airborne the other day and handed Jeffery the string. He wants to tell Kate how frightened he is in her absence, how he stood at their bedroom window during a thunderstorm one night, watching fierce pushes of lightning comb through distant tree lines, and he couldn't stop shivering, thinking, for whatever reason, Kate was never coming back.
They sit along the shore. Kate studies a handful of darkly purple pebbles, taking each smooth stone alone and holding them to the light, turning them in her fingers.

Michael and Kate drove to this same shoreline after they had just met. Early winter. They took photographs, setting the timer, racing to pose. Michael keeps one of the photographs near his bedside still, a pose of the two of them standing behind a wide oak, both peering around opposite sides, their faces full in laughter. When Michael looks at the photograph now, he's still amazed at how effortless their love seemed when it began. Nothing had ever been easier.

"I wished you would have talked more, Kate," says Michael. "Along the way of us. How was I to know the ways you were sad when you always were so silent?"

Kate nods. "That's what this is about," she says. "Me finding my voice."

Michael watches the traffic moving across the draw bridge. "Kate," he says. "I have to know because I feel responsible. Did I take away your voice?"

"When I find it again," she says, "if I do it on my own, it'll be mine forever and no one can take it away."

Sometimes Michael feels as if their bodies both float in a blue, wordless world, briefly touch and fall away again. He can feel the pull. The getting lost. The reaching out to touch and the elusiveness of contact. His fingers flutter, tremble. She is silent. Always she is silent. She is like
the mermaid in Andersen's story, he thinks. So much so. Like the mermaid that yearns so to be in the world above the sea she gives up her tongue to get there. Like Jeffery's drawing, she floats in blue. They both float in this blue, wordless world. Floating. Drifting. Lifting above the tableau of their two bodies softly touching.

Kate draws a number of cold stones from her hand, drops the rest. She holds them a moment. "I'm just going to take these with me," she says. "Sometimes you're in a certain place and for whatever the reason, you decide you have to take something back from that place." She sets the stones in her jacket pocket. "Have you ever felt that?"

"Yes," says Michael.

A chevron of geese come across the sky, low, and Michael and Kate watch. They stare at the sky quietly after the geese disappear.

After their walk to their cars, Michael holds Kate a long while, his eyes closed. He presses his face into the curve of her neck and draws a deep breath. "All this swimming, Kate," he says.

She tells him, "I know."

He holds her a moment longer and lets go.