CutBank 82
CutBank is published biannually at the University of Montana by graduate students in the Creative Writing Program. Publication is funded and supported by the Associated Students of Montana, the Pleiades Foundation, the Second Wind Reading Series, Humanities Montana, Tim O’Leary, Michelle Cardinal, William Kittredge, Annick Smith, Truman Capote Literary Trust, Sponsors of the Fall Writer’s Opus, the Department of English, the Creative Writing Program, Kevin Canty, Judy Blunt, Karin Schalm, Michael Fitzgerald & Submittable, and our readers and donors.

Subscriptions are $15 per year + $3 for subscriptions outside of North America. Make checks payable to CutBank or shop online at www.cutbankonline.org.

Our reading period is September 15 - February 1. Complete submission guidelines are available online.

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All correspondence to:
CutBank
English Department, LA 133
University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812

Printed by McNaughton & Gunn.

Copyright © 2015, issn: 0734-9963, isbn: 978-1-939717-12-2
CUTBANK EIGHTY-TWO

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CONTENTS

Kathleen S. Johnston | poetry
9 Spring is the Time of Plans and Projects

Michelle Donahue | fiction
10 Fire-Adapted Ecosystems

Kallie Falandays | poetry
21 The Story in Which the Imaginary Lover Becomes a Small House
22 I Wish to Be Evenly Lit

Brian Clifton | poetry
23 Nocturne in Blue and Amber

Ben Nickol | fiction
24 Missing

Matthew Schnirman | poetry
37 Zac Asks What the Plastic Sheet is For
38 Zac, That’s Not a Rabbit

Wynn Chapman | non-fiction
39 The Fat Filly

Kimberly Kemler | poetry
50 On Kajii Motojiro’s (Alleged) Jellyfish

Vintage Prints | art
51-54
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Pages</th>
<th>Works</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anders Carlson-Wee</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Maybe Kansas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Mollie Silberman</td>
<td>fiction</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Boy Scouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenneth E. Harrison, Jr.</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Little Hymn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Elegy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindall Gray</td>
<td>fiction</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>The Entire History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aran Donovan</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>The Moon Considers the Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia Heney</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>Interpretations of Philip Guston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>79</td>
<td>October, North Hero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ian Stansel</td>
<td>non-fiction</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>The Truant Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna Doxey</td>
<td>poetry</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>Book of Absence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Book of Absence II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>91</td>
<td>Interlude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>92</td>
<td>Book of Worry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Spring is the time of plans and projects

I am looking into the eye of the buffalo and fainting, I said. This was my way of being direct, way up high, that afternoon. It failed. The story was called “The Buffalo.” I was the woman loving, and wanting to hate, drowning in the buffalo’s eye. I was alone at the zoo. Nothing then worked. The eye of the buffalo was all around me. The city was blinking stupidly, all neutrality, all fountains and sun. My revulsion grew. I stumbled towards a church. Outside, children flitted. Amidst them, a ball. From a bench in the shade I watched the day hold them. I wanted to murder that light. I wanted to join in its not-thinking. The river behind me was so much water.
Michelle Donahue

Fire-Adapted Ecosystems

[Zeus] said, “I slice each of them in two, and thus they will be weak...”
- Plato, The Symposium

her & him

My friends said I should snort cinnamon if I’m too poor for weed. I don’t smoke weed, but my friends think I should.

I think they’re joking about the cinnamon. We’re too old for that.

Maybe twenty-eight is too old for weed too. I don’t like smoke, but I do love cinnamon. I drink it in Chai tea. It’s a perfect drink.

I’m driving home, to the mountain mazes of Southern California. We had sex in a LA hotel once, with the curtain open so we could see the Hollywood sign. You said that was like magic, but the mountains were even better. Beneath you, I looked up at you, as you looked at those mountains.

Perhaps I will snort cinnamon.

I’m crying. Large dinosaur tears into my cold Chai tea with cinnamon. Your skin is the color of cream Chai. You have cinnamon hair.

Or was it nutmeg? Did my friends say I could snort nutmeg?

I have no emotional attachment to nutmeg.

My mates keep giving me cigarettes. I don’t smoke, but they say I need it. That I need something and that’s least deadly.

I make a list of things more deadly than cigarettes.

Elephant stampedes. Sadness. Sad elephant stampedes. Magma and fire. Sad elephant stampedes through fire. It’s a good list.

I’m flying to London then driving to Oxford. We never flew together. We always were halfway across the earth from another. I felt like if I could drill a hole into the earth, I could stick my hand in and touch you. Is California halfway across the earth from England? No, but it feels like it.

I’m tempted to smoke.

I feel too confined. I need to move, to stampede away my sadness. You have hair the colour of fire. You are too many kilometres away.

I tried to find the distance on Google maps. It said it couldn’t calculate directions.

The distance between us is indeterminable.
home

I’m home again only it doesn’t feel right anymore. The walls are bent and my body intersects them: stuck.

I do nothing but stare at walls and stare at the TV, which is like a wall. I flip channels searching for a British accent, one that sounds exactly like yours.

I approach recovery after break up like a scientist, because that’s who I am.

I should be out doing research, in the chaparral of Southern California.

Hypothesis: If I get outside, if I unearth our box with the ring and if I do not remember, I can do research again.

My mates say home is where you spend most of your time. I am homeless everywhere but in the crook of your arm.

I pace around my empty Oxford flat and think of images to describe you. I can’t, so I watch football instead. I cheer for my favourite club: Calcia Catania.

I paint you, one portrait a day, because art is the only way I think.

I should be on the streets, on the job, taking photographs.

A picture: you done in hot pink, blood orange, surrounded by fire. If I can burn you, forget you, I’ll be fine.

meeting underground

We collided in the metro. I remember how your accent sat on your tongue, how you smiled and the skin furled around your eyes. You had a distinctive nose, sharp like a hook, and you hooked me. You were here for travel photography, a piece on Gaudi. A piece on unfinished work, his Sagrada Familia, big and grand, like coral sky spirals, his magnum opus, you said, left undone.

I saw you in the metro and ran into you on purpose. You were attractive, I noticed that: the curves, the white-toothed smile, how happy you looked. You followed science here, said something I didn’t understand. I never understood those words, but I didn’t need to. I understood you through visuals: gesticulations, the wink of eyes, the tilt of your neck.
After chupitos at that shot bar, the one with a shot for every state (I took a California one) we rode the metro to nowhere. I’d heard Barcelona was a city that never closes, but everywhere was closed that night.

Riding back, a drunk guy asked you if we had cigarettes.

You said, “we don’t smoke.” You didn’t know me, but you knew no girl you could love would ever smoke.

Even then we felt it.

I looked at you, at myself echoed in your pupil. The retina sees images upside down. Your eye turned me upside down.

home

I drag myself outside. I have no energy because I’m on a diet. I’m tired of being just a little too fat to be average. My bones are dinosaur bones. I would love to be just average. It’s better than being fat.

You liked fat girls you said. No, you were diplomatic, you said curvy. You weren’t kidding. I tracked down two ex-girlfriends on Facebook.

You called me “quite thin” once. My heart broke because I thought you were joking. You weren’t. I’d never been called thin before. I thought I’d never be called thin.

We went to a pub. I wanted to grab your picture, your dark magma hair and the flaming blue shot. We weren’t drunk but pretended we were as we rode the metro and searched for a club, walked along the beach.

On our way back, a guy asked me, “do you have cigarettes?”

“We don’t smoke.” I hoped this was true. You wrinkled your nose and I knew you hated smoke as much as I did.

Even then I could read you.

You were a painting, visceral and unworldly. Like a Cezanne, blurred, the perspective slightly shifted.

I begin painting, trying to find the way to forget. I bump my head on the ceiling fan in my studio. I’m too tall, have always been. I have elephant bones. I’d love to be shorter. Not short, but less awkward and tall.

You loved tall guys, you said. You never talked about your other boyfriends. I could never gauge if I was your type or just an anomaly.

“You’re sexy,” you said once. I thought you were joking, because I grew up feeling ugly and unwanted. Mum cheated on Dad with his brother and left. Dad left me at
I loved that freedom. Standing naked in front of you, knowing you thought I was quite thin and not worrying about the dimpled upper thigh, the flabby jut of ribcage, or the soft pouchy stomach.

I’m outside, walking. The wind brushes trash and pebbles across the asphalt and it sounds so much like rain. Cement leads me to the chaparral.

sixteen, as if that’s old enough to be an adult. As you stood naked, in front of me, you glowed and I forgot what it felt like to wander in the rain, to live in a flat with seven others, to drink in an empty car park.

I paint outside. It’s raining. I let the thick acrylic paint run. Look out at the Oxford domes and imagine you here, beside me, on the canvas.

We walked through the rain in that small city outside Copenhagen. Higlerove or something. We dragged our luggage. I was tired because I had slept in the Milan airport on the hard gray bench by the bathrooms. We stayed in a hotel, that wasn’t really a hotel, but more like greenhouses tacked onto a main building. I had told you how much I loved greenhouses, how I loved glass, being able to see the sky, warm plants.

My hair was drenched from rain; it was a rattled tornado, but you didn’t see this. Looking at the sky, feeling you beside me, within me, we were a tornado. Connected to the ground and to clouds, I was everywhere at once. We spun until our worlds turned upside down.

You took a break from your research and followed me to the city, Hillerod, for one of my photography assignments. I felt bad, because I wasn’t prepared and had lost the directions to the hotel and we wandered around so long in rain. But you looked so beautiful, wet hair, clothes sticking to your breasts, the concave curve of your waist. I said you’re fit, you’re sexy, you’re beautiful because I wasn’t sure you believed it yet.

I took you to Frederiksborg Castle, the largest in Scandinavia. You liked the gardens most, baroque, green hedges sprawling until they hit the ocean, the plants twisting like a maze. You were always impressed with how much humans could change nature.

meeting under glass, between plants

Donahue
You showed me your tornado-life and I liked this new perspective.

I kissed you in the maze and for the first time I felt that I liked being stuck.

home

There’s so much nature here in LA County suburbia. There’s a lot of cement and ashy trucks too, but there are these lucent pockets of green. The smog gets eaten at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains, in the chaparral. Wooded grassland. More wood than grass though. Grassy woodland.

There are a lot of forest fires here. I walk through these flame-licked lands.

Oxford is cloistered. It’s beautiful, but it’s the beauty of books, of academia, of indoors. I can only take so many pictures of the blue slate, butter yellow buildings. These buildings aren’t enough to burn you from my mind. My paint and my canvas aren’t enough either. With you, here. I’m too stuck.

I buy a plane ticket. I take a bus, then the tube to Heathrow Airport.

meeting dinosaur-elephants

What London needs are woods, you said. There’s Hyde Park, I said. With rain-fed grass and some trees. And that statue of Peter Pan. It wasn’t the same, you said. There are benches in Hyde Park. You hated benches; you never could sit still. You moved through places like a migratory bird.

You move around too much, I told you. It’s hard. I never know who you’re with.

You said, trust me. And I did trust you when I was with you, as we

We went to London together, almost my hometown. An hour away but mum never took me to visit. That surprised you. I knew then that your parents were different than mine; it was hard not to yearn for that. I met your parents once and then you made so much sense to me.

You must have a flaw, I said. You said yes, many. It’s hard for me to trust people.

Trust me, I said. You got silent and I could tell you were nervous as
walked through Hyde Park.

In Hyde Park, there was a fake elephant, painted like a dinosaur. Green, with lots of teeth. Let’s pretend to be dinosaurs, I said. Let’s grow claws and thick skin and become ectotherms. I told you that meant cold blooded. Blood affected by heat.

My blood felt too warm. You made me too warm.

I took pictures with you and 44 elephants. In every photo you held an iced Chai. You hated coffee, but you were British so you couldn’t hate tea.

home

I’m in search for our ring box, searching through the chaparral. You were here once when you met my parents and I took you to these trails. No benches here, you said. And you pulled a ring from your pocket. Simple, clean silver. Not now, you said. But a promise. Let’s keep it in the earth until the time is right.

My reflection hung upside down in the ring, like when you look at yourself in a spoon. It was a sign you weren’t ready.

I need to find the ring. It’s difficult; the chaparral burned since and looks different now. It burned

we walked through Hyde Park.

There was an exhibit in London, elephants hidden throughout the city, all painted by different artists. I painted the one in Hyde Park, for you, because I knew you would like it. But I didn’t tell you it was me. I wanted you to think it was London’s magic.

I thought some things were better left unspoken.

I took a picture of you, kissing that dino-elephant. I developed it by hand, watched your face, upside down, slowly appear as it soaked in developer.

I need to see you. Or else I need to unearth the ring and melt it away, to burn the promise from it. I’m not sure which yet. I have twelve hours of thought, of being wrapped in this winged, metal box. The perfect place for thinking. We boxed the ring to keep it safe, housed it in earth, because I knew you’d like that.

Now, I think, why did I do that, why did I hide a piece of me so far, so close to you? I was too certain of us.

I bought the ring, because I wanted it to happen now, but I knew you weren’t ready. I had been
once too, when I was twelve. Firemen came to my door at three am, the night before Halloween and told us we had to evacuate. I remember because I had been to a Halloween school dance and my hair was a sticky tornado from hairspray. When I had to evacuate I brought only two things: a photograph of my best friend and my stuffed leopard Leo.

If I had to leave now, I would take our 44 pictures of elephants and my stuffed leopard, Leo. I’m far too old for him, but some things I can’t let go.

This mountain dirt road goes up forever.

I yelled, until the words didn’t make sense anymore.

In our Athens hotel, with fake statues of Athena and Zeus, I picked up your wallet: soft, worn leather, and a picture fell out. A young girl, maybe three, with that same strong nose as yours. The picture was folded and when I smoothed it, I saw you, smiling, holding her hand.

A daughter, I screamed. Do you have a wife too? I wouldn’t know would I? You’d seen my home, but I hadn’t seen yours. You’d told me to trust you.

married before; it lasted only six months. It never felt like us. That was a whisper and you are a roar. The plane engine roars beneath me and it sounds like a magnified version of the soft way you snore. I sketch in charcoal on the plane, quick sketches of you. I used to do this frequently, if only to show you how beautiful you always were.

If I could go back, I would propose to you, stay on my knee with a ring I couldn’t afford and refuse to leave until you believed everything I did.

My plane lands and I step out into the hot, California sun.

meeting photographs

I wonder if maybe I kept the photo in my wallet on purpose.

You yelled, a lot. You really had a set of lungs (you used to be a swimmer.) I wonder if I kept the photo in my wallet because I was afraid, overwhelmed and too used to chaos. It was you who taught me the science of entropy, how the world tends toward disorder.

I had a wife. Six years ago for six months, I said. I had a daughter too. Lizzie, who didn’t make it past her fourth birthday. I didn’t say that part.
We’d touched in so many countries, spread too thinly over too many years. Long distance was hard enough; we’d begun to fray, had burned too bright. I cared too much. I threw my scarce belongings into my bag and stormed out.

I walk past a manzanita tree, tall with branches like cobwebs. It has no leaves, not during the summer. It did, when we walked through a patch of these trees and picked it as the place to bury our box. I’d told you about the chaparral, how people say it’s adapted to fire. They’re wrong. You can’t adapt to a force that strong. Too much fire destroys it. It’s only adapted to certain fire patterns. Fire must happen at the right intensity and the right time. Or else it all burns.

People forget that fire can kill manzanitas, the ancient trees that can live for hundreds of years. They forget the baby trees grow slowly and are fragile. If they don’t grow enough and there is a second fire too soon, they die. And they don’t come back.

Still, people say some species were born to burn.

I drive to your home, at the base of the mountains. My rental car feels clunky and I’m always surprised by how jarring it is to drive in the wrong seat, on the wrong side of the road. You’re not home, but your car is in the driveway. You can walk nowhere except the trails from your house. I drift out there too, in search of you or maybe our ring box. I try to remember about those manzinitas. You loved them, so when you talked of them, I tried to love them too.

After a fire, the tree grows from the burls at the base of the burnt shrubs. The chemicals in smoke and charred wood makes their seeds germinate. Manzanitas cannot sprout from the seeds without fire. Fire decreases competition from other species.

There aren’t many manzanita trees here anymore.

Donahue 17
Can you imagine that? I asked you when we walked here, too long ago.

A burning life? You asked. You had sad, Modigliani eyes. Oval and dark. All smudge, no light. You said, yes, I can imagine.

Don’t you see? You asked. No species needs flame the way we think it does.

No, I didn’t see. My parents almost burned my house down. They smoked, in the house, right in my face. They needed fire.

meeting gods

You tried calling me, but I threw my phone down Lycabettus Hill, the highest hill in Athens. I walked there from the metro. I bought a pound of red grapes for only one euro on a small street. I hit the steep slope of Lycabettus and started climbing. I had no water, only all my clothes, my backpack and one pound of grapes. It was 98 degrees and noon. But when I reached the top and found that small little chapel and looked at the Acropolis, I forgot the heat.

Later, much later, I stumbled to the lookout behind the Acropolis. I climbed all the stone and my sandal fell off twice. Lucky, my feet were rough and thick like dinosaur skin. People were drinking, right out in public, in daylight. Some guy offered me one, but I said no, because beer was too weak to support my sadness. I looked at the city, so old and dirty and breathtaking. I took pictures,

I left the hotel, but didn’t take the metro, just kept walking on the hot stone. My feet weren’t used to this heat. I walked up the steep hill to the Acropolis. I wandered, eyes holding the tears in, until it was too much. I cried with Athena right there in her old temple. It had been three years since I cried. I touched the crumbling ruin and felt the heat and art of it, even though the signs said don’t touch. I was kicked out of the Acropolis because I couldn’t stop.

I tried calling and you didn’t pick up. I left a message. A stumbling message, trying to explain. I waited for you to call and I wandered down the hill, to the melting asphalt of Athens. The Temple of Zeus was across the street, so I went there, not bothering to look both ways. I hoped maybe the god of gods could provide me with answers. Or maybe just a lightening bolt, through my body,
of the crumbled rock, the dim city lights, the faint outline of Lycabettus in the distance. I imagined this is what sadness would look like.

or else in my hand, so I could aim it. Start my own fire. I think Greece, like California, has fire-adapted ecosystems.

meeting on mountains

The phone in my pocket vibrates. I always bring a phone in case I step on a rattlesnake. One killed my neighbor’s big dog. If I were an average weight, I would weigh as much as the dog, so a rattlesnake could probably kill me too. Especially the babies. When they bite they don’t know when to let go.

I take the phone from my pocket and squint at the glinting screen.

I answer, Hello? I hear your voice, but it’s in pieces. Reception peters in and out here, mostly out. I can’t hear you, I say. I want to talk, I do. I don’t know why you’re calling. But I like seeing your name on my phone.

Then I see the tree. The manzanita, the one I know we buried the box under. It has three main trunks that each split off into two more trunks. I take out the trowel I brought and dig. It’s hot, the sun burning the dirt I dig out from the earth.

I call, the mobile buzzes. You pick up, but I can’t hear words. I love you, I scream. I don’t know I’ve said it, until it’s already out. I hold my breath to hear your response. All I hear: I…can’t… All else static. I swallow, my throat tasting of dirt and sweat. I walk, aimless now. Walk until my feet start to blister.

My white trainers turn blister. The rubber sole grows soft.

I hear a snake, somewhere near by, in a bush, and it sounds so loud, louder than an elephant stampede. A hawk glares at me through his amber eyes. You told me the retina sees all images upside down.

I feel upside down. My brain isn’t working anymore, isn’t flipping the images to the right side up. I’ve flown over almost half the earth to see you, my world literally has a different side up. And this changes nothing between you and I.
I scoop out our box, fire and rainproof, from the dirt. I enter the combination, take out the velvet pouch. Feel the warm metal ring in my hand.

I slip it on. I should never have put it on my finger like that. This is something that once done, cannot be taken back.

I have some weed, but all I want is Chai and cinnamon. I roll a joint. It’s lumpy and sad looking because I don’t know what I’m doing. I light it. My thumb hurts; I’m not used to using a lighter. But now the sad end of my pathetic joint burns. I suck in, until I can’t stand it.

My friends said I should snort cinnamon, but I wanted something more dramatic.

But weed isn’t dramatic. My eyes are bleary. My lungs hurt.

It’s too hot now and the whole forest screeches.

I think the trees are on fire.

I sit on the dirt and a pack of Marlboros my mates gave me falls to the ground. The red and white box, cigarettes spilling out.

I pick one up. I should never have done it, because once it was in my hand I had to light it, to smoke it.

My mates gave me a lighter too. My hands shake. I light it and just watch it burn until it burns down. I flick the butt, still burning, to the ground. I light another, watch the flame burn a little longer. I hold the cigarette loose between fingers. I suck in, until I can’t stand it.

My mum almost burned our house down by leaving her butt, still burning, on the couch.

The long grass by the trail is on fire. I yell and stomp on it.

The soles of my shoes are thin and start to melt.

I think the trees are on fire.
I dreamt of him again. He lived
in the room next to mine. I tried to look like there’s a hole in the wall
that separates these rooms, like there are rooms in the buildings
that are always locked. Like there’s a river at the end of the hall
& I dreamt that too. & you’re weeping
now. I’m sorry— I wanted you to come so I loved you
back to paper. I thought I heard you say something about being hungry.
If you were, I’d wash your collarbone in my bathtub.
I’d build your bedroom in a hollow wall.
I want to unhook you.
Form your stomach muscles out of plywood;
your hands: filled-in bed sheets; your skin: wallpaper drips.
I want to make you slop mesh screening.
The circular ruins of your eyes waterfall, looking for moons.
Your knee bones,
your knee-stops,
your knee aches when it rains.
I’ll make you love the weathervanes.
I’ll never tell you it’s not morning. Imagine it’s not
morning. Imagine it’s still night-washed:
Your pillows aren’t soaked in anything;
your hands aren’t stuck
to anything; your eyes haven’t studied anything.
Not even the walls look covered in holes;
not even the windows look streaked with handprints.
Even for one minute, I will not let you open.
I Wish to Be Evenly Lit

but like morning, there is always one part that feels especially dark. And in my own bed, I am tied to the dark parts so that I wish myself fully awake, if only to be less tired. But today, I do not wish to wander around myself because there is only one place to get lost in. And I burrow in it like a bee-eater and I only look for flying things and wings and their translucent veins. And with them, I’ll build a house, and sleep it in the dark, and cover it in the insect-vein of night. And when I wake up, I will still raise bruises the same way. As if hanging onto them is like a welcomed love. I’ll say to them “Come here. Sleep here.” And I’ll name them as if they were on the opposite side of my skin.
Bending off a side street, we sucked down our parents’ Old Crow—

its luster grew in the mason jars of our esophagi. That summer we kept our animals in red wax sealed bottles, and I played dead in the corners of the swimming pool.

It was the year we would fill it in with concrete, the year I fished an opossum from the filter. Its fur peeled off in hunks and hotwired the amnesia clawing out of our necks.
Dusk arrived at three. The throngs jamming the chairlifts evaporated, revealing the corded lanes that all day had organized them. It was like the discovery of a skeleton. Below the village, down the road to town, the terraces of parking drained, revealing expanses of stained snow.

Claire, who hadn’t skied that day but who nevertheless wore snow bibs and a parka, crossed from the hotel to the bar at the lodge. Luke, the bartender, came down the taps and flicked a towel at her. He poured her a beer.

“What’s going on down here?”

“It’s a bar,” Luke said, and set the glass in front of her before walking back to the kitchen. Sipping her beer, Claire watched the patrons at other tables, and some men playing pool. The bar’s windows, all down the wall, were darkening slabs of ice. The men finished a game and started another, the balls lurching into the carriage. She walked over. “Who’s the pro here?” she said.

“This guy,” one of them said.

“Har, har,” said his friend. He racked the balls, “You want to play?”

She shot a game with them. Between shots, she considered angles and options, but then stepped to the table and simply fired at the densest cluster, hoping commotion masked incompetence. The game finished, and something passed between her new friends. “We’re headed out,” one said. “Have a good one.” And they drifted off.

She ate dinner at the bar, where Luke checked in on her.

“I’m out of here,” she told him. “I’m done with it. All of it.”

He followed his wiping hand down the counter. When he returned, some minutes later, he said: “So what were you saying?”

“Fuck you.”

She took her food to a table by the window, where a chill exhaled from the glass. She was at the window when the night skiing came on, the lamps strung like pearls into the sky, through which floated skiers, just small shards of darkness chipped free and falling—and at the window when she saw, high above the night skiing, some lights all their own, floating oddly up the ridgeline.

And at the window when they came through the bar with the photograph.
They were ski patrol guys in red jackets with white crosses. They stopped at the first table and handed the photo around. She couldn’t see it, but saw the sober way each person studied it, then passed it on, shaking his head. They brought it to Luke, then to her.

“Have you seen this girl?” one of them said.

She looked at the photo. A girl in summer, standing in tall grass.

“Who is she?” The photo was so warm. She doubted, on such a night, she’d recognize anyone photographed in sunlight and grass. She handed the photo back, “I’m sorry.”

“If you see her, call the desk. All the phones 9-1-1 the desk.”

“Andie,” the other one said.

“What?”

“Her name’s Andie.”

When they’d left, the bar was still. The music, which before had been unnoticed, now was a sharp, ugly presence, like a provocative sculpture. She went to the bar. “God,” she said, but Luke was on the phone. Other people crowded around her. Finally Luke hung up. “They lost her,” he said, “She went off the ridge.”

“Jesus,” Claire said.

“They’re getting ready,” said someone at the window. The group of them, Luke included, left the bar and crowded at the glass. Below, under flood lamps, a team of riders ran checks on snow machines, their exhaust fogging the night. Before they left, one of them stood on his machine and addressed them through a bullhorn. He gestured at the mountain, finning his hand up routes. Finally he climbed down and the riders, saddled in pairs on the machines, some with skis or snowshoes strapped to their backs, tore out through the dark.

Everyone had a drink, then Luke closed the bar and they went downstairs. The ski patrol office, behind its glass partition, was bustling, people zipping back and forth. Farther within, at a vast topographical map, stood a cluster of gesturing officials. They weren’t alone in convening there. People came in sweatpants and pajamas, or clomped down the stairs in boots. Luke talked to some guys from the kitchen, still in their breasted jackets. When he
returned, Claire said: “We need to do something.”
  “Do what?”
  “Do you know the patrol guys?”
  “They don’t need us, Claire.”

Something was happening. Someone was pushing through the crowd. It was the guys she’d seen earlier, the guys with the photo. “Claire…” Luke said, but she stepped past him and blocked their way. “Hey,” she said.

The men tried to step past her, but she got in front of them. “Hey,” she said again. “I want to help.”
  “Ma’am,” one said.
  “I’m serious.”

They tried to step past her, but again she stepped in front of them. In the end, to appease her, they printed off some photos she could take around. She tried to find Luke, but he’d left.

For all the commotion in the lodge, it was a still, deserted night. The night skiing was off. Floating up the dark mountain, like phosphorescent bubbles, were the isolated stabs of snow machines’ headlamps. She heard their engines, vaguely, but then was walking and heard only her own breath and crunching snow.

The hotel was dark, but she left photos at the desk and by the fireplace. A man crossed the lobby and she put one in his hand. “Her name’s Andie. She’s missing.”

“Jesus,” the man said, and she kept going. She left copies by the elevator and courtesy phones. After the hotel, she walked down the road, knocking at cabins and condos. Most of the doorways were dark, but where a door opened, she provided a photograph. “We’ve been looking since this afternoon. Any information…”

They were sorry to hear that, they said.
  “We need to find her. If you see her…”

If they heard something, they’d be in touch. They were sorry, they said. She moved down the road. It was a cold night, but away from the
village a milky light that was almost warmth descended through the pines.
Below, in the valley, lay the shimmering lights of town. At the end of the road,
an old couple answered in pajamas. The man fumbled glasses onto his nose,
“What’s this?”

“It’s her photograph. She’s missing.”
He held the picture away from him, then studied Claire over his frames.
“If you see her, you need to call that number.”
“We will,” the man said.
“My name’s Claire,” she said.

When she returned, the room where the crowd had formed was vacant and dark. The only light came from the ski patrol office, where now a lone man stood at the map. Others sat at a table with papers and laptops. Stenciled on the door were the words STAFF ONLY, but in her hand were the rest of the photographs. She stood in the dark, rapping the sheets on her thigh.
When she entered the room, a woman looked up from the table and said, “Excuse me?”

She lifted the pictures. “The flyers,” she said. “Mike had me pass them out.”
“Mike?”
It’d been a guess. Still, she kept on: “Are these not yours?” She brandished the flyers.
The woman studied Claire, then nodded at a shelf. Claire set the photos on the shelf, then waited, watching the woman work. “What can I do?” she said.
The woman again lifted her eyes. She folded her arms and sat back.
“Who are you, again?”
“Mike had me help. He said to help.”
“Anyone know a Mike?” the woman said.
There were shrugs. “Could be a Mike,” someone said. “Could be with County.”
“He said to help out. I’m helping out. What do we need?” Claire said.
“Look,” the woman said, “we don’t need…”

Nickol  27
“Coffee? Anything like that?”
Some heads lifted.
“What about food?”
“Oh,” the woman threw up her hands, “you could bring us some food. Sure.”

Claire left and crossed to the hotel, where after bickering with a clerk and manager she was shown into the pantry. Everything she took—salads, sandwiches, breads—the clerk recorded and added to her room bill. When she returned to the office, carrying plastic bags and an urn of coffee, she was greeted like family. “There’s our girl,” one said. “Atta girl.”

They circled like hyenas, peering in bags. Once they were eating, she asked about the search.

“Nothing yet,” one said.
“No?”
“It’s a lot of land,” another said. He was an older guy by the room’s standards, a handsome guy. A radio crackled, and he unclipped it and jammed buttons. “Fucking thing,” he said.
“So what do we do?” Claire said.
“We invest in radios. Fucking Soviet era. Look at this thing.” He showed it to her.

“Let me see that,” one of the young guys said, and the old guy tossed it to him. “Fucking radioskhinev,” he said.

They ate awhile, chewing their food like cud, before the old guy stood and fed his arms into a jacket.

“Where’re you going?” Claire said.
“Here,” the woman said, “take them the weather.” She handed the man a printout.

“Wait,” Claire said, and pulled on her coat. She grabbed the coffee urn.
“No,” the woman said. “No, you’re staying here.”
“No, I’m not,” Claire said.

***
Any vehicle that could go up the mountain already had, but Charlie, the old guy, called a lift operator, who met them at the quad. It’d been frigid earlier, but now it was arctic. The sky had cleared, releasing all fumes of warmth. They floated through the housing, then jumped cables and flew into the sky, each breath cutting her lungs.

It was a still night. Even soaring in the air things were still. Trees ghosted by, slumped in their wedding cakes of snow. What light there was emanated from the snow, from within, as if an overcast day had dropped from the sky and now smoldered on the mountainside. Stars shone above them, and to their left and right. The valley glimmered.

Charlie poured coffee. “Should you check in with Mike?” he said.

“Who?” she said.

He laughed. “Look, I don’t care.” He gave her a cup, then poured for himself. “I get it, I think. It’s a good feeling.”

“It’s not about how it feels,” she said.

“No,” he said. “Of course not.”

They floated up the mountain. As they neared the ridge, a wind kicked up, carrying grit that stung her eyes. The chair swung wildly. Within the blur, passing from view, were the floodlights and orange tent of the search party.

Inside, the tent was musty, and surreally lighted, as if it were surrounded by fires. There were tables and cots, and at the far wall a kerosene heater that looked like a cage for something radioactive. The walls sagged with wind, an icy draft leaking through. The two men in the tent stood when they entered, and conferred awhile with Charlie. They poured coffee without acknowledging where it’d come from. They studied the weather printout. Finally, one of them glanced at her.

“Oh,” Charlie said. “And this is…” He snapped his fingers.

“Claire,” she said.

“Claire. She’s from County.”

“You’re not a monitor, are you?” one of them said. He was bald, with
thin stubble where his hair would grow. “What, are they making us accountable?”

“That’s what it sounds like,” the other said.

“Unacceptable,” the bald one said. “Unacceptable.”

“I’m just helping out,” she said.

“Well, that’s fine. But let’s keep that monitoring to a minimum. I’m Scott,” he shook her hand, “and this is Sam.”

From outside came the surging rip of engines, something like chainsaws, and then abrupt silence. Two men ducked into the tent, covered in snow. “Wind’s blowing!” one of them shouted in his helmet. Then they removed their helmets. “Hey,” one said. “Who’s she?”

Scott brushed them off. “That’s our monitor,” he said.

“They making us accountable?”

“Let’s go,” Scott said.

While the new guys unzipped, Scott and Sam zipped up. They pulled on gloves, took helmets from the rack. “Monitor?” Scott said, offering her a helmet.

“I’m going?”

“Got to find Andie, don’t we? Yeah, you’re going. Let’s go.”

In the floodlights, the snow was a whirling blindness, like sand infused with glare, but they soared off the ridge and soon the snow was confined to their headlamp. She gripped Scott’s torso, her chin at his ear. The headlamp passed over tracks, and caught in its scalloped periphery the low hang of timber. “Where’re we going?” she shouted, but the helmet reverberated her voice. She doubted it went anywhere, and if Scott replied she didn’t hear.

They followed a descending track, in the bend of which she saw, over her shoulder, the headlamp of the other machine. It was far back, drifting through the trees like a spirit. After a while, they arrived at a boundary rope. Scott stopped the machine, exhaust wafting forward, and lifted his visor, “You good?”

“Yeah,” she said.

The other machine stopped beside them. “Do the basin?” Scott yelled,
and Sam flashed his thumb.

Scott clapped his visor down and idled forward, lifting the rope over their heads. They went through a creek bed, then climbed out in timber. There was no path then, just snow. What had been a sturdy machine now wavered beneath them, like a kite. They ascended a ridge and she leaned with Scott's body. Off the back of the ridge, he leaned back against her. She watched trees pass over. In the ambience of their headlamp, the trees were like discovered things, their boughs shielding faces.

They crossed a meadow, the two machines in tandem, then angled off and killed the engines. Sam tossed them snowshoes, each shoe thumping the powder, then dropped his own and stepped on.

“You used these things?” Scott said.

“Yeah.”

“They're pretty easy.”

“I've used them,” she said.

The shoes were steel hoops with plastic stretched over them. They shifted when she stepped on, and she had to catch herself on Scott's shoulder. She leaned and fumbled the straps.

“Other way,” Scott said. He jumped in the snow and fixed the shoes himself. He climbed out and strapped on his own. He turned on his headlamp, then Claire's. Sam handed them poles.

“We ready?” Scott said.

They killed the snow machines' headlamps, and instantly the world was three glowing embers. They started out, but almost immediately her shoes caught the powder. She leaned on one foot and worked the other free, but the next step it happened again.

The headlamps swung back at her. “Step higher,” Scott said.

“What?”

“Higher. You ever wear your dad's loafers? Walk like that.”

It was difficult, but eventually she squared a step, and another, and then it was working, they were fanning up the mountain. As she climbed, Claire peered at the surrounding darkness. For such open wilderness, it felt
close around her. She had her radius of light and smoking breath, beneath which passed snow, like seafloor in the lamp of a submarine. Brush appeared, its tangled shadow stalking wide of her, and then cattails, their heads so thick the snow couldn’t fall through. She saw birches, invisible in that whiteness except as a picket of shadows.

The creek they followed corralled her Scott’s direction. When she reached him, he was inspecting boulders in the current. He stepped to one, then to the opposite bank. He offered a pole and helped her across. With Sam on the first bank, they fanned up the drainage, their headlamps flashing the water.

After a while, Scott called the girl’s name. “An-die!” he called. And then Sam joined him, “An-die!” Claire expected an echo, but there was none. The night swallowed it.

“An-die!” Scott said, and then said: “Monitor, where are you? Let’s hear it.”

“An-die!” she called.

“Louder,” he said, and she called out again: “An-die! An-die, where are you, girl?”

They passed through timber, the pines slipping among them. It was hard going, her legs gelatinous and quivery, but she kept on. They came out in a meadow, where the creek vanished in drifts. Her lamp passed through thickets, at the deepest of which she paused and parted branches, craning her beam at the shadows.

“An-die!” Scott called.

“An-die!” Sam echoed.

It was farther, near the top of the meadow, that their voices found each other. “An-die,” Sam said, and his tone lay as a platform for Scott, who after a pause sang, “Oh, my sweet An-die!”

They fell silent, peering in brush, but their melody lingered. Finally Scott took it up again. “You’re caught in the snow…”

“Don’t know where to go…” Sam said.

And after a moment Scott crowned it: “Come out from the woods,
and we’ll take you home!”
   “An-die!” Sam began.
   “Oh, my sweet An-die!”
   And then together: “Caught in the snow, don’t know where to go, come out from the woods and we’ll take you home!”
   “An-die!” Claire began, and they loved it, they howled: “Oh, my swe-eet An-die!”
   “Belt it, Monitor!”
   She sang: “Caught in the snow, don’t know where to go, come out from the woods and we’ll take you home!”
   “An-die,” Sam began.
   They were singing like that, and searching the timber over the meadow, when night paled to morning. They reached the rock field at the top of the basin and circled back to the machines.

   In the tent, they flopped on cots and melted together as a single thing, their nerves interwoven. They were so tired, so linked, that it seemed any one of them could touch any other, and it would be permissible. It would be no different than touching oneself. Once, Claire walked outside and watched a helicopter thumpet up the mountain, its nose to the pines. As it lowered, the snow beneath it billowed and raced off. But then she went inside again. She wished to dwell in that heat forever.

   That afternoon, the search was suspended. Weather had moved in, a blackening howl that surged the tent walls, knocking gear from the shelves and once blowing out the heater. They were joined by others, other heat and voices. Then that evening, the call came through: they were taking people down.

   They walked out into blackness, and hard cold. Near the tent idled a massive snowcat, the storm whirling its headlamps. They piled in with other guys, guys from County. Finally the engine snorted, and they lurched into motion. As they descended, the guy next to Claire wiped his glove on the fogged window. “Not looking good,” he said.

   When no one replied, he said, “This one’s on the books.”
They nosed off a ledge and down a steep slope of powder. No one endorsed the man’s opinion, but also no one disputed him, and soon the air sagged with defeat. They seemed already to have called it. The group of them, in that cab, seemed already disbanded.

“They won’t call it,” Claire said.

No one answered.

She said, “Well they haven’t called it yet. It’s still going.”

The village appeared in the windshield, a milky haze from which the hotel and lodge gradually dissociated. The cat parked at the lodge and cut its engines. “We’re still doing this,” Claire said, but the men were gathering gear, wandering off. She managed to marshal maybe five of them, Scott and Sam included, but even these five were only too tired to resist. “Let’s go, let’s get some rest,” she said, herding them towards the hotel. She guided them through the lobby and into the elevator. In her room, they peeled off coats and snow pants and hung them in the bathroom. They draped socks and gloves on every doorknob, rod, lampshade. “Okay, what do we want?” She picked up the phone, “I’ll get food. What do we want?”

But when the kid from the kitchen knocked at the door with soup and tuna sandwiches, with French fries, pasta, and rolls, no one answered. He knocked again, then swore under his breath and pushed the cart up the hall.

In the room, they’d collapsed like narcoleptics on the bed and floor. Someone had hit the lights, but that was it. They lay where they’d fallen.

Though even sleeping, if she could be said to be sleeping—it was more nearly a fugue of near-sleep not wholly distinct from waking, from trudging drifts—even then, there was an ache in her. She lay on the bed between two of them, one before and one behind, and at some hour, in the dark, she reached for them. The one before her she gripped with her hands, drawing him near. But he was out cold. She pressed into the body behind her. He didn’t respond, but she stayed there, coaxing, until he stirred and they stirred together. It would go on like that, she believed. Garments drawn aside, he would press and discover her. They would fall through shared breath. But no—they were still again. He was sleeping.
In the morning, a shovel was scraping under the window. A newspaper thumped the door. And in the room’s pale light, it was hard to believe any part of the night was recoverable.

“Let’s go, we’ve got to go,” she said, climbing stiffly from the bed. She shuffled over them, their sleeping forms, and hit the lights. She went to the window, already pulling on gloves. Only nothing had changed. The lodge, maybe sixty feet off, was visible only as a grainy thing, an irregularity of shadow. A man in a neon coat trudged at the wind.

“It snowing?” someone mumbled.

For a long while, as the rest of them slept, she remained at the window. Something would happen, she believed. The weather would lift. But it snowed, and gradually the men in her room rose and shuffled to the bathroom, sorted for coats. They wandered out, thanking her vaguely. Soon, it was just Sam and Scott.

A radio squawked, and Sam punched buttons. “Repeat,” he said, resting the receiver against his eyes. There was static, then: “No go. We’re shutting it down.”

Then the two of them left, too.

That day and the day following, Claire stayed in her room. Something still would happen, she believed. Snow machines would convene at the lodge. But the weather cleared, and rather than snow machines the village filled with smiling throngs. They packed the chairlifts. Under a canopy by the lodge, a woman was giving massages.

After checking out, she stopped by the bar. Luke was wiping counters. “Well lookie here,” he said.

She mounted a stool, “What’re you doing?”

“What’s it look like?” He walked down the bar and flipped on the TV.

“I’m leaving,” she said. It hurt to say. It was like the pronouncement of some dreaded thing, past which there was no orientation, no gravity. Only Luke was confused. “Again?” he said. “You’ve got to make up your mind.”

He had no idea about any of it.

“I know.”
“That’s your problem,” he said. “You’re always going somewhere.”

Outside, every surface was aflame. Eyes throbbing, she made her way to the parking lot, where the valet had her car.

The road off the mountain wound through cabins and condos, then fell through heavy timber. She drove slowly, her breath fogging. It was weeks before the doctor from Spokane, skiing the glades under the lift, glimpsed the mitten or part of the hat, the pink scrap clinging to brush—glimpsed it and skied on. It wasn’t her, he decided. What was her name again? Angie something. Annie. He’d read about it. But they’d lost her out of bounds, out in the canyons. You died in the canyons, skiing beyond the ropes. Inside, they would hear your screams.
Anger can empty our swimming pools.
Competition is hard and drains the mind:

diving boards, chlorine, all kinds of trophies.
Zac says, *I lost my temper*, with a drawl,

and that was the end of his story. So
dreamy, to be in love with a man who
gives everything up for no reason. He quit
college and moved back home to Florida,

where I am from, to become a small-town paperboy.
People live right in the heat of the swamp there:

my heart sank deep in the muck of it,
just once, like a ruby clenched in a gator’s jaw.

But that’s the end of my story. The other story
begins, *A man walks into a bar*, and ends

how the man ends: hog-tied, handcuffed,
bare-assed, and beaten. *I can’t keep explaining.*

*Zac. Some men like to play slaves in motel rooms.*
That’s not how Zac perceives the pains of being

in love; no, he sees a blonde: curling a cigarette around
her breathless lips, asking dirty questions

on a beach towel, willing to piss all over his wounds.
The whole damn world sweats when he sweats,

jerking off on his bedroom carpet just thinking
about her. Not everything can be realized.

I walk down to fetch the paper. A corridor
is a forced perspective. Zac delivers this news daily.
Zac, That’s not a rabbit

*What do you think is alive in those woods?*
But Zac hasn’t thought a thing all day. A weight

transfers to the earth in unknown throes, in death-traps. Every single step is like falling and landing

in a clearing where we fall to our knees again
in a space of green fields. Wind winds through a border

of rivers, trees, and gullies. Animals keep hidden, conducting wild sex, their body heat charging through narrow passages.

I grow desperate in territories. *I’m happy if you’re happy.*
I hide the self, rest it in a cave, and listen to the pendulum

of my heart knock against my ribcage. I can mask a bitterness with another bitterness; classify a carcass

as another carcass; shit and barf, writhing in worm-pain. *There are so many things that can go wrong.*

You only want to live once, so you should know what it takes to survive:

a fire, first;
a fear of god.
The Fat Filly

A horse can run on a broken leg. I’ve seen it myself, sitting in front of a fuzzy television screen that showed Ruffian breaking down in her famous *Great Match* with Foolish Pleasure on July 6, 1975.

For weeks my mother and I had been looking forward to watching the race between the two horses, the so-called *Fat Filly* and the winner of the Kentucky Derby that year, The Girl versus The Boy. There were buttons for sale at the grocery store of the mare’s distinctive profile, and a general buzz of pure anticipation filling our shabby but clean rented apartment, a tiny oasis of sorts in Atlanta’s summer heat.

And there she was on the television that day, winning. There she was with that remarkable stride until, a length ahead, both bones in her right foreleg gave out with a snap. There was the jockey, Jacinto Vasquez, doing everything he could to pull her up, to stop the catastrophe that was happening in her leg, the skin torn open now and blood spattering, ligaments snapping and the hoof flopping against the ground as she ran. She couldn’t let herself lose. She tried to finish the race.

I was six years old. There were 50,000 people in the stands, a roaring sea of them, and 20 million people watching on TV. My mother was on the couch behind me and I was sitting Indian-style close to the television, so close that when I remember this moment, this is what I see: the sudden lurching of her gait, the jockey jolting upright in the irons and pulling the short reins back and back and my mother gasping *Oh my God* and the announcer shouting *Ruffian has broken down* again and again. I can still feel my eyes widening in terror.

My mother cried and I cried. We bought the commemorative magazines and watched the memorial shows and the Special Reports. We listened to the eleventh-hour calls for horseracing reform to protect the animals from this ever happening again, though it had been happening every day and everywhere and this time we all just happened to be looking when it did.

My mother never forgot it. She wasn’t fond of children, but she did have a soft spot for animals. She wouldn’t eat beef because she’d raised cows
for 4-H and said they were “like big dogs” to her. She named them as she raised them, and they came to her along the fence’s edge as she walked up the dirt drive from school, calling to them. Her father once butchered a cow she’d raised while she was at school, and when they sat down to dinner that evening, he took great delight in telling her she was eating it.

It was 1974 and my mother, newly married to my stepfather, was ready to start a new life. The first step was to move us to a newly built apartment complex in a rural area outside Atlanta, one of the many Nixon/Ford era manmade-lake communities that were cropping up. The area of farmland and old country houses was being developed as the city sprawled, so there were still pastures and barns just a short drive from the complex, many of them renting out stall space to the newcomers to country life.

I think there was something about horses that reminded my mother of both a good part of her poor farm upbringing and of the rich people she wanted to impress. So after a trip to a livestock auctioneer a few counties away, we had a stout brown and white horse in a barn outside of town.

A second horse soon followed, though I can’t recall whether that one was the bay or the buckskin. Windy, that was the buckskin’s name. Or was it Lady, the huge black horse that reared back and landed on my stepfather as I stood behind a tree at the paddock’s edge? It could have been the one with the hormone problem who never grew beyond a yearling’s size. Maybe the donne? The tallish gray?

There were so many of them. Most went lame, or we were told they would when the farrier came. We loaded them into the stable owner’s trailer and returned them to the auctioneer. The auctioneer was a huge, white-bearded man who wore a cowboy hat and had the air of a ringmaster, some Emperor of The Swayback Nags who showed off the cock-heel ed, drowsy horses like used cars. When we brought our hobbled creatures back to him, he ts ked and apologized, told my parents there was a bad one in every batch, and offered them a trade.
I was just a kid, and getting a new horse still was an exciting thing, a constant thrill on Christmas morning. Too young to ride and too small to work the barn, I spent the year or two of stable life mostly on my own in the hay bales, the oat storage, or the back pasture by the pond that froze hard enough to walk on in the winter months. I had my Star Trek and Planet of the Apes action figures, my Breyer’s horses.

My mother and I had different ideas about things even then. She thought the way things were on television was the right way, the only way. We should all talk like newscasters with no Southern accent, cook the convenient ready-made meals in commercials, and look just like the people on the sitcoms she loved so much. She wanted a normal (one of her favorite words) life, a sitcom without the laugh track: a buffoonish husband who earned well, the good dog, the beautiful children.

We felt differently about a lot of things, like all those horses. After awhile, I started to get attached to them, and I noticed even then that she didn’t. At first she’d fawn on the animals, show them off. Later, as we drove to the barn, I would begin to hear the indifference in her voice. Everything became wrong with them, and they were gone soon after that.

The constant unveiling of “the new horse” to the other people at the stable was also starting to feel strange. It was becoming a joke, and I felt the parade of new horses making them uneasy, these people who all managed to keep same, adored horses year after year.

One Christmas, one of the women made varnished clay tree ornaments for everyone in the barn that were painted to look like their horses, with careful attention to the correct colors and size and their names hand-stenciled across their sides. She gave my parents one that was painted like a patchwork quilt. Where the name should have been, there was a question mark.

Racehorses are notoriously hard to retrain. I learned this the hard way when I started volunteering at an equine rescue center here in Kentucky. You could tell the racers out in the pastures from the regular Chapman
horses because their spines were missing the usual curve, the vertebrae instead forming a high, straight line from the neck to their rear. They aren’t used to other horses coming toward them so they do badly in a public barn, often anxious and unpredictable from being poorly socialized. They were sometimes aggressive and notoriously difficult for anyone but a professional to ride.

Sometimes the ex-racers dropped off at the shelter were so mean-spirited from a life spent running that they had to be put down. Others would be dropped off still in their monogrammed blankets, leather halters sporting their racing names on custom brass plates – Mr. Lucky, and Atta Girl.

“The one thing you need to know about taking care of horses,” one of the other volunteers told me as she trained me, “is that they’re herd animals.” We were brushing out a group of newcomers, checking their hooves, giving them a “socialization check.”

I blinked. “Which means…?”

“It means if you spook ‘em, they’ll run before they do anything else,” she said. “So don’t be in the way.”

Horses don’t like to stand still – it’s not what they’re built for. Ones that can’t equalize their body’s weight on all four legs are prone to inflammation; sores on their hooves become fatal. So when a horse injures a leg, the rest required to heal it is nearly impossible. Often a horse confined in a stall will channel its instinct for movement into nervous “tap-dancing” that aggravates the break. Add to this the incredible expense of treatment, and it’s something few owners even consider undertaking. They just have the animal destroyed instead.

Once while I was working at the center, I watched the volunteer equine vet evaluating a gorgeous chestnut Thoroughbred, its forelegs still wrapped with bright red tape from the morning’s race. The vet bent the horse’s left front fetlock and leg; the horse tossed its great head back, its irises rimmed with white crescents. His assistant then trotted the horse down the length of the barn so the vet could check its gait.
Two times, three. The vet crossed him arms, unmoving as he watched the horse’s clearly hobbled gait.

“Nope,” he said sadly, shaking his head, and they put the beautiful horse down the next day.

I couldn’t help but think of Ruffian. When she woke from her three-hour surgery, she started running again, right there on the ground where they’d laid her on her side. They tried to hold her down as her thrashing legs destroyed the stall’s wooden walls, the cast on her foreleg shattering her elbow so badly that one of the vets said the bones looked like a sheet of ice that had been dropped on concrete. There was nothing else to do. They buried her at Belmont with her nose facing the Finishing Line.

We moved north when I was nine. There were no stables in the city, so my mother now channeled her particular kind of love for animals she’d shown with horses into purebred dogs instead.

Purebred puppies, to be exact. This was in the time before it was frowned on for pet stores to sell them, so every mall had at least one shop with puppies tumbling over one another in the windows to draw the customer in. A trip to the mall would inevitably involve a tour through the pet store, my mother standing in front of the wall of cages with a childlike smile on her face.

The first puppy I remember was a sickly Bloodhound, Ali, that we kept for four days and then took back because it got diarrhea on the apartment’s white carpet. A Brittany Spaniel was the replacement, but she was slow to take to housetraining. Then there was the Miniature Schnauzer and her litter of puppies. We kept one and got rid of both when the mother attacked the mailman. Then came the Scotties with their unstoppable tails, and the Wired Fox Terriers.

One by one they were deemed “too hyper” or “too stupid,” “too destructive” or the catch-all “too hard to train.” We got Cairn Terrier littermates for Christmas one year, my sister’s given away for wetting on the rug and mine gone soon after. The gangly Irish Setter puppy was deemed
“too big” to keep. We bought Stormy, the German Shepherd puppy, from a police officer, only to take her back again. The Shih Tzus were given away for “yapping,” The English Springer Spaniel sold after putting her front feet up on the counter and knocking off a plate.

Two Basset Hound puppies arrived Christmas Day 1977. I pretended to be happy at the sight of the thumpy, clumsy, lovely little things, and then took my tri-color puppy upstairs. Knowing the dog’s days were numbered, I held her on the bed against my chest and cried.

Sure enough, both were gone in two months’ time: my mother gave away my sister’s puppy first again, this time for growling when she had food in her dish.

It wasn’t until I had dogs of my own, two Cavalier King Charles, that I realized why the puppies were exiled back to the shops or to the pound: they weren’t toys. They were dogs, and that was their sin.

It’s hard to tell how many doctors my mother took me to before I started to think she was looking for something wrong. She had taken diethylstilbesterol (DES) when she was pregnant with me in one of the last years before they realized it caused deformities, hormone issues, and cancer in the offspring of women who took it. As a result, my body staggered into a particularly unattractive puberty filled with “excessive” and “abnormal” everything.

Sometimes my mother would say to the doctor: “Can we talk privately?” and I’d be left in a hospital gown, bare legs dangling over the observation table as the two of them withdrew to his diploma-wreathed office. She came out looking sour and dissatisfied, we would leave, and I wouldn’t see that doctor again.

I was a tiny child -- bird-boned, pale, white-blond -- and very nearly underweight. A man could close his entire hand around my wrist and easily make a fist. But as puberty set in, I began to put on slabs of muscle like a gymnast: calves like inverted bowling pins and thick thighs. I excelled at the butterfly on the swim team, my waist thinning as my
shoulders widened. I was short and stocky and preferred short hair so that it wasn’t hard to manage after swimming. Strangers started to confuse me as a boy.

“You were supposed to be so small,” my mother lamented one day in the kitchen. “That’s what the doctors said—that you’d always be pretty and thin.”

The only thing that was true of those doctors’ predictions was that while she and my sister made it to 5’8” and 5’9”, respectively, I topped out at just barely 5’4”. So her little white pixie had somehow become short and stocky and far too strong for a girl.

The light bulb went on for me at the last of the visits with the mysterious parade of blood-drawing doctors. This one was friendlier than the others. We spent more time talking without my mother there, and I made him laugh. He even let me keep my clothes on at the follow-up appointment for the blood tests’ results, for which I was grateful and relieved. My mother sat there as he read off another litany of medical things, the word normal coming up again and again. Every time he said it, my mother shifted in her seat.

“Is there some other test you can give her?” she asked finally. I looked away.

“Maybe it would be helpful if you told me what you were looking for,” the doctor said.

“I just think—” she lowered her voice as if someone in the hallway might overhear. “I think she has too many, I don’t know, male hormones or something.”

I could feel my face turning red.

“Mrs. Chapman,” the doctor said, “There’s nothing wrong with your daughter. She’s fine, okay?”

They glared at each other.

Oh. It sunk into me. She thinks I’m one of those “gays.”

I was, of course, though I didn’t really know it then. And no doctor in the world was going to give her a Magic Pill to take that away.
When there was no medicine for what ailed me, my mother used her most potent weapon: shame. The muscle I put on could be controlled with less exercise and less to eat, with more flattering clothes, with nail polish and perms at salons with names like The Look and Coco & Buffs. She took me clothes shopping and asked me to pick out things I liked, usually jeans or sweaters or button-up shirts in earth tones, white, or black. These were discarded and I was offered rough approximations of what I’d chosen in brighter colors, cropped lengths, skirts, and more feminine cuts.

“You’re going to be losing weight soon so I’m going to buy this in a smaller size,” she’d say once I’d finally agreed to one or two of them. She’d say this in front of the saleswomen behind the counter, giving them a knowing look and inviting them to chime in. They would turn to me with their Vaseline smiles and beam.

“Good for you for losing weight!” one would inevitably say, and I’d take the bag and hope the earth opened up and consumed me.

My closet filled up with garish, girly clothes in their various sizes, always at least one size smaller than the one I was actually in. I wore a uniform to school that had to be purchased in the correct size, so I didn’t notice my scant wardrobe too much. I’d started to avoid going out much anyway. Years later the price tags still hung off their arms and legs like toe tags in a morgue.

My mother found a willing partner in her campaign when I was twelve or thirteen. Dr. E. was a mannish woman who would stand in front of me where I sat on the edge of the examination table and tell me, over and over, that I was overweight. Vowing that it was time to work on me, my mother started taking me to biweekly weigh-ins with her new accomplice.

“You know we’re finding people having heart attacks when they’re thirty because they weighed what you weigh now,” Dr. E. said once in her thick Spanish accent, using fear of death to scare me thin, and straight.

“You probably think you look fine the way you do,” Dr. E. tried another day as I stepped off the scale. “But I’m here to tell you that you don’t. What are you eating so much of anyway?”
“I like cereal,” I offered softly. My face was burning red again. “Well, this isn’t just cereal.”

Finally, she reduced me to tears. She asked me why I was crying and I just shook my head and looked away, wiping my eyes with the sleeve of my shirt.

“Just get dressed,” she huffed and went out to get my mother. A minute later they disappeared into the office together, leaving me there. “Well, thank you very much,” my mother hissed on the car ride home, slapping the turn signal hard as we neared the house. “Now she thinks you need to see a psychiatrist.”

One bitterly cold morning at the equine center soon after I’d turned 40, I worked under the stable’s yellow lights. The two barn cats were huddled on top of the water heater near where the donated halters and blankets hung suspended on their hooks. We’d had new arrivals the night before and I went down the rows to see which horses needed brushing or their hooves picked. Outside one stall, someone had taped a sign: **Blind**.

The horse was standing with her head facing the corner, a smallish, pied brown and white horse with a wild blaze down the middle of her face. I murmured to her (*Hey girl, hey*), her flank jumping as I laid my hand on her rump. I moved slowly, running my hand up her side as I neared her face. She turned her head toward the sound and her eyes, bluish white from the ghosts of cataracts, were uneasy as she sought me out.

When I touched her nose, she turned away from my hand and bumped the wall, jerking back. She bumped into me, startled again, and knocked into the wall. I shushed her until she went still, and then left the stall, something painful fluttering in my chest.

“There’s a blind horse down there,” I said to the barn manager in her freezing, cramped office at the stable’s end.

“Yeah, I know,” she said sadly. “Its companion horse died and the owners brought her in.” She went back to writing entries in the feeding log book.
“‘Companion horse?’”

“Yeah, blind horses have to be raised with a companion,” she said. “It’s like the other horse becomes its eyes. They spend all their time together like that.”

“Can’t we find her another horse who can be a companion?” I felt the panic rise in my chest.

She didn’t look up from what she was doing. “No, they don’t work like that.”

I went back to the stall. Standing there, my hand on the horse’s wide blaze, I started going through everyone I knew in my mind, picking out anybody who had a horse or owned some land. I wondered how much it would be for me to pay for the blind horse to be stabled here or somewhere else, imagined myself coming every day to care for her. I would talk to her until she knew me and wouldn’t be afraid. She would come to the sound of my voice and I would walk her around the pastures and down the trails.

But I was in school then and could barely feed myself and my partner and both the dogs. And I didn’t really know how to care for a healthy horse, much less one that had an issue like this.

There in the stall, the blind horse bumped against me again, pulling her face back. She blinked, sniffing me, and turned away. I finished my shift, brushing out the racers who’d taken a roll in the mud before last night’s hard freeze. I didn’t go in to see the blind horse again, and when I walked out of the barn that afternoon, I never went back.

***

_The Fat Filly_ is what they called Ruffian before they knew the remarkable horse she would be. She was big for a yearling and as comfortable to sit on as a sofa, they said. She was undefeated in ten career starts, and most of them she won in record time and by record lengths.

I knew all that, but what I remember most about her was how
stunningly beautiful she was, how she bucked when she crossed the finish line and played all the way back to the stable after winning a race, how that lovely, dark head of hers was proudly on display on the wall of souvenir buttons for *The Great Match* in the grocery store check-out lane. I remember the sound my mother made as the creature broke down under the strain, how Ruffian’s ankle was left flapping on a hinge of skin. The chestnut racer in his blanket. The blind horse and my dog when he shuddered his last breath on the couch one winter while I held him tight against my chest.
Each morning, after a breakfast of streptomycin
and ginger tea, he would brood over them: the way
one might fit nicely in the palm of his hand
slightly larger than a piece of fruit, the way

he might leave one somewhere (his neighbor’s
koi pond; the Osaka canal; in a bucket of water
under a cherry tree, where he was known
to contemplate the later stages of his disease—

when *consumption* had two meanings, previously
a word he used only to describe meals, now
filling and overfilling the cone jellies under his ribs),
the way their tentacles’ lilt might be compared
to a lion’s mane, but subtler—the saltwater
combing them out from beneath umbrella bodies,
their multicolored bells all glowing yellow
like lemons, but warm to the touch.
American Larch
Larix americana
We were somewhere in the middle of the country. Maybe Kansas. Maybe Iowa. I remember a small farm and a stave silo, gravel roads cutting through fields of flint corn, turnouts for tractors dipping into ditches and dissolving in the half-formed husks. We camped in the rows and chewed the dry kernels uncooked. Slept pressed together in that narrowed-down land. Got knots in our backs from the base-roots. In the morning I divided the gear. Sent you with the filter and atlas. Watched you walk down the shoulder and waver in the heat-lift. Then I went back into the fields. And as I went, I closed my eyes and made a practice of that blindness. Followed the tractor-tilled grid, listened hard in the ditch before crossing the roads. Felt the weight of my footsteps un hinge. My reddened hands outstretched, heavy and shapeless and numb in the tips. Not me going forward so much as the flint-corn coming through my clay-caked hands and passing. Not you disappearing so much as Kansas vanishing.
We wondered what Kevin Wilson’s sister looked like naked. We wondered what every girl looked like naked, but in particular we wondered about Wilson’s sister. Caroline was a freshman, curtain of blond hair, pretty in a way that seemed like a promise. Maybe one or two of us had actually seen a girl without her clothes on, but in our excitement and confusion, and in the darkness of the room, we’d forgotten to take a good look.

It was Saturday night. The television in Turner’s basement was muted, tuned to a zombie apocalypse where all the non-zombies were tan, in ragged army jackets and Ray-Bans, tearing across the desert on dirt bikes. Turner passed around a bottle of Evan Williams and the five of us talked about Wilson, how he’d dropped acid before track practice the previous week and raced up and down the bleachers while the rest of us ran sprints. The assistant coach let him do it because he said it was good exercise. Wilson was the only one on the track team who was cool—he was the only one who knew where to get acid—and earlier that month he’d quit varsity basketball to run track in both fall and spring. That was how little he cared. He’d stopped caring in January, after his father hit a patch of ice on Rivermont and ended up at the bottom of the ravine, the car crumpled like a beer can.

At practice Wilson wore a neon pink sweatband that said EXERCISE! in white letters, and he called all of us gentlemen. “Is he like gay or whatever?” Dieter asked, and the rest of us told him to shut up, not because we had any idea if Wilson was gay, but because we doubted that you could be cool and gay and have a dead father at the same time. It was too many things. Nobody could be so many things at once.

We passed around the bottle of Evan Williams a second time, a third. The bourbon was warm. We closed our eyes and pretended like it was August, like we were stretched across the flat rocks by the river, like Caroline’s head was on our chests and we were raking our fingers through her yellow hair, the sun in our eyes, the water lapping at our feet.

Turner punched the buttons on his phone.

“Who’re you texting?” we asked.
“Wilson’s sister,” he said.
“What about Wilson?”
Turner pressed send. “What about Wilson?”
“Nothing,” we said. “Never mind.” If there was one thing we knew, it was the difference between texting a girl and her texting us back.

We waited. We wondered how Turner got Wilson’s sister’s number in the first place. We finished the Evan Williams and pretended to smash the bottle over each other’s heads. We watched the zombie apocalypse on TV: a girl climbed a water tower, each step rusted to the color of blood. Her black hair was wild and shiny, her camo t-shirt reduced to shreds. Hundreds of zombies swarmed the desert beneath her, rotting from the inside out.

Turner hit a button on the remote and the sound returned. We heard the girl’s heavy breathing, her combat boots ringing on the steps, the zombies moaning like dying animals. There were two types of girls in zombie movies: the ones too pretty to die, and the ones too pretty to live.

Turner’s phone buzzed right as the zombies had figured out how to climb the ladder. He looked at the screen and grinned. “Caroline,” he said.

*

Turner had theories about girls.

1. Girls liked arms. As runners, we would never have the right kind of arms, so we’d have to find other ways to make up for it.
2. They drank vodka. It was clear, so it seemed pure, so they trusted it more.
3. They disliked being called “uptight.”
4. Calling a girl “uptight” was not necessarily a bad way to get what you wanted.

*
Caroline knocked on the basement door an hour later. She wore a green shirt with tiny gold buttons that looked like prizes, her cheeks flushed, the wisps of hair that had escaped her ponytail floating around her face. She and her friend each held a plastic water pistol. Caroline’s was clear, her friend’s was blue. “We got lost,” Caroline said, “but we found you.” She aimed the water gun at Turner’s mouth. “Vodka?”

“That’s genius,” Turner said.

“Dana’s idea,” Caroline said.

Dana wove past them and settled next to us on the L-shaped couch. We recognized her, not from school, but from the dollar theater and the Sip n’ Dip and different parking lots around town. She was pretty, dirty blond with bangs, the kind of girl who always looked like she was loitering. She held up her water pistol. “Anyone?” she asked.

We shot vodka into our mouths. We felt disoriented from the alcohol, from the sheer good fortune of being so close to those girls. We double-checked our math: there were five of us, including Turner, and two of them.

Across the room, Turner took Caroline’s gun and aimed it at her heart. “Bang,” he said.

“Your friend likes her,” Dana said.

“Does she like him?” we asked.

She shrugged. “She likes that he’s a junior. And that her brother doesn’t like him.”

“Does Wilson know she’s here?”

“Definitely not.”

“Did you guys sneak out?”

Dana looked at us for a second before she answered. “Caroline’s dad is dead. She can do whatever she wants.”

We looked at Caroline, studying her face for signs of grief. She was laughing, trying to grab the water pistol back from Turner. We remembered what we’d heard about her father’s accident. How it had taken the county two and a half days to haul the car from the ravine and another day to
confirm the identity of the body. How the damage was so bad that Caroline's mother had decided to have her husband cremated. The urn was the size of a paint can. We tried not to think about it. Mr. Wilson, all six-foot-one of him, sitting around in a goddamn paint can.

Turner had taken hold of Caroline's wrists, now, and she was laughing like crazy, twisting away from him, the bottom of her t-shirt rising to display a pale slice of her stomach. “She seems okay, right?” Dieter said. “I don’t know.” Dana twirled her water gun around her finger. “What's the difference between okay and not okay?”

* 

It was easy to tell the difference between drunk and not drunk. We were drunk. We could tell because we tried really hard to act sober, and because if we sat still we thought too much. We thought about our mothers, the way they'd started to look at us like we were strangers who'd already disappointed them. About our stepfathers and their grubby toothbrushes in our toothbrush holders. About Wilson sprinting up and down the bleachers like a sad, high, tireless madman while Mr. Wilson sat around in a goddamn paint can. We thought about Dana's t-shirt, how the cotton was so thin that we could see the outline of her bra underneath it. At first we felt guilty for thinking about her bra. Then we decided that she could have worn a thicker t-shirt.

Dana tried to refill the water gun from the bottle in her purse and spilled most of it on the couch. She drank straight from the bottle. “I wish I had a straw,” she said.

“You ever see Wilson?” we asked. “At Caroline's house?”

“Sure,” Dana said.

“How’s he seem?”

She passed the bottle to Dieter. “He takes things apart,” she said, “with a screwdriver.”

“Things?” Dieter asked.
“The lamp in the living room. The microwave. He took the basement door off the doorframe.” Dana shrugged. “Caroline’s mom says it’s part of the grieving process, but Caroline thinks he’s going crazy.”

We pictured Wilson bent over a microwave, twisting a Phillips head—setting the door, the display panel, and the vent on the counter, laid out like an assembly diagram. We knew plenty of people who smashed things when they were angry, but it made sense that Wilson would do something different. It made sense that he would take apart a microwave. Or, at least, it made as much sense as his dad dying.

“Weird,” we said. We wanted to ask if Wilson planned to reassemble everything, but Dana’s attention had shifted to Turner and Caroline. They were on the big recliner in the corner of the room. He was in the chair, and she was perched on the arm next to him. It was hard to tell if he was drunk, but he had a higher tolerance than all of us, which meant that he had a much, much higher tolerance than Caroline. “I have the spins,” Caroline said. She held the back of her hand to her forehead and pretended to faint, sliding into his lap. “The spins like spinning.”

Turner put a hand on her forehead, like to check her temperature, and whispered something into her ear. She laughed.

“Caroline,” Dana said. “Want some water?”

“No,” Caroline said. “I’m fine.”

“You’re fine,” Turner said to Caroline. He looked at Dana and smiled like they were best friends. “She’s fine.”

*

Dana said the one thing better than drinking was drinking in a hammock. “There’s one in the garage,” Turner said. He pointed to the door, decorated with a poster of Uma Thurman in a skintight yellow jumpsuit, holding a sword. “You can get it, if you want.” Dana got up and three of us followed her. Dieter stayed on the couch with the rest of Dana’s vodka, tapping on his phone, pretending not to look at Turner and Caroline.
The garage smelled like fertilizer and cigarette smoke. Dana flipped on the light, and for the first time we noticed how small she was, how her shoulders were as delicate as bird bones. We wondered what it was like to take up so little space in the world. We wondered if we should offer her our sweatshirts, and then we wondered if our sweatshirts would smell bad to a girl.

We picked up the badminton racquets propped against the wall and sliced them through the air, fencing. Dana stepped around a bag of woodchips, an air hockey table covered with a blue tarp, an ancient-looking Christmas tree, and tossed us a birdie. We swung and missed. “Nice shot,” she said.

“We’re runners,” we said. “We don’t really hit things.”

She picked up a football helmet and put it on. “Where’s the hammock?”

We shrugged. We’d spent hundreds of hours at Turner’s house, but we’d never seen one.

“I don’t know about your friend,” she said.

“Turner?”

“He’s arrogant. My mom says arrogance is the worst quality in a man.”

“Turner’s not really a man,” we said.

She shrugged, like that was obvious.

“What about Wilson?” we said. “Girls like Wilson.”

“Wilson’s not arrogant.” Dana pulled off the helmet and set it on the floor, smoothing her hair. “He’s unhappy, which makes him interesting.”

“We’re unhappy.”

“Everyone’s unhappy, but Wilson’s the right kind of unhappy.”

“The right kind?”

“He’s tragic,” she said.

If one of us had been alone with Dana, maybe we would have tried something. She was pretty and interesting and the way she talked—honestly, without politeness—thrilled us. Instead, we stood there. We
decided that if there was a zombie apocalypse and we were forced to leave everything behind and retreat to the garage with her, building a fort with the tarp, surviving off woodchips, weaponizing with shovels and anti-freeze, we wouldn’t have minded that much.

Dana sighed and placed a hand on her hip, looking around the room. “There isn’t a hammock,” she said. “Let’s go back inside.”

* 

Turner and Caroline weren’t in the basement. “Where are they?” Dana asked. She walked to the recliner and picked up Caroline’s clear plastic water pistol. The zombie apocalypse had started over again on television. The five remaining humans had regrouped in the abandoned chemical plant: a black guy, a white guy, an Army officer who’d lost an arm in Afghanistan, a blonde girl, and a brunette. They were tired but determined, glistening with sweat, the fate of humanity in their blood-smeared hands. The fate of humanity was always, somehow, in the hands of really good-looking people.

“Seriously,” Dana said. “Where’d they go?”
We sank into the couch and saw that the door to the laundry room was closed. We pointed.
Dana walked to the door and tried the knob. “It’s locked.”
Two things occurred to us just then: if Turner was locked in the laundry room with Caroline Wilson, he’d never let us hear the end of it. Also, Dieter was missing.
Dana knocked. When no one answered, she turned and looked at us. “I’ll scream,” she said. “If that door doesn’t open, I’ll wake up everyone in this house. I’ll wake up everyone in the neighborhood, if I have to.”
“If you’re so worried about her, why’d you leave her alone with Turner?” we said.
“I didn’t leave her alone.” We could tell, though, that she was wondering the same thing. “Your other friend was with them.”
The door to the laundry room opened and Dieter walked out. He moved uncertainly, like the floor would collapse if he stepped on it wrong.
In seventh grade, Martin Riviera had had an asthma attack during gym class and our teacher, Ms. Galloway, had raced to his side and repeated *Jesus Christ* over and over in a way that had nothing to do with prayer. That’s what Dieter’s face reminded us of.

Turner was right behind him. “Give me your phone,” he said, and Dieter barely hesitated before he handed it over. That was the thing with Turner. It was easier to do what he wanted.

Dana slipped into the laundry room as Turner tapped on the screen.

“What’re you looking at?” we asked.

“You’ll see,” he said.

We looked at Dieter. “What’s going on?”

He looked at the floor, shaking his head.

Dana came out of the laundry room. “Caroline’s not wearing a shirt.”

Turner looked up. “She wanted to take it off. Was I supposed to stop her?”

Dana’s voice shook, but just a little. “She doesn’t take her clothes off when she’s drunk. She either throws up or she falls asleep.”

“Look, she obviously has problems,” Turner said. “But you need to calm down.” He said it like it was a fact, like everything was fine and would continue to be fine if Dana calmed down. And we believed him because we wanted to. If we had stopped to think about it, we would’ve realized that Dana was already calm. She was calm as she snatched the phone away from Turner, and she was calm as she looked at the screen, biting her lip.

A few seconds later, our phones buzzed in our pockets.

Later, we found out that Turner sent the video to everyone in Dieter’s phone: forty-six people including Dieter’s mom and stepmom, his stepmom’s mom, his piano teacher, and a pretty college student from Korea who tutored him in physics. The video was fourteen seconds long, and Turner liked to say that it was nothing compared to the stuff you could find
on the Internet. In a way, he was right. In the video, Caroline sits on top of a washing machine, unbuttoning her green shirt to reveal a white bra. She pulls off the shirt, drops it to the floor, and leans back against the cinder-block wall, closing her eyes. That’s it.

“I mean,” Turner would say. “I don’t see what the big deal is.” He claimed that Caroline had known that Dieter was filming her, but whenever we asked Dieter about it, he never said much of anything.

When we watched the video—and we would watch it many, many times, always on our phones even though it ended up on the Internet—we’d sometimes pretend that she was meditating. Other times, we’d pretend like she had asked us to sit with her, just to keep her company until she fell asleep.

*

Caroline walked out of the laundry room before we had the chance to look at our phones. Her ponytail hung loose over her shoulder, and one of the gold buttons on her shirt was unbuttoned. For the first time that night, she looked like a girl whose dad had died. Not that she was crying or anything, but it was there on her face, like she was really, really tired. We wanted to tell her that we understood what it felt like to be that tired, even if it wasn’t true.

Caroline walked straight past Turner and Dieter, past all of us. “You ready?” she asked Dana. Dana looked at Dieter as she slid his phone in her pocket, daring him to say something, and followed Caroline out the door. We couldn’t have said why, but the three of us went after them. Turner and Dieter stayed in the basement.

In the backyard, the air was cool and the light from the neighbor’s porch threw shadows across the lawn, which needed to be mowed. Caroline walked through the grass to the swing set and sat on one of the rubber swings, attached to the wooden frame with two fraying pieces of rope. “Just for a minute,” she said, and Dana sat on the swing next to her,
and we stood around them in a half circle. No one talked for a while. The girls drifted from side to side, and we dug our hands into our pockets. The air smelled like mulch. The smell must have drifted over from the neighbor’s yard, because Turner’s dad never did anything to the lawn.

Caroline reached to the ground and pulled up a handful of grass, and for some reason it reminded us of Boy Scouts: of collecting different types of moss and building wind chimes that didn’t chime and mistaking every bird for a woodpecker. We remembered pressing our hands to tree trunks, studying the imprints they left on our palms. We remembered our Scoutmaster, a bearded guy named Theo, who wore a bandana tied around his forehead and carried a hunter green Swiss Army knife. He had wanted us to remember two things: that it wasn’t his place to say if there was a God or not, and that nature was important because it reminded people that there was something bigger than themselves—that everyone was tiny and insignificant. Even then, as eleven-year-olds, it had seemed weird that anyone would want to be reminded.

Caroline dropped the grass into her lap. She pulled up another handful, and another, and another. She started to use both hands, working slowly and mechanically—like she would be there all night, if she had to—building a pile that eventually spilled over her lap, forming a new one at her feet.
Kenneth E. Harrison, Jr.

Little Hymn

Could have been but we no longer

what pools of shadow beneath what drains the sky of

this place through a hundred thousand leaves

administering light

passes like doorways each remembered street a camera tilts

the traffic of our bodies slowed down to the curve of a pear

how much we’re worth

less than the sun brought to color a meadow’s flowering skin

dragged across our backs—
ELEGY

Cut grass spit out along the road’s edge
across a summer turned slowly away from a window
stretches sunlight into an adjoining room
of August sets the kitchen table in silence
whose face blurs against
the reflected blades of a ceiling fan
spun at the bottoms of our spoons
between us knowing ourselves seemed lost
in some neighboring valley the clouds move
effortlessly out of view—
It happened this way: my boyfriend of two years broke up with me. Although I saw it coming, although we hadn’t gotten along since we met, it felt like a restaurant bill that is too high, a thing you could take back up to the register and say to the cashier, “You did your math wrong,” or “I didn’t order that.” But there was no bill, no register, no cashier. Only Ian standing in front of me with a serious expression, wearing his collared gray shirt and tan slacks.

“Is this because I dropped out of art school?” I asked. “Because you think I’m a failure?”

“No,” Ian said. “Don’t you think we’re just. . . different?”

“Sure,” I said. “But I don’t mind.”

“We’re leaving this relationship with everything we came into it with. We haven’t lost anything, Liv.”

I came into this relationship with a 1982 Honda Accord and a print of an Andy Warhol painting. I worked as a barista—minimum wage plus tips, thirty hours a week—but Ian had supported me almost completely. He’d paid for the failed semester of art school. Mostly I sketched sullen looking women with sharp collar bones, lounging around on sofas smoking cigarettes. My instructors—name-dropping adjuncts without any real world art experience—were unimpressed. They were in their mid-twenties, like me, and rotten to the core. My ceramics teacher, Miss Kim, liked to spin around the classroom in her peasant skirt singing what she called “Native American chants.” Once, a student asked about her cultural background and she said she had a “great great, great, great, great great grandmother” who was a Cherokee princess. “I mean, I don’t have any pictures or anything,” Miss Kim said.

“If I’d known it was so important to you, I’d have finished,” I said to Ian.

“Don’t be myopic,” Ian said. He was an engineer for Rayon, a company that built bombs and weapons that were shipped to places like Israel and South Korea. When we played Trivial Pursuit with his friends, he shouted the answers and pointed out tiny disparities in score keeping. He
finished—and excelled at—everything he tried. It was easy for him to call me “myopic” whenever I spoke about success. Success was his forte. “We’re different,” he said again.

“You keep using that word,” I said.

When I called my mother and told her that Ian had broken up with me, she said, “Come home, then.” She lives two hours from Seattle in Aberdeen, and she sits in front of the television for days at a time drinking coffee, eating very little, letting the phone ring and ring and ring. Sometimes she doesn’t check the mail. But I agreed. When I’d visited my mother in the past, usually only for a weekend, I took comfort in the routine of her day, the thread-bare robe she wore in the morning after her bubble bath, the dry kibble with gravy she shook into the cat’s bowl, the coffee she drank out of a gold-trimmed white cup, snugly nestled into a matching and equally delicate saucer. And then the morning shows she watched, followed by the afternoon shows she watched, followed by the evening shows she watched. Morning shows were calm, educational, providing inoffensive news about modern medical issues, or the President’s dietary restrictions. Afternoon shows were trashier, fun, loud, totally non-educational in every sense, and most of the people in them, at least the ones my mother watched, were poor. I often questioned this, said to my mother, “Why do they provide such horrendous representations of humanity on these shows? What’s the purpose?” And my mother curled her lips into a little rosebud. “Oh, pooooo,” she’d say. “You don’t have to take everything so seriously.” And I would shrug my shoulders and continue to watch.

Evening shows were scripted; my mother watched any drama on prime time, but her favorites involved lawyers, doctors, or police officers. Basically any person endowed with authority over the peasants. Over the guests on afternoon talk shows. I didn’t have any particular issue with the evening shows; they seemed artful in some aspects, if nothing else. It took time to create them. The producers didn’t just turn a camera on a crazy person and say, “Go.”
Ian and I took a trip to the Bahamas two months before we broke up. He planned the whole thing. He said it would be invigorating, something to look forward to. My supervisor at the coffee shop gave me a week off and Ian took vacation time at Rayon.

We cruised over on a big loud boat packed with dance halls, comedy clubs, and buffets. “This is pretty nice,” I said to Ian on that first night, after we ate a dinner of black pepper shrimp (heads still attached). “Except for all the midwesterners with their flip flops and margaritas.” “Why can’t you just say that you’re having fun?” Ian asked. “I am having fun,” I said. “You analyze things, talk around things—it’s boring,” Ian said. “I think it’s important to talk about our experiences. To not put things into little boxes labeled ‘good’ and ‘bad.’” I shrugged. “I don’t even know what you’re saying,” Ian said. “You are putting things into boxes—labeling things good and bad!” He shook his head. “Let’s get along.”

Later, we curled up together in bed. As usual his kisses were urgent, his hands soft and gentle. The sex, at least, had always been good. Of course I had reservations about going on a cruise. There are certain stereotypes about cruisers, shall we say. One, they eat a lot. Two, they drink a lot. Three, they don’t care about culture or authenticity. Four, they are old. Also, I liked my routine in Seattle. I woke up in the morning, took a walk around the neighborhood by the apartment I shared with Ian, came home, drank coffee, read a few pages of a novel, watched a movie on HBO, went to work at the coffee shop for five hours. Came home, napped. Woke up, nuked a Trader Joe’s family meal and threw together a big apple and goat cheese salad. Ate dinner with Ian. Drank some wine alone on the patio while Ian played a video game. Watched kids roller skate outside. Took a bath. Had sex with Ian. Went to sleep. Rinse. Repeat. I didn’t feel like doing anything else.
Still, I was here. I was with Ian. I decided to relax.

We ate more black pepper shrimp. Our waiter was from China. He said, “Eat the heads! They’re the best part!” So we did. The eyes and antennas were crunchy and sweet like fried pork skin. We drank cheap wine that tasted expensive because we were so drunk, went out at night and danced in clubs located in the boat. We danced together, and we weren’t joking. We met another couple (about our age!) who gave us cigarettes which we smoked while standing on deck. At night the water was black onyx, lapping in deep, hungry waves. “I wish we had some coke,” I said to Ian, who said, “Liv!” But he said it with humor, he was glib, it was no big deal.

I’d done cocaine before I knew him, in a friend’s apartment. We invited men over, from the bar where we worked. The men laid out lines on hand mirrors. I lowered myself to my hands and knees on the old, smelly carpet, told this guy Ricky to do me. He looked confused. “But I thought we were just hanging out,” he said. I met Ian at that same bar. He’d never had a girlfriend before. He was funny, uptight, unfashionable. I was reasonably pretty and talkative. He asked me out. On our first date, I told him about how rabbits screamed when they died. I’d just seen it in a PETA infomercial on TV. I guess I was nervous. “You’re a barrel of laughs,” he said. Still, we had sex later that night. To my surprise, he knew where to touch, how to kiss my neck. And he didn’t say, “But I thought we were just hanging out.”

Ian and I had one day in Nassau. The ocean, the damp smell in the air, the green, green foliage. The packs of sickly stray dogs that stared at us as we walked down the road, eying us with disdain and regret but making no move toward us. I clutched Ian’s arm and said, “What if they attack us?” I have a deathly fear of being attacked by dogs.

“They’re not going to, Liv;” Ian said.

“How do you know?”

Ian shrugged. “You can tell. They signal before they attack. I grew up with dogs. You didn’t.” He said it as though he were insulting me.
We found a bench and flipped through The Nassau Guidebook. “The Queen’s Staircase,” Ian said, pointing at a tiny square picture of a staircase. He took the book away from me and began to read aloud: “Built between 1793 and 1794. Slaves constructed the staircase, cutting through limestone with axes and hand tools. The staircase is one hundred feet tall and has sixty-five steps. Tourists can walk up and down the steps free of charge.”

“Kind of depressing,” I said. “The slaves and all.”

“It’s historic,” Ian said. He looked at me, unblinking. There was sweat on his upper lip. “Do you just want to eat the food or do you really want to know what makes Nassau, Nassau?”

“Oh, Christ,” I said. “So now it’s our duty to see the staircase? Like it means a damn thing to the people who live here, if we see the staircase?”

“You say you want to talk about our experiences,” he said. “So, let’s have an experience we can talk about.”

It was our second to last day on vacation, and we were hungover, edgy. Using a small map Ian had purchased on the ship, we walked to the Queen’s Staircase. We passed more packs of dogs, people in front of crooked square houses, barefoot kids in American t-shirts. They looked at us with a disdain similar to the dogs’. “Hi,” Ian greeted them. None of them responded. I had the distinct feeling that we were not welcome here. That we were fools, parading through the neighborhood with our expensive backpacks and Canon camera and our map.

Eventually we found the staircase. We stood at the top and looked down. I had to admit, it was beautiful. My eyes had difficulty moving up the steps which never seemed to end. Moss slithered across the rock walls that surrounded each side of the staircase. I knelt and touched it with the tip of my finger. Furry jelly. Tender green and spongy.

“Walking down could be dangerous,” I said, standing up. I had a slight—perhaps a significant—fear of falling downstairs, which I had not identified until that very moment. “My balance is poor.”
“We’ll be fine,” Ian said. “I promise. Will you just believe me? For once, will you just believe me?”

Instead of believing him, I pictured the townspeople waiting at the bottom of the staircase; they’d take their opportunity to kick me, to beat me, when I fell. I—we—deserved it. I recalled an essay I’d read by Jamaica Kincaid, about tourists, in which she said that a tourist is an “ugly human being.” It had been back in art school, in a required introductory English class. It was the only class I liked, where I didn’t feel intimidated. At the time, the idea struck me as horrifying: the tourist can never be moral, ethical. The tourist is always consuming, leaving their trash around, staining everything up, pissing in toilets, throwing pizza in the ocean. And then catching a flight back home. I got a B in that class. I did all the assignments, unlike in Ceramics.

“Can you imagine building this staircase, Liv?” Ian said. “Building this staircase with your hands? Can you imagine?”

I shook my head, rocked on my heels. He was talking about the experience—he was getting under the surface of the experience. I couldn’t appreciate it, though, because I was dizzy. The humidity was so thick my curly hair stuck to the back of my neck, and sweat dripped down my spine. My thighs were chafing. I took off my cardigan to reveal a plain black undershirt. I felt fat, greasy, monstrous. “No,” I said. “I can’t.” I really had nothing else to say. I wasn’t sure how to feel: shame for being a tourist, sadness for the slaves forced to build this masterpiece, awe over the beauty of the staircase. Maybe I could feel all three things. In a way, my anxiety wiped me of all nuance, and I became a living, throbbing nerve. When I was a child my mother said I literally stunk with sweat, I’d get so nervous. She said my mind would blank and I’d mutter, “Time out,” about whatever we were doing.

I followed Ian as he walked. One foot over the other. One foot over the other. Down, down, down the Queen’s Staircase. “Should we take a photograph?” I said in a thin voice. I wanted to be normal. I wanted to act the way people acted on vacation. Ian whistled. Down, down, down.
He didn’t respond. I wouldn’t take a photograph.

As we reached the bottom of the stairs a man came into view as if out of the shadows. He was in a wheelchair, waiting there for us, calves folded like umbrellas beneath his knees. He smiled a black toothless smile. He was a local, not a tourist. “You know you’re required to pay?” he said, but he said it like he was offering a gift.

We finally reached him. I still felt unsteady, out of breath, confused. There were beads of sweat dripping down my back. “Are we?” I heard my voice say.

“I know the entire history. Would you like to hear it?” the man wheezed. He lurched forward in his chair. One eye was yellowed, wandering. I wanted to get away from him.

“No,” I said, swallowing.

Ian stepped forward. He reached into his pocket and counted out one, two, three, four, five, six dollars. He offered it to the man. “Thank you,” the man said, tucking the bills into a small leather pouch clipped to the side of his chair. This was unlike Ian; he was not particularly charitable. In the States, he wouldn’t have given this guy the time of day. I was always giving money to homeless people, in the median or on the side of the road.

The man began: “Slaves were forced to cut through rocks with axes. This is not something they wanted to do.” He closed his mouth, fixed his eyes on me. Smiled. So this was the history—this was the entire history the man had promised.

“Thanks,” I said quietly.

“Why’d you do that?” I asked Ian when the man was out of ear shot.

“I don’t know.” He seemed embarrassed. “Why the hell not?”

We did not climb back up the stairs. We went the long way around Nassau, got ice cream cones, walked back to the dock, drank margaritas on the boat.

Later in the evening, Ian said, “That guy was interesting.” I thought about this. “He needed the money, didn’t he? Probably has a
family, and all that. Don’t you think?” It was like he wanted my approval. “You got tricked,” I said.

“Tricked?” he said. “A few dollars? You go to a foreign country, you can afford to throw a few dollars at the locals, right? I mean—right?” He looked incredulous. “Right, Liv? I’d think you, of all people. . . .” He trailed off.


Of course. What was wrong with me?
We didn’t speak of the stairs, the man, again. The stairs didn’t trigger the fracture of our relationship. But things changed, got even worse, soon after that, once we were home. The sex became mechanical. Less tender.

I wouldn’t have helped the man in the wheelchair. If Ian hadn’t been there, I’d have walked on and on, I’d have wanted to get back on the boat, with the clean people in their clean clothes and their perfected happiness, notes on a piano. I hated them and yet I wanted to join them. All the fat midwesterners. High note, low note, high note, low note, meant to build a crescendo of emotion. If I drink this drink, dance to this song, wear this bikini, I will be happy. It’s possible—no, in fact, it’s definitely true—what Jamaica Kincaid said about tourists. But you could really replace “tourist” with husband, girlfriend, wife, daughter, mother, lover, cruiser.

*

Now I’m living with my mother. In her small white house on her small white street with her small white cat beside me on the couch eating a cockroach. My mother looks over at me once in a while. “I never liked Ian,” she offers. I don’t say anything. I know she liked him; she said he was the nicest guy I’d ever dated.

“We weren’t right together,” I say slowly.

“Don’t beat yourself up,” my mother says. There’s light on her face.
from the television. It’s getting dark outside. She’s watching the TV more than she’s listening to me. I lean forward on my elbows. *NYPD Blue.*

“I’m not,” I say.

“You should never blame yourself,” she says. “You seem sad.” Eyes still on the TV.

“Let’s just watch,” I say.

For the first time since I arrived in Aberdeen, I relax. “I can’t believe he cheated on her,” I say.

“That actor’s pretty handsome,” she says.

“Yeah,” I say. “I guess he is.”

For an hour, I feel everything around me. I can feel—I can actually feel—my mother’s lungs. I can feel her breathing in, out, in, out, in time. I can feel her chest fill with air as she sighs.

The fact is, I like this show—all the shows—as much as she does. No matter how I criticize them.
the moon considers the body
Aran Donovan

THE MOON CONSIDERS THE BODY

the moon cuts coupons
from the local papers
then takes scissors
to the round faces
in People, Us. who wore
the blue lace best. who owns
the embodied dress. how walk
around, a body’s guest. the room
assumes the attitude
of a lazy Venus, uninhabited,
more or less
Interpretations of Philip Guston

The exhibit label calls attention to the bare light bulb high in the center of the tableau which was *perhaps a reference to the artist's father who committed suicide by hanging* although nothing in the scene suggests his family life. It is still life, although the cartoonish objects show no sign of decay or care—blank-sided boxes, boots overturned on a shelf, and a bulb the pale yellow of a moon made yolky in an afternoon of blue it just won’t leave. This mid-century work suggests one might never recover from this particular type of loss while the world keeps hanging one’s paintings from walls, keeps insisting on wrapping each swordfish steak in a perfect twine-tied package that the butcher swings across the counter too fast so you just catch it by its knotted bow and love its weight the whole stroll home where you place it on the countertop beside the inherited lamp whose cord is still wrapped around its soldered globe while it waits to be moved to the dining room, to be hung and filled with light.
Count peregrines nesting off the causeway, isthmus, interstate.

Inventory: count isthmus after isthmus. Your neck is an isthmus.

Count fence posts. Count forks and spoons. Count coil after coil of rope. Then, give up on numbers.

Start to start and end the day on your knees. Wake up in time to watch the day veer off on horseback towards the isthmus, towards the village where nooses are painted on the backs of doors. Start to leave the house at night. Take dance lessons in the village.

Go to the festival where scarecrows hang in nooses off the pillars. This is how they can stay upright all night. Wink at them. Tap loose your longings through the soles of your shoes. Unbutton, make cuffs of your grief.
In the very early 1980s, my sister and I would wedge ourselves into the cramped space beneath the sink in our family’s upstairs bathroom. We were nine and seven, respectively. We stored books and a flashlight there, even snacks. From our refuge, we could listen to our mother tromp through the house, frustrated and desperate, calling our names with increasingly tremulousness. In the final moments before giving up, she’d call from the bottom of the stairs, “I want your rooms clean!” or “Pick up the dog stuff in the back yard!” Anything to wrest some small bit of control from a situation obviously gone from her grasp. I can’t recall or even really imagine how it went the first time we pulled this; all that remains in my memory is a conflated few moments after we’d established this ritual, when our mother knew what was up, but still not where we’d hidden ourselves away.

My sister and I spent our hooky days eating deviled ham sandwiches and playing with our dogs, watching game shows and MTV, recreating videos by Bruce Springsteen, Huey Lewis, the Go-Go’s. Those days seemed endless, hours upon hours of childish diversion. In the final half-hour before our folks got home, we would clean up any messes that we’d made and take a quick pass at whatever chore we’d been assigned, and then go to our respective rooms, where we would put on our sorriest faces.

It is hard to say what I dreaded so much about school. Certainly the social pressure was a part of my aversion. I was fairly well accepted by my peers, never an outcast, but still navigating the schoolyard involved a constant low-grade terror—or, more accurately, the fear of terror, which I suppose is a form of terror in itself. Above all else in my life I feared embarrassment, which, of course, could come at any time. That was the thing about embarrassing situations—they didn’t announce themselves in advance. And they could materialize in any form: an inept movement during gym class caught by the wrong eyes; an incorrect answer to a question in class; an unexpected challenge for dominance from another boy on the playground.

At home, though, I was relatively safe to be myself without worrying that my defenses were down, safe to ask questions, safe to be clumsy,
confused, dopey, awkward, curious, and occasionally funny. I was safe to own all of my imperfections, of which I was constantly and acutely aware.

Yet for all these negative feelings about the world of education, one of the games my sister and I nearly always played on these hooky days was “school.” She was the teacher and I the student set up in on a pillow atop one of the kitchen chairs. My sister wrote out spelling exercise sheets, math problems. There was always a short horizontal line at the top of each sheet of paper for my name. But it went beyond make-believe. We really were learning. I labored over these worksheets and would pass them to her for checking. I don’t believe the irony of these games ever occurred to me.

*

My affinity for days off continued in high school. The stakes were higher then—detentions, suspensions, even expulsions and a snowballing shitty life—but so were the pay-offs. Though I could and did stay home with the television and stereo, my friends and I could also take the train into Chicago and bum around like proper vagrants, going to record shops and punk-rock clothing stores, eating slices of pizza on the curb. We truancy kids formed a kind of subculture, in and out of school.

The way it worked at Niles West High: if you had an unexcused absence for any classes, the next day during homeroom—a pointless fifteen minute “module” at the start of the morning—you’d be summoned to the deans’ office, where you would wait in a crowded lobby area with the other kids until called (“Next!”) in to face your punishment. My brother and sister had both shared my habit of missing days, so Dean Kupferberg, poor man, was thus subject to nine long years of my family’s absenteeism. The story goes that on the occasion of my sister’s first of many visits to Dean Kupferberg’s office her final year of high school—which happened to be my freshman year—the man on the other side of the desk said, “You’re a senior. My last year of having to deal with you Stansels.” To which my sister replied, “So you haven’t met my little brother.”
He would soon enough. I became a fixture in that office. Once or twice a week I would be called down from homeroom to find the usual suspects from my growing circle of friends likewise waiting their turns.

Of course there was a flaw in the system in that most of us far preferred hanging out with our buddies in the lobby of the deans’ offices to being in class. After all, that’s why we were there: we didn’t like going to class. We lounged, slumped low in a train of chairs along the wall, trying our best to charm the secretaries. We made half-hearted efforts at excuses to get out of yet more detentions:

“I was in the nurse’s office fifth period.”
“So if I check the sign-in sheet for that time yesterday I’ll see your name.”
“Well, I can’t guarantee the woman has her paperwork in order.”

Along with us there were always the stray scared kids, ones there because of an attendance-taking mix-up or because they had indeed cut class (probably gym) in some flirtation with rebellion but who now sat pale and trembling as they awaited their punishment. And of course my friends and I would encourage them to go first to further extend our own time there. “Just get it over with, kid,” we’d say. Or, “I’m gonna be in there for a while.” These nice children looked at us with a not-uncommon mix of awe and pity. *I wonder what it’s like to be really bad,* they seemed to think, all the while thanking God that they would probably never know.

But I wasn’t a bad kid. By my sophomore year I was pierced and my hair was cut at unorthodox angles and, yes, my attendance record was as spotty as my skin, but I never had any interest in, say, destruction of property or any of the other hobbies of those classmates of mine whom adults feared. I never got into fights, for example. I just hated going to school.

By this point I had shed some, though not all, of my social anxieties. I’d taken after my older siblings and aligned myself with the so-called weirdoes of the school: the punks, skaters, stoners, and junior club kids—few of whom took school all that seriously. In some ways, we were simply drunk with the freedom of knowing that we could step outside the prescribed lines of behavior, that we could jump fences and defy precedent.
School was dull because it rewarded, at best, controlled creativity. But the world outside—the world my friends and I were quickly falling in love with—throbbed with unrestrained and chaotic energy.

By my junior year I had begun to amass a backlog of assigned detentions and sessions of “Saturday school.” Detecting that these were no deterrents to my truancy, Dean Kupferberg was ready to make a deal. “Here’s what I’m offering,” he said to me one morning. “You come to school for two weeks, and I’ll erase all these detentions and Saturdays. That’s two full weeks. No missed classes. No tardies. No going to the nurse during gym. Two weeks of perfect attendance and you don’t owe anything.” Of course I agreed, but it was a long two weeks. The sentence ended on a Friday. Tuesday morning I was back in his office.

“Didn’t we agree you were going to come to class for two weeks?”

“Yeah,” I said, an irresistible smirk cutting across my face. Kupferberg looked at his notes, then at the calendar on his desk, and set his head on his hands.

* 

My first semester out of high school—after somehow graduating with not-terrible grades—my mother encouraged me to sign up at the local community college. Since I had friends heading there, I figured it wouldn’t be a bad way to spend a few days a week. By this point I had an inkling that I wanted to be a writer and had begun to read fairly seriously. I had a special affinity for “campus novels,” books that delved into the lives of prep school and college students: *The Catcher in the Rye; A Separate Peace; The Secret History; The Rules of Attraction*. These books, along with films like “The Paper Chase” and “Dead Poet’s Society,” examined (to one degree or another) what it meant to be in the business of learning. They did so, though, with discernible and entertaining plots—that thing my life always seemed to lack. They edited out the boring bits, which—let’s face it—is most of school life.
I would learn later, in large part through the process of writing my own stories, that plot is entirely a construction, a thing we impose onto the essentially random and often unrelated events of our lives, a method to keep meaninglessness at arm’s length. But these thoughts were still a ways off for me at eighteen. So, sure, okay, college. A life of the mind.

The only problem was that while the environment and schedule had changed, I hadn’t yet—not enough, anyway. Most days I showed up to class late, reeking of the pot I’d just smoked in a classmate’s car. I read the assigned books and followed most of the writing prompts (including my first ever short story, a maudlin bit of dreck about a depressed young man living at his mother’s house), but by the middle of the semester my presence in those classrooms was more and more infrequent. With six weeks left in the term, I stopped attending altogether. A few days after the end of finals week (not even a blip on my radar by then), I received a report showing five failing grades. I spent the next couple years dragging myself to a class or two per semester, slowly erasing those Fs.

It wasn’t until I found myself in graduate school that I learned to take school seriously. I’d attended and finished college at a large state school in the cornfields of Illinois, making it to most classes, only occasionally opting out of Astronomy or Introduction to Theatre to spend an afternoon reading Dickens in my apartment or some smoky bar. And after a couple tries, I was accepted to an MFA program in fiction writing.

There were a few people in my graduate program who never attended any seminars or workshops, students who were not students in any traditional definition. These were folks who, yes, signed up for courses each semester and even occasionally made appearances at readings and parties or the bar where we nascent scribes collected most nights, but who never set foot in one of the professors’ offices where classes were held. And at the end of their two years of doing, well, whatever they were doing, a degree of Master of Fine Arts was conferred upon them. This was both the genius and essential flaw of this particular studio program: the job of writing, and learning to write, was set squarely on the shoulders of the students. What
the program gave you was time: these two years were yours to do with what you deemed appropriate. If you wanted to come to class and learn from the professors, great. If you wanted to dick around for 24 months, fine. It was as if the program leaders were saying, “We see your potential, but it is yours to cultivate or not.” The scrap of paper announcing our mastery of this art of writing was nothing, a souvenir. What mattered was what we did next, the poems and stories and books we would write.

One might see how this could be a dangerous freedom for a habitual truant such as myself. And it might have been a problem if it were not for a quick, fortuitous conversation one night during my first semester.

I’d skipped workshop that day—I don’t remember why. It could be I’d been feeling ill or that I disliked the stories up for discussion and this was my small, petty protest against them. But most likely I just didn’t feel like going. I did, however, feel like showing up to the bar that night, and I almost made it. A block away, washed in the white and red light of the emergency room sign of the hospital up the road, I crossed paths with a fellow student, a second-year whose reputation was one of a socially goofy, but absolutely committed writer.

We exchanged hellos and enjoyed a laugh about something that had happened recently at a party, and then he said, “Wait, didn’t you miss workshop today?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I wasn’t feeling well.”

“And you’re going to the bar?”

“I’m better now,” I said.

Still smiling, he shook his head slowly. “Workshop is sacred. You don’t get to go to the bar.”

We stood silently for a moment, my own smile slowly thawing there in the warm, Indian summer air as I attempted to gauge his seriousness. My entire life this sort of absenteeism had been something to joke about, a quirk of mine, a habit that supported my generally ironic outlook on life. And now this person was standing in front of me talking of sacredness?

At a loss for words, I finally managed, “You’re probably right.”
“I’ll see you later, man,” he said and turned up the street, leaving me to head back home and contemplate just what the hell I was doing there at all.

My classmate was right. “Workshop is sacred” became my own personal adage, an internal rallying cry to raise me out of my habitual torpor. What I’d been given—what education is in the purest sense—was a chance to develop my understanding of the world and my ability to react to it, to participate in it. It was the opportunity to write and to have my peers and professors read and consider what I’d written. It was the chance to formulate my own thoughts about literature through the process of reading, each week over the course of two years, all these dozens of works in progress. It was a gift, and from that moment on I would have felt like an ingrate to miss even one moment of the experience. There is an implicit vow in any workshop: you read, you think, you show up, you talk. Simple, right? Yet at that time, it was an epiphany. I no longer needed the romance of the fictional academy of books and movies. I had my sometimes chaotic and drunken—but mostly quiet and boring—life right then in that present moment.

I teach now, and in my syllabi I detail a careful attendance policy. At the beginning of each class session, I call my students’ names and mark their presence or absence in a book, but really I can think of few things more tedious than this ritual. In its best form, school would be self-regulating. The act of learning would be thrilling enough to demand attention, would bring students, even lazy, easily-bored ones like me, to class. And there they would happily sit to listen and write and debate with one another and me. But I know this isn’t really possible. That’s just the old romantic bullshit stinking up the joint again. We might come close here and there, we teachers and students together, perhaps stretching a good streak into weeks, a semester, maybe more. But even within those good spans there are lags and silences, days filled with feelings of inadequacy and irritation. There are near constant emails and excuses, the truth or falseness of which I’ll never know.
I have mixed feelings about those students of mine who fail to attend. If I’m honest, I fall into the habit of thinking less about their missing out on the great, transcendent beauty of learning, and more about the day-to-day trivialities of grades and GPAs. In other words, I commit the same crime they do so much of the time: seeing school as a series of checkmarks they must collect in order to receive a slip of paper conferring upon them the adjective *educated*. But every once in a while a student or two will stand out. They will appear tired or bored, will miss class frequently, but will have interesting things to say when they do attend. They will unslouch themselves at this or that notion, or smile coyly at some passage from an essay that turns a small bit of their world on its head. And the combination of apathy and insight, the yearning for something to excite them, will strike a chord within my memory. Often these students will seem to have struggled along the path that brought them to school. For many of them, higher education has not been a foregone conclusion. They might be the first in their families to attend college. The world of their home may not be particularly conducive to study. And I fear that if they fail, they won’t make it back again.

We have no parallel lives against which to compare the wisdom of our decisions. Only hindsight and lost time. “We live,” Milan Kundera writes, “everything as it comes, without warning, like an actor going on cold.” Why did I end up going through with school rather than dropping out? Why did I find myself in an MFA writing program and then going beyond that for a PhD, the first in my family? Luck, I suppose, and a lot of support in one fashion or another. At some point my interest in reading and writing was piqued, and my circumstances were such that this interest managed to survive the morass of necessities and distractions and mundanities of everyday life.

After that conversation with my classmate, I missed only one other workshop across those two years of graduate school. It was my final semester, and I was laid up with the flu. But even then I read and responded to the work up for discussion that week, and a few hours before class, I dragged my sweating, shivering body to the converted Victorian house
where we gathered for classes and gave these letters of response to my professor to pass on to my classmates. He looked at me quizzically and received those sheets of paper between thumb and forefinger and held them at arm’s length. I cinched up the collar of my coat and coughed into my fist. “You know you could have emailed them,” he said. But that wasn’t the point.

Point was, I showed up.
My book of worry will remember you—

this is not a book of states, but just try to say the word *Nebraska* without looking up:

here –

but *here* sky and ground in steel and sky consumed snow I am not concerned with the touches of light and pink, but the sinking into the closer to blue

it is what it is but I need perspective

This place where you can see mountains is not a mountain,
perched tree perched barn they have been
here before I left circles on plains before I knew you after you stopped

please just say it plain

I wrote this on a glacier, once I have thinned time before

steel leaves out the stars and by saying color you can see it
steel blue steel grey steel my eyes from the border of sky

this is the afterimage of a song, not the song
I name it snow
In this land full of sky we read sky:

degrees of rain or wind and beyond calm and a breeze brings silt and sometimes fire

and beyond calm I am beyond calm beyond I

To calm: exists in worry

See also: the broken can break again like water

: the way a glacier has worried and wound its ends into calving

Spill fragments, for example

For example: the infinite and finite seem so close not untouchable, but we all have skin and boundaries

: I broke my heart on a dare: a calming water
I can bury a voice and name it foxglove or iris

it will speak only in harmonics it will speak of spring under snow

We become coordinates in distance like grids of fields and boundaries in clay

There is no past tense only memories of was and ice
in broken to smooth soil

Now:

Edges of flat lands are circles and

maybe

And maybe they just opened inland

Doxey 91
The thing is this:

the thing is

I want to lie flat on a flat land and border flat sky: look down onto: press down:

We are star-shaped, like this.

In this love of commas I delete them

We are star-shaped like this planted to ground I remember summer in Wyoming and I only miss autumn in autumn

I dream of places I have never been, but I dream of them often so they are familiar –

this valley where I do not love you

In this humming and doubled land, hold worry, only me and I get older or I grow farther from myself and I always most love the moment before now and the history of a word like snow
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Quoth the raven . . .

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