

2012

Monarchs

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The University of Montana

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MONARCHS

By

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B.A., University of Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN, 2009

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in Creative Writing

The University of Montana

Missoula, MT

Official Graduation Date (May 2012)

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Creative Writing, Fiction

Monarchs

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The following includes a collection of short stories based in the limestone quarries of Southern Indiana.

Monarchs

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Origins

Search crews found him in the limestone quarry atop a gnarled pine tree, moaning like a stung hound. Pressed so hard against the bark he'd torn the skin from his chest. News spread to the men searching in the woods, relayed as if they were back in the hills in that Vietnam. The boy was alive. Hudson McCormick—six years old, deaf. Known by most folks in our valley for his fascination with trains. Now a gash at his eyebrow bled crows feet. Along with his footprints they'd found a second, larger pair—sized fifteen. I know all this because I was there, watching them, listening, crouched within the mouth of a nearby Indian cave.

The boy could not talk right, his speech at odds with his tongue. But his garbled words melted into my ears and he became at once so beautiful to me I wondered if the crewmen were sure he ought to be brought down so soon into the Lord's cruel, civilized world.

The half-opened mouth of that cave begins something deep—I've surveyed all of it, I've slept there—and in one of the chambers a litter of bones pile beneath a sinkhole some leagues up. They might be old Indian bones mixed with antlers and ribcages from deer that have fallen into the abyss. Or maybe they are the remains from something more sinister: ropes and rattlers and the kind of Old Bible Law that once sanctified these hills.

Earlier, I picked up a picture in that stack of bones. The faded colors ran, but you could still make out the form of a dog—a cocker spaniel—laying in a grassy yard. The picture had been folded into a triangle, with a name scrawled on the inside: *Gus*. I put the photograph in my pocket, to keep.

I am the only living person who knows these caverns, only soul who has licked water from the walls, breathed the sour mash air. The only person other than the boy Hudson. From where I hunkered at the mouth of the cave, he looked like an animal—ferocious and afraid both—and my insides turned warm knowing some part of him would always remain this way.

In my father's office at the limestone quarry, a map spreads across the side wall, pinned with thumbtacks. This map charts the thirty-five square-mile quarry Benton Limestone Company owns in Southern Indiana. When I am feeling put-out from the world, I take to wandering these hills. Alone in the woods, it is as if I can sense the black inked edges of that map harboring me within. I grew up exploring every inch of this quarry. I could tell you things about these hills not my father or anyone else would know. Because, when you look the way I look, you find yourself spending a lot of time hiding in the woods.

When I was a youngster, all my hair fell off. I woke one morning missing a whole clump off the back of my head, as if the hair had vanished, revealing a pearl white oval of skin my dear mother noticed at the breakfast table with a scream. Next morning another clump had fallen out, then another.

I felt like some kind of bald alien-crossbreed. I would go into the hills and imagine I'd been set loose in the quarry—a pent monster to keep the machines safe at night—and I would crawl through the wet leaves, slink across creek beds with my stomach pressed to the silt, my bald head pasted with algae. I wanted to go underground.

At dusk I would climb above the dig sites to watch as my father's workers packed to go home. They would see me—a hairless beast creeping above them, huddled against the stone—and I wondered if they felt panic as they walked to their vehicles, scared of the creature I had become.

This desire still exists, I won't lie.

Whenever he catches me in his office staring up at the map, my father asks me a simple, no-brainer question to make me feel good, something easy, like, “What you say we do some expanding, huh? What do you think about that Sam-boy?”

We both figured out a long time ago I will not turn into the powerful man he is. But he likes to throw these little pick-me-ups when he can. So I play along, “Yep, yep.” I'll say, “Expansion. Sounds good, Pop,” or, “You're the boss.”

“And hey, Sam—” he'll say, “You know the rules.” Points to my head. “Cover up.”

Rule of the quarry stands you must wear a hard-hat at all times, no matter where you go. Though, I've noticed—more and more—my father looks at me differently when

we are away from the quarry, when I do not wear a hard hat. So I've taken to wearing a Benton Limestone Company ball cap when in town, or when my parents have me over for dinner, or when I join them at the Methodist Church where the old ladies see me in my cap and ask, "Are you going to run the quarry just like your Dad there?" But I am not fooling anyone.

When the others my age from this valley drafted to fight The War We Lost, back in '68, I stayed here—in the quarry—where I belong. I am seven feet tall, weigh one hundred and fifteen pounds. A stick, a bean. I have a weak heart. My body was unfit to go to war, they told me. Unfit to kill, though that mess is all over now. But when you tell a man he is powerless, the name sticks, and I have never forgotten this. Those my age who returned from the war have not forgotten either.

They returned scarred men. They returned without arms, eyes, teeth. Kip Harris, my old friend, did not return at all. But dead or alive—both arms in tact or stumps—they returned as brothers.

I work with those brothers, now. At the quarry, they call me Samson. This is a joke. I have never been strong, or healthy, for that matter, but Ricardo lies for me. He has worked for my father for a long time, since coming up from Florida, and he makes sure nobody gives me trouble. He tells folks I was the strongest kid he'd seen before I lost the hair. He says, "Samson, this crane is not doing it. The horsepower is no match. Samson, grow your hair and lift this stone on the truck, eh?" Little jokes.

But when Ricardo is not around, the brothers turn mean-spirited. No jokes about Samson. They do not like me. I am not one of their kind. I am my wealthy father's son and have not seen war. On breaks, they sit together on the crane, one man a head above

the next to match the tilt and hitch of the boom, smoking cigarettes and re-telling stories I do not know. Talking about the war, they say, “Ah, Remember Luggie’s arms?” or, “Now *there* was a tough dude,” or, “What a fucking shame,” they say—remembering, I guess. Then, “Dead for rich slimes like him,” pointing in my direction.

Once, I joined in, “Remember Kip? Good guy, good guy.” Kip had been my friend. I missed him. But rather than agree, a man named Luke Swarens took the flat of his hand to the back of my head.

He said, “You don’t know shit, about *shit*.”

Sometimes the world can feel like a faraway place. On breaks, I practice my yo-yo. This is a hobby. A green wheel of plastic with yellow lightning bolts on the sides, I’ll swing the yo-yo around in a big loop, do some daydreaming, say.

I think about how Samson killed all those people with a donkey’s jawbone. I think about temples and tearing things down. I get riled up and take a sledgehammer to the limestone, pulp the rock into a misty powder and lose myself altogether. “Easy, easy,” Ricardo tells me. I think about my hair growing back someday when nobody is paying much attention.

Evenings—if our shift has gone late, or if a cloud blots the sun from our dig—I’ll look up into the hills and feel as if I’m being watched. Maybe I just like to spook myself; I’ll scan for movement in the shadowy crevices, in the pine groves and cliff edges. Or maybe I wish a slinking version of me still crawled across those dark places.

My father is a wealthy man and his father was wealthy before, too. They take their money and buy up more land, more stone. And I wonder if—one of these times, if they haven’t done so already—they’re going to buy up something in this land they wish

they hadn't. In my father's office, I trace my finger across that map and remember all the places in these woods where once I could hide away from this mean-spirited world.

I was waiting in the office-trailer when my father came in with the recovered Hudson. Muddy knees, muddy face, dirt caked in the boy's hair—he looked as if he'd fallen into one of the mixing tanks where we keep water and lubricant churning in a pulpy white froth. I stayed focused on the map. My father paused to look at me—maybe because I'd lost my Benton hat somewhere along the way and wasn't wearing a hard hat. I hadn't noticed the lost hat until he looked at me. So it goes. He sat the boy in the chair, dialed the phone.

When Hudson had disappeared sometime in the night, his parents figured he might have walked to the limestone shipping trains. That's why the Vietnam brothers—brothers good at finding things—discovered him stuck atop a pine tree, on the outskirts of the quarry. The blood on his forehead was now dried to a crusty splotch. Someone had given him a bottle of water—one of those square-edged numbers with a picture of Hawaii on the front—and Hudson sat crunching the plastic in and out of shape.

“We've got him,” my father said into the receiver. “Let them know.”

With the child came a faint scent, like mushrooms. Then the room filled with the smell, as if he'd rolled on a dead animal. When our eyes met, he quivered. When I faced him, he began to cry. When I said to my father, “Who's this?” the child buried his face in the blanket, slouched down the chair and whimpered on the floor.

On the phone, my father said, “Up by the North quarry. No, we don’t...” he turned away from us here, “*I can’t understand anything he says.*” Then, “We likely would’ve missed him if he wasn’t crying.”

Now that’s pitiful, I wanted to tell Hudson as he formed his body into a ball on the floor—though he wouldn’t have been able to understand my words. This is part of the boy’s magic, the distance he holds from the rest of the world. Forming shapes with his hands to tell you he is hungry, tired, etcetera. There is a beautiful thing, that distance. But in the office, whimpering on the floor, he was back in the clutches of civilization. He’d looked so brave before up on that pine tree! And now, *this*. I didn’t feel like being in the room with him anymore, so I took my yo-yo outside and waited for the boy’s parents.

The brothers were standing by the trucks, tools in hand, waiting to know whether or not the shift would be cancelled due to the boy. They watched me as I walked out of my father’s trailer, awfulness in their gaze.

I looked him right in the eyes, that Luke Swarens. Then he raised his foot a couple inches in the air, pointed his finger to his boot, then to mine. There is only one person in this camp who wears a shoe size as big as mine, a shoe size like they found with that Hudson’s footprints. And here was Luke Swarens thinking he knew a big secret.

He doesn’t know the half of it.

The boy’s parents brought fresh clothes, hot dinner in a Styrofoam box, blankets spread in the back of their Suburban like a bed: you would’ve thought the child had been missing for a lot longer the way his parents coddled him, as if he’d been missing for years.

A sadness grew in me as Hudson and his parents drove away, back into town. I thought about their reunion at their house—a white brick ranch with purple shutters, fenced backyard, a cocker-spaniel who goes by the name of Gus—and thought about Hudson going to sleep that night in his bed, the Amtrak trains stitched into his blankets. That would be a soundless sleep, though I wondered what dreams of dark places might filter into his beautiful head.

After they left, my father watched as I paced in front of the trailer; I pretended not to notice him in the window. He opened the door, said, “Sam—in here.” And inside, “Do you know anything about that Hudson?” A toothpick swung in his mouth like a weathervane.

“No. Nope. How would I know anything?”

I’ve been feeling guilty about all sorts of things, lately. Small things—like forgetting to open the door for someone, or switching my turn-signal too late. I’ll make a mistake and it feels like there is a sea of hatred held at bay by a thin film that might tear at the first error—the slightest mistake. I almost told him I’d forgotten to take my trash out that morning.

“You’re sure, Sam?”

“You bet,” I said.

The warmth in my blood felt like floodwater that pulses against a levy, trying to escape. It’s hard to know what I want these days. Like, what’s next? Spend the rest of my years working in a stone quarry? Take your yo-yo and go on break. But in the office that afternoon, when my father asked about the lost boy, for a second I knew exactly what I wanted. I wanted to have secrets, and I wanted to keep them from people.

“Oh, and hey,” he said. “I don’t want to tell you again. Cover up.”

I live in a one bedroom apartment in Oolitic, Indiana—the closest town to the Benton Limestone quarries. The single window on the second-story apartment faces the main street of the town, at the top of the hill there. Because the only window is in my living room, and because it feels like I am so high up above everything, my bedroom creates the strange sensation that I live in a cave.

Every town in the surrounding area is a town because of the discovery of limestone in the 1800s. Originally, they wanted to call the town of “Oolitic, Indiana,” “Limestone, Indiana.” But given the boom of population in the area and the quick nature of so many companies and people moving here at once, another town had already been named Limestone. We are a town of second chances. You find that everything here relates to stone in some way. The buildings are all what made of limestone, the visitors in our hotels are what geologists from the university in Bloomington or land scouts for foreign mining companies, and just about everyone who lives here has worked—or knows someone who has worked—in the quarries. When the day completes itself these summer months, the air hovering above the town rings a kind of sigh; so much work completed—so much work still being done by night crews and scientists pouring over the day’s data—the dying sun signals a shift, a pause, a marker point. We are digging the earth out from itself. We will do the same thing tomorrow. Count on us, world! Your cities begin here, in Southern Indiana.

At home in my bed, the evening haze just burning off the sky, the brilliant end to a strange day, I take down the Sign Language book I bought at the swap meet a few months back and page through the sketches of hands forming different shapes.

I put the book on my chest and my hands in the air, follow along: Step 1.) Curve each hand into a C-shape; thumb below, jointed fingers above. Step 2.) Form a circle with both hands, tip to tip, joining the C-shapes. Step 3.) Move the left hand—still in C-shape—away from right hand, to indicate depth. This is the sign for cave.

But by the end of things, I look like I am holding a bazooka. I have learned the sign for trains, locomotive and caboose, have learned words Hudson would be able to understand.

I pull my C-shaped hand further and further away from my right. It is impossible. No hand-to-hand distance can communicate how deep that Indian cave in the quarry really goes. But I do wonder if that's the shape little Hudson is trying to make for his parents right now, if he's trying to tell them about bones, the deepness.

I know how to say "Goodnight." Know how to form my hands to say "I love you, Mom," or, "You too, Dad." In the past several weeks I have learned, "I am thirsty," or, "I need to go to the bathroom." With my hands I can say, "No, go to bed." I am not proud of it, but there is beauty watching a son and his parents give their final regards at the end of the day, or seeing a boy like Hudson dread that closed door, the lights switching off. A beauty, indeed. Even if you're only watching through a window, like I do sometimes. Even if you're hiding in an azalea bush and the chiggers get into your skin. When those lights go off in Hudson's room, I am the only person who knows his world.

I am getting better and better at sign-language. I've had enough practice for tonight, I'll say. I put the book back on its shelf with the others. I am not sure if there is even a word for knowing how to speak sign language. Not sure *fluent* is the kind of thing to say, though that word—fluent—makes me think of small, soft hands fluttering in the air: Hudson's bird-like hands.

Whatever the word is, I'm nearly there. I know hymnal lyrics. I could teach someone how to mine limestone without speaking. I know the strangest phrases, like, "There is a pale man outside my window," or, "There's no monsters outside, baby. Go to sleep."

Or, "Please, don't leave me alone with him."

That lost Benton hat of mine must be out here somewhere. I'm out here this morning by the open mouth of the cave, by Hudson's pine tree sticking out of the ground like a tower. Summer months like these, the sun is up by 5 a.m., so I have enough time to search around, do a bit of digging.

Above the cave, the sinkhole appears in the forest floor like an open wound. Miss it, and a wrong step will send you falling to the antlers below. Drop a penny down that hole—like I do now—and you might hear its *tink* against the bones. Or that noise will get sucked up into the ground and you might never hear the bottom; makes you think the sinkhole goes on forever. This time, I hear the penny hit a large bone, ricochet against a stone wall, for me to find and pick up later. Deep inside that cave—rock walls that have never seen sunlight—time and memory dissolve. I drop pennies or nickels into the hole to discover the next time I'm down there—copper and zinc reminders of the known world

above. I'll send down un-read newspapers and magazines. At the bottom of the caverns, I'll read about a new profound discovery in the medical field, or hear about a foreign car factory built, or a domestic dispute in town that ended in tragedy—a missing boy found, say. Reading like this, I feel even further separated from the visible world, as if all the business that goes on above me—humans and their tinkering—exists in a parallel dimension I can at last escape, only read about. In the caverns, you can look at a picture of your parents and, pretty soon, you won't even recognize them from anyone else. New meaning exists down there.

I write notes to myself, too, that I drop into the sinkhole. Reminders, say, to clear out bat guano, set rat traps, tidy-up—anything important. As I'm searching around for that Benton hat today, I drop a note in the hole, scrawled on graph paper: *Amtrak*. The note sways in the air, then disappears below for me to find later. Little games.

“Playing telephone with yourself?” a voice in the woods.

I know Clemson Hall because he came to me in the night. I say it that way because that's how it was—him finding me, not the other way around. And that's how Clemson always appears, like he does now, stalking up on you silent, shocking water from hell.

“Or are you out here putting two-and-two together about that boy they found yonder up top?” He shows his pearl white teeth. For a person living alone in the woods, his teeth are perfect.

He is a ghost of man. I met him back when my hair had just fell out and I was spending most my days and nights slinking around the woods feeling put-out for myself. When he stalked up on me in a thistle of chokeberry and put his hand on my shoulder, it

felt as if the sun had come up all at once, hot and white. He has some devil in him—no doubt—but he means well; he didn't intend to scare me that night, not after he brought me to his little walnut shack next to a brook where he lives most of the time. Though, it's a strange word—"lives"—as I can never tell exactly what he does with his time out here other than snipe for morels and turnips.

When I met him, the moon was low enough and big enough so we could see one another squarely: his great white hair thick yet smooth, his clothes made of tough wool but still clean. He didn't mind the bald patches riddling my head as we sat stool to stool along a plastic table inside his hutch. *You've about enough left to feather a pillow*, he said. And that's all he spoke about my hair, all he's said about it ever since. A guy can appreciate a friendship in Clemson. We stand on either side of the sinkhole, peering below.

"I'm after a hat," I say. "How'd you know about Hudson?"

He has an ear for stories. We might be deep in the brush looking for mushrooms when, all a sudden, he'll stop, tell me about, say, three criminals who hung from branches yonder, or a babe burned in the bushes there. Old Bible Law. But to this day, I am not able to tell *Clemson's* story because he's chosen not to tell this one. Instead, I like to invent the idea that Clemson has always lived in these woods, since forever.

He does not approve of the work being done in the quarry—all this digging up the earth—and sometimes he will surprise me by knowing plans for the quarry that only my father or someone high-up would know, or the names of people I work with.

"That was a nice trick, you staying put in the cave," he says. "But you'll have to take him deeper, next time. If you want this to stick."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say.

“That was a fine plan,” he says.

“His skin was slippery.”

The wind kicks dandelion snow into the air and swarms about his face and arms. The parachute petals needle into his beard so that his hair looks to be made of the stuff. The dandelion snow swarming about his face, his random appearance in the woods today, the way he can know the names of men and their plans as if able to call into their minds at will—I could never lie to Clemson.

I say, “He’s beautiful in a way I don’t know what to do with.” I want from Clemson what I have always wanted from him: “Would you help me?”

He shines his white teeth: that manner Clemson possesses to be accepting of whoever and whatever. The world holds no surprise for him. “What’s your end?” he says. “Tell me what you want to do. Why you haven’t said so before.”

“Only what I said—” this is all I *can* say, “—I see this boy, this *something special*, and I think the world doesn’t deserve him, that they might ruin him. That he’s too beautiful for their lot. I want something else for him, something more. I’m tired from the wanting, Clemson.”

I am on a ledge now. I think about Samson captured up in that temple, his hair all gone, that Delilah and her trickery. I think about how he probably trusted her, and then she went off and betrayed him.

“Ought to tie his hands, you want this to work.”

The brothers are mean-spirited today.

When they arrived earlier, all of them had spray painted their boots a deep blood red. The still-fresh paint left behind crimson footprints as they walked from their trucks, into the field. But Ricardo's boots were still the same white-powdered Red Wing boots we wear. And my hopes lifted when he cited the brothers for breaking uniform policy.

But, sure enough, Luke Swarens has kept a can of the red RustOleum in his Carhartts and now sprays on a fresh layer whenever his boots stop leaving behind red footprints.

Today, there are a lot of other places I'd rather be.

We've just started working the North quarry when Ricardo all a sudden switches off the diamond blade. A quick lurching in the machine, then stillness. He pauses at the saw, then lets out an ogre-like "Shit!" He tells everyone to go home. The men begin to pack and leave—and I plan on leaving with them—but when heading towards the trucks, Ricardo calls for me to hang back.

Some people get stuck doing the same kind of job for so long that—at some point—they stop believing in the possibility of doing anything else. Or they never believed in that possibility in the first place. Sort of a comfortable place to be, I know. Ricardo is like this. Big, heavy-set, and more dedicated than any other man who has touched this land. He loves this quarry and would do just about anything to keep it running.

He carves small statues from scrap pieces of limestone. He's shown them to me, and the statues look as if sculpted from the bones of something ancient and big—like the bones of a twenty-foot lizard, whittled down into a statue of a horse, or a man and woman kissing. They are very beautiful, and rubbing your hands along the smooth stone feels

like something's flesh. Ricardo tells me limestone is formed from ancient animal bodies—fossilized bugs and dinosaurs—so, when he makes these statues, he says they have the spirits of the dead animals encased in them.

I don't understand how rock can be formed by animals, no matter how old they are. Still, I have one of Ricardo's statues—a fish—on my mantel piece at home, though I don't believe in spirits. I am a story-teller, instead, and Ricardo—perhaps—is my greatest audience. When he shows me his new carvings, I like to invent a story about them. That fish he gave me, say. I told him that fish is the kind that lives in the deepest parts of the ocean—at the very bottom—and that particular fish was the first of it's kind to brave to the surface of the ocean—where water meets sky. And when he did, when he saw the sun and the clouds and the birds above, he turned directly to stone, sank right back down to the bottom of the world.

Ricardo liked this story very much.

But at the North Quarry, he seems upset. He was one of the men who'd found the boy in the tree, helped pull him from the branches in the cherry-picker. I wonder if, maybe, seeing the bleeding boy has been a bad start to his week. Ricardo has three daughters about the same age as the boy in the tree, and that must do something to a person like Ricardo, imagining your own kids gone missing.

After the other men have left, he says, serious, “How you been Sam? You doing okay lately?”

Ricardo is really a wonderful father—always showing me his daughters' most recent school pictures, telling the others how proud he is of them. I don't see my own father much, and feel that, at some point, he and I became disconnected in a way I don't

yet understand. But Ricardo is someone I can look up to. But, man, *doing okay?* I wonder if people are spending too much time worrying about me. Do I not seem like I am doing okay?

“Great, great,” I say. “Those brothers, they sure are thick with it today.”

He reaches through the window of his truck and pulls out a Benson Limestone Company ball cap, the one I wear to church, around my father.

“This yours? Looks just like the one got.”

Sure enough, my hat.

I do not have the best singing voice, but there’s a song we sing at the Methodist Church: *Oh what a friend we have in Jesus*, and it’s my favorite of the tunes in that book. For that song, I belt it out and don’t care who hears. I take the hat from Ricardo, replace my hard-hat with the ball cap and sing, *Oh what a friend we have in Ricard-Oh! thinking*, surely, this will cheer him up, give him his own little choir service. Instead—for the first time—Ricardo cringes when I momentarily reveal my baldness.

He offers to take me home in his big Ram truck. On the way he says, “You’re sure that’s your cap, Sam? I mean, it could be someone else’s. There’s no telling with this place.”

He is the only guy in town I can talk to about feeling like an alien, feeling different than everybody else. He is a stand-alone person. “You gain an inch of hat-space without any hair,” I tell him. “This is custom ordered, buddy.” He draws quiet for the next mile or so, until he parks the truck beside my car in the parking lot, then turns the truck off.

“Sam, why did I find that hat so deep in the woods, where we found that boy?”

I have never told Ricardo about my desire to hide-away from the world. How, when we're working the limestone, I like to imagine myself delving underground like a worm, deeper and deeper. I've never told him about the small places in the quarry where I used to hide as a kid growing up, or about meeting Clemson Hall.

I don't tell him everything that afternoon, but I do tell him that I've been doing some hiking, that I've been getting some fresh air. I don't tell him about the cave. I don't tell him about the bones in that dark chamber. And I'm glad I didn't, because after I told him I like to hike, he drew quiet again. Didn't say anything more when I got into my car. He just drove away, leaving me again with that lovely exhilaration I get from knowing more than I give away. Surely, you understand what I mean by now.

Here's something I don't like to admit to anyone other than Clemson, even now—after so much time—even if people ask.

This happened the week I learned the Draft did not want me. Kip and I were out in the soy field behind the quarry's parking lot. He was the only kid who'd hang out with me back then. I miss him. That day the ground was muddy from the spring rains, and our feet clung to the muck and made sucking noises as we walked. A couple rabbits poked into the field from the tree line to chew the shoots beginning to sprout there. I got the wild idea to spook the rabbits by throwing rocks. Like any other thing you think of to waste time. Anyway, that first rock beamed into the nearest one's skull with a *thunk*, and the rabbit started writhing its head against the soft ground as if a mud dauber had just stung its eyeball.

I tried stomping on its neck. The body sank further into the muck. “You’re sick, man,” Kip said, and ran off. But he didn’t understand I’d only wanted to scare the rabbits. He didn’t understand that sometimes you have to put a thing out of its misery even if it was you who caused all the misery in the first place.

I took the rabbit into the woods—cradling the softness in my arms for a while as blood bubbled from its nose—then found an edged stump. Popped its skull until the convulsing stopped. I wept for a long time, holding the broken animal, before I got in my car and drove west.

Three things I decided along the way out of Southern Indiana: I was never coming back, I would never see my family again, and I would never forget how it feels to kill with your hands, to feel life drip off your fingers and course into the muddy ground.

There I was, rabbit’s brain hanging from my lip and blood splattered across my pale bald head, hitting ninety-miles-an-hour, hating myself something awful. And if you’d have seen me on the road then—if by chance you looked through the window, saw the blood on my hands, the twitch in my face—you might have thought I’d just murdered someone.

A towering metal crucifix appears in the sky as you drive west along highway 70, near Effingham, Illinois, growing out of a field like an upturned sword. I drove closer and closer until I began to think the cross might fall on me. That’s the kind of judgment I saw fit for my skin, at that point. I turned the car around and never left Southern Indiana again.

But I’d meant it, I really had—all that stuff about never coming back. Even if the choice only lasted a couple hours, the feeling was true. That’s the part I don’t like to

admit: leaving. The remains of that feeling have stuck around—like bones of an eviscerated animal, windswept—and there are days at the limestone quarry when the shipping trains will start all at once, a sudden clanking noise moving down the line as the wheels jolt, moving the cars full of crushed stone to all parts of the country, and I'll think about all the places people go on trains, in their cars—the nerve some people have to get up and leave. I'll get a lump in my throat that lasts for days, as if a piece of food is caught. I can't quite breathe.

All this just from thinking about the one time in my life I thought seriously about leaving our valley. When I arrived back from Illinois and parked the car and took off into the woods, I didn't plan to see Clemson. Instead, I felt like I needed to be back in the woods—pay penance, in a way. But it was Clemson who I found, stoking a fire with staked turnips titled over the flame. He saw the rabbit's blood turned-brown on my arms, asked me to sit with him.

"I've done something awful," I said. Then I told him about that rabbit, the misery I felt welling up inside me.

"The world is a fine tuned instrument for cruelty, Sam," he said. "You've only played your part in a long chord."

"So we're all goons."

"Exactly," he said. "Only some of us are goons with the ability to feel. Few people get to realize what this means to take from the land—upturn rock, kill rabbits—to steal life, to uproot something magic. And fewer still take it upon themselves to go out and try to create it."

I've been thinking about this ever since—what that might look like to go out and create something wild.

If you ask, I'll say that of course I had nothing to do with that boy, or know why he ended up hugging the top of a big pine tree.

Like when the brother's corner me today by my truck, grabbing me by the arms and legs and pulling me into the bushes. When Luke Swarens appears tall, dark, a camouflaged bandana around his neck, and takes a clenched fist to my gut and face—to the back of my head—and says, "If Daddy and Ricardo ain't going to do anything about your pederass, we sure as hell will," then I try to tell them, "It wasn't me!"

But if I ever would do anything like that, it wouldn't be for any funny business, any wrong-doing, or anything like that. Instead, if I ever did anything like that it would be because I'd wanted to see what the woods could turn a person into. It would be sad, at first, the way the boy cried. The man would've been thinking about this for a while—about creating something truly wild. Driving back into town one evening from the quarry, he would've seen the boy walking along the road. It would be *very* sad, how the boy cried for his parents as the man tugged him into the car and drove towards the quarry, telling the boy, "It's alright, it's alright." It would be sad, but necessary, because this world is becoming less and less wild—we no longer have legends—and as the man carried the crying boy deeper into the woods, he would know that sometimes cruelty is necessary. Even when the kid bit his shoulder, the man would know this was necessary. Even as the boy tore loose from the man's grip and ran, then tripped and banged his forehead against the ground, bloodying it. The man wouldn't have intentionally hurt the boy. He would

have taken the boy to a cave, far from any of the quarry work being done—a place deep enough and dark enough no one would think to look there. The man might have even been planning to take care of the boy for a while, bring him food a few times a week before the boy could learn to hunt with rocks, fish for crawdads. Maybe the man had even brought things into the cave he thought might cheer the boy up; say, a note with a picture of the boy's dog with the word *Gus* written below. The things he did to make him comfortable! But then, inside the cave, maybe the boy would get loose for good, breaking the man's grasp and losing him in the winding caverns. The man would search for hours—ramming his head against a ledge at one point—trying to find the boy. But, let's just say, dawn approached and—after still not finding the boy—the man figured they were far enough in the wild that it'd be impossible for the boy to find his way home, that he had indeed played a part of creating something truly wild.

And then what disappointment to have it all ruined when the boy was found at the top of a pine tree the next morning.

The way the world goes now, you can live years in a place without ever knowing the taste of the algae in nearby stagnant ponds, the smell of bugs squirming in rotted logs. Hell, you can travel half-way across the world in less than a day. I know people live like that, now, and I don't like it at all.

Take that Hudson they found in the woods, for instance. He's going to grow up, play sports at the high-school, probably date a pretty blond for a few years, then run off to college. He's going to have new friends there—in Bloomington, say—and maybe he'll meet a lovely Filipino girl when he's studying abroad. Maybe he'll even tell the girl about this one time he got lost in the woods, because he wanted to see trains in the middle

of the night. But, really, he's not going to remember exactly what happened, or how it felt to climb the pine tree, the stubby branches scratching his thighs. He's not going to remember a man in the woods that night, chasing him. He'll tell that girl about this time he got lost in the woods. Maybe they'll be laying in bed together, his arm underneath her pretty black hair, and he'll say, "Here's one: I got lost in the woods when I was six years old," and then they'll make love. But a couple years or months later he'll graduate and leave that beautiful girl, just like that. Some Filipino girl he used to know. And then he'll move to Montana, or someplace far-off like that, forget *completely* about her, forget that time he got lost in the woods. That missing boy is never going to have the sense to stay put, to be content. Do you see what's wrong with this? How he should have just stayed in those woods?

Easy as a jimmied window. A small limestone town. The dark, quiet night. Soft as a whisper. A purpose! Careful, careful. Amtrak-stitched blankets to mute the noise.

Tonight, I sit outside Hudson's window among the azalea bushes, trying to muffle the weeping. You might think it's Hudson making this noise. You might picture me with my hand over Hudson's mouth (it is), but it's my weeping I'm trying to control. See, a man can want and want and want until sickness, but to never go about getting the thing itself is the truest sign of weakness, no matter the damage. You men forever hiding in the whale's belly. Where is your passion, Jonah? There is an ocean here. Even with shoelaces tied around Hudson's wrists, he's still trying to sign words for "Mom, Dad,"—for, "*Help*,"—but he is all caught up in a bad tangle.

The truck door closes. A dog barks. Lights. Then, sirens. Wake up, wake up, you rotten brothers. You are needed again.

By the time we reach the mouth of the cave, Hudson has gone into himself. A kind of shock. No longer crying, no longer trying to speak with his hands, “*Help, Help, Help,*” as he was before. I’m trying to both hold him and sign words at the same time. I want to tell him about Clemson—what a kind man he is once you get to know him. I want to tell him how quiet the world becomes when you move away from all the noise of the visible world. I want to warn him about the person he might have turned into if I hadn’t taken him from his bed, brought him to this sanctuary. I want to tell him so much!

Inside, we snake through the corridors—deeper, deeper—and I can already feel it, that rush of hope, that floodwater pulsing in my veins. But I am worried about Hudson. He does not look well. He is losing some of his beauty the further we crawl into the cave, as if the air is not getting all the way into his lungs, into his blood. I rush us through faster, until we get to the main chamber.

The piled bones are translucent white in the moonlight raying down from the sinkhole. This monument to origins, this beginning and end. It does not take me long to find the piece of paper, the folded triangle resting against what looks to be a femur. I open the note up, hold it in front of Hudson’s face, say it out loud, even if he can’t hear me. *Amtrak, Amtrak, Amtrak.*

Look at that word, I sign to him. Think about your trains, those soft blankets and your parents kissing you goodnight; remember the world from before, don’t forget your parents—I motion with my hands the sign for “Trains,” for, “Goodnight,” for, “I love

you”—what once made you happy. But this is your new world. Your escape. Your new home. Your new name. Amtrak.

Here’s the last part of that rabbit story.

I later told my father all about killing that poor animal, how the brains were hanging from my lip. I told him about the *thunk* sound. I even used that bit about a mud dauber, because I wanted him to know how bad I felt. I told him about Illinois, how I promised never again to leave the holler here. But he just laughed, said, “What a throw!”

Well, the next afternoon I stopped by his office after school. Ricardo was there, and some other big-wigs with the company, and even some stone carvers who’d come to buy slabs of limestone. They were all sitting around my father’s desk, right below the map that hangs there, and my father says, “Sam-boy! Tell all these men about that rabbit you killed.” He said, “Fellas, he slung a rabbit with just a rock! That’s my son, the hunter.” The *hunter*. He went on to tell them how I bashed that dumb rabbits brains in. They all seemed pleased, said, “That’s some arm you got,” and laughed. Even Ricardo thought the story was something else. “That’s Samson for you,” he said. “The killer!”

The only sad piece of this story is that folks will go on believing that title. When they find my truck at the limestone parking lot, when neither I or Hudson are ever seen again, when, after years of searching, the boy is never found—they will believe they had been right. That, all along, I was something dangerous. And that’s just not true. The sad part is that they won’t ever know all I’ve done is give voice to the voiceless. Instead, they’ll go right on believing it: that I am a killer. I figured Clemson might be the man to tell them not to worry, that he could explain everything, that—all said and done—this

was actually a heroic thing to do. But as I'm pacing around his hut, knocking over that white table that now looks ochre, scattering remnants of a fire pit that look years gone, calling out his name—Clemson, Clemson, *where are you?*—he is nowhere to be found. A sad voice inside my head acknowledges I might never see him again.

Back inside this cave, the air smells like mushrooms.

So this is what happens: you come to realize the visible world has turned mean-spirited. You work at a limestone quarry surrounded by deep pines and sharp outcrops, and when an irregularly large cloud blots the sun for an instance, you like to believe another world exists out there, underground. Or that you could create one. You think about this often, to the point of obsession—to the point you are willing to do something. Take a child into the woods, say. Carry him on your shoulders, even when he resists, even when he bites. Something might go wrong. The little shit might get away. But you tried, you had the gusto. Isn't that *something*? Later, when a boy is found atop a pine tree, clinging hard enough that the bark grinds the skin off his chest, you start feeling guilty about all sorts of little things—bad things you did when you were younger, like killing a rabbit. But the world doesn't take seriously the things of that nature either. So you run into the night. The world doesn't understand anything. Say, like why you go back to that missing boy's house and do it right this time. Is this making sense?

Scratching against thorns and ridges of shalestone, you finally reach the mouth of a cave—a cave nobody knows about, where the bones of Indians lay mixed with antlers and stones—and you descend with that deaf boy. You never return. Not ever. You think about those men laughing about a rabbit you killed and your soul quakes. But, then, what do they know? They've never had any blood on their hands.

Monarchs

Well let's try this, she said, and did everything to stir the boy, who was still some parts hesitant, still careful not to unravel all at once. She ran a berry-stained finger along his spine. She rubbed lotion onto his belly in warm circles as they lay on the dead moss in the shadows of an orange colored hickory grove. His body ached he so wanted everything to happen and nothing to happen.

His first year of university over, their summer afternoons happened this way: in the cool woods not far out from town, her hands rooting over his skin for someplace new to go. For him, a dark feeling in his lower belly building like a charge.

The dogs with them lay sprawled out, bellied up against the hickory trunks asleep. Mutts—Charlie and Silver—their gray furred bodies looked like the dried moss on the trees, except when they raised their heads each time the girl cried out. Her name was Jo, gold haired and lovely. His was Gabe, and his mouth was pressed between her legs.

She'd taught him to do this. Not that he hadn't had some idea of what to do before her—he'd known—but in a hazy, faraway kind of knowing. The same way he'd known how teeth would feel on his nose, a nipple grazing his cheek—the taste of skin. He hadn't

known much. She flicked her tongue on his wrist to show him what she wanted. He struggled to match her rhythms, how soft. The air above the nearby pond swirled cooler than in the muggy trees, and when a breeze blew the air into the grove, the sweat on their backs turned cold, then warm again.

First with her hands, then with her mouth. He stopped her.

—I want you to, she said. Tried to go again.

—Not sure yet, he said. He always said this.

She rolled away from him and scratched Silver's ears, her pink buttocks sticking up so distinctly flesh-colored against all the green. He hated himself.

—Unbelievable, she said.

At first she'd tried to understand, told him it was sweet the way he teased himself. She no longer said this. Instead, their afternoons began and ended the same—all tension and grasping. What was so wrong with that? Nothing. Everything. Gabe believed in anticipation, is what he told her. But that wasn't quite true. More like a secret knowledge he was not yet ready to unearth. There was nothing for him to say—there never was—so he tried to kiss her. She buried her face into Charlie. Usually defensive of her, the dogs permitted Gabe, as if he wasn't a threat. She teased him about this. She teased him about a lot of things. Like not fucking her.

Later, he didn't stop himself. She kept him in her mouth when his legs kicked, when his hips bucked.

Progress, she might say—or maybe not—but this was the only word he thought as he lay in a foggy afterward sleepiness. Like, we're making progress; that's better;

congratulations; etcetera. Now his skin buzzed. His belly felt hollow where something had resided before, though he did not know exactly what.

—What do you feel?

—Real good, he lied.

He had no talent for any of this. The dogs began to wake, yawning their pink and black-spotted tongues as if they knew business had concluded. To be a dog, he thought. To be a dog and mindless.

Afternoons, he carried an insect net into the woods, by the big pond, where he swung the cone through the cattails, choking the neck shut to trap and discover what bugs he'd caught. The creatures had lasted him through a sore year at the university—or caused it—and they would be curiosities enough to last him through this summer after.

His father started him catching insects—with butterflies and moths—and they'd stuck the creatures with needles onto velvet boards. That was a long time ago, when his father *didn't* own a separate house in Bloomington, a separate bed, a separate retired greyhound and a dinghy fishing boat.

Years later, Gabe removed the protective glass over the spread-winged *lepidoptera* they'd caught and touched their wings, breaking them apart into silky needles. A stupid try at preservation; all those would-be graceful flutters wasted. You try holding onto something delicate, sooner or later all that's left is an empty needle pinned to velvet and weekend visits to Bloomington. In this way he started catching insects again—ordering a new net in the mail along with one book of entomology and one book on Praying Mantis, *mantodea*—but he no longer killed them, remembering the delicate

wings and how they'd turned into dust. He preferred the creatures alive, in his net. Or, more so, cupped in his hands when he held them, feeling pincers and exoskeletal legs wander across his skin. He liked to feel close to the insects—to feel what they feel—without having to mar them.

He saw himself as another creature slinking along the banks of the pond, hyperaware and belonging, the summer heat attracting him every afternoon and evening to join the living things unfurling there, a privilege granted him by the god of insects.

Jo had first seen him at the pond, swinging his net through the air like a fisherman in big whooshing strokes. She hadn't meant to spy, really. A slimy green scum covered the surface of the water, and she liked to dive to the bottom where the cold nipped her skin, and then to rise, peeking her head up through the algae like an alligator. When she rose her head to the surface that time, she saw Gabe, swinging his net at the cattails, humming to himself.

She swam for the school team—a senior—but during the summer avoided the crowded public lanes and, instead, came here, where she could be naked and alone. She usually swam in the mornings—in the cold air, a mist clouding above the water—but that day didn't make it to the pond until later, the same time Gabe came for the mayfly hatch.

Gabe liked to observe—as a scientist, a living recorder—wanting to meet the world's stranger happenings in their own environments. So when Jo called out to him from the water—“What are you *doing*?”—rather than respond, he put down his net and walked into the pond.

Their first discussion breathy, treading water in the middle of the pond. “The mayflies—the mayfly—the hatch—wanted to see—the mayfly hatch.” He was a bad

water speaker. He was an *awful* swimmer, she decided. So she lead them to the shore, where she walked out from the water naked, towards her clothes.

Maybe he should have turned away, but he didn't. He watched, is what he did. Then he fell in love, the way you'd love anything graceful like her.

Later, he'd think more about this, the way she walked out of the water without a blink. The mayflies gathering in the air like pieces of floating cotton, the bass lifting lips to the surface of the water and sucking them down. A naked girl walks out of the water and who *isn't* overwhelmed by the sheer terror of the world? In so many ways, Gabe felt powerless against all the stubborn beauty that summer.

They lived in limestone country. Quarries riddled the hills like cavities—pale and sore—and rainwater filled them when the digging was finished. The two would hike into the hills, around sinkholes, to the cliff edges jutting out like teeth, where they jumped into the cold water again and again, laying out on the flat rocks afterwards in a certain bliss. She went topless—jean shorts, tennis shoes. So when they passed bearded hikers on the trails and she waved a sharp *hi!*, Gabe would have to hate her for the next hour, jealous of his own world.

They lived in limestone country and Gabe's mother, Petra, worked as a geologist for one of the quarries in Oolitic, a town of less than two thousand where everything and everyone centers around the stone they rip from the ground and send across the country on trains and shipping containers. In Oolitic, gas stations are gas stations because trucks needed to traverse the quarries. Artists are artists because of the beautiful lines webbing the stone. His mother, a scientist, had slowly grown to take the look of every other man

or woman who worked in Oolitic: Carhartt pants, steel-toed Red Wings, white dust on her face when she came home each evening. Someone altogether different than the girl in pictures of her college years, wrapped in a white smock, donning protective goggles.

She dated Chuck, from the quarry also, who ran the diamond blade saw. Chuck was a toothpick man. He kept one in his mouth at all times, swinging it back and forth like a weathervane. And it was Chuck who, soon after Gabe's father moved out, went into Petra's bedroom and made her yell out in the night when Gabe was ten years old. When he was older, Gabe sometimes ran images through his mind of Chuck hovering above his mother, toothpicks swinging from both their mouths.

His father, Dennis, had also worked as a geologist for the same quarry company his mother did, until the split. Now he taught students about rocks at the university in Bloomington.

When Chuck began appearing more often with his mother, Gabe had wanted to ask his father if he knew Chuck. Had he ever worked with him? A gut feeling told Gabe yes, he had, and he guessed at what his father's jealousy or anger or sadness or reluctant happiness felt like. Then he would try to guess what he himself would feel, and his mind went dark. His father was the type of man who failed to react. Show him divorce papers, show him a porno—show him a gangly awkward son and an altogether new life in Bloomington seeing his gangly awkward son once a weekend. Nothing.

Gabe would imagine his father imagining Chuck fucking—to trigger a reaction, to understand what that might feel like—then decided something was wrong with his young head.

Weekends, Gabe drove his dirt bike the twenty miles north to see his father. They took the fishing dinghy out to the quarry lakes and caught bluegill, striped bass, crappie. Pines grew out from the rocks, and the bigger the pines the older the quarry. His father's retired greyhound sat at the front of the boat, switching his head back and forth at the water when Gabe threw back whatever they caught.

—That's nice bluegill you've been throwing back.

The bluegill were stupid fish, taking bread, cat food, bacon grease or red clay wrapped around any sized hook. Gabe held a seven-inch pan fish, about ready to let it go with the others.

—Keep it.

His father was long-limbed and wiry, one of those pet owners who mimic their pet. They would pull the boat alongside the cliff faces on the lake because, as his father had told him, that's where the bass hunker in the shadow. Instead, Gabe knew his father had no interest in fishing or where bass hunker, but wanted to take closer inspection of the limestone, recording notes in a black booklet from sample pieces he chipped off with a silver hammer. The scientist bachelor. In some ways, Gabe knew he was just like him, the way Gabe paid attention to crawdads as they sprung backwards into their mud holes—not to better imitate the creature with his fishing lure but rather to understand crustacean anatomy. The scientist virgin.

His father grabbed the fish and smacked its head with the blunt end of the hammer. Ran a blade tip to tip from jaw to fin along the bluegill's white belly. He tossed the purplish guts into the water, and the surface swirled with the backs of other bluegills

devouring the still-warm insides. He threw the eviscerated fish into the ice bucket atop the Coca-Colas and Root-Beers they'd brought.

—There, he said. As if he'd just dug a hole or finished grading an essay or driven a needle into the thorax of a moth.

His father lived in the world of rocks. Had no depth for the world of living things. Instead, the limestone he studied was formed by the decomposition of animals over millions of years, and now his father could kill fish, birds, and insects with ease—as if he were only doing his small part to contribute to the Earth's later formations. Just like that, and a living thing was no more, inanimate flesh cooling atop ice particles. Everything was like that, Gabe thought. For a short period of time things exist as they ought to. Then something changes and we are flesh in the ice bucket, purple organs in the mouths of bluegill.

Jo had fucked before and he hadn't—wouldn't—yet. The knot in which they were tangled. She'd used these words, said—"This is so *tangled*"—her way of putting things to words a part of the magic for him. They sat on an outcropping beneath pines that crawled out of the rocks like tentacles.

—How many times? He wanted to know.

—You're impossible. Lots of times. One-hundred and fifty-seven times.

He imagined all her previous boy-lovers as men. Really, she'd been with few others—two or three—but Gabe imagined a lot more than that. He imagined all of them with her at one time—all of them touching her, licking her, pawing like animals. None of her lovers he imagined had faces, only bodies and dicks and hands and tongues. A glint

of sunlight on her face, the smooth texture of pond scum on her skin, each time he said her name out loud—whenever Gabe felt a lurch of happiness, he next thought about whoever she'd loved before. Not fair, he admitted. But what was he supposed to do, *not* think about it?

Yes, exactly.

—You're ruining this, she said.

—Hey. It's pretty great weather.

—This could have been magic.

He desired skin, the grunting and pleasure and release and touch and sweat and carnal strength he imagined this entailed. Oh God, did he. But to give in to this all at once didn't seem right. Wanted to keep hold some of the wonder.

She jumped from the ledge first, cannon-balling into the quarry lake without warning. The wind rushed from his lungs as he followed, plunged. But when he began to swim toward the surface, he felt her hands on his shoulders, keeping him below. He couldn't tell the difference between her tongue or the flowing water in their open mouths. She held him like this until his veins pulsed, wanting oxygen. Later, Gabe realized a choice had been made somewhere below the water, almost as if it had been decided for him. Like the involuntary rise to the surface, his body deciding it needed air.

On the cool rock outcropping, his mouth at her belly button. She stopped him, pulled up by his arms, brought him back to her mouth. Her panties were at her ankles. He grabbed her wrist at his belt.

—You're a child. That's it, I'm done.

He didn't want to talk, or explain, or say, "I'm ready." So he didn't—just brought her back to the ground. A horsefly buzzed at his face, tried to land and rip out a hunk of his skin, until he smashed the insect into a bluish goo when it kept on his shoulder.

Halfway inside her he felt enough goodness in the world to last the rest of his life. Good enough for now, he thought. Her hands were on his hips, tugging to pull him in further. Still yet, there was some mystery for him to hold onto.

—It's alright. Gabe said.

Changed nothing, halfway only.

—The hell *is* wrong with you? Jo said.

He heard someone talking—a voice—though wasn't sure how far away or what they were saying. Gabe did not realize he was the one talking, so focused he was on his own movement—in such a far away place he now existed from where they lay on the rocks, moving together.

What Jo heard was Latin coming from Gabe, or Spanish. She felt good, felt right, outdoors and sun and air and rocks and soil. She'd told her mother about the college boy she met who wanted to be an entomologist, who took a net to the cattails like a fisherman. Who—she'd smiled here—had never made love before. What she heard was Latin, or maybe it was nonsense coming from Gabe's mouth. She tried to kiss him, but his lips still moved; she could feel his words echoing in her own open mouth. Jo wondered if he might be praying. She'd heard of that happening to some girls: suddenly their boyfriend is crying Jesus! Jesus! Christ, Almighty! in the back of their parents' Sedan. But that was something altogether different. And Gabe had never been religious, unless she'd missed this bit altogether.

Beads of sweat fell off his forehead onto hers.

Afterwards, she felt as if she'd missed something—something she should have said or done to encapsulate the now open secret. Maybe the words Gabe had been speaking were important, and she'd been too lost in the minutes of sweat to pay enough attention to what the words might have meant.

Jo would consider this more in the coming afternoons, when Gabe arrived and rushed them into a hickory grove where he pulled at her dress and her underwear. Sometimes he only lifted her skirt up to her shoulders and bent her over onto the ground without fussing with the rest of her clothes. For a time, this was fun; she knew Gabe was excited, a person who went to the very core of a thing. She could understand that. Though, when he pulled her into the moss those afternoons, she sometimes closed her eyes and pretended to know what words Gabe had said that first time. She imagined the words were lovely: how special she was to him. Other times she imagined him saying embarrassing things: just how good his dick felt, that he liked the way her breasts shook. No matter what words she envisioned him saying—as she closed her eyes, felt his body rocking against hers on the moss—none of them fit. Anymore, Gabe didn't say anything, Latin or English. Only afterwards would he say something like—“Wow, you bet”—or—“Was that good for you?”

She could be patient.

They would walk along the pond where Gabe pointed out various types of moths and beetles, listing the scientific names for each. He told her that, come August, the monarchs would pause here on their way to Mexico. Maybe a few would appear first,

then thousands of them would hang from the sycamore branches, turning the trees orange as they ate their way through the thistle fields on route to a greater warmth.

Gabe would lug his thick black book of entomology with them as they walked, rifling through the pages for insects he didn't yet know. She enjoyed this. Even when he once took fifteen minutes to identify the elytron span of small *coleoptera*, she liked how curious he was at these moments, came to enjoy studying the insects too. But when the daylight began to fade—a dying red haze in the West—he would take her into the hickory grove and undress her. And anymore, it seemed as if the dark came so often.

—The first time, you said things.

—Like what?

—Like a different language, like those scientific words.

—Come here. I don't remember that.

The afternoon she showed up at the end of his driveway, hoping to ride on his dirt bike, Gabe peeked through the window blinds, arrived from out the back door, and shuffled her to the backyard.

Hunks of limestone lay about the yard in various stages of carved or weathered: stillborn projects stone masons had given to Petra and Chuck as gifts. He sat against the backs of one of these, tugged on her hand to sit with him.

—Chuck's home. He reached for her breast. This'll be fun.

—I thought we could go somewhere.

—What's the matter?

—I'm sore. She wasn't. Let's go somewhere on your bike.

He ripped hunks of grass out of the ground, looked as if someone had flushed his goldfish. This was embarrassing, she thought. He walked the dirt bike out of the shed, poured gasoline and oil into its chambers. The bike whined at the kickstart, loud and irritating. A sound to match his face.

Even with the cool wind blowing in her ears and against her face, with her hands gripped at Gabe's waist, with the pine forests lining the hills they drove along, the ride wasn't pleasant at all. Instead, she felt too hot. The kind of summer day you wish to be in a too-cold library, and once inside wish to be back in the heat. Only the water made Jo feel comfortable these days.

He drove without saying where they were going—nearly forty minutes had passed—then they reached the town of Bloomington where college kids walked along the streets in flip flops and tie-dye t-shirts, carrying Energy Drinks and cigarettes. She knew Gabe's father lived in Bloomington, but it wasn't until he turned onto a neighborhood street and stopped in front of a red-brick ranch house that she knew where he'd planned to take her. He stayed on the bike, kept the engine running.

—Am I meeting him?

—Nah. Just somewhere to go. You wanted to go someplace.

—Don't be an ass.

A tarp-covered fishing dinghy was parked in the driveway on its trailer. The original pathway to the front door had been halved into a narrow lane due to the various geodes, quartzes, and marble stones his father collected. A pile of colorful- gemstones were heaped at the doorway, as if he planned to encase the house with pink and teal and orange colored rocks. Just as Gabe had done earlier, a flap of curtain pulled to the side of

the double front windows and Gabe's father sat at a desk squinting out. He formed an "O" shape with his mouth when he saw them.

Gabe kept the engine running when his father came out to see them, had to shout over the drone.

—Dad, this is my girlfriend!

They shook hands; she felt ridiculous. This was the first time he'd called her his girlfriend. She didn't know what he intended, taking her here. His prize goat, his show-thing. Something had changed inside of Gabe. Only now did she choose to admit this, though she'd known for some time. He'd begun to ask her about her friends, where she'd gone in the daytime before meeting him at the pond.

—Gabe, cut the engine! His father's hands were cupped over his mouth.

—We got to go.

When he'd described his father to her, she thought the man sounded sweet, even though Gabe made him out to be a kind of widower. Pathetic, he'd said about him. That he only went fishing with him because he felt sorry.

—Sure, Sure. A swipe of his father's hand through the air. You go on, he said.

She wanted to step off the stupid bike and hug Gabe's father. What she did not want was to spend the next forty minutes holding onto Gabe's ribs. Before she could say anything, he gunned the throttle and she was forced to grab onto him. After they'd driven out of town, he pulled onto a logging road, found a campsite and suggested they lay down awhile. Tried to grab hold of her hand as he got off the bike.

—I don't want to stop here.

Paused like he was weighing options, figuring out something important.

—How'd you get sore?

She didn't know what he was talking about.

—I think you're lying to me, he said.

He didn't know where he was going with this, only that he felt like something caught up in a trap, no real options other than to be damn angry at nothing in particular and everything altogether. He grabbed her wrist.

—Do I go to slow? He wanted to know. Do I fuck you too slow?

—*Gabe*. Let go.

—I don't fuck you good as everyone else. That's it.

—Unbelievable. You shit, she said. Hot tears because she was angry, because—
anymore—things turned in on themselves. She could figure out the bike. Hold the lever, kick the pedal. Break his wrist. And pretty soon she was gone, blinking the wetness from her eyes to get a clear view of the road.

He'd found his dirt bike bashed into a tree, a hair-tie wrapped tight around the throttle so that the bike would've driven itself. First he'd tried to walk the bike back to his house, but the wheels were bent and made a screeching noise each rotation. He slumped the bike into a ditch and lay branches over it. Either he'd come back for it with a trailer or the rain could rust it into the ground and someone like his father could come along and dig it up long after Gabe was dead. This was the kind of thinking he'd been doing recently.

Afternoons, he waited by the pond, but she didn't show. Jo a phantom he imagined walking towards him down the path.

He remembered what he'd said that first time on the rock outcropping—the strange words Jo later asked him about. Couldn't manage to forget, try as he did. The names of insects were stored up inside him. There was no helping that. All those hours in his bedroom poring over taxonomies and descriptions, photographs and illustrations—the words held a certain magic, as if a prayer to that insect god hovering above the humidity line. He couldn't have stopped himself. Anymore, that's how he felt with just about everything he did: someone else's hands, someone else's thoughts, someone else's mouth.

But if you put enough time between that bad thing you did awhile back and where you've come to now—Gabe decided—things feel better. You start thinking the bad thing you did yesterday won't hurt so much in a little while, so forth and so forth. In this way guilt and forgetfulness created an immortal friendship for him, such as sisters, or Newfoundland puppies, one never too far removed from the other. If he ever saw Jo again, he wouldn't admit to anything—not the names of insects, not his reluctance, not his fear. The way he'd put it to anyone who asked: just a good fuck in the woods.

Chuck's daughter—Clara—was a few years younger than Gabe. She mostly lived with her mother, on the other side of town, and he rarely saw her. She worked at the Dairy Queen that summer making soft-serve and handing out Dilly Bars, bringing an entire box with her on the rare holidays she spent with Chuck and Petra. That was the first thing Gabe saw, peeking from his bedroom window after hearing a car pull into the drive: a big white box held up by short arms, plump white legs in cut-off jean shorts below.

—Dilly Bars! Brought you all something from my benefits package, Clara said.

Gabe thought she looked as if she might have already worked through the rest of her benefits, working the summer at an ice-cream parlor with legs like that.

He'd spent the last several weeks in his bedroom, re-reading the same passages in his black entomology book over and again. The creatures seemed dead on the page—as if they'd all gone extinct and the only thing to do was look at the black-and-white photographs, remembering what once flew through the air, wiggled beneath logs. The summer was ending. He'd be going back to school soon. No more afternoons around the pond—even though, with the weather still nice, he'd not been in weeks.

Chuck and Petra were heading for a swap meet up in Clermont for the day. They'd asked Gabe to come, but he had no energy for it. Hearing this, Clara decided she'd stick around, too. At the lunch table and Gabe found himself plotting with himself. Someone else's plans forming together like woodwork in his head.

—Y'all go outside or make a fire, Petra said. Won't be gone for long.

It'd been Chuck who helped Gabe get his dirt bike out of the ditch and into the bed of the pick-up truck, Chuck who paid the shop bill for the repairs. Because of this, he hadn't been riding the bike at all. Choosing instead to have Petra drop him off at his father's on the weekends.

Clara had the same build as her father—wide shoulders, wider legs. Not fat, he wouldn't say. Brown hair cropped to her shoulders, a shirt becoming too tight, but in the kind of way high-school girls go back and forth deciding how clothes ought to fit their bodies. She wasn't bad looking, not at all. They sat together in the living room after Petra

and Chuck had left. She held one of the dripping Dilly Bars, taking bites at the hard chocolate.

—What're you reading?

—Entomology. You know much about the natural world?

At first, she tried holding onto the back seat of the dirt bike, but Gabe went fast enough that, pretty soon, she put her hands on his hips, had to hold on. He liked that feeling. With Clara sitting in the back and him focused on the road, Gabe could imagine whoever he liked sitting behind him, holding onto his body. At first he thought of Jo, but Clara's touch was so unlike hers, unfamiliar and new. And he decided he liked that just fine.

She was young enough to think Bloomington was a good place to go, like so many other high-schoolers in the area. Bloomington is where you snuck into parties, drank illegally, got into the good kind of trouble you're so striving for at that age. Sure enough the kind of trouble a girl like Clara liked, he thought. When they entered the town limits he imagined he felt her hold onto him a bit tighter. He could take her for a burger, walk along the street and show her places he and his friends hung out at during the school year. They could go wherever they wanted.

No one was home at his father's house. He banged on the door, kicking over a few of the colored stones in the process. He didn't know if his father would recognize Clara as Chuck's daughter, or what he'd think. He figured he'd keep the engine running and wouldn't have to talk much anyway. What he wanted was for his father to see he had someone new. Look-y here. He banged on the windows and tried the backdoor—all

locked up. He punched the code into the garage door, found the keys to the Sedan and hooked up the fishing dinghy. Left a note for his father in case he worried about the boat.

They drove to the quarry lake. Clara had said she didn't think they had time to get all the way out onto the water—not before their parents were back—but Gabe didn't pay much attention to her. He wanted to show her the quarries, get there before sundown to see the fish begin to feed on the crickets landing on the water. He wanted to be out on the water when the sun lowered, when the water took on that amber glow of dusk, that dark often.

In the middle of the quarry lake, he moved to her side of the boat, next to her on the bench. The front of the dinghy tilted upwards, but the weight held.

—See that? *Lepidoptera*.

A hatchery moth floated above the boat. He knew so much about insects, he could tell her anything she wanted to know. He took hold of her hand. She retracted, moved away, but the bench was small, not much space allotted between them. She's just nervous is all, Gabe thought. Maybe they were too late to see any of the fish rise, but that was alright. Lightning bugs would show before long, and that would be something to see. He tried to scoot closer to her, felt the side of the boat tip up, so he couldn't go any further. He put a hand on her shoulder, rubbed the synthetic fibers of her shirt. Started small. Thumbed her earlobe.

—Let's go back. *Now*.

—Come on, it's not so big a deal. You see the bats flying?

Sharp movements in the air above, the whirling and occasional flap of a skin wing. He moved his hand down to the neck-line of her shirt, could just feel where her

softer flesh began, like a promise to something more wonderful. He would be sure not to go too slow this time. Headlights appeared far up the ridge. He kept his hand in place awhile, thinking maybe she'd changed her mind. Then, as Gabe watched the headlights point down the road towards the dock, Clara screamed.

The sound reverberated in the canyon of rock and water, made Gabe jump, and the water slapped against the boat. Something had gone wrong. The water rippled at the edge of the boat, made hushing noises against the wood grain. The truck had arrived at the leveling point of the quarry, rayed its headlights onto the water and the dinghy like spotlights from his father's truck.

—Help! Clara yelled. Jesus, Joseph!

His father had left the silver hammer in the boat, and Clara picked this up and threw it against Gabe's shin. Half moaning, half speaking, he tried to call out to his father across the water, could just make out his shape on the pier. At once, he wished none of this had happened. He wanted to tell him he'd seen bats. In another world—a simpler world—his father would've driven down to the pier, found him alone on the water with his bug net, with a thermos of coffee, and Gabe would've called out to him, something like—"Hey, there's bat's out tonight!"—and he could have rowed to the dock and picked his father up. In another world, they would have spent the rest of that night on the dinghy, telling jokes and shining a flashlight into the water to see the catfish lurking in the depths, cold and far away. That's what Gabe thought as Clara jumped in the water, swam towards the shore, towards his father. How cold and far away were the fish at the bottom of the quarry, consuming rot in the deep.

Come August, and Jo made her way to the pond, weaved the trail through the sycamore woods and cattails. This was the cool sort of air she liked, end of summer and the leaves beginning to brown. That's why she didn't see him, not right away, in all the orange glow of the leaves and browning thorns. That, and because of the monarchs.

In a way, Jo had come to the pond for this reason—for the monarchs—to see them off on their way to Mexico. She'd read there had already been sightings this week. Maybe she came to the pond for another reason too, but what she told herself was she'd come here to see the butterflies. She remembered Gabe telling her about the first time he saw them, ringing on the branches like yellow and orange bells. The delicate sound they made, a thousand small wings fluttering on the branches. She didn't see him right away because the trees were lined with orange wings, because Gabe was sitting so still, because the skin on his arms and bare chest looked a strange ochre color—as if stained—and because the monarchs had begun to land on his hair, on his arms, on his neck.

He sat so still. She didn't want to move or breathe or speak. She wanted to watch without letting him know she was there. The ground below her felt soft, as if trying to hush her feet, telling her to be careful, that something important was happening. But it ended with a smack. Quick and sharp on his arm, so the other monarchs didn't shift, only fluttered their wings, considering flight. An orangish paste was left on his skin where he'd slapped, like the other ochre spots on his neck and back and face. Another *thwack*, and another orange spot—then another. By the end of things, his hands were dripping.

Tooth & Claw Hammer

Her husband gone away to war and sending photographs of corpses in the mail, now this afternoon what looks like someone broken into Ruth's house. Globbs of pale mud and boot tracks start at the kitchen door where she stands dripping rain from her hair. No safe places any longer. The boots follow into the dining room, up the stairs to the bedrooms. Ruth grasps the keys in hand, knuckles the truck key between her middle and naked ring finger, and clenches a fist.

Sycamore woods surround the miles to her closest neighbor. Coiled branches wrap up over the house and fold together like clasped fingers. Folks in town don't figure why Ruth stays here so far out with a husband gone away and acting depraved, what with her child to tend to. Home to baby boy Allan. She swore herself she wouldn't back down from trials like this—the sickly raccoon in the tool shed she quit hammer-to-skull, or the wasp nest hanging fat as a pumpkin, doused with kerosene and lit—and now some vagrant figures trespassing. She slides a boning knife off the strip above the sink.

Up the stairs, colors from the television in her room flash against the hallway walls in greens and purples and reds. Below the blinking colors, the old familiar leather

boots lay dripping mud. Her husband's old trainers—empty. As if they'd walked themselves. For an instant she believes somehow husband Derek is back from the war. Grips the boning knife tighter.

She swings the door, expecting him. Instead, her six-year-old Allan is sprawled out on the bed asleep, his mud caked feet hanging off the edge, silent cartoons playing on the television. A dark moment before she loosens her clutch on the knife. She is angry at him. He should not have scared her like this. He *wanted* her to panic. He is like his father.

She drops the keys and knife to floor, air whooshing out her lungs. “Shit,” she says—almost in a whisper, to let him sleep—then yells, “Shit!”

He raises his head, “Uh oh.”

“About to be hell of a lot worse than that.”

While he scrubs the carpet with a sudsy shoe buffer, she yells. Mean blood in her veins from thinking to stab somewhat. She follows through the kitchen pointing, “Here, here, and here,” where the mud is a hardening crust, the same in the living room. “I wanted to hurt you,” focused on the mud, on Allan, rather the fact she thought to hold a boning knife to her husband—or something worse. Red-faced wild, she no longer recognizes herself.

Mornings, she drops Allan off with a neighbor where he is supposed to stay until she picks him up. He'd somehow snuck from the sitters house and walked the miles back. He would have found the boots along with the rest of his father's things she stowed in the tool shed: his old boots and camies, his civy jeans and shirts. Maybe Allan had found the pictures Derek had been sending her, too—the photographs she first considered turning into the MP Corps, or burning, or instead—undecided—keeping.

“It was just me!” raising his hands up.

She smacks his face. White fingers form on his cheek where her hand displaces the blood beneath skin. She smacks again. Mother hitting child; old age evil she didn't know she had in her. Then, no, someone else—*something* else—is hitting her boy. Stops herself. She would never hit her boy, not ever. She draws breath, lays down on the floor, bringing crying Allan with her and hugging him against her chest. He smells like milk and wheat and swamp—a pure, animal smell. She tries to whisper but her voice was too hoarse and scratches out. Says, “Exactly the kind of shouting I hate.”

This is the kind of shouting she and her husband did the month before deployment. They woke up hung-over with sore throats, piecing together the last night. They mumbled apology before leaving for town—Derek to the limestone warehouse, her to the orthodontist—and they returned each evening to shout more. The eight hours apart were just enough to remind them it'd soon be for far longer. They fought the way they had not before, yelled what they had not before. The stretch marks on her belly. His puny dick. Nights, wine-glasses popped against their walls in red stars and oozed down small bloody rivers.

He told her to get fucked, so she told him to get shot.

Next morning Ruth rolled towards him, remembering. But he wasn't in bed. Not in the house. He was gone, and he stayed gone the rest of the week until deployment, when the bus took him to the Indianapolis airport, where the airplane took him across the ocean, across the ocean where he went to the war—the war where he takes pictures.

March, a cow grazed in the thick foliage at the edge of the woods when Ruth went down the street for the mail in the morning. The animal stood ripping out leaves of sassafras. An acre of grass surrounds Ruth's house, protected by a then-new chain-linked fence. Cows from nearby farms will escape their own fences and slowly plod into the woods until they reach her house, intent on the grass. This is why she had the fence installed—a small barrier stuck between her and the wild about. On a morning run, Ruth has seen a herd of deer licking a fire hydrant at the end of the road. The cow that morning was brown, camouflaged into the wood, startling her. She would have missed the animal if it didn't lift its enormous head, circle its jaw. The animal looked at her—a dumb, sleepy gaze—and she paused, wary, before she walked to the mailbox, then quickly back into the protection of twisted metal wire.

One hand-written letter was shuffled with the stack of printed bills and coupons. Grains of sand stuck to the gluey parts of the envelope when she opened it. The chicken scratch, all-capital handwriting on the envelope was Derek's familiar clunky writing. She'd thought there was little reason to expect a letter after telling him to get shot. He was the kind to burn his bridges, cut his losses—which is why she'd not written him, not once. But another part of her had still been waiting. She fought the urge to lick the crease, lick where his tongue had licked.

But it wasn't much of a letter. It was a picture. He would have taken it with the same Polaroid camera she'd give him for his twenty-sixth birthday—the camera he snapped at Allan ceaselessly, the camera he'd brought into their bedroom to take pictures of her lingerie, “for later.”

The picture showed a young man slumped down on the sand, backed against a crumbling wall. He wore a green and white scarf around his mouth and it wrapped up over dark, curly hair, as if the cloth blocked the sun from the man's eyes on a mild afternoon while he slept. But his eyes were open. Blood leaked from a dime-sized bullet hole in the man's skull. At the bottom of the picture Derek had written, "For you, Little Ruthie."

Later, she would learn Derek sent pictures to each one of his co-workers at the limestone warehouse—pictures of the bodies from different angles, close-ups and ground level pictures—pictures of Derek standing next to the bodies with a certain hollow look in his cheeks. Later, she would learn the men each brought their picture to work. They stood at the center of the warehouse passing them back-and-forth, gazing at each blood spattered Polaroid. She learned the men left work early that day—even the foreman. They drove away in their Oldsmobiles and Chevys, a strange feeling forming in their lower bellies and beneath their skin.

Later, a man named Saul Witt hurt himself in his garage with a screwdriver, somehow jabbed his leg. An accident. Though, more and more, accidents of this nature began to occur steadily in the lives of Derek's correspondents. Crash their cars, forget to go to work—smack their children.

After looking at those photographs of the corpses, they felt as if something had been taken away from them and replaced. Folks have come to use this word—*replaced*—because this is the only way people who view Derek's photographs can begin to describe such a new sensation, why the men and women in Ruth's town begin to misbehave.

At work, Ruth pulls teeth. Their dental office is a converted Victorian house—operating rooms in the bedrooms upstairs, filing systems and lobby in the dining rooms, and the basement used as storage space for outdated equipment and jars of unlabeled yellow liquids. One day a month, the head orthodontist brings in an atypical patient to demonstrate surgery techniques for Ruth and the other assistants. This afternoon, a nineteen year old boy named Kurt Lymell acts as the case-study example for cuspid mutation.

While they wait together for the doctor, the women hush. An over-the-weekend new purplish spot stains the hollow area beneath the eye of an assistant named Marybeth, the bruise coated-over with waxy layers of pink concealer. “It’s something awful, what your husband is doing,” Marybeth whispers to Ruth.

Where most people have two cuspids—the fang teeth, the canines—Kurt has four. The extra teeth are long and jut out further than the others. She’s known Kurt from the church, remembers him with his fangs running the length of the chapel with the other children years ago when she still went to Harvey Hill Baptist. Ruth was so young then, not much past childhood herself. As a teenager, she teased the young kids at church, kids like Kurt—especially Kurt—and let them kiss her cheeks, remembers how his cuspids felt grazing her skin. Kurt lays back in the chair with his mouth open as they stand in a half-circle around him, prying into his mouth with mirrors and stainless steel.

Deformations are common here. Ruth met a man who had fashioned a replacement tooth from a piece of quartz. She has seen patients with three rows of teeth. The doctor fingers the tips of Kurt’s teeth—as if to the point of a dull knife—then passes x-ray photos around the circle. Without meaning to, Ruth holds the transparent sheet

above Kurt's face. The x-rayed bones look like a mask on him, and he smiles at her through the plastic. Does he remember?

"Kurt will be back with us next Thursday, and we'll go through with the removal then," the doctor says.

Before leaving, each assistant takes a turn inspecting Kurt's teeth, Ruth last of them. She brings the circled mirror to the backs and fronts of the teeth. A beauty in their deformation. She has adjusted to the feeling of close proximity with strangers. She can be objective, even when men look directly into her eyes, or when she catches young boys looking down her scrubs for a glimpse of white bra or breast. With Kurt, a difference; she feels uncomfortable sharing closeness with him. Maybe because of his teeth, the wonder or strangeness of them, but she enjoys the feeling of nervousness again, as if back in school, younger and more excited about pulling teeth out of good-looking mouths.

"Just reach in there and yank them out, would you?" he says, after the others left. "I'm scaring kids with these things." He hisses at her.

"Kids, huh?"

A once lanky boy, Kurt has grown into his body, lean and big. But Ruth can tell from his face he probably doesn't have an extra hair on his body—the kind of fair person who doesn't grow it in any unusual, common places. No beard or chest hair. Maybe some fuzz under his arms, around his balls. She hasn't left the house in a month other than to go to work, to jog around the woods in endless circles, or to pick up Allan: she is allowed to picture how someone's testicles might look.

"Just yank them out?" she asks. Picks up a drill and revs at him, the high-pitched squeal like a frequency.

This is in Southern Indiana, an old limestone town where the surrounding quarries have already been mined out years ago. Now, the tops of their hills look like craters, where red and white dirt lay raw to the sky. In the summer, the colors of the hills bleed into the dusk, leaving little difference between the tops of the rising hills and the red horizon. Now, gray warehouses pock any flatness of land, and shipments of limestone come daily on trucks; organized, marked, or carved. In this valley, the stone means jobs, and there is little reason to leave.

Not a week passed after the first photograph, then Saul Witt—longtime friend to Derek—visited her at her house in the sycamore woods. Of all the men to go away to war, only her husband had left their holler. All the town wives—like Saul Witt’s wife—still had their husbands; the children, their fathers. An entire town and Derek the only one to go, Ruth could get to believing her husband never existed.

Saul walked with a fresh limp to the garden bed where she took a watering can to the Indian Paintbrush. He flinched at each step towards her. “You heard from him?” right away. She didn’t want to tell anything about the photograph. He started again before she could lie. “I’m not gonna say exactly how, but I got reason to be worried about him. A few other people have reason to worry him, too. Not saying how we all know together, but...” He winced, sucked through his teeth, grabbed his thigh.

“Did he send you the pictures, too?” she said.

“Damn, Ruthie.” he looked away from her, paused. “I don’t think he’s behaving normal. All I’m saying.”

“I don’t suppose any of us would.”

With Saul, she only wanted to hurt her husband like he'd hurt her with the pictures. She wanted to react, too. Maybe that's what all folks wanted—to bite back. Saul was her husband's friend. Why don't we come in and have us a cup of coffee, talk? She tried kissing him at the door. She didn't know what she hoped would happen, what she thought she might feel. Grabbed his lower back and pulled him to her. Put her lips against his. He quit the kiss, limped fast as he could to his truck. The taste of salt still on her lips. She couldn't manage to feel anything at all, is what she noticed.

He rolled down his window on the way out the driveway. She could still hear him as he drove down the dirt road out of the woods, repeating, "What is this? What is this? What the hell is all this?"

The photographs create a quiet chaos in their valley. Begins at the warehouse, between that close circle of men, spreading into town, into their homes and schools. Begins at Ruth's place, in the tool shed, where she sometimes finds herself hunched at the bench in the afternoon, or late at night, not sure why. Part fascination, part horror. But mostly, because Derek had once been so good.

Working at the warehouse, he would use the forklift to switch people's cars around in the parking lot during lunch hour. When she was pregnant, he kept an ear to her belly and choked up hearing Allan's foot patters. He joined the Army Reserve for weekend cash to build a back patio in the sycamore groves where they might hang a hammock, lay out on rainy spring days and nap. He drank too much; he sometimes swore at her; he once fired a man at work when he lost his temper. He went to war. He left them. But he had been good.

Knowing a part of Derek would not be good again, they looked at his pictures and no longer felt much like being any good themselves.

Running into each other at the grocery store, Kurt asks if she can give him a ride home. “Or a ride anywhere,” he says—“Wherever you’re going.” Knowing exactly why she should say no, she says yes. A drunk to the tavern. The cold air in the freezer section full of bags of meat and fish, the sterile buzz of the overhead lights, she doesn’t want to be alone any longer. They pick up Allan on the way to Kurt’s house. She could have dropped Kurt off first, but she found herself wanting to spend more time with him, felt guilt and exhilaration both as they drove the streets downtown.

With Allan in the car, Kurt acts playful, teasing him in the backseat. There is a difference, though, in the way he plays with Allan, like a cruel older brother. So different than how Derek played with his boy. He teased him, too, but with sudden pauses and a faraway look on his face occurring more and more often the closer deployment came: tears forming in his eyes; abrupt hugging sessions with Allan at the dinner table that lasted five minutes. The boy clueless why his father would sometimes stop tickling him, leave the room and walk into the woods.

Ahead, rising above the water tower and treeline, a column of smoke blooms from the interstate. Closer, an orange misting glows against the sky. The line of vehicles ahead of her stop, then the cars pull off to the side of the road, park in disarray. Drivers out of their cars and walking toward the plume smoke. She pulls into the grassy median and drives past the cars, not wanting to know the trouble.

“Damn,” Kurt says.

When they pass, a man she recognizes from the warehouse stands in the middle of the highway next to his idled flaming pick-up truck, howling at the passing cars, at the circle of people forming around him. He holds a red gas can, pours amber liquid onto his arms and splashes it on his shirt and face like aftershave.

There is Saul, too, hands raised and speaking to the man with the gas can.

“Allan, don’t you look over there, okay hon?”

As Ruth’s car passes, Saul notices her, stops talking to the man. She rams the car into third, speeds away. But from the rear view mirror, Saul raises his arms further into the air—watching her—as if feeling for rain, or asking a question—“What is this?”—his silhouette smaller and smaller until a speck, then disappeared.

She drives faster, brings the car to ninety. She forces herself to look at the road—her eyes on the yellow flashing lines—and anything else to distract her from the whooshing orange explosion she thinks she might see at any moment in her rearview mirror, to know the man from the warehouse—Jared is his name, she remembers now—has brought flame to his gasoline-soaked skin.

Maybe her husband sees this kind of thing everyday. The weeks before he deployed, she read articles and watched television specials about the religious men who strapped explosives to themselves and walked into the city. The sick women they strapped with C-4, how they begged to be helped—the market suddenly emptying—before, *boom, boom*, fire and sirens and dust and blood. It would be a quick end, and that was comforting for Ruth, imagining herself strapped with explosives, or soaked in gasoline.

She thinks about Derek returning, those images in his mind. Or maybe his skin will be burned. Maybe his face will be gone. But how was that any different than the pictures folks in town saw each night going to bed—the hollow look on Derek’s face as he crouched next to bodies slugged one atop another? Or how would his shrapnel scars be any different than the scar from the screwdriver in Saul’s leg? Marybeth’s eye? If Derek returned with burn marks on his arm, she would bring him to Jared’s bed, she would say, “Look! *Look!* You didn’t need to leave. You could have built your hell here and never left our bed.”

She drops Kurt off without saying anything. Whatever she’d planned to do with him—which she wasn’t exactly sure—she no longer feels like going through with. At home, Allan complains when she puts him to bed with the sun up, not yet seven o’clock. She pulls the gin bottle from the cabinet beneath the sink and brings a glass with her to the tool shed, where she closes the door behind her—lines of sunlight panning through the cracks in the wood—and sits at the bench. There is an unopened letter from Derek in the stack of mail collected over the last few days. She cries while she opens it.

The man’s head is caved in. He wears no scarf, or it burned off. Like a pumpkin in November, a deflated skull slouched on snapped neck. The color is more gray than pink, but still the color she has imagined brain to look: brain pink. This picture is for Allan. For his son. “I’m all garbled up,” he closed the note on the back of the picture. Then, “Everything’s fucked.” She tasted the gin, drafted a letter to the MP service. When she woke several hours later, the light no longer panned through the cracks in the wood. But the letter was no use. He was gone.

She walks towards the house, the moon fat in the sky—like something you could get closer to. In the woods, a noise—a branch cracked. She wants to run. An enormous dark shape walks onto the road. The shadow comes into the moonlight—another cow coming towards the fence, wanting to eat the grass. The first rock Ruth throws misses, scuttling across the gravel like a ricochet. The second rock thunks against the cow's stomach, but it refuses to move. She throws another, and another. Still, nothing happens.

The photographs spread out across the town like flyers. Some of the pictures are the same, copies sent by Derek or photocopied later. A math teacher overhears one of his wrestling students asking another if he's seen Pumpkin Head. Names are attached to certain photographs: Pumpkin Head, Sawtooth, Star Eye, Cut-Myself-Shaving. Some people say they are going to hurt Derek when he comes back. Others say they will throw him a party, welcome him at the airport.

At the warehouse, men disappear one after another. Jared—the man with the gas can—left first. He didn't show up for work the day after Saul convinced him to put the gas can down, go home. Gracie Mathews—a ten year old playing at the side of the White River—later told folks she saw Jared walk into the water, lay on his back and float down the current, out of sight. After a few days and two more men gone missing, the foreman cancelled shifts, told everyone they'd start back up again in two weeks. Saul limped from one house to another to check up on the warehouse men each morning and afternoon, to make sure everyone was alright. Derek was due back in a month, and things could get figured out then.

Ruth begins to receive phone calls. Some come in the middle of the night, drunks who want to say they are sorry, or tell her to fuck herself. She takes the phone off the line. When she comes home from work and plugs the phone back in, messages blink on her machine—wives or teachers or parents or police officers. She ignores all but one: Kurt. Could he come over for dinner? He doesn't mention the photographs, or that something is wrong. Just dinner.

She cooked the steaks more raw than she meant to, but they tear their knives against the redness anyway. The blood tastes like blood, and she can't eat it. She has told Allan that this is her good friend. With dinner finished and after putting Allan to sleep, she takes Kurt into the living room and kisses him. They hug standing on the carpet, and when Ruth looks across the moonlight pooling in through the windows, she can still see the shadows of stains Allan left from the boots. She leans up, puts her tongue in Kurt's mouth and runs it across his teeth.

“What are you doing?”

He is a slow lover. Every action seems to be asking if this is okay. Ruth wouldn't call it fucking. They lay down on the living room carpet and he finishes without any change on his face, just a tightening in his shoulders. Ruth climbs on top of him and bucks her hips against him, digs her teeth into his skin until he yells out.

“Shh! Allan.”

“You're hurting me.”

“That's part of this.”

Afternoons, Kurt waits for her at her house, sitting on the porch. She leaves work an hour early each day, no longer caring what her boss thinks, what the other assistants guess at. They are uncomfortable around her at work now, so in a way this was good. She and Kurt go into the bedroom, remove the duvet off the bed and undress. Something hollow and magic. More and more, they say less and less to each other. Among the pillows on the bed and the pictures of Derek and Allan hanging from the wall, they fuck. She might have say he is improving, but the action is no longer about pleasure. More like a release of sweat she can count on each afternoon. She can hurt him—bite, scratch, rip his hair—and he can yell without Allan in the next room to hear him. Afterwards, she drops him off a mile from the babysitter’s house, then drives the rest of the way to get Allan, a numbness when she sees him.

This goes on throughout the week. The final time, they don’t speak a single word the entire afternoon—before they undress and afterwards. Even when Kurt tries to say something as they drive the two-lane towards the babysitter, Ruth stops him, “No, don’t.”

The following day, he isn’t waiting for her on the porch. So she calls him.

“You can’t call me like this.”

“Where were you?”

“Maybe this is getting to be too much.”

“I want to see you tomorrow.”

A black car is parked in the lot the following day when Ruth arrives home. Dust still hangs in the air from the its arrival. The military officer has not yet made it to the front door, turns to see her car coming towards the house. She keeps driving. Doesn’t

look at the house. Drives and drives wanting to forget everything her husband has done—the pictures, the notes—wanting to forget he ever existed.

In the night, Allan screams. She is out of bed and running to his doorway before the scream stops. On the floor next to the bed, hidden beneath layers of blankets, he cries quietly. Ruth uncovers him, his warm smell rising up from the quilts.

“Honey? What’s the matter?”

“Listen.”

The sound, dull. Becomes louder, turns into a deep kind of wail. Something outside. Allan’s window faces the backyard, faces the sycamore woods, and the noise comes from out there. Ruth can’t think of anything that sounds like that. But it signals pain, something suffering. The moan abates, but no sooner does it stop that it begins again. Louder, closer.

On the floor, she can’t see out the window. And she can’t manage to stand up and look. All those late night phone calls, all those people who are angry with Derek—who knows what ideas they might get. She stays with Allan and listens. Each time the thing bellows, Allan clings to her, digs his hands into her back and shakes. She wants to love this about him, wants to tell him that this is a beautiful, endearing thing to do in a time of danger, that he is overreacting. But she is beyond rationale at this point herself. After several minutes, the moans become less loud and less frequent. The sound of something quitting.

She calls Kurt. “There’s something outside. Come over.”

“Ruth? You can’t call like this. Who might have answered? What’s wrong?”

“There’s something out there. Just come, *please*.”

She is waiting on the front porch when he pulls up in his parent’s car, the headlights turning the driveway into daylight for a moment, then extinguishing. Ruth grasps a hammer in her hands, behind her back. She’s told Allan to go into the closet and stay there. Instead of telling Kurt what’s going on, Ruth leads him into the backyard, pauses against the siding. A whimper from around the corner, breathy and muffled.

In the backyard a cow lays on its belly, wedged beneath the chain link fence, trapped. Blood runs down its brown coat. The head and front half of its body in Ruth’s yard; the torso, in the field. The fence bent up, the sharp chains digging into the cow’s back, pinning it down. The animal tried to stick its head beneath the fence to get to the grass—a clump of it is missing—but the further it has come inside, the more trapped. She hands Kurt the hammer.

“I want you to kill it,” she says.

“With a hammer?”

“Use the teeth,” she stubs fingers to her forehead.

He walks towards the garage. She follows, grabs his arm, but he keeps walking. The garage door opened, he looks through the tools and yard equipment until he finds a large set of Derek’s bolt cutters, two feet long.

“No.” she says, as Kurt goes to the cow, snaps the first chain-link with the bolt cutters. He begins a circle of fence to allow the cow to escape.

“No, you’re supposed to kill it,” she says, louder. “What’s wrong with you? Jesus Christ!” Like something is slipping away. She wants to see the thing die. Needs to know that absolution—something large losing life, spilling blood. She could do it herself—it

would be easy to pick up the hammer and slug the thing between the eyes before Kurt freed it—but that’s not the point, is it? As Kurt cuts, she knows he is weak because of it.

The fence falls away and the cow lurches up, all at once big and alive. It backs away, then trots into the field, its hooves slogging in the mud until it disappears into the darkness.

When the black car pulls into her drive and the same young officer knocks on her door, this is what she imagines: pieces of Derek’s body falling to the ground in clumps, as if he’d been floating in the air before until a needle or finger tore through the membrane of skin and flesh, and popped him. Like a bubble in the air, hollowed then collapsed, specks of soap and water collecting and falling onto the ground in drips, losing purchase in the air. He can not float any longer. She can not watch him from the ground, up and up and up. My husband the bubble, she thinks. Popped.

Few know exactly how to respond. Though, a general sigh of relief follows, folks admit. When the evening news broadcasts that one of their own from Southern Indiana has been killed—a foot atop an IED, beneath a road, outside a city whose name they can’t pronounce, in a country across the ocean, in a war they have not been able to forget about—when they play photographs of Derek in his uniform, kneeling on one knee and smiling, the same people who felt hollow before feel hollow still, will forever feel hollow.

Kurt is sedated. Streaming Nitrous Oxide into a mask over his face until he dozes, now the orthodontic assistants gather around his chair and remove the mask. The doctor

has pinned x-rays on a light-board and she points to the nerve that needs to be anesthetized to decrease discomfort in the coming twenty-four hours. Kurt's cuspids root far deeper than any of the other teeth, nearly an inch into the gums, and this requires more sedation, more anesthetic. Ruth watches as the assistants give Kurt six shots to the root area of each tooth. She is next.

The doctor acts as assistant to Ruth, and she hands her the elevators first. Digging the razor-sharp metal into the gums, she pries the stringy roots from the bone, separating the two. Like any other operation for her, objective. She clamps the forceps around the bone, pulls, and is surprised at how easily the tooth eases out, a suction noise following the pull. The tooth feels heavy. They perform the same on the opposite side, then Ruth waits until they wheel Kurt into the recovery room.

She takes each of Kurt's teeth and places them in a plastic baggy, into her pocket, where the blood will dry and turn brown against the white. Later, she puts the teeth into an envelope. On a piece of paper, she helps Allan with the letters. It takes some time, but he manages to spell with Ruth's help, and she places the note in an envelope, lets Allan hold the envelope as they walked outside to the fire pit. "Creature's Teeth" says the note. These are its teeth, she tells Allan. "These are the creature's teeth, and your daddy's the one what killed it."

Saul places bundles of sticks in the fire. He's collected the photographs from the men at the warehouse in a stack. Ruth adds the other photographs from the tool shed and they place the bundle in the fire, watches them burn. When Allan frizbees the envelope of Kurt's teeth into the embers, the paper quickly burns away. Then the plastic casing melts and dissolves. Ruth can see them—the teeth—almost puckering and shaking, the calcium

rich hardness collapsing in the flame. Watches the pearl white bone turn black against the heat and coals, and nothing is fair.

Oil Baby

Porter was on his way out when they found her, halfway sliced in two and her hair burned off. She had been stopped at a rail crossing. The train cars pitched on the turn and rolled—livestock cars, all of them—and afterwards dead or dying cattle littered the road. The animals' bleating faded out as, one by one, they were silenced by pistol shots. Her Chevrolet had been put in reverse, they found. She had tried to escape, had seen the train cars keeling onto her. Porter sat on the floor of their living room for a long time and tried to understand if it would be better to know the quick end was coming or not.

He'd been planning to leave Darcy that night. Not for another woman. But he felt like an animal that knows to crawl under a house when instinct warns it is about to die. Darcy was younger than Porter, by twenty years, and he'd turned foul with her. "A regular dick," she'd say. He opened the envelope and read the note he planned to leave telling her enough was enough. Quitting had been a simple idea that felt new. Currently, he missed the way her breath smelled. He went to the bedroom, put his nose against her pillow.

Now after the crash, there was Cheyenne—Darcy’s daughter—and the way her black hair looked like her mother’s. “You just needed a daddy in a hurry,” Porter would tell her. Too old to be a daddy—without doubt too old to be a single one. Cheyenne was asleep in her room and he knew she would stay asleep if he left.

He drove west thirty miles, then pulled to the shoulder.

“You’re a shit, Porter,” he said. “A shit.”

He u-turned and drove back. Parked above the tracks, he looked down and saw men lugging the brained cows onto a truck-bed with a forklift. The pile of them looked as if an altar, ready to burn. Crews worked the pocket fires in the soy field. What was left of the train: an enormous, thick metal snake halved in two, one part still writhing as an engine pulled the righted train cars eastbound. In some way, he felt all this was his fault. Her truck was gone already. Porter thought, like fire has rained down, taken Darcy and her truck, left me nothing but burning fields and a six-year-old.

Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he owns?—Porter’s father had written this above the mantel in their childhood home in thick black paint. A verse from the book of Job. The Devil asked God if he could destroy Job, and God said yes. Simple as that. “A lesson,” his father said, “Things’ll go to hell if you let God send them there.”

He’d worked around that warning. Had a reply, even: never care too much about anyone, you’ll never worry about losing them. This was God calling his bluff. Darcy caught in the middle. Now all Porter could think was to light those dead cows on fire and beg God to stop. Do penance as long as the Almighty saw fit.

Moths fluttered the light above the garage door and darted at the lamp on Porter's workbench. He swatted mosquitoes on his arms until he saw blood, then stopped and let them take as much as they wanted. He was tired of blood. He was tired of the hot, tar-smelling garage where they'd been for the good part of the last several days, because this was the only place Cheyenne wouldn't holler. Only place other than inside Porter's Jeep.

She stood to reach the passenger-side handle, yanked a few times at the locked door, then stopped as a fly landed on her lip.

"Flash your lip, hon." He motioned with his hand.

She let the fly walk down her chin. Porter lifted her on the workbench.

"Cheyenne, where we gonna go?" *Anywhere*. He knew that much. She just wanted to go.

A look that said *you ought to know*—which was the same look she'd been giving him since he walked into her dark room and woke the girl to a motherless world. Cheyenne hadn't said anything since. He stopped going to work. He'd done selective cutting for thirty years, finding and cutting the oldest trees in the Midwest, but when the foreman called after missed work, Porter told him it was time for the younger guys to take over.

"That's nature, Saul. My turns up."

He knew Cheyenne wanted to go, and any place was as good as another—as long as they went. He buckled her into the backseat.

Driving terrified him. Each time he looked at the Jeep, every window shattered, every piece of metal burned and crumpled into itself. The two Husqvarna chainsaws he kept in the back revved on and shredded the seats into leather tongues. As bad as Cheyenne wanted to go was as much as Porter dreaded the sound of engine turning over.

Driving was a small hell, sure. But as long as Cheyenne was happy—as long as she wasn't dead, or burned up in a train—he could tolerate a small amount of hell.

They started down the two-lane, rising and falling in the dips of creek beds. They deadpanned through farmland until the road reached woods and they drove into them. She didn't talk, but she didn't holler either. A good sign. Shit, the *only* sign. In the growing dusk, she fell asleep. He drove further into the woods, making sure she had time enough to go into the kind of sleep she wouldn't wake up from when they got home, the kind of sleep that'd let her forget awhile.

The logging road sloped off the paved street into a thicket of walnut trees. Razor briar raked against the windows and sides of the Jeep. He thought the bumps in the road might wake Cheyenne, but the road was a shortcut and he was tired. There was only so much driving to be done. Only so much time he could sit behind the wheel thinking about Darcy, feeling a strange sort of guilt.

When Cheyenne woke in the morning, she and Porter spent a long time in the garage before Porter had to start the Jeep again. Time earned—he believed—when nothing bad could happen to them.

The thermometer didn't show a fever, but Porter had one. A burning inside his skin. He walked into the bedroom, stood at Darcy's closet door. He slept in the garage now. Opening the door, he looked through Darcy's shoes, found her sneakers missing. Now he knew what she'd been wearing.

Porter had duct-taped a sewing needle to stick out from the driver-side door at thigh-level, and—driving the miles at night, as Cheyenne fell asleep—he worked the needle through his jeans, into his leg. Not enough to puncture muscle, but enough to hurt, bleed. They drove further now, reached the outer side of the timber fields, kept going across grasslands and thick aisles of corn. He thought about Darcy’s sneakers turning black. Rubber melting onto her feet. He worked the needle through his jeans. It’s your fault, your blood. Challenge God and that’s what he gives you.

When Cheyenne woke the sun was burning the haze off the land. They’d driven through the night. She raised up and looked out the window, then at Porter. “Why aren’t we home?” she said.

Porter jumped in his seat—hearing her talk—and the needle went deeper into his leg. He yelled out.

“What’s that on your pants?” she said.

A brown splotch stained his pant leg. “Must have cut myself on something. It don’t hurt. We’re going to keep on driving, I think. That okay with you?”

“How far?”

“Pretty far.”

The fever whirled in his head, a slow burn. He was the man who let his crop spoil, the man who left his fields to the crows. But it wasn’t like that at all, really.

He had tried to give his paycheck to Darcy: this when they first started living together. “We don’t want none of that,” Darcy said. Always, “we,”—and Porter understood then that it would always be them—Darcy and Cheyenne—together, and he by himself. Maybe that’s why he had planned to leave; they didn’t need him. But even

that was too simple. Their first Easter living in their house, Porter woke to laughing from outside. In the grass, Darcy and Cheyenne wore sundresses, no shoes. Facing each other, they brought their hands up in the same manner and smacked their palms together, then again. He stood in the doorway and watched them. An Easter dance, they said. He left them as they started to dance again.

He could have been a daddy to Cheyenne before the crash. He didn't know what that looked like, except to act less grumpy, tell her he loved her. Maybe you play games in the yard on Easter morning, but—in truth—he hadn't been a father, not at all. Didn't even try.

He pricked his finger without Cheyenne seeing. A droplet of blood bubbled to the surface.

“Maybe sometimes, maybe it's good to keep driving a while. Even if you get tired, this is probably best to do after something like what happened happens,” he said.

“I don't got to sleep in the car anymore,” she said. “Not even in the garage.”

Porter didn't know how far they'd go. He didn't want to stop. But the reality was: how long you think you can actually do this?

They crossed state lines. Porter kept off the interstates and stuck to the two-lanes. He closed his eyes when they passed green signs with mile markers and town names listed—the rush of driving sightless for two or three seconds, the rush of becoming deeply lost. He'd logged all over these parts, but the land began to look new to him. Dark, yet foreign. Cheyenne counted telephone poles until she didn't know what the next

number would be, then started over at one. She no longer asked when they would go home.

They set camp under a thicket of hanging willows and Porter built a fire as evening came—a purpling in the clouds. The branches hung down over them in a globe—a false barrier, like plastic-wrap over a busted window. Porter fed Cheyenne crackers and canned meat, fixed them one at a time.

“I can make ‘em myself,” she said, took the butter knife and sliced some of the meat. “You make them for you now,” she said.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten. He no longer used the needle on the door; the wound on his leg had started to infect—his thigh reddening and swelling. Instead he took to grinding his teeth together at night until they popped. Cheyenne handed the meat and knife to Porter, but he put them back down on the ground.

“I think you better eat something,” she said.

With every hundred miles they drove, Porter felt further from the blame, though the point of driving had been to embrace it. He would starve himself. He would crack his teeth. Stick needles in his leg. He would do whatever it took, as if to say, *I haven’t forgot you Almighty. I still feel like shit. I’ll feel like shit forever long as you leave Cheyenne be.* Tomorrow they’d drive back to the crash, he thought. Maybe take Cheyenne home first. But he needed to keep that feeling, to know God—if you let him—will bring fire.

He heard their footsteps before he saw them. Four shapes appeared out of the blackness and circled the fire. Three of the faces were distinctly men, but the fourth was a woman. They had a sooty blackness on their faces—permanent shadow beneath their

eyes—and they smelled like a lot of booze soaked through skin. In the clean air the stench hung around with the pungency of rotted vegetables.

“Evening,” one of the men said. The woman giggled.

Porter had spent enough time in the boons to know what these people were. His logging company often had him in places of the Midwest that are still wild, still untouched. Not a phone line running to entire towns. The land here had been dodged by highways and rural sprawl, and now it bred a raw, leathery people. A man he worked with had called them bibbers—the way their overalls hung down over bare chests. The thing about bibbers, he’d said, they’re self-righteous. More likely to do you wrong because they think you aren’t Christian.

“You’re awfully far out here for a picnic, don’t you think?” one of the bibbers said.

The woman sat and twirled a finger in Cheyenne’s hair, rubbed the girl’s earlobe like a dog’s. The first time Porter had tried to hug Cheyenne, she screamed. He figured, now, she knew well enough not to say a word. Porter tightened his lips, dropped another stick into the fire.

“We’re taking a trip. Nice country out here,” he said.

“Well I know it’s nice. You don’t have to tell me that,” the bibber said.

“This here’s Cheyenne, my daughter. I’m Porter,” he said, held out his hand to them. Nothing.

The bibber nudged the other, looked at Cheyenne. He had a narrow, angular jaw—like part of it had been removed.

“Well Porter, this is a far ways away to be taking your daughter.”

“Like I said, we’re just getting out.”

The bibber ran a hand through thinning black hair, itched his neck.

“There’s difference between getting out of town and coming out here,” he said.

“Like you don’t wantin’ to be found,” he said. “Huh?”

The wind shifted and smoke blew into the eyes of the bibber who hadn’t said much. He was far drunk, eyes narrowed to slits as if he’d been stung by wasps. He raised on his knees and punched the burning logs—once, twice, then again. The skin of his fingers curled back in black strands.

“Marv, Marv—easy. Look what you did to your fuckin’ hand. Hah!”

Cheyenne scooted but the woman lowered a hand on the small of her back, nudging her closer.

“See, listen. I don’t think you’re out here having a picnic, mister. Something don’t seem right at all. She don’t look like your daughter none,” he said. “She got that black hair, looks nothing like you,” he said.

“See the way she’s looking at him?” the other said, nodding towards Cheyenne.

Porter knew he had options. He could explain to them Darcy was dead, tell them Cheyenne wasn’t blood, no, but she was his daughter all the same. Hell, maybe they were drunk enough he could grab Cheyenne and be in the car before any of the bibbers could stand. But none of those options mattered. The angels had found him. No driving in all the world could get him away from this kind of inevitable. Stick needles in his leg all he wanted, no matter.

“Little girl,” the woman said. “This man ever touch you dirty-like?”

They used fishing wire around his hands and ankles. The woman collected twigs and—one at a time—put them in his mouth like straws until his lips were wide open, the skin stretched out and cracking. They tied him in such a way like a roped calf, except his hands and ankles were tied behind his back. Porter wondered if they'd start unbuckling their belts, because that's the kind of people they were. Instead they only humped at his leg with their pants on, jumped up and hollered. The man's black hand grabbed his shoulder, and with it came the sour stench of cooked flesh. The woman took Cheyenne's hand and brought her into the tent. "You hear that? Hear what they're doing to him?" Porter heard her say. "What they're doing is your fault," she said.

Then Porter did hear their belt buckles—heard the hiss of fire, smelled the rankness of burning piss. In the dying light of fire going out, the bibbers circled him. He smelled their urine again, felt its warmth running down his back.

They left Porter tied up. Sometime in the night the men passed out around the fire's waning embers, and now—at dawn—smoke rose and met the morning's fog, collecting in a grey blanket over the meadow of choke-weed.

He'd managed the sticks out of his mouth, working them out one by one with his tongue, which bled. He felt cracks in his lips, tasted copper. The stench of old urine mixed with the smoke from the campfire. One of the bibbers woke, stirred the others. The tent opened and the woman came out.

"Little girl, remember what I told you." the woman said.

Behind her sat an older-looking Cheyenne. She wrapped her shoulders in a down blanket, looked at Porter. She began braiding her hair, something he hadn't seen her do

before. Her eyes were red, but she looked at Porter without crying. She was still looking back at him when the flap blew shut.

“Don’t move till you can’t see us—pedderass,” the man said. He spit on his legs. “Then I don’t care what.”

They ran the direction the woman had walked. The places people like that might come from; the places they return to. Cheyenne crawled out of the tent and sat far from Porter. She waited a long time before she took a knife from the car and sat again next to him.

“Only if we go home,” she said.

They moved camp, hiking; Porter said camping would be as good of a home as any, if that’s what she wanted. He didn’t want to go home yet, or maybe never again. He removed the rest of their supplies from the back of the Jeep—long underwear, kitchen utensils, sleeping bags—along with the larger of the two Husqvarnas and a cord of half-inch thick chain. Then they left the Jeep where it was parked, sitting beneath the willow where the tree’s rope-like branches had already begun to fall and blanket the car.

A few miles into the brush they stopped and Porter washed the blood out of his mouth in a creek. The water stung—re-opening cuts and softening the scabs forming in his mouth. He swished the water around and spat, watching the blood rope into thinner threads downstream, where Cheyenne was washing her hair.

“Move upstream. *Cheyenne*.”

“More blood on me won’t hurt nothing,” she said, dangling her braids in the water.

“You don’t have any blood on you already. Quit that.”

“I’ve got plenty,” she said, continued wetting her hair and wringing it damp again.

He spat the rest of the watery blood into the grass, walked to where she was dipping her hair. She yelled *no* and banged on his shoulders as he picked her up by the waist, took her away from the creek. *Why* he grunted as she hit him again and again. His shoulders were sore still from being cocked back all night, and her fists hurt more than he thought they would. He set her down in the grass, held her down. “Why you doing that? Getting blood in your hair. Huh?” he said.

“Why aren’t we going home? Huh?” she said.

He didn’t know why. Didn’t know what he planned to do once they were out so far. He only knew that he was tired—had been tired for a long time—and the thing to do was walk. Keep moving. Towards what? Didn’t matter, as long as there were places still to walk, further into forest, further away from people and machines and the havoc the two wrought together. Maybe he should have left Cheyenne at home, but that didn’t matter now, either.

“You’ll let everyone else do whatever they want,” she said. “That’s why. You just go on and let them. So I want to go home. So I’m making us go home.”

He’d let go of her shoulders. She leaned on her hands to stand up, but he stopped her by placing his open palm on the crown of her head, staying her on the ground. Her words ate into him like a saw-blade into shinbone.

“Shut up,” he said, squeezing her head more. “Shut up, now.”

She hadn't cried when Darcy died, and he didn't see her cry when the bibbers had him. He'd begun to believe maybe the act was beyond her, as if so much hurt had closed off that ability—left her in a perpetual shock. Porter lifted his hand from her head.

“She was right,” she said.

“Who?”

“That woman. She told me dirty things only happen to dirty girls. And all I want is to go on home, but it's my fault we're out here in the first place. She said that's why they had to tie you up, cause of me. Said I was a *temp*-tation.”

Maybe his father had been wrong. Maybe God sends things to hell no matter how much you protect them. With all the cruelty in the world already, felt like the Devil was turned obsolete. Not for the first time Porter felt a vast helplessness, like nothing he could say would change what Cheyenne thought, how she would see the world from that moment on. For her to understand that, no, nothing was her fault, she'd just stumbled too soon into a web that, in a few years, would make more sense. Not much more, but some.

But then—no, he thought. Fuck *that*. Nothing ever makes any more goddamn sense than it did before. And that was the worst of it, that it never got much better.

“She said I deserved it. Pretty black hair. I don't understand. I'll cut it off, Porter—swear. I just want to go home.”

“Keep your hair,” he said.

Crows circled the sky like buzzards, and the birds' dark shapes faded into the black sky as night fell. Porter's heavy breath fogged in the cold air as he lugged his equipment through thickets of thorn-brush. With each breath he felt like he was waking

further from a dream. The brush lasted a quarter-mile before it opened into clearer forest, where he found the bibbers living.

Their double-wide trailer sagged into its foundations and appeared half-buried—sinking into the ground like a buried car on the banks of a river. The once-white trim had turned ocher and the trailer looked as if it was turning into another part of the forest—like any piece of yellowing flora except for the muddy pink dress hanging from the clothes line and the neon red light nailed above the front door. A riding lawn-mower was parked outside. A pair of panties were draped on the bushes where Porter crouched and poured oil into the Husqvarna.

A grove like this one would've yielded extensive cutting. Fat, thirty-inchers. And walnut was a good wood to cut. A heavy, dense wood they used it to make rifle stocks. When the chainsaw was oiled and gassed, Porter sat down and opened the canned meat Cheyenne packed him. He watched the house and put pieces of pre-cooked meat in his mouth, tasted the brine saltiness. He'd promised her he would eat when he left her at the Jeep, but his stomach hurt with the small amount, not yet ready to digest food. The windows glowed blue from a television inside. No sounds came from the woods, only the dull, monotonous hum of the television, playing what Porter guessed were VHS tapes, with no television signal available so far out here. He liked that thought—no signal. No radio waves or telephones, no communication with the outside world. There was only Porter and the bibbers. He waited another hour, then crept closer—foot by foot—to the trailer.

He wrapped the chain around the door knob, then roped it around the trunk of a nearby tree, pulled the line taught. He pumped the primer of the saw, ripped on the

starter-cord once, then again—the motor not yet turning over. He heard one of the bibbers from inside, “The hell *was* that?” They jerked on the door to open it. “Hey!” Porter pulled once again on the starter-cord; the only noise he heard after that was the revving of the big Husqvarna—a familiar hum—and the purr of blade spinning.

The bibbers broke a window and Porter saw one of their hands reaching out just as the first tree slammed down on the trailer longwise. The sound of tree hitting trailer—thick branches gashing roof, window, frame, everything—was like the cracking of bone. The second tree he lay crosswise over the first.

They drove several miles before he found a familiar road sign, and the sun was all the way up when he found the nearest highway. His hands smelled like gasoline, and for a moment the smell reminded him of Darcy, reminded him of the oil her car spilled that night, the oil that left him Cheyenne. “I love you,” he said, looked at her. But the words were like fresh paint on rotted wood, and he knew the cracks in his lips would take a long time to heal.

Red Flag

Three of us from the wrestling team went to Buck's house to sweat. We slit holes in Hefty trash-bags for our arms and legs, pulled the black plastic over our heads like ponchos, and tied off the wrists and ankles with rubber bands. Then we fell asleep like that, to be smaller, to weigh less.

Next morning, Buck and I snuck to the bathtub with liters of water sloshing in each of our suits. I felt like fainting in the mornings. We laughed as each of us ran an X-Acto knife across the bags, watched water flood out as if from a gutter during a thunderstorm. Wearing a trash bag for eight hours is like staying in a sauna for twelve. You might sweat fifteen pounds.

We were missing Drew Jensen. I figured he was still sleeping in Buck's room. We yelled: Fatty! Bitch Sleeper! Lazy Ass! We shook him on the ground where he lay, but the sweat was the only moving part.

I didn't know what a dehydrated person would look like because I didn't buy into words like dehydration or starvation or heat stroke or anorexia. None of us did. Hell, Drew slept right through it. And I didn't know what Drew would look like dead, had

never imagined death as a thing you can see—touch with your fingers. But this is what it looked like: his eyelids were half-open and the eyeballs inside looked like thick, plastic snow globes. Felt like stones.

I trained that following week like I trained every week—no, more. I woke at four and ran bleachers. Thirty-two times on the stairs—up and down, again and again—before my legs turned to putty. My friend was dead because he wanted to win, so what did that say about me if I showed up next match and got my ass tanned? I heard Coach Dixon yelling my name from the football field. “Justin, Justin,” he said, rhythmic. I tried to hit five stairs before he said my name again.

I would hear a noise during matches. Gymnasiums get loud: parents screaming for their son or daughter, multiplied by at least two—one parent for each. Multiplied by how many coaches are screaming instructions. Multiplied by the gasping, cussing person you are trying to stick to the floor and hold. Multiplied by your own gasping and cussing as you try to prevent that someone from sticking and holding you. The noise I would sometimes hear is the absence of all that. I heard this when I had control. When I could keep someone’s shoulder blades pinned to the ground forever, my muscles turned to granite, a funny-face held for too long. That was the noise I wanted to hear. A sound that meant nothing was going to move—or shift. Coach Dixon’s voice ruined that, some Pavlovian magic.

My name got closer until he picked me up off the ground and carried me down the bleachers. “Dammit, Justin,” he said, but not angry. And my arms were the only parts of

my body working then, so I wrapped them around Coach Dixon and squeezed his thick neck like I was waiting for a referee's whistle to blow.

In Clermont, Indiana we have an Admiral gas station and a thirty-five-mile-an-hour road. We have a bar called The Saloon, a hair place next to it called The Salon; between these two places most domestic disturbances among Clermont families are resolved. And back then we had a high-school wrestling team that, at one point, was made up of nine boys and one girl.

But the reason Clermont is a town is Raceway Park—a mile-long drag-strip of concrete rebar six feet deep—where, each summer, in the surrounding area, a hundred-thousand people plop campers and tents on every piece of soybean field or parking lot, and for three weeks watch cars-strapped-to-jet-engines blast down straight pavement at three hundred miles an hour until one of the cars gets to the finish line first—or explodes. The latter seems to happen every fifth or sixth time.

Oddly, the few of us who still live in Clermont hate racing. The rest of the town, those who lived here before—like both of my parents—ran off with the race fans the way some sixteen year old girls leave town with sweet-talking Ferris-wheel carnies.

Before he left, my father claimed he found work with a racing team as a machinist. I believed him. He quit his job as a real machinist in town—where he ran CNC machines that turned hunks of metal into moving parts—and said he was going to make fast cars go faster. But none of this was true. Come race-season, I sometimes saw him wearing a grime-covered racing suit trying to get into the pit stops, or back into a tavern. I walked by him once when he was arguing with a man outside The Saloon, and he turned

and saw me, just for a moment. He didn't lead-on in any way that he recognized his son. Or he chose not to. I thought my mother might still live in Clermont, but I was fairly certain she came and went with the races, too. I heard she popped up once a year at the abandoned drive-in theater, across from the Raceway, where they host wet t-shirt contests. Buck's cousin said he'd seen my mom's tits—and I believed he had.

When I first heard Buck's cousin say that, something felt bitter, hurt. Something inside I'd left from before when the three of us were still a family. I think I felt this again when my father didn't recognize me outside of The Saloon. Not embarrassment: grief. A piece of shrapnel working its way up and out of my thigh. I'd hoped that somewhere along the way I sweated it out, or spit it onto the ground along with a one-ounce mouthful of collected saliva. Or Drew Jensen or Buck beat it out of me on a Red Flag day.

An old maritime signal-standard roped to the end of a wooden staff, we brought the blood-red triangular flag into the hot wrestling room on days we needed to kick into gear. If County or State was coming up, we'd hoist it into place next to the Indiana State flag. We trained harder, looking up at the cloth through stinging, sweaty eyes, in between countless rounds of pummels.

Drew would pop his shoulder against my jaw on Red Flag days like he was trying to get those pieces of shrapnel out of me. Buck too. We'd come home with black eyes, scabbed faces, and purple splotches forming beneath our skin. The three of us were working to get metal slivers out of each other. We were trying to get smaller, smaller—so that maybe the hurt that seemed to curse Clermont, Indiana would pass us over, just miss us, because we were too small to be seen. Like field mice a hawk sees, then loses in the gray wash.

But more and more I began to feel like the hawk, searching for something I saw once, at a glance, but lost. Maybe I was looking for my parents—or Drew. Or maybe I wanted to hold small life in my jaws and end it.

I lived with Buck, mostly. But I also lived with Coach Dixon. And I also lived with the Jensen's, and with some other guys on the wrestling team; and sometimes I lived with a girl named Bretta who worked at The Salon—though her parents weren't aware I did. After Drew Jensen died, I began bringing each of these people—except the Jensen parents, of course—one at a time, into the Raceway at midnight to the end of the drag-strip where most explosions and deaths occur. They all agreed with me: there was something special about that spot.

That night Buck walked with me up and down the drag-strip, and we picked up glass bottles and chucked them over the fence, where they popped against the blacktop and shattered into a glass misting.

“I heard Coach Dixon found you on the bleachers,” he said. “You know they cancelled the matches all this month.”

Buck was like his name, an animal. Big and clever, in his own right, but considered dumb by most human standards like bubble tests and Algebra. He understood more than people granted him, but different kinds of things.

“Just wanted to run,” I said.

“Dixon said you couldn't walk afterwards.”

“The fuck does he know?”

“Yea, big mouth, right? Telling people that. Don’t you think we ought to be thinking about Drew right now? Not Dixon, or running, or anything like that.” And this was Buck’s way of telling me I’d gone too far, trying to sweat again.

We found another brown bottle on the lawn. The tag had peeled off, and most of the liquid was gone. But some fluid remained at the bottom, made a sloshing noise when I picked it up. “Probably beer,” Buck said. “Or piss.”

I thought it could be spit or rain water that had somehow seeped through the loose-screwed cap into the bottle. For a moment I considered chucking it over the fence, to spill out on the blacktop like the gasoline, oil, and blood there before. Instead, I unscrewed the cap, poured the liquid onto the grass.

“That’ll filter through bedrock, then clay, where the wells form,” he said. “Someone will drink what you just poured. Someone in Clermont.”

I thought about how easily we could have turned on the tap that night. I thought about how easily water flows through the ground, into our wells, how there is so much available water. Buck probably understood I was thinking about Drew, and water. He was like that, like an animal. He wanted me to think about those things, but I didn’t have to admit he was right.

“Yea, someone will drink that,” I said. “Gross, huh?”

I opened my coat, put the empty bottle in the inside pocket. I took it home with me to Bretta’s, put it on her mantel next to the red flag that leaned against the wall there, to keep. I wanted to own the beginning of a thing. Wanted to know the origin—a dirty, brown bottle—and know where water ends up. But I didn’t tell Bretta this. When she asked what the bottle was for, where it’d come from, I crawled into her twin bed, didn’t

say anything, but instead wrapped my arms around her back like I had done to Drew so many times before in the wrestling room. Stopped only when she said, “Hey, not so tight.”

The art of shrinking yourself. Always smaller, always lighter. By November the body-fat is depleted, maybe four percent left—what only a few Olympic athletes maintain—and what remains is chiefly water-weight and the minimum requirement of nutrients kept in your stomach. Why? Because the art of shrinking is the art of deception.

Say you were like me. Say your natural, healthy weight was one-sixty, and you decided you were going to wrestle one-forty-five. That means, once a week, you drained fifteen pounds of water-weight before a match. Spit, pee, sweat. Spit, pee, sweat—until after weigh-in, when you had about an hour to drink Gatorade, eat oranges, sip Nutri-lite before the match. This was the deception. I saw it on their faces when they looked at me across the mat. I was bigger than I should’ve be. I didn’t look like I weighed one-forty-five and my body confused them. I saw their fear, the nervousness. And I imagined the noise. The absence. I’d hear it when I was in control, when I became surprisingly stronger than the person I fought, when they lost adrenaline because I’d deceived them. I’d hear it then.

But that noise only lasts a few seconds. All week, all that water flowing down foreign drains, all the sweat evaporated into the air and taken up into the muddy Clermont sky—all of that for a few seconds of control.

This was worse: someone controls you.

Once, after I hadn't slept at all the night before—when, in the morning, Coach Dixon had to catch me as I fell off the scale—once, when I was caught off-guard, a boy from Mater-Dei High School beat me. What's worse—he talked to me. He whispered. Something about someone named Steven. He wanted to call me Steven—and as we were tangled together, each fighting for leverage, for a cross-arm or cradle, he called me that. Asked if I liked this, said Steven is a creep. “Steven, you're a creeper, aren't you? Oh Steven, do you like this, this creeping?” he said.

I wondered if a mistake had been made—if maybe this guy had just got my name wrong, or if he had proof of something wrong I'd done when I was younger that I'd forgotten: a neighbor's window I peeked through, a porn magazine I stole. He dug his chin into my back and brought my arm back further than the joint wanted to allow—but, more so, he made me feel like he had something on me, some secret. As we pummeled each other and dug nails and chins into each other's skin and bled from our eyebrows, I was scanning everything wrong I'd ever done. I wanted nothing more than to know what he meant—who he was talking about? what made me a creeper?—but when the Mater-Dei boy pinned me, when he held me against the rubber mat like some fish writhing in clasped talons—when he wouldn't let me up until a second after the whistle blew, I couldn't do a thing.

“What just happened?” Drew had asked, “You were limp out there.”

“He called me Steven. I don't know.”

Drew called me Steven for the next month. But the next year—the year we got really good, the year we would sweat every day, spend our weekends in the gym, our lunch periods in the locker room standing on the scale to alternate bites from an apple,

the year we forgot about anything except the release of water and the control of sweat—that year, Drew would only call me Steven if I slacked off. When I was dragging, or not feeling well, Drew whispered to me. *Steven. Pick it up.*

Do I know what held the leather in his mouth so taught? What he believed all that destruction might remedy? No. I don't. Maybe he just liked to win. That is a simple, good thing to want. But my guess is, Drew was after something more. I like to think he lived in a world where nothing too terrible had yet come down the road, but that he knew, eventually, something would. One way or another, he would be ready. Then to wake up that morning and find that nothing would ever stay still in our grasp.

Drew, all the things I could tell you now.

There was a lot I couldn't control after he died—couldn't turn my parents into people they never were, couldn't afford to take Bretta out of Clermont to someplace that didn't smell like oil. Couldn't ever tell Drew I was sorry. Couldn't get him back. Evenings when I pulled on long-underwear, then two hooded sweatshirts, snow pants, when I went into Bretta's bathroom and turned the shower on to high heat and began to do crunches on the linoleum floor—then, nothing else mattered. Not even when she pounded on the door, when I would hear her say, "Please, don't."

Summer came. Along with the season arrived the SUV's and trailers, Hot Rods and Winnebagoes, beer advertisements on television and painted cardboard signs for wet-shirt contests along the main road. Lines of cars formed all the way out into two-lane country roads—both lanes now coming in to Raceway Park, no going out.

We sold everything we could think of. We sold Coca-Colas in our garages for five bucks a can. We ordered t-shirts for that year's race and sold those. When these were gone, we took sharpies to white Fruit-of-the-Loom t-shirts and wrote "Raceway Park—Clermont, Indiana," and sold those next. We sold a lot of beer.

Sweating is easy with this heat. The poor Clermont ER saw more dehydration in that one week alone than in the rest of the year. The muddy blanket over Clermont pulled back, an impatient sun waited behind it, ready to burn our shoulders and steal the water from our bodies. I obliged, running dirt paths in the swampy woods at the hottest hour of daylight. The season was over, but that didn't mean anything. Better, in fact. No one to catch me running bleachers, no one to wonder where I went in the afternoons.

When the race fans had all arrived, Buck and Bretta wanted to walk the strip. Even though we hated the races—hated what it did to our town—the excitement was too much to avoid. Insects to the Zapper. Other summers, I would walk around Clermont nervous I might see my mother or father, re-opening wounds like a cigarette's cherry pressed into a fresh scab. But that summer, I didn't care. I weighed one hundred thirty seven pounds. When I took off my shirt and looked in the mirror, I was something from an anatomy class—my skin stretched so tight around the muscle I appeared to have no skin at all. No metal shrapnel poking through my legs for my parents to see. Looky-here. I am one hundred bucks. The real thing.

Buck's loyalty could turn bad; he was likely to kill you for hurting yourself, so I didn't tell him about training. Between the two of us, we'd probably lost six-hundred pounds of water weight from fifth grade till then. But I was after something different.

Somewhere he could not follow. We walked down the main road with the other traffic, Buck, Bretta and I.

I let go of Bretta's hand when I saw my father outside the Saloon, stubbing out his cigarette before going back inside the bar. Buck and Bretta had seen him too, stood in front of me. My father's dark shape passed behind the tinted windows and sat at the counter with a woman—my mother.

“Hey, hey,” Bretta said, tried to take hold of my hand.

I felt powerful, felt the sinews in my arms, could almost feel the shape they would form wrapped around someone's neck. My body was a predestined thing, in a perpetual state of respite between now—resting, at ease—and when it would be called to act.

“Look at that,” I said.

“They're not going to be who you remember,” Buck said. “Get that in your skull. Forget them.”

Here's what I thought, almost said it out loud: fuck them. Buck, Dixon, Bretta—even Drew. You shouldn't damn the dead—that's God's job, and I figured you ought to leave it up to him to take care of that business—but in that quick moment, I did. Damn them all. Drew: a quitter. This town chews on the weak. My parents and their races, Bretta at her Salon—the same job she'd have for the rest of her life—and Buck with, what? Compassion? I felt like the only person with any gristle to their bones.

“You're better than them,” Bretta said.

And this was a great thing for her to say after taking her boyfriend through Clermont, showing him where his lost parents hang out, beginning a new chapter for her friend's life that was free of guilt and questioning. Free of sweat. It was *almost* the

perfect line to say as she shuffled us along out of the parking lot to take me back home. But it wasn't quite perfect enough. I ran into the bar, big neon-red letters.

Mom and dad sat at the counter, together, and the image was unoriginal, sad. An empty chair between them, locals and race tourists murmuring in the crowded bar. My father wore the now forest green colored racing suit. My mother and her wry smile, drunk—happiness, happiness, happiness, happiness. From inside the bar you could still hear the growls and pops of the dragsters at the time trials. Every few minutes a growl would come and the noise in the room would halt. I pulled out the seat in the middle, between my parents, got a Pepsi from the man behind the counter.

I focused on the Pepsi in front of me. Began to think about how it would taste, if I would drink it. I hadn't tasted soda since elementary school, since I began wrestling. If either of my parents saw me, they didn't say anything. I sat there deciding if I'd drink the soda. Deciding other things, too.

I looked at my father, then my mother. They both stared back at me like they'd been looking me over for a while, remembering—and I wondered what they remembered. Which version of me? The version who cried too much as a child, or the version who said almost nothing for a month after Trent Nichols punched him in the jaw. The version who once loved them, or the version who told his teacher his parents drowned with their car in the White River. No, the version they get is this one: I'm scared shitless in a place I've never been, wanting to know where my parents have been—who they have been. I wondered if they liked that version. What should they think? What's most practical? Coincidence? Ghost? *Funny seeing you here!*

“Hello Justin,” mom said. A pop—engine sparked—growl.

She’d been beautiful when she was young, and was pretty still—fierce and quiet both, like one of the crows that fly around Clermont. Her hair was jet black, purpling. I looked at her, saying nothing, and knew I was happy to see her—really.

“Back for the races,” she said.

This was funny to hear. *A rewarding explanation*, I wanted to tell her—but didn’t. Because I was having a hard time being mad. Whenever I’ve needed to be angry it hasn’t worked, and instead the anger turns to numbness, to something blank—like a computer screen gone a digital blue.

“It’s nice you found us,” dad said.

“Hey there, Justin...” mom said. “*Woo-hoo.*”

Was I winning? Was I making a point here, sitting with them, staring at the Pepsi, silent? I waited for that absence to form—waited for the noise, when the murmurs around the bar would fade, my parent’s voices would dissolve—as if the air could be vacuumed out of the room, only a dull tinkling of glass and ice. Another dragster growled—louder, maybe an engine problem, one great moan. I waited. I thought that if I waited long enough then, eventually, the absence of sound would come and I would reach some kind of absolution. But that never happened. Years later, I would realize the absence would never happen again.

“Justin,” dad said.

“Justin, Justin.”

I missed them. Even after all that had happened, I liked sitting between them, enjoyed the way my mother smoked her Kool cigarette only halfway, though she tapped a

new one out of the pack immediately after. I saw myself in my father, his widow's peak—my own in the mirror behind the bar. I waited as long as I could because the time was temporary—special—maybe the last time I would see them. And I enjoyed as much of my own silence as possible until both of them were saying my name—“Justin, Justin”—trying to get me to say something, wanting to hear from their son, maybe wanting to know the name of the girl from The Salon they'd seen me walking with. *Bretta*, I could've told them, and she is as beautiful as her name—I could've said.

“Justin, listen to us.”

“No, no” I said. “I think you're confused. That's not me, I'm not Justin.” I said. “Steven. My name's Steven. You must have me confused with someone else.”

I stood, picked up the glass of Pepsi and drank it all. I wasn't used to carbonation then and the fizzing burned my throat, but I swallowed in chugs, kept the ice back with my teeth until the soda was gone. I felt it already—a full stomach, hydration. Like the last years of their absence culminated to that cold feeling in my gut and the empty glass on the counter.

Some nights I take out the bottle Buck and I found at the raceway, fill it to the brim with water or soda—about a liter—and drink the entire thing at once. I don't wrestle anymore. Haven't for a few years now. From where I live, you can hear the jet-engines from the raceway roaring across the night like belches. On warm nights, I open the windows and listen to the pop and growl of the dragsters, listen for explosions. I don't try to know if my parents are there, what they are doing. Instead, I fill the bottle with Pepsi, drink it, and wait for that cold, good pressure to build in my stomach.

I see Bretta walking to work some mornings and she is kind to me, smiles in a familiar way, the smile she flashed passing sellers at swap-meets, or when she met my friends when she and I were dating. She doesn't say anything about the weight I gained. Forty or fifty pounds. And the only time she gets upset, only time she says she's in a hurry, says she's late for work and has to leave, is when I correct her to call me Steven. She is very pretty, and I tell her about the house I live in now, that I have my own room, which she laughs at, though I don't mean it to be a joke, but a possibility.

Empire

Lyle keeps a dead crow under his bed, and tonight, when he believes his father is asleep, he takes the bird out of the shoe-box and holds it against his face. When Lyle found the crow in the backyard, cold and hard, he picked it up and put it in his coat pocket. The feathers feel soft on his cheek, and he rubs his nose against the beak, the way his mother once told him Eskimos kiss. One of the feathers falls off while Lyle pets the bird—they have started to do this—but he quickly finds it beneath the covers, and places it in one of his father's empty Skoal cans with the other feathers that have fallen off. Lyle takes the furthest end of a wing between his fingers, and pulls, extending the wing all the way out. The pit of the wing—where the wing meets the bird's body—would have been warm in the winter. Maybe the warmest part. Lyle sticks his finger in the cleft and lets the wing recoil back, as if the bird moves on its own, grasping Lyle's finger under wing.

The bird has dried out. The eyes are hard mucus, the skin flakes off. Lyle learned from television what happens to animals when they die; when he found the bird in the backyard, recently dead, he put it in a box outside before the body bloated, waited until all the fluids drained and the bird mummified. The bird still smelled for a week after Lyle

took it to his room, but he rubbed hand lotion on his own face to cover the smell. You could almost forget about the smell because the feathers were so soft, Lyle thought.

Lyle takes two fingers and pries open the bird's mouth. Inside, the tongue looks like a worm caught in the day's heat above earth, shriveled and brown. Lyle brings his lips near the beak, nearly kissing it, and blows air into the mouth. He takes a breath, then blows out. Twice, then again. Nothing.

He starts to doze, the bird pressed against his chest, its wings outstretched. He closes his eyes and imagines himself with a pellet gun, or his father's shotgun. He's seen more birds around the yard—big black ones flying high and in large groups. He's stood in the yard and seen hundreds of them flying the same direction, black spots staining the sky. This is on the outskirts of Clermont, Indiana and the crows here fly east towards Indianapolis, towards the warmth of the tall buildings, away from wind and predators. Lyle smiles—thinking of all those black birds collected under his bed. He holds that bird until he thinks he might be able to sleep, then puts it in the box so his father won't catch him hugging it in the morning.

Rick knows about the dead crow in his son's room. He sits on the couch in the living room and hears Lyle's bed squeak upstairs, then hears the shoe-box sliding back under the bed. Rick—a balding man who rarely takes off his Simpson Racing hat, wearing it now as he watches the television—raises Lyle by himself. Just the two of them, Rick doesn't know what to do with his son and his bird. He hasn't told anyone at the garage where he works about his son and the bird—not something he could bring up

around the guys—but he's sure the neighbors wonder about the kid, probably think something's terribly wrong with him.

Back in August, Rick was in Lyle's room and smelled something foul, something dead. He found the crow under the bed, even threw it outside—but later he got up from the couch, found the bird in the yard and put it back in the box. He wasn't sure why, but felt like Lyle needed this, needed just the one thing. Lyle smelled like women's body lotion and dead-animal for three weeks. That was before school started, and Rick doesn't know what the school would do if Lyle still smelled as bad as he did in the summer. They'd send someone to the house, he's sure. Somehow, Rick knows he shouldn't let his son keep dead crows. But kids do these kinds of things, right? No harm really—just a crow. He is glad, though, when he hears the box close.

Rick spits into a bottle and a strand of brown saliva hangs on his chin. He wipes the spittle away and scoops the last pinch of Skoal from the can with his finger and tucks it away behind his bottom lip. He works the tobacco in with his tongue and tastes the bitter peach flavor, spits again. He falls asleep like that, in front of the muted television.

He wakes to the phone ringing at four a.m. Rick's bottom lip is still full of tobacco and he's drooled spit down the side of his face, down his neck, and the left front of his white t-shirt is stained yellow from the tobacco. Walking into the bathroom before answering the phone, he spits most of the chew into the toilet and swallows the rest of it. His lip is numb when he picks up the phone—his wife, Jules, calling from California.

Rick has learned to expect the phone calls from Jules, he has learned to expect them sometime around four, the morning after a holiday or birthday. Kyle's ninth

birthday was Thursday, and Rick knew she'd call; he's embarrassed about falling asleep and about his spit-covered shirt, but it makes sense to him, her always calling at the wrong time.

Jules called after Christmas and told Rick she was in Denton, Texas. She said it was warm there and told Rick he couldn't imagine what it felt like to have Christmas without snow. Other holiday phone calls were similar: the morning after Labor Day, Rick woke early morning to the phone ringing; Jules was in Ohio, closer to Indiana than she'd ever called from. He had believed then that Jules might be working her way back, calling from places that slowly brought her back to Clermont, back to Lyle. But this call from California ruins all that. She calls and asks what they did for the holiday, asks how Lyle is and asks Rick if he will give her love to Lyle, though he never has. "Wish I could've been there for that," she says about Lyle's birthday, "Will you tell him I love him?"

Rick once told Lyle's first-grade teacher Jules died in a car crash. He described in detail a Mayflower semi-truck, not able to see the traffic stop after a hill, smashing Jules' car into chunks of metal along with Jules. He likes this story most, but there have been others: cancer—a rare, untreatable case that brought excruciating pain to Jules; a drive by shooting that left her with four bullet wounds in her chest; a ship wreck off the coast of Greenland killing over two-thousand people.

They met at a race in Florida, Rick then working on the crew of a racing team. Rick is a short man, short enough to be confused as one of the race car drivers. Jules thought she wanted his life; she enjoyed the speed of changing tires and lug nuts loosening and tightening, fast cars and the men that drove them. Rick lived in Clermont most of the year working on engines and was only a replacement crew member called out

to less than four races a year. Jules knew this, but after moving into Rick's house in Clermont she was convinced hers was a fantasy lifestyle, and took to wearing tight, colorful racing suits to amateur night at the Clermont drag strip—a trash hang, Rick said. She loved the gawks and cow-calls from the billies there, though never smiled and walked around looking bored and rich. Months into the pregnancy, when her belly started showing—to Rick's surprise and anger—Jules went to the drag strip more often, her stomach bulging out of the pink and black racing suit, not receiving the whistles as she walked by anymore, but instead awkward glances and young boys' laughing.

Jules left with the winner of the '88 Annual Clermont Drag-Shootout. Lyle was two years old. The winner drove a Plymouth Barracuda Fastback, and Rick knew Jules' decision had been made in a rush, probably without much thought beyond the Barracuda. When Jules calls, she asks about Lyle, and she asks about the armoire, the two things she couldn't fit in the Barracuda.

As a wedding gift, Jules' parents strapped a massive, cedar armoire to the bed of their truck and drove it from Texas to Indiana. Passed down from Jules' grandparents to her parents, the cabinet had been in the family for decades. Jules' father yelled at Rick to be more careful as they unloaded it from the back of the Dodge Ram, reluctant to trust Rick with the heirloom. When Jules left, she took only her clothes, leaving half of the armoire empty, the other half filled with Rick's clothes.

“You're still using the armoire, hun?” Jules asks. Rick tells her he still keeps it in their bedroom, and tells her the other side is still empty, waiting for her clothes, but Rick lies. He couldn't stand looking at the armoire, so moved it to the garage where it now acts as storage for racing magazines and dust.

On the phone, Rick fights vomit—his gut rolls with the fiberglass of tobacco inside it. His lip is still numb and he avoids saying much because what he does say is slurred. “You sound off,” Jules says. “Tell me how Lyle is.” Rick thinks about Lyle with the dead bird upstairs, how he had to bathe him with tomato juice before his first day of school. “Jules, he spends hours in the backyard, in the good weather, playing in the grass,” he says. She goes silent at this, imagining her boy happy. Rick can be generous. He doesn't tell her about the dead crow Lyle keeps under his bed. He doesn't tell her Lyle talks in his sleep and can't pass two nights without peeing the bed once.

Rick hangs up the phone—now early morning—walks into Lyle's room, and shakes him gently to wake for school. Lyle smiles and hugs his father. His too-long, frizzed hair smells like milk and wheat—a pure, animal smell. Then Rick smells the sour, acidic odor of urine, and maybe still smells the bird. The wet sheets bleed into the comforter and mattress. Lyle hugs his father tighter, burying his face into his chest.

Lyle brings things back from the creek. The first time Lyle found the creek he told his father about a hunter's stand on a ridge, where a hunter can sit low in a tree but be fifty feet above the creek because of the ridge. This means deer drink from the creek, and the chance of seeing a deer sends Lyle to the creek as often as he can. The closest he's come is finding a set of antlers: small, four point. He brought those home, and everything else from the creek: arrowheads, bones, shotgun shells, dead fish. He tugged the bumper of an old MG Roadster clear back to the house—Lyle found the roadster cut in half in the middle of the creek, thought his father might use the bumper at the shop. Rick said it must have weighed ninety pounds.

Lyle walks out the gate of their backyard, across the fields behind Rick's house where one year they grow corn, the next soy-beans, the next pumpkins—something new every year. The hike doesn't seem far now. Lyle is quiet coming into the foliage of the forest in case of deer. He finds the hunter's stand, avoiding the crunch of leaves on the forest floor, and climbs up the ladder. He sits up here—seeing all through the forest, down to the creek—watching for deer or rabbits, though the deer can always smell Lyle even before he gets out of the field. But being above everything else is enough for him. After sitting quiet long enough, the grey squirrels come out, and he hears mice and moles burrowing through the fallen leaves, he hears the smallest things.

In the summer Lyle would sometimes swim in the creek and come out naked, walk to the deer stand—still dripping—and let the breeze dry him. Though it is cold now, sweatshirt weather, Lyle thinks about how good it felt in the summer, just his skin against the wind, and he takes off his long-sleeve shirt and stands in the cool, November air. His skin feels tight like this. He shivers and faces the direction of the wind; tears begin to form in the corners of his eyes from the cold. The wind presses against his ears until it is the only thing he hears, the humming.

The first rock hits Lyle above his left eye. A line of blood streaks down into his eye so he isn't sure where the rock came from. Grunts come from his right, below the deer stand: two brothers who live in Lyle's neighborhood. The brothers are both younger than Lyle, but they have chased Lyle through the forest, around the creek before.

The second rock hits him hard in the arm, in the bicep. The boys stoop down to pick up more rocks, saying nothing. Lyle begins down the ladder, his shirt still off, taking rocks the entire way. The two back away now, ready to run, as Lyle climbs down. When

Lyle's foot touches ground, the brothers are already gone, not a sound. He bleeds from the eyebrow and welts form on his chest and back.

Down the ridge at the creek he dunks his head underwater and washes off the drying blood. He pulls handfuls of sand from the creek bed and grinds it into the cut to rub the crust off. Underwater the creek life teems around him, and with his eyes closed, Lyle imagines fish rubbing against his face, minnows flashing through his hair, crawdads with their mud-brown claws inches away from him, considering his ears. He imagines an underwater world confused by his head sticking down from the sky. His head pulled out, Lyle drips frigid water onto his chest, and he thinks it could fix anything to stick his head under again and again.

The creek is small, not twelve feet across and shallow except for a few holes that might be three-feet deep. Lyle wades up stream, feeling distant from the underwater life he sees: crawdads scared into their holes, minnows racing fast through the smooth shallows. He moves his legs slowly against the weak current, careful not to splash or make much noise, watching the world below him. He'd feel closer to them if he stuck his head down there again.

Rick's backyard is a scene from the future, some post-apocalyptic battlefield. When Lyle was seven Jules sent him a bag of small green and tan plastic army men and Rick has bought him hundreds more since then. With what Lyle brings back from the creek—bones, construction trash, dead animals, the MG bumper—he's turned the backyard into a miniature World War III.

A pile of possum bones and fish vertebrae create a fortress where tan army men hide behind skeletons; tan snipers hide in the eye sockets of possum skulls. With the arrowheads and shotgun shells Lyle finds, he builds barricades and defenses. In the summer Lyle dug a shallow trench in the corner of the yard. After the first rainfall, he returned from the creek with a five-gallon bucket full of dead creatures from the creek, and dumped fish, crawdads, turtles, and limp snakes into the shallow pool. Now army men stand in eternal firing positions on the backs of turtles and bluegills sticking out from the water.

Rick marvels at his son's microcosm, the world of plastic men and creek regurgitation. When neighbors see Rick's backyard, they see piles of bones and dead animals piled up, but a military saga unfurls among the wreckage. Rick sees that. He allows the mess mostly because he's impressed and maybe understands this about his son most: he is building, working. Soldiers fighting over invisible boundaries and nations, plastic men in the dirt fighting against the deterioration and madness of the yard. Breaking down the yard to build it back up. Lyle is building something that will last, an empire.

Lyle opens the gate, back from the creek, holding a rusty cage of some kind. The cage could have been a raccoon or possum trap at some point, but it is now bent out of shape. Rick watches from the kitchen window as Lyle pulls a dead turtle from the fish pond and slices off the two front legs with the knife Rick gave him, and pulls the legs out of the turtle. Throwing the rest of the turtle back into the shallow water, Lyle walks to the

cage and strings the turtle legs up inside with twine. The legs dangle like rabbits feet on a keychain. Lyle props the cage door open and looks up in the sky; he angles the cage up, and walks back toward the house.

“What's the idea for the legs?” Rick asks, Lyle opening the front door.

“Bait.”

Lyle guesses the black crows will eat turtle legs, makes all kinds of sense to him. Rick looks up to the limits of the window frame towards the clouds. Not a crow in sight. Nothing but the turtle legs dangling. He watches out the window and sees Grook, the neighbor's doberman, snooping through the yard.

Rick's yard is fenced all around, but Grook somehow manages to slip beneath the fence. He's told his neighbors, Pete and Elgy Clark, to keep their dog in their yard, but at least once a month the dog gets in, wrecking Lyle's work, stealing bones. Pete loves Grook, thinks he couldn't do a thing wrong. He and his wife can't have children—an early tumor in her womb—so they keep the dog and treat it like a child. They hang pictures on the fridge of Grook in a Halloween costume and wearing a Santa Claus hat. Elgy says Grook just wants to play, and is no harm. But Rick doesn't like the dog in the yard.

Rick watches Grook smell his way to the fish pond. He's ready to chase the dog out when he sees Grook pull out a rotted cod with his mouth, then swallows the fish with two chomps, gags seconds later, and vomits bones and fish filth onto his yard. Rick dislikes dogs, but hates Grook. He smiles, watching the dog hack up what should have been left alone. Lyle doesn't like Grook either. When Grook sneaks into the yard and eats the dead fish or raids the bone piles, Lyle finds his bone-towns destroyed, says, “Shit, Grook,”—one of the few times Lyle curses.

“Lyle, look at this. Grook's not feeling well,” Rick says, smiling. The dog is sick in the yard. Lyle watches from the screen door as Grook vomits again, this time hacking up dog food slush.

“That must've been one sour fish,” Rick says.

Once Grook manages to stop hacking, he sniffs the vomit. Avoiding the fish guts, he eats what he can from the dog food throw-up on the ground. Lyle runs out of the kitchen, through the back door into the yard, yelling “Shoo! Shoo! Shit, Grook!” The dog thinks Lyle wants to play, and runs back and forth through the yard, stomping on the bones, ruining Lyle's latest battle plan. Lyle forgets about shooing Grook, and now tries to hit him, attempting to smack his snout when he comes too close, but to no use. The dog keeps a few feet away from Lyle, appearing to smile at him as he pants. Lyle falls to his knees, unable to get Grook out of the yard. The dog stands in front of him, panting; Lyle, helpless. Rick calls Pete Clark. “Keep better care of that animal. I'm telling you,” Rick says, “Last time.”

Pete Clark, a strong looking man—except for the belly he's developing—with clean, crew-cut hair, walks through the back gate and Grook is digging into the yard, unearthing more bones and creating a hole. Lyle is inside. Pete smiles at the dog, “Old Grook, you silly boy. What're you getting into?” Rick walks out the back door.

“Sorry Rick,” he says, “old Grook is curious, that's true.” He pulls Grook away from his hole by the collar, then rubs his ears. Pete looks around the yard, noticing how much Lyle has collected since the last time Grook got loose.

“Great kid you got there. One of these days he will find a dinosaur egg or something. I told him he ought to take those arrowheads to the museum in Indianapolis,

make some money instead of leaving them in the dirt like that. Rain come and wash it all away.” Pete says.

Grook is invested in the hole and pulls away from Pete's hands, digging one last pull of dirt before Pete grabs his collar again. They've had Grook for seven years now, and Pete says they let him sleep in the bed with them, pour milk on his dog food because he likes that. Pete pulls the dog towards the gate and on the way both man and dog trample the bone village of the tan soldiers. The bones crunch beneath their feet and the army men fall over as if shot. Grook has destroyed the battlefield, destroyed the makings of an empire.

“Wonder how he manages to get through the fence. *Come on, good Grook. Come on,*” he says.

Pete takes the dog through the back gate towards his own house, leaving Rick standing in the yard, observing the damage. He walks to the fish pond; the mudded turtle shells are flipped and the fish flesh falls off the bone. Rick picks up a few of the fallen green soldiers in the mud. He swishes them in the pond, cleaning the mud off their helmets, and places them back in their positions. Rick puts his hand into the filthy water and pats the mud bottom until he feels a plastic soldier, picking it up and placing him back on the bloated belly of a blue-gill. The fish pond is recreated by the time Rick is done. His hands stink. He looks into the sky then, and sees the crows. Hundreds of them. They fly east, though flocks twelve at a time land on the branches of a tree or on the electrical lines for a moment before launching again to join the group. Grook knocked over the cage with the turtle legs, and Rick now picks it up, angles the opening towards the sky and hopes the birds will find it.

Rick hunted once. Jules' father lived in Texas and hunted the deer and coyote on his land. He even took a trip to Idaho once to shoot big-horn sheep, but came back with nothing. He said he preferred watching the coyotes leap into the sky after being shot anyway. After the engagement, Jules and Rick drove to Texas to meet her family, and the first father-in-law situation Rick found himself was with Jules' father leaning against a four-wheeler, waiting for coyotes to come out of the woods. Jules made Rick buy a gun for the trip—a two-hundred dollar twenty-gauge from Wal-Mart—but when Rick pulled out the shotgun, Jules' father and his friends couldn't stop laughing, Rick bringing a shotgun instead of a rifle to a coyote-shoot. Jules' father lent Rick a rifle, and after twenty minutes the coyotes came; Jules' father yelled before he shot. He yelled then at Rick to get firing. Rick's first five shots made dust, but his sixth hit. The coyote must have leapt six feet high. Rick fired again at the coyote in the dirt, wanting it to be dead, wanting to be sure. Jules' father gave him a dumbfounded look as Rick shot three more times into the fallen animal.

Rick hasn't hunted again since then, but still keeps the Wal-Mart shotgun in the closet, for protection he guesses. Sometimes after Lyle and Rick finish a watching a war documentary, his son begs him to show him the gun again. They get it out and look at it, the black stock and barrel, and Lyle always asks if he can have it when Rick dies.

Rick looks up at the crows. He heard from his boss at the garage that crows are legal to hunt anytime of year in suburban areas if causing a nuisance. Rick thinks it would save a hell of a lot of time. The crows fly over like fighter planes and Rick imagines puffs of ack-ack fire in the sky. He walks back inside the house and the

television is off; Lyle is in his bedroom. Rick hears the box come out from underneath Lyle's bed, sliding against the wood floor.

The door to Lyle's bedroom isn't locked, but Rick knocks at the door, giving his son plenty of time to put the bird away. When Lyle opens the door his father stands there with the shotgun in his hands. "Let's shoot," he says.

Rick digs into the garage through piles of car parts and cardboard boxes of ancient racing magazines. He finds an old yellow dolly, the paint flaking off, and heaves it under Jules' armoire, leaning the cabinet back, and it is heavy still with the dolly. Lyle follows with the gun and they leave out the backyard into the farmer's field, Rick dragging the dolly and armoire through the dirt and broken corn stalks. He finds a spot out of eyesight of other houses and sets the armoire down against an incline in the hill, sure no stray shotgun pellets will hit anything else. Lyle has never fired a gun, and walks carefully with the shotgun away from his body, his arms straining with the weight of it. They walk fifty feet from the armoire, and the midwestern sky is low as always, making Rick feel enclosed. He wants to shoot holes in the clouds. He takes the gun from Lyle, inserts a yellow .20 gauge shell, hands the gun back to him.

"Shoot," he says.

Lyle eyes the loaded gun. He's seen them do it on the military channel, but can't remember the right way to shoot. Rick says nothing else. The armoire stands in the middle of the field, and Lyle stares at it for a moment, then suddenly gut-fires the gun, and dust plumes into the air in the direction Lyle aimed, twenty feet from the cabinet. Crows fly out of the trees at the noise, away from Rick and Lyle.

Rick reloads the gun, hands it back to Lyle, and he fires again, closer to the armoire. They reload and fire the gun three more times, Lyle never able to hit the cabinet. Rick wants to see a hole in the doors, wants to see wood chips shoot out the back. He grabs the gun from Lyle, loads a shell, fires, misses—loads again, then blows a basketball-size gash into the gut of the armoire. The wood splinters, Rick loads and fires again, this time hitting the ornately carved top, blowing a hundred small pellet holes into the woodwork. He doesn't think much about Jules, just watches the pellets chip away at the piece of furniture in the field, eating away the wood.

Twelve more times, Rick shoots the armoire like he did the coyote, making sure of its death.

“Here,” he says, hands Lyle the hot gun. “Walk right up here, get as close as you want. Further. Alright, you can hit it there.” Lyle raises the gun and fires a shot into the side of the door. Rick shows him how to reload, then Lyle raises the gun and fires again, hitting the armoire again. Lyle reloads the gun himself, opening the stock over his knee. Fires, hits, repeat. Rick watches his son move further away from the armoire, missing less often and getting further away until he's hitting the armoire five out of every six shots, thirty yards away. Lyle empties the box of shells. They leave the armoire riddled in the field, Rick towing the empty dolly behind him, leaving the fine cedar to the rain.

This November evening, after Rick and Lyle clean the gun and eat dinner, Lyle is in his room and Rick is on the couch watching a Korean war documentary. Rick gets up, walks to Lyle's room and opens the door; Lyle is on his bed thumbing through a National Geographic magazine. Rick walks over, sits on the edge of the bed, reaches under and pulls the box out. He removes the lid and takes the dead crow out, petting the bird twice

on the head. Without saying anything he hands the bird to Lyle, kisses his son on the forehead, and turns off the lights on his way out. Lyle presses the bird against his chest

Saturday morning, Lyle wakes up and he has held the bird all night. Steel-black feathers are littered on the comforter, the pillow, one in Lyle's blonde hair. The nearly naked bird's skin flakes off onto the brown sheets like dandruff. The skin around the head begins to fall off, revealing the skull's connection to the beak. Its wing has been crushed in the middle of the night, almost broken in two. By the time Lyle collects the feathers, the Skoal can is full, and the arrowhead tips of feathers poke out of the side when he shuts the lid. The crow deteriorates fast, Lyle helpless against it.

Outside he surveys the damage Groom left. His empire is scattered, the bones and men disarrayed on the ground like the feathers in his bed. The morning is grey, the sky the same color as the neighbor's cemented drive-way, and Lyle feels helpless against the deterioration of the weather, the bird, his empire. He sees the men his father dug out of the pond and returned to the fish's backs. He starts there, at the pond, and works his way around the yard returning things to their proper places, taking the whole morning to rebuild. He fears his father is mad at the mess Groom made, thinks rebuilding the battle scenes will tidy the place up. Lyle knows the yard looks terrible, but he also believes that when the empire is complete, when the enemy has been defeated and the yard successfully won, he and his father will turn it into something wonderful. A garden. Or they will grow grass like the neighbors, plant flowers around the base of the fence. Once the war is over they'll be able to turn this place around, he thinks. He will get rid of the

bones, but not before the empire is built, not before he can keep Grook away long enough to finish the battle. He thinks of a garden, and sets the men back in their positions.

Rick—out of the shower, dressed in a clean white t-shirt, with a fresh dip packed under his lip—feels the newness these Saturday mornings bring. He remembers the armoire from last night: the soreness in his shoulder from the recoil gives him a satisfaction. Saturday mornings bring this contentment, and the world is right. Then he sees the dog, and everything is wrecked.

He sees from the kitchen window Grook is in the yard digging into the fish pond. Lyle stands in the corner of the yard throwing rocks at the dog, though no matter how big of rocks Lyle throws, the huge dog doesn't seem to notice. Then the dog is running towards Lyle, then back to the hole. Lyle stops throwing stones and kneels, covering his head with his hands.

“Dammit,” Rick says.

On his way out Rick leaves the door open. He runs right at Grook, thinking he will hurt him, but Grook leaps away before Rick can lay into him. The dog runs past Rick, through the open door, into the house, smells his way to the kitchen, then finds Lyle's room. Rick and Lyle follow the dog inside, but while Rick follows the dog to the bedroom, Lyle runs up the stairs.

The dog has already found the bird and is chewing on the dry carcass when Rick finds him in Lyle's room. The dog must have smelled it out. The few feathers the bird still has stick out of Grook's mouth, and the dog's slobber works on the dry skin. The incident is quiet, Rick not yelling, Lyle nowhere to be found—only the dog's nails on the

hardwood floors. Rick chases Grook out the back door and has him cornered when Grook's gut explodes. Rick hears the gunshot afterwards echoing across the fields. Lyle stands with the shotgun on the porch.

The dog yelps, the bird still in his mouth. He crashes to the ground, his insides blasted on the fence. Grook works his paws at the ground, trying to stand, attempting to walk—some instinct to move on and away. He turns his head to his torso which has been shot away, only intestines and blood showing. He whines and licks the foot-wide wound once before collapsing. His chest heaves. Rick is close enough to see Grook's eyes looking at him, sees agony, the desire to live.

Silence now. Silence like always after a gun. Lyle leans the gun on the porch and walks to Grook, kneels beside him and removes the bird from the dog's mouth.

Pete Clark is the first one out of the house, and the first to see Grook lying open on the ground—he walked out of his house smiling, thinking Rick and Lyle were shooting furniture again—but his face turns sick when he sees the dog bleeding, Lyle standing over him. He runs over, kneels, puts his head against the dog's shoulders and presses his hand against the open wound, all the time saying, “*No, no, no, no, God no, Grook.*” He lifts Grook's head up and places it in his lap. He looks up at Lyle.

“Don't let Elgy see, don't let her come out. Don't let her.”

Lyle stands there petting the bird, drying the drool off with his shirt. A smudge of soot is on his cheek from the gun. Rick watches him, and thinks he feels compassion, he thinks he has never loved his son more than that at that moment, wishes he could give his son all the different birds in the world.

The crows come out then, and Rick wonders if they come for the dog. Do crows eat meat after all? The turtle legs are untouched. So many damn crows, Rick thinks. He walks inside and puts in a fresh dip, then grabs a box of yellow shells out of the cupboard and is back in the yard. Elgy comes out of the house and sees Grook laying dead. She lets out a moan, a moan of death and grief. Rick puts the first cartridge in the gun. Pete brings out their softest blankets, the blankets from their bedroom, and he wraps Grook in them. Rick fires the first shot into the air. A single crow falls from the sky. The Clarks cry more, moaning as they care for the dog. Rick fires again and another crow drops. Lyle is running, running towards the birds falling, and he picks them up, carries them in his arms like a bouquet of black flowers. He returns to his father, crow blood smeared on his face, drops the bundle of crows at his father's feet, and runs back into the yard to collect more.

Fort Jericho

Scotty watched the helicopter spin and sputter through the open spots in the treeline before it slammed into a ring of pine trees on the south moraine. The chopper from Lakeside Sawmill had been passing over Scotty and the other two boys—Mack and Art—all summer, taxiing between the sawmill and town. That morning the boys saw it when they were in the river, again when they peaked the ridge on the east side of the woods. The buzzing drone was never far, and then—silence, all at once.

They had forgotten about the chopper until Scotty pointed out the plane had stalled. The back rudder coughed grey exhaust, then quit. The whole of it swooped back and forth, while the silhouette of a man inside swiveled his head side to side. Sammy pointed out the block-orange letters on the tail of the helicopter—*LAKESIDE SAWMILL CO*. It began to spin. Once, twice, out of control. Then the trees blocked the boys' sight. Only the percussive thwacking of blades against the tops of pine. The final bang of the helicopter echoed across the valley in slumps.

“Looks like it’s already started,” Mack said. He acted calm, as if he expected the crash. “They’ll all be coming down soon.”

Mack was the oldest, then Art and Scotty. They carried machetes in leather cases strung around their backs. Their shirts wrapped around their heads like handkerchiefs. Their belts held an assortment of multi-tools, pocketknives, matches—whatever their fathers wouldn't notice. All summer, hacking at saplings and whittling the white tips to sharpness, throwing the spears into rotted stumps of trees. Practicing for what Mack called the End All, when not just Scotty and Art's fathers would lose their jobs, but everyone would lose their jobs. Throwing a spear would be important then.

Both Art and Scotty's fathers had worked for Lakeside Sawmill, and both had been terminated that spring. The second string of cuts that rocked the valley that year. So when Art and his father came to Scotty's house, the two boys would play outside in the growing dusk while the men inside drank too many Coors and smoked too many cigarettes.

When his father had been fired, Scotty felt the blow as hard as his old man, or he tried to. So when Art came over, Scotty wanted to talk about the sawmill, wanted to curse and spit at the name, talk about how unfair the whole business had been. This was the conversation around the house. This was what he knew. He stole cigarettes from the stash in the drawer and tried to convince Art to hack and cough one down with him. But Art wouldn't. Said that it was just a job, nothing you could do. He didn't understand, not like Scotty did—you take a man's job away, you take away something else, too.

Mack was different. He told Scotty the lay-offs weren't stopping. By the time they were old enough to have jobs, people would be living in the wild, would be shooting their own food. Those that knew how, anyway. The rest of them would just keel over and die in

the cold.

The boys learned to live in the woods. They would walk quiet. They would catch red-backed crawdads out of the river with twine wrapped between forked branches. They would build small fires in pits where they boiled the crawdads in tin cans and dared each other to suck the brains out. The blood of bluegills they would streak beneath their eyes like war paint. “End All,” they would say, yip and yell when the spears were released from their hands towards the rotted stumps, each time the spears closer to where they’d aimed.

When the boys found it, the helicopter was upside down. Holding purchase above the ground by pine branches cambered to their limit, smoke rose from the tail. A gap in the forest canopy had been hacked out by the now weed-whacked rotors, allowing a circle of sunlight on the area. Splintered metal and wood littered the forest floor. The boys walked out from the shadow of forest onto the lit scene of the crash. They held their spears with two hands, walked quiet. Scotty walked close with Mack and approached the front of the downed chopper—Art approached from the back—like they had planned. Mack whispered, “He could be dead.”

The man inside the cockpit was upside down, too, and stuck. He whimpered between grunts, tried to free himself from the straps, his dark hair flopping away from his red scalp. A liquid trickled down from the fuselage, drops of it spattered on his forehead. The shattered glass glinted on the ground from the runoff fuel. If the pilot freed himself he'd fall right away, break his neck on the glitter.

They stood twenty feet from the cockpit, Scotty ducked behind Mack. “Hey guy, you dead or alive?” Mack asked

The man looked up from the strap he'd been working with. He opened his mouth and coughed from some of the liquid running down his chin, then spat. He squirmed again in the straps. A muffled whimper. "Hello? Who's there?" He coughed. "I'm stuck." Mack walked a few feet forward, in clear sight for the man, Scotty following behind. "Boys, help me out. I think my arm's broke." The liquid spattered down in even drops, pattering on the man's forehead. The man blinked his eyes to keep it out. "This gas is getting inside me," he said.

Art was at the tail of the plane, not showing himself—like they'd planned. He was reinforcements. While Mack talked with the man, Art stayed low, quiet beneath a hedge. He inspected the metal on the plane and the upside-down block-orange lettering along the tail.

Mack whispered to Scotty and said back to the man, "You got gas on you, guy. We can't come close. This whole thing might catch on fire. Does it taste like gas?" He wiped his nose on his arm and stepped back. Scotty was crouched down behind Mack, the spear thrust out in front of him. He didn't recognize the man. He wasn't one of them his father would have over after work. But the man wore the Lakeside Sawmill logo on his shirt. "That's one of them," Scotty said.

Art broke his silence by banging on the metal tail with his spear. Twice, shaking the frame. The man yelled, swallowed more gas. Art walked to the front of the plane and peered inside. "You're soaked," Art said to the man.

The fuel streamed onto the man's face. His arms were locked tight into the straps so that his hands couldn't reach his face, so he shook his head violently back and forth, spurting the gas out of his mouth, blowing it out of his nose. His eyes were bloodshot.

Each time he spoke, more gas went into his mouth, so he cut his words short. “Help.” “A knife.” “Please.”

“Hey, guy,” Mack called. “Scotty says you fired his dad. That true?”

Black oil leaked then—more viscous than the fuel. It dribbled onto his chin and forehead, some up his nose. He sneezed and the blackness spattered across his face. He grunted long through a closed mouth, wriggled his hardest to be free from the straps, the helicopter shaking, but they held to. His eyes closed tight, his lips pursed, he breathed hard through his nose, sending small black geysers up at each breath. He shook, whimpered through a closed mouth.

Mack reached up and grabbed onto a hanging rotor. “You just have to shake your head or nod your head.” The rotor bent at his weight and he bounced the blade, shaking the helicopter some, sending a downpour of the fluid. “You just gotta nod,” Mack called. “You fire his dad?”

Shaking the rotor stopped much of the flow of oil and gas. The stream abated to just a couple drops at a time. The man could breathe easier, opened his mouth and gasped for air. “Crazy,” he mumbled, coughed. “This stuff is filling me up.” He looked sick.

The three boys huddled with their arms around each other’s bare shoulders, their spears in their hands, their kerchiefed foreheads pressed together. Mack looked at Art and Scotty, his face straight, serious. He clasped their shoulders. “This is your game,” he told them. “Whatever you two want. We didn’t see any of this.”

Scotty reached at his belt and pulled out a book of matches he kept for the crawdads. He held it on his palm and reached out. His hand shook, but he faked like he was weighing the matches in his hand. Art took his hand off Scotty’s shoulder and backed

away. He looked at Mack to say something, but Mack kept his gaze on the matches.

Scotty opened the book, ripped out a match and struck it. They watched the flame spark, then form at the tip of the match.

“You can’t,” Art said.

“Shut up,” Mack said.

Scotty faced the helicopter and looked at the man. The match reached closer to his fingertips and heated his fingertips. The longer he could hold it, the better. The more that man would squirm. The match burnt out in his fingers, and he dropped it.

“I want to watch. Just a little longer, then we can go,” Scotty said.

Art and Mack stood on either side of him, Mack’s arm around his shoulders, watching. The man's face was black and red, the red skin veining like it would burst. “I’m going to be sick.” He coughed up black bile. It ran down his face then dripped from his hair onto glass shards beneath him.

“That's good,” Scotty said. Mack squeezed his shoulder.

“You did good,” Mack said.

They ran into the woods, bare feet on the brown pine needles, throwing their spears against trees, then picking up the dulled pikes and running again to catch up. They heard the man in the helicopter yell for them to please stay, wait. He begged them. They scuttled deeper into the forest and as they ran they croaked deep noises from their guts. Quietly first, then they belched the dark sounds from their throats in a roar as they threw their spears harder and hacked at the air with machetes.

And as Scotty gripped the whittled stick in his hand, he imagined his father

calling him into the living room in the coming weeks, patting the cushion next to him and asking his son to tell him again how much gasoline the man from Lakeside swallowed. And Scotty would tell him how much, tell him what the vomit looked like running down his face. He'd tell his father how scared-shitless the man had been and how Sammy had watched. And he already knew what his father's words would be, could hear him say them already, "You did good."

Fires

Oak trees grow in their living rooms. The trunks break through their ceilings, into their bedrooms and hallways, and split open their roofs. A creek runs through one of their kitchens. A bull elk enters the front door of a Tudor home, stops and pisses onto the carpet in a constant yellow stream. They are not here to see this. *They* never existed. The couples that were supposed to buy these houses—supposed to make love in these bedrooms and raise children on green, fresh sod yards—never arrived.

At one point, the government commandeered northwestern farmland and began building neighborhoods. Pricing new homes at a fifth of the normal value, they hoped people would buy again—like a heart defibrillator for the economy. But after years of building—and no one buying—the government men picked up and went. They left bulldozers in their lots. Furnished houses went unlocked. Entire neighborhoods were abandoned in the empty places of the upper Midwest, and the houses sat there as if the people who'd lived in them had vanished one autumn afternoon. Everyone gone—just like that.

Standing on his porch, Polston Mayweather looks down on brick chimneys rising out of a two hundred acre canopy of forest, the land his grandfather once farmed. It's April, and this same time decades ago his grandfather would've been perched at his tiller, riding endless aisles of moist soil. Now, the combine is all but scrapped—the dinosaur hulk parked in the yard, sagging into the ground. As the trees thicken and their branches crack through windows, the houses appear to be growing.

Polston doesn't know what has happened in the world away from this land. The radio—when he flips it on—buzzes white noise. The tuner scans through the frequencies, and it would continue endlessly if he didn't switch the thing off, no longer compassing any hope that it might pick up a signal and let him know what has happened. Instead, there's only silence. The lights switched off in a dark room and no one around to tell him what's happened.

This evening, the air feels electric. A tin can hangs on the top of a wire-post and spins in the wind, making a rattling noise. The trees don't so much sway as they grumble, from the roots up. Polston wouldn't usually be bothered by the wind or the temperature change or the static-electric air, because—as the land returns into itself—it behaves in strange ways, and he's trusted its process—its purging. But this evening feels altogether different.

The sky to the east purples. What looks like a storm but isn't. Traveling maybe fifteen miles a day—always closer—the thickness of sky is like a soup. He's noticed the wall for the last week, first appearing as a faint discoloration, then growing more and more bulbous and purple. Even when the wind blows eastward, the bubble approaches yet. You can't see past the front—only a burning purple void. He can't know what it

might mean, can't flip on the weather channel to explain the haze in the east. Instead, Polston stands on his porch and waits for whatever is coming.

With his only neighbor, Norris Abrams—whose grandfather farmed the next plot over—they go into the swallowed neighborhood to trace a column of smoke that has risen above the tree line the past several nights. The smoke curling through the canopy in the evenings can only mean somebody is out there, somebody alive.

Polston lives alone. Only on rare occasions does he see Norris, or Norris' wife and daughter—Phyllis and Sandra. When something in the neighborhood needs checked on, or if a pump at either of their houses breaks, or if either of them has seen or heard anything new, they meet to talk. Like last week, when Polston walked to Norris' house to ask him if he'd seen the sky to the east. And again the next day, when he noticed the smoke. Otherwise, the two of them leave each other more-or-less alone. Much in the same way their grandfather's must have. In such solitude, he finds himself wanting more of it.

He is older than Norris by several years. They've both let their hair grow long during the winter—for warmth, or from negligence—and now graying streaks run down the lengths. "Hippie," Polston said when Norris showed up that day with his hair braided.

They carry shotguns going into the neighborhood. For a while—after the radio went dead—they sometimes came across people who'd somehow found the houses, even so far north. But these people were half-mad or dead by the time Polston and Norris got to them. Unable to give the men any news about the outside world, instead these people

were too weak to do anything but crawl into the living rooms of Tudor homes, fall asleep and expire.

Their bones still litter the rooms. Polston and Norris have spray-painted black X marks across the front doors of these houses.

The snow has melted save for a few dirtied patches of white in shadowed groves. They walk the muddy path into the woods. Adolescent hickory trees break through the houses' rotted roofs. Crows fly up into the tops of the trees, then jump down the branches into the houses—the birds' homes now built of two-by-fours and Fibramat insulation. Corn and soybean stalks peak through the brush, descendents of their grandfathers' crops. When the government men came, they paved roads and cul-de-sacs here, and Polston and Norris find hunks of blacktop littering the forest floor like cooled magma.

By the creek, a pair of neon-colored running-shoes hang by the laces from a branch. Still wet, dripping. A pair of damp shorts are splayed across a stump. Farther on, an extinguished fire—smoke rising from the center.

Beneath a blue tarp hung over a branch—forming a tent—they find a young woman. Apparently sleeping. Norris raises his shotgun towards the tent, but Polston signals him to wait, looks in the tent. Inside, the down mummy bag is pulled up to the woman's shoulders, her hair short and tangled. Her calves are outside of the sleeping bag, and they are large and muscled. Scabs decorate her feet, some still issuing blood. The collected heat inside the tent vents through the open flap. A warm, doughy smell. The woman's lips curl. "Oh," Polston says.

"Who are you?" the woman says—calm, sitting up and leaning on her elbows.

"That's a question for the person with the gun," Polston says.

The woman's name is Kay Acton. Polston and Norris walk down the path as she dresses in the tent. The horizon is pink in the gaps of trees as they wait. She returns, running barefoot, wearing another pair of shorts and a yellow t-shirt despite the cold. She unties her shoes from the branches where she hung them after swimming the creek that afternoon.

"Why didn't you stay in one of the houses?" Polston says.

"I was choosing," she says. "I wanted one with a red door."

She tells them she ran here from the east, from the coast. She catches the men looking at her scabbed feet—the lines of dried blood running down her ankles to her toes. She stuffs on her still-damp shoes to hide her feet.

"Are you running from that?" Norris says, pointing his barrel towards the eastern sky.

"No." she says. "I like that one, though," motioning to a house with green shutters, sassafras trees and milkweed growing in the yard.

"Well if you're not running from it, maybe you can tell us what the hell it is," Polston says.

Kay lifts a flat hand to her forehead as if blocking sunlight that isn't there, looks to the pink sky. The edges of her lips turn downwards, creases form at her forehead—then she bends over and coughs, a deep hacking followed by a red colored spittle dripping from her mouth. She spits, takes a deep breath and relaxes. She faces Polston and smiles.

"Beautiful, in a way. Isn't it?"

Polston was a young child when the world began to crash. First, the animals disappeared from the suburb where he lived with his parents. Songbirds were cherry-picked from their perches on telephone wires, snatched up and stuffed into bags by hungry, roaming teenagers. Then the dogs could no longer be heard barking in the park, or from behind neighbors' closed fences. Killed, then devoured over trash-can fires in alleys behind libraries and Laundromats. He remembers the dogs' yelps at night, like coyotes kicked in the stomach. Quick, sharp deaths.

When the looting began—bricks chucked through windows, grocery stores emptied, truck drivers stuck in the neck with screwdrivers—his parents moved Polston to his grandfather's farm where the government had recently abandoned a housing project in the opaque flatness of soybean fields. He remembers the houses when he first moved here: weeds beginning to grow in the front lawns, crumbling pavement and his grandfather patrolling the neighborhood as if keeping watch for the raccoons that once rooted into his crops. When his grandfather told him no one lived in the houses, he was first upset that he'd have no one to play with. Then he thought the houses could be his—a thousand rooms to hide in, explore.

Soon after, his grandfather taught him how to kill a man one night. He'd woke Polston by nudging his ribs with the gunstock, then kept watch out a slit in the window blinds while he dressed. Killing was an easy thing, his grandfather showed him—walking quietly around a house from which moaning sounded through open windows. Inside a pale man was on his knees, clutching his stomach with his forehead pressed to the hardwood, groaning through closed lips. He looked like an animal, glaring up for an instant to see Polston and his grandfather standing there. The man parted his lips as if to

speak. And then, as easy as you'd scratch an itch or yawn or put a plate of food in front of someone, his grandfather fired a slug into the young man's ribs.

He wasn't a cruel man.

"*You've* got to survive," he said, stubbing a finger into the center of Polston's chest. Later that night, they spray-painted a black X on the door of the dead man's house, then barricaded the windows and entryways with two-by-fours.

The old man had worked for the Forest Service in an earlier life, and he often told Polston about the smoke from those fires. When they dropped him behind a fire line to cut fire-lines, you couldn't see what direction the fire was coming from. Couldn't see any of the other men with you, or the sun.

"A glowing mist," he'd said. "You do as much as you can to stop the fire, to get everyone out safely. But in that blindness," he said, "You learn a hard realization. Know what that is?" He didn't. "We all run," he'd said. "We're damn good at it."

Run, kill, sweat, bleed—whatever it takes—*survive*.

Polston looks to the purpling east and imagines this is what it will be like when the wall finally arrives: like smoke. You will not know which direction the sun comes from. You will not be able to find your friends. If they are alive, if you are alive. But you will know to run.

But sometimes he likes to imagine his grandfather young, running between burning trees—through smoke—grasping a shovel and coughing as he stops to dig into the earth, to halt the fires. Those old muscles returned new—arms and legs jolting, his skin alive and stretched—he imagines him brave and compassionate both, willing to die

for someone. A person altogether different than the one who shot a starving man in the middle of the night to teach his grandson a lesson.

Polston's parents never returned for him. Like those who were supposed to move into the new houses on his grandfather's land, they never showed up. They're now as distant and unresponsive to him as the people and the world he's lumped into the category: "gone." Like his grandfather's dead body when Polston dug a ten-foot trench and dropped the limp, sheet-wrapped bundle into the ground, and—without thinking about anything in particular—burned a black X over the upturned soil with old railroad planks.

Since then, he's done a pretty good job at taking his grandfather's advice. He grows vegetables until the harvest season, then cans them for winter. He raises rabbits in a shared wire-compound with Norris and his family. In his garage, he lifts metal scrap pieces from the combine up and down, keeping his muscles taught. He doesn't make close friends with Norris or Phyllis. He tries to keep to himself. And he knows—if he has to—he can pull a trigger to kill someone if that's what it takes to survive.

But in some way this mindset of survival sometimes gives Polston a feeling of numbness, and entire days will pass when he's unable to remember thinking about anything at all. Just a blank ritual of daily actions like bathing, eating, sleeping. More and more he feels as if he's caught in some place that is part reality and part dream. And more and more he wants that feeling to stop.

Kay has chosen the largest house in the neighborhood, a three story brick manor with winding stairs and ochre turrets, ivy growing out the windows and through the

plumbing. This was the house the master architect from California designed for his wife and kids to live in—another family who never showed up. Kay found a street sign still holding purchase in the ground, and she calls her home San Juan Avenue—nailed the sign to the head post of the front door.

On some evenings, Polston finds himself walking to Kay's door to bring a plate of stew or blankets or a picture of the old farm—or, sometimes, he just comes to say hello. They talk about old movies Polston remembers from childhood that Kay doesn't. Or they walk through the decrepit house, running hands along the banisters covered in sawdust from termites, against the viscous windows sagging into their frames, guessing at what kind of people might've lived here if things would've ended differently. This is the world they live in: guess-work. But no matter the reason he gives for coming to her house, the conversation ends the same way each time. After a pause in conversation: "You really don't know what's happening to the sky?"

"I don't."

"That's bullshit."

And he leaves angry, crashing whatever plate he's brought against the side paneling when Kay thanks him for bringing blankets, tells him she's tired and he should go back home.

On other evenings she is sick when he comes to her house, like she is tonight. She fevers in her mummy bag and vomits at ten-minute intervals while Polston sits by her on the floor. She coughs and hacks up bloody spittle. He goes to the creek and back to wring a washcloth for her forehead. And when he returns, he fights an overwhelming instinct

when he sees Kay laying on the floor to see her in the same way he looked at the body of the starving man his grandfather shot.

“Kay, what *is* it?” he says, even though she’s sick. “What’s happened in the east?”

“Isn’t it the most beautiful sky you’ve ever seen?” she says in far-away voice.

“Tell me.”

As she drifts to sleep, he does something that surprises himself: he takes her hand in his and rubs his thick calloused fingers across her dewy skin, like he’s touching something he shouldn’t. She opens her eyes and smiles, then retracts her hand.

“It might stop,” she says. “Wait and see if it gets any closer.” As if the sky were a scar that might disappear if ignored long enough.

After she falls asleep, Polston walks from room to room in the massive empty house. On the third floor, he looks out the window and sees movement. Across the dark wash of green, the bushes shake and wave, shadows flicker and halt. Soon he makes out the shapes of raccoons and possums. He hears scratching on the door downstairs from something’s antlers. A pack of five or six deer amble around the house, down the path.

They must be running, flushed out. Some instinctual knowledge to move on and away. As he watches the animals disappear into the darkness, he feels a gripping urge to follow them, as if he’s tethered to their movement. Yet there’s also this contrasting thought: fear might be a silly thing to trust.

He brings Kay to the Abrams' house to meet Sandra and Phyllis. Norris looked embarrassed when he walked to Polston's house to ask if his family might get a chance to "see the woman," as if she were some kind of creature to be gawked at.

The Abrams' keep a radio on their kitchen sink where it plays static throughout the day. The radio never picks anything up, but Phyllis and Sandra like to pretend they are hosts, and they keep the static turned up. This evening, in the wash of white noise from the radio, Phyllis and Sandra are teaching Kay to play Euchre at the kitchen table while Polston and Norris wash dishes and scrape compost for the rabbit shed.

Kay is trying to understand the game but is failing, Norris is refreshing his cup with home-stilled whiskey, and Sandra—losing interest in cards—pretends to swim on the tiled floor when a voice comes over the radio. They have kept the volume high so the static is loud enough to be heard. Now the voice on the radio booms.

*...FROM FIRE AND GNASHING THE ALL POWERFUL EXUBERATED BY FLAME
CRASHING DARKNESS. ABOVE ALL YE UNDEAD MUST STAY... FROM THE
COWARDICE OF THINE ENEMIES, UP FROM THE DEPTHS, STAY.... UNDEAD OF
THE ALL POWERFUL, ALMIGHTY, YE WHO LAST, STAY. GOD WILL COMMAND...
STAY. STAY. STAY. LIKE A BRILLIANCE... ALMIGHTY COMETH LIKE THE THIEF
IN THE SKY, THE POWER OF ANCIENT... STAY. COMETH HIS ARMY, COMETH
HIS SKY. COMETH HIS RADIANCE... STAY AND REMAIN...*

And then the static again. Sandra begins to cry and Norris picks her up, takes her into the bedroom. "Daddy, it scared me!"

They sit in the growing silence, the breeze now colder through the window. Polston listens to the white noise—as if expecting to hear more, another flint of radio wave somehow picked up from hundreds of miles away, caught on their weak transistor radio. Kay shuts off the static.

“What’s happening, Kay?” he says.

He looks at her as if she’s the one who causes the sky to change. As if it’s her fault Sandra is crying, her fault the little girl looks at the sky each morning and asks her parents to explain.

“Tell us *something*,” Phyllis says. “You have to know something. What’s happened to everyone?”

Norris returns with Sandra from the bedroom, her eyes red from crying. Kay stands and asks to hold Sandra. When the girl is in her arms, she hugs her rather than holding her up, puts her hand on the girl’s hair and rocks her.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t keep the radio on anymore,” she almost whispers, as if to a child. Then, “If you hear anything else, it will only be worse.”

The sky from the east has swallowed the river Polston used to be able to see from the roof of his house. Now he sees only a pink mist, fading in the evening light. Another month. That’s how long he figures it will take to reach the woods. Then another day to consume their houses. Polston thinks about Sandra sometimes, how she might escape. They haven’t had gasoline in years. Kay is sick more and more, though tonight she feels well enough to sit on the roof with Polston, waiting for the stars.

“Will you run with me?” she says.

They run the deer paths in the woods. They run through briars that cut at their calves. She is faster—even after being sick—and does not get winded like Polston. He can't remember the last time he ran. Owls start and hoot at them in the branches above. The moon—near to the earth in its cycle—is like something to get closer to. He loses her. He finds her at the creek, bent over and heaving. When she sees him, she walks into the creek and lies down face-first, fighting the current by clinging to a boulder. Her pale calves are like the flashing of trout's bellies underwater. She lifts her face from the water, walks to Polston, who's still catching his breath.

In the glow of moonlight she removes her shirt.

There are purple spots on her stomach. Dark, oval splotches make it look as if she's been punched. But they aren't bruises. Four or five of them stain her stomach. Another on the bottom of her left breast. Like dark rocks protruding from her insides.

"I'm sick," she says. "I'm getting so sick."

They lie together in the living room of San Juan Avenue, covered by the down mummy bag. Polston brings her warm body closer to his. He thinks he can feel it, can feel the sickness moving from her body to his. A sponge sopping up spilled oil. He covers her with his arms. It's as if he's letting go of something, giving in to one side of a compromise. Like a coin flipped in the air but grabbed before fate has chance to decide where to fall. Because the choice seems apparent then, holding her, trying to get closer to her body and sickness both.

"This wasn't like before," Norris says. "There was screaming."

They stand at the kitchen sink running blades into the six or seven rabbits Norris killed that afternoon, slumping the guts into a plastic sack to later feed the fishery. Polston slices a cut from the breast bone to the anus—then works to peel the fur that comes off in ripping noises.

“I thought you got rid of the radio?”

Norris slumps down his rabbit and runs water over his hands. He opens a drawer and pulls out a duct-taped radio—random wires connecting to a pair of headphones. By tinkering with the transistor radio and a voice recorder, he’s figured out a way to send signal on the airwaves. Like a weak CB radio.

“I must have been calling for an hour before I got through to anyone,” he says. “After that, I heard this one loud scream, and then a sort of moaning. So I shut the damn thing off.”

“Maybe we should keep trying.”

“We’re going to leave.”

After his grandfather died, Polston thought about leaving. But then the television went off, the radio was silenced. No more cars drove by to look at the ruined neighborhoods, or to ask for directions. Pretty soon they didn’t know anything, and Polston—at one point—considered leaving. But Norris figured they had it pretty good: shoot a few deer each autumn, plant a garden, play a lot of cards. All the silence they’d ever wanted. Let the world be, as long as it kept away from them.

“Just going to leave Kay here?” Polston says.

Just then Norris slips and his knife punctures the stomach of the rabbit he's gripping, releasing a foul odor into the kitchen. "Shit," he says, and begins eviscerating the animal's insides to save the clean meat.

"How much longer do you think she'll last?" he says.

The blood pools on the kitchen counter and runs down the lip to the floor, splattering the men's pants and shoes. The rabbits' guts are the same color as the splotches staining Kay's stomach.

"Not long, maybe," he says. "But I'm staying here."

"And what good will that do?"

"It'd be good if no one had to be left alone."

He moves Kay out of San Juan Avenue into his own house, away from the neighborhood. She stays in bed most of the time, and he does his best to keep her comfortable. The Abrams have agreed to stay another week before leaving, and the few times Kay manages to get out of bed is when Phyllis brings Sandra to see her, and they spend afternoons walking to and from the rabbit shack.

This morning Polston wakes to a bright light shining through the window onto their bed. The room seems to be glowing from the light, and—walking outside—he can see nothing past the houses but the pink sky, towering above everything. It's as if—in the night—the wall has moved much closer to them. For the first time the abyss of the thing feels real to Polston—feels inevitable.

When he first tries to wake Kay, she doesn't respond. He puts a hand on her shoulder, her neck—but she doesn't move at first. Dread settles in his stomach, a literal

aching, at the thought that she might not wake up at all. He bends to put his head against her chest, to feel her breathing. Her breaths are short, wheezing—but she’s alive. He thinks he can smell it then—the poison, the smell of decay, as if it somehow leaks through her pores, filling the room. A few days left? Is that all?

“Kay, wake up,” he says.

She groans beneath the quilts. The purple spots have moved to her face and cracks form at the edges of her lips. He imagines what will happen when the cloud filters into the room, whether or not he will be able to breathe. What the air will taste like. For a moment he lies next to Kay and grasps her hand and imagines that—when the pink sky comes—the air will be sweet, as if drinking from sugary, green anti-freeze. And they’ll hold one another and breathe in the sweet, deadly air, because that ought to be better than being alone, better than running.

But then he imagines a noise—after the cloud—the humming drone of nothing. The sound of being dead, and everything around you cut from existence, and—feeling the heaviness of Kay’s body next to him, her body so stuck on the verge between beautiful and gone—he decides he can’t stay.

When the sky gets so close it appears as a balloon, as it nears the edge of the woods and seems so close that you could shoot it with a gun and pop, or drive a truck into it and hit a solid, purple wall—when the sky gets this close, Polston begins setting the houses on fire.

The Abrams have left, taking the last of Polston’s food with them westward. He told them there was no way he’d leave Kay, but as her breathing slows and she seems

stuck in the bed, he knows he can't stay. Sitting in the room with her makes death seem like a contagious thing, and he's already exposed himself too long. He doesn't want to admit so, but his grandfather had been right. Doesn't matter that the wall will continue to follow him, that eventually he won't be able to run anymore, that—more than likely—he'll end sick like Kay, or dead. Still, nothing stops him. Everybody runs.

Polston has prepared torches, and he walks through the forested streets, dropping a torch into each living room, watching the slow glow through the broken windows. In the houses with black X's on the door, Polston first puts blankets over the piles of bones, then drops a torch to burn them.

The last house he sets on fire is San Juan Avenue. He drops a torch onto Kay's stained mummy bag. The flames lick at the floorboards, climb up the walls.

The smoke is trapped beneath the thick, humid air and it holds above the houses like a wool blanket. Soon Polston feels the heat moving in waves, moving with the rush of wind—the hot air rising and forcing more oxygen to feed the flames. Polston has imagined a crash, has imagined a wall of fire colliding with the purple bubble. The force of the land his grandfather worked coalescing into staying power. Fire hot enough to stop something. This he knows won't happen. But soon all that's left will be burned into small pieces of sky.

He walks from the burning houses away from the wall, to follow after the Abrams. As he looks back, a door from one of the houses sways open on its hinges—a small movement in the distance. The house hasn't yet erupted in full fire, and the door

creaks back and forth with the current of hot hair. Slamming shut, then reopening. As if an invisible person stands there moving it, deciding—yes or no—whether to run.

Blood In This Water

Wendy operates a ten foot long diamond belt saw at the limestone quarry in Southern Indiana. Each day at the quarry is about the same as the day before. Always the enormous ten-foot by ten-foot slabs of limestone. Always the spray of water and the dull grinding noise the blade makes digging into rock. Always the white mud on her clothes—clothes that were once new and orange and tan, but are now the color of white mud. Always the dust in her hair, her nostrils, and in her eyes—everything covered in white powder until she will find it sprinkled on her food when she eats, will leave white handprints on any piece of black clothing she touches. The dust seeps out of her skin as if she's ingested it. As if her insides are made of rock.

Sixty hours a week—every week—she takes raw hunks out of the earth and loads them onto trucks that will go to builders across the country to be fashioned into things like bridges, tunnels, skyscrapers. She studied geology at the university in Bloomington, then quit when the quarry job opened. Now she knows the patterns in the rock, the age of each section of limestone, how it formed. She knows there is an underground world

beneath her feet and knows where sinkholes might let out and send her crashing into the abyss.

But the cave is something new.

Formed by an underground river that has eaten away a vein in the limestone, she finds the entrance while surveying sites for the next dig, alone. The stone here is green, stained with runoff algae and weathering, like a piece of oxidized copper. The rock beneath will be white when they cut the first sections of this wall. Untouched stone that hasn't seen sunlight in two-million years, or—maybe—ever at all. A creek flows out from the cave's mouth, and that's where she sees the outline of human shapes in the darkness.

A smiling face peaks out of the shadow into sunlight, then returns. Like a purple ball you'd find in the middle of the forest, nobody around to explain.

“Show us your boobies,” one of them calls from the cave.

High-school students who've ignored the many “Restricted Area” signs and chain-linked fences sometimes sneak into the quarry to rock dive, or build fires and drink on the outcrops of the limestone ridges at night. She grabs the radio on her hip to call in security. One of the boys walks into the sunlight. He is young—maybe sixteen, seventeen years old. He smiles at her and waves like a child—both hands flashing back and forth in rapid succession. He wears no shirt and his skin is pale, almost as if painted, glaring there in the summer light.

“Show me,” says the boy.

Copy? The voice on the radio.

Maybe twenty yards of shallow water separate her from the boys—murky runoff from the creek pooling here, enough for her to feel distanced from them. She tells the man on the radio it's a false alarm. Not sure why she does. As if telling the boys they don't belong here would be incorrect, or out of sync with some natural order. They don't *look* like high-school students, their pale skin and thin bodies. And in the same manner they belong here, she thinks—why not?

She lifts her grey stained shirt, revealing a grey stained bra to the boys. And this feels like a freeing, harmless thing to do. Innocent, yet sexual. Twelve years old again, and her covered body is something to be curious about, mixed with equal parts desire for something she doesn't know what. The color summer ought to look like: swimming pools and copper flesh. The boys cover their mouths, bending over and laughing, “Ahhh! Ahhh!” as if she's just performed a magic trick. She can see—but can't hear—their laughing. Just shapes moving in the hum of water noise, as if they are removed, part of another world. She lifts her shirt back down and leaves them, choosing not to report the cave, the limestone, any of it.

And in this way Wendy begins coming to the cave each day on her lunch hour to strip for them. Not everything all at once, but instead she removes pieces of clothing one day at a time. The boys are always there, waiting at the mouth of the cave. She stands for maybe five minutes—sometimes walking into the shallow water and waving at them, other times ignoring the boys though they call out to her—then she returns whatever piece of clothing she has removed, gets in her truck and drives back to the quarry. Back to her saw where she cuts again into the rock—feeling wild, more and more.

She doesn't tell the man she lives with about the boys in the cave. With Kurt, everything is the same: she wears a loose fitting shirt when they go to bed. A shirt that remains on for the duration—when she feels him first harden against her buttocks, his hand rooting over her stomach and breasts. When he lets out the quiet, familiar gasp. When he starts and after he finishes, the shirt stays on. Kurt used to take her clothes off, and then—at some point she can't remember—he stopped fussing with them altogether.

Tonight, afterwards, his breathing slows and then he sleeps. But Wendy can't. Instead, her eyes are open and she has the feeling as if an energy current is built up in her skin, crawling across her back like electric fingers. They've lived together now for, what, two years? Three? And Wendy has the same numb comfort she did with him in the first few months of dating. "Easy living," as Kurt calls it. Not much in the way of sweaty impassioned shouting matches or dishes slammed against the wall, but more like a stern word to each other about forgotten bills gone unpaid, the milk carton left out since breakfast. Which is the kind of small shit she can't stop thinking about now. Did we turn off the oven? Easy living, she'd say.

The air is cool outside when she walks onto the porch. An evening that signals end of summer's relentless heat. This afternoon she showed the boys her legs, took off her jeans and stood wearing panties in the shallow water. They didn't laugh, but sat on the rock outcropping of the cave and watched in silence.

The energy beneath her skin is like an itching all over. Once again, she has the abrupt sensation that limestone dust is leaking through her pores. She has said nothing to the boys, and they have said nothing to her. A boundary she knows might likely be crossed, at some point. But for now there is Wendy trying to decide which pulls at her

more: the exhilaration from stripping in anonymity, or figuring out who the hell these kids are. Her boss's sons? Her neighbors' children? She likes to think the boys aren't from here. She likes to think they aren't from anywhere.

She can't sleep. That's an excuse. So instead—in the early morning hours before sunlight—she puts on her work clothes without waking Kurt, collects her lunch pale and a flashlight from the kitchen drawer. Drives to the limestone quarry.

Animal grunts strange in the night, the wetness hanging off leaves on low branches that turn her shoulders and arms cold and damp, the green darkness of the woods: she feels more comfortable when she reaches the cave. Shines her light at the mouth and enters. Seeing nobody in the mouth of the cave is strange, as it has been crowded with the three boys each time she's been here before. Stupid to think they'd be here. What was she expecting? Still, she walks further in.

The caves in Southern Indiana are all but mapped out. She's been to the Bluespring Caverns, Squire Boon, the Marengo Cave for research during school. They do this thing on the boat trip in Squire Boon where the guide tells everyone to turn off their phones, their flashlights—tells everyone not to talk—and they sit in the bobbing canoes in a blackness that is an absence of everything. Sound and light. And that's what Wendy does now—ousts the flashlight—and stands in the absence listening to the run of the creek at her feet.

When she flips the light back on, the bald boy stands in front of her. A shirtless white ghost holding his hands in front of his eyes. "Shit!" She flicks it off, scared, then on again—repeats this so the boy approaching her appears closer each time she flips the light

on. Then she keeps it traced on the boy like a searchlight. Rapidly her situation is turning into something altogether different than taking her clothes off in the daylight for a quick rush.

Stopping—his hands held up against the light so she can't his face—he says, “Will you turn off the light?”

She doesn't want to. Yet, something about the absence feels better. As if—in the dark—she won't feel the boy standing so close to her. Or, everything can still remain anonymous, imagined. She envisions bulb-like orbs where his eyes should be, glazed over a haunting white. She flips the flashlight off.

“I'm Amtrak,” says the boy.

“This is property of the Bedford Oolitic Limestone Company,” says Wendy. “You're not supposed to be here.”

“What's your name?”

“Wendy.”

He stands in front of her. Your hand in the darkness, knowing it's in front of your face, but not seeing. Only now it's Amtrak. She can hear his breathing, feel his body's heat, maybe. His sharp, sour odor—feral, yet good.

“Will you take off your clothes?” In a voice that is part child, even.

“No,” she says. “Do you live here?”

His hands are expected, almost. First touching her shoulder, she almost smacks his hand away, then stops. Waits. She cringes when his hands follow down to her belt, where he un-tucks her shirt and lifts it over her head. Like you are motionless, floating.

When he moves to undo her belt, she smacks into the darkness—catching warm, hardened skin. His face? Arms? A pause, then he continues with her belt and jeans. Taking time to unlace her boots. Is this what you came for? His hands touch nothing but her clothes, until only her bra and panties remain. Then his hands stop, just like that, and she doesn't know where he is.

Maybe there's a shaft of moonlight somewhere in the cave, or her eyes are adjusting to the smallest amount of light from some unknown source, but she begins to see the outline of his body, its whiteness.

“Where do you live?” she says.

“Wherever I want.”

Her clothes held in a bundle, he takes her other hand in his, leads her deeper into the cavern. Her eyes work to adjust to the shapes of rocks hanging from the ceiling or rising from the earth, like fingers reaching out to touch each other. She can't see well, but enough to know the cavern's ceiling raises as they move deeper in. The air cooler, or she's just feeling it more on her bare skin. Droplets of water fall onto her shoulders.

“Down here,” he says. He crouches into a small shaft—maybe two feet tall. Wendy hesitates.

A *non-place*, that's what they called the deepest caverns: where light is extinguished to the extent that regular human eyes can't make out any perception of depth or space. In the bottom places of the earth, you go blind. Mad. He might be leading her someplace like this, some non-place where she might be left. Yet, she can't help but wonder, *where does this lead?* To what end? And she trusts him, somehow.

She follows, crouching into the small shaft. They snake through on their stomachs, wriggling their bodies to fit, to advance inches at a time. She can smell Amtrak in front of her, can smell the wet bedrock. There isn't mud here because of the erosion, but instead, a watery mineral deposit runs down the shaft, wetting her hair and underwear.

“Be real quiet,” he says, and then, *giggles?* Is that the noise she heard him make?

The shaft opens into a second cavern. He helps her out, then whispers, “*The flashlight.*” He takes it from her hands and shines the light. On the floor are piles of scattered clothes, blankets, empty bottles and cigarette packages, small bones from rabbits or mice. Newspapers, a Romance novel, a bucket. The other two boys sleep on beds of browning leaves and tattered blankets.

She notices Amtrak squinting, trying to adjust to the light, trying to look at her in her underwear.

“Lay off it, would you?”

He leads her through the room with the light. They crawl through another narrow shaft, into the next cavern. Who knows how long she's been underground. She thinks she'll be late for work, or maybe the work day is already over. The next cavern is lit, a glowing orb to get closer to.

A sinkhole in the ceiling, sunlight peering through. A mound of human skeletons and bones rises out of a shallow pool of water. Skulls and arms and fingers and toes. They're piled beneath the sinkhole as if the bodies were clutching to one another for warmth in their last moments. An Indian burial site, maybe. But that wasn't the way the Sioux were known to send their dead to the other side—just shoving them down a hole in

the ground. Instead, maybe these skeletons are earlier than the Sioux, or much more recent: a handy site for the bodies of the missing persons of Southern Indiana. There is blood in this water, somewhere. Diluted in millions of gallons of underground water, somewhere the particles exist—remnants of life floating in pools and in creeks, soaking into the rock or into other bones.

“The *dead-ohs*,” he says.

“Who are they?”

“Probably my parents,” he says. Then: “Will you take off your undies?”

“No,” she says. “Why do you say that—about your parents?”

“They’re just the *dead-ohs*. I don’t know who they are.”

“How long have you lived here?” she asks, but knows he won’t answer. Will never answer. Isn’t surprised when she turns and he’s gone. Returned into the shaft, back into the depths where who knows how many more chambers—or tombs—honeycomb the earth.

She climbs the side-walls to the rim of the sinkhole—emerging wet, mostly naked, and cold—and walks back to the truck, avoiding any routes that might lead her near the quarry to be seen by any of the men there. Though they wouldn’t recognize her.

Kurt drives her into town that weekend for breakfast. Weekends for her are less relaxing than she’d like, mostly because she feels more comfortable behind the saw, or surveying a dig-site, than she does watching football games, or going into town—having breakfast. But Kurt says it’s nice for her to get away from all that rock work. Get dressed up. This morning they eat at a diner in Brown County.

“Maybe let your hair down,” he tells her, sitting in the booth. “You know, take it easy. You look so stiff.”

“You don’t like muscles? Check. I’ll work on that.” Little digs.

“Just relax.”

Each weekend, the same. She won’t see the boys for two days. More and more she wishes she could work seven days a week, see Kurt each Christmas and Fourth of July to visit her parents.

“Mandatory resting. Commence,” she says. “We observe the Sabbath,” she tells the woman pouring their coffee.

“Maybe we’ll take a hike later on?” he says.

“Yes. A hike. Absolutely *perfect*.” She can’t stop herself at this point.

“I’m trying, Hon,” says Kurt. “Least I’m trying,”

When they pay their tab at the counter, Wendy sees and picks up the blue and white milk carton with pictures of missing children on the sides. A few coins rattle around when she picks it up, maybe twenty-seven cents to pay for—what?—search helicopters? The children’s pictures are grainy. One of them has been missing since 1965.

Kurt finishes paying and puts his arm around her lower back, rests his hand on her hip to lead her out of the diner. She’s thought about it before: Kurt works at a Natural History museum—at a desk—so, what’d happen if she didn’t budge, didn’t follow his lead? Just stand where she stands, reading the milk-carton, taking her time. She imagines him like a cartoon, falling on his back, unable to move her, tripping because of it. Is this how lovers ought to think?

That evening she searches the internet: Missing Persons of Bloomington County, Indiana. She finds a website on the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, where the government has recorded the missing people and children from as early as the 50s. Photographs of the children, when they went missing. A fake-looking computer sketch of what they might look like now: age progression.

Creech Arturo: “Endangered Missing”—1965. Current age 35. Last seen at a bus stop in Lawrence County Indiana. Soft, one-inch scar on left cheek.

Landers Coy: “Missing”—1998. Current age 16. Last scene at a DairyQueen with his father, estranged. Left-handed.

Shannon Cobalt: “Endangered Missing”—1988. Current age 18. Believed to be abducted by an Aunt going by the name of “Cindy.” Seen last in Evansville, Indiana.

Kurt walks behind the desk-chair, rubs her shoulders. The age-old ploy. In bed, she faces away from him, and—after she turns off the light, Her side—she feels his hand on her stomach. Trying to tease her, but just pissing her off.

“Babe, not tonight. Just not now.”

Then he’s tickling her, grating his fingers into her ribs for a laugh, a smile. The covers thrown off. Wendy out of bed, rooting in the closet for a blanket. Blanket found, she faces Kurt and takes off her shirt. Just stands there, naked. Wishes her skin actually would turn to limestone so Kurt could keep fucking her every night and know how meaningless this has all become. She takes the blanket to the living room couch.

Amtrak isn't at the cave the next day. Neither are the other two boys. The Autumn sky has finally settled: an even, mud-colored grey, like a blanket thrown over the woods. As if the tips of the highest trees are being bitten off and chewed, the sky feels so close. Light rain throughout the Southern hills. Wendy waits by the runoff pool until her lunch hour has come and passed, still no sign of the boys.

At the mouth of the cave, she calls on the radio. *Trespassers, three male—adolescent, one female—adult.* Gives them the coordinates, then chucks the radio into the pool and enters the cavern.

She feels their hands before her eyes adjust to their white, opaque forms. The three of them working together, they remove her shirt, her bra. She helps them scoot her jeans off her ankles. Then her panties. They pause, just as Amtrak had done before—all except the taller boy. He waits, then lifts a hand to her breast.

“No,” says Amtrak.

“It's alright,” she says.

The taller boy's fingers graze across her skin, then up. His hands are soft, feeling her skin from a distance, as if close to something too hot to touch fully. Five hands follow the first—unsure, yet delicate. She has the list of names memorized—all the males in the last twenty years—and begins reciting the names of the Missing Persons in Indiana counties.

“Frank Walter... Alejandro Fritz... Peter Clay... Jonathan Gregory... Allan Carmichael... .. .” until the list is complete and none of their hands have twitched, or returned from her skin.

They walk further in, their hands clasped together. Her eyes have already adjusted so quick to the darkness, so that sight means something different entirely. To relinquish seeing, and instead her eyes become an organ to feel the rock, to know the space from one piece of earth to another. The caves are deep. There are many of them, and in some are more bones. In others, there is nothing. The list of names repeats in her head, “Frank... Alejandro... Peter... Allan...” And she takes the boys with her into the depths.