

Winter 2020

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Recommended Citation

Traverse, Maureen (2020) "Johnny, Be Good," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 93 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss93/15>

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MAUREEN TRAVERSE

JOHNNY, BE GOOD

WOMEN AT THE office give him names—John Boy, John-John, Johnny Angel—each more endearing than the next. Barb in Finance, Devita in HR, and Laurel in Admin cajole until he models a fitted button-down from Arrowhead, then coo their approval. At twenty-three, he knows how to tilt his head, how to smile with only half his mouth, to launch a rejoinder sly as a boy with a slingshot, to stoop to fill his cup at the water cooler and glance over his shoulder as he returns to his cubicle. Johnny, boy, you sure can walk, that's Devita, as he saunters like he always does past the receptionist, a grazing gaze so she knows he sees her. Johnny, boy, like honey off a spoon, like he has no place to be, like nothing could ever trouble him longer than an inch.

Under the surface of every tease is some other tease—*Johnsy, what do you do with that baby face?*—by which they mean soft, by which they mean feminine. He is their boy and not their boy, sitting in the break room on Casual Friday, he combs back his hair, extends his arms so his fingertips brush the bright turquoise accent wall, a sliver of flat, bare stomach visible when his shirt climbs. Johnny, says Barb, holding herself around the middle

like she'd burst, Johnny, you are something, as if he has said anything of note, as if they are talking about more than the swelling pollen count that's plaguing Laurel's sinuses, the parking lot frosted in cottonwood dander, that Thursday evening show where hopeful singers compete, that little girl with the satin voice robbed of the title by some glitzy beauty queen. A crime, he says, though he's never seen it.

Tuesday and Thursday nights he is out with Brian from 4D. After a few pre-game shots of whatever Brian is drinking, they walk across the 270 overpass, shouting to be heard, the rushing traffic like a swollen river. Brian takes Johnny by the arm for emphasis whenever he wants to make a point, saying, man, this guy's a prick, a fucking prick, like he can't let you alone for five goddamn minutes, like if you're going to take a crap you better make it clear you need longer than it takes to piss, because Brian can't stop talking about crap and piss when he drinks. They cross three long blocks to the mall, past fast food islands, gas stations, a gleaming Target sign in the ashy dusk, grown quiet for a stretch until they see the neon martini glass tipping and begin their rounds again, Brian complaining, this shit with the DUI, and Johnny being Johnny, forever smoothing out the wrinkles, and by the time they're inside, Brian is asking the hostess where she's from, with that sweet little twang in her voice, and Johnny catches sight of his reflection in the tinted windows lit by candy-colored lights and smiles at the swaying blade of grass and the tree trunk, his lithe and limby figure beside Brian's solid muscle, so polar they might be illustrations in a children's book, big dog little dog, each one making clear what the other is not.

WHEN JOHNNY INTERVIEWED for his job, which he needed if he was going to keep his distance from home and the tiny town where he'd gone to college, it was Devita and Ken Blazer in the room, and even before it started, while they were still having their nice-to-meet-you-did-you-find-the-place-all-right moment, he recognized the wall he was up against and set himself right, because the Ken Blazers of the world, and there were plenty, had a way of announcing themselves, the line of Ken's haircut so sharp it might hurt you, the bit of extra weight he carried like evidence he'd had the good sense to be bigger, one of an army of fathers and T-ball coaches and youth group leaders who would set you straight with a side-eye, whose duty it was to remind you of who you were. So it was no surprise that, during Devita's pitch about the family atmosphere at the annual picnic at Emerald Lake, Ken elbowed in to say how John should feel free to bring his girlfriend, even though Johnny had never mentioned Kayla finishing up in Cedarville. If you're single you won't be for long, Ken had said, lots of college girls in this town. Devita's brow creased with an admonishing look she must have known would never chip into Ken Blazer's solid sense of right. In that moment, Johnny figured what he needed to know. Whatever power Ken Blazer wielded, he was not well-liked, and when Devita shook his hand at the end, Johnny liked her, and figured she would like him in the ways women typically did—Johnny Dear, Dear John—because they believed he was no threat. As she walked him out, he watched his ghosted form slide over glass suite fronts, Allodial Title Corp, Manley Deas Kochalski, Inteliserv, his faint presence and gentle

features, his chest the opposite of a barrel, his fingers and eyelashes long, his narrow waist and clean jaw. Johnny poses questions simply standing in a room, and questions make some people uncomfortable.

BRIAN WAS THAT sort of person, but not here in Bar Louie with his bare feet up on the bench beside Johnny, Brian, who two whiskeys in, has returned to the subject of his DUI, the court-mandated classes where all they do is watch old VHSes, can you believe this shit, movie after movie of bloody car wrecks, and his father already wrote him off as piss but you know his father drank, he remembers those days real dim, like this one time, rainy light in the windows, his mom on the kitchen phone and his father comes in dripping, hugs the refrigerator humming in this low, creepy way, wet against the shopping list and drawings and photos tacked up, and it's only years later that big brother Drew says something so that it makes sense, his father drank, he doesn't drink now, and his brother blames it on their grandfather, a distance that was the rule in that generation, but Brian has no excuse with a father who sobered, never missed a Little League game and wrestled with them on the floor, see Brian has it made. Sure, Johnny says, don't we all have it made, and Brian laughs and the sound is like the big boom of a firework that startles a trio of girls at the next table, and Brian waves when they cast suspicious glances but Johnny looks away. It's temporary, he tells Brian, and again he has the power here to let it go and move on, he can do that and be better for it, and Brian says he knows it and the thing about that now infamous night was how the bouncer got up in his

face for talking to the bartender, this tiny thing in like half a tank top, and she was handling herself all right, she didn't need help, if she wanted to tell him off that's cool, but don't let some fucking meat sack get up in his grill. When it came time to go he had to give the guy a few parting words, and by the time they got to the car he was high on it, you know what it's like, that light-headed rage, but now he wished Johnny had been there to talk some sense into his drunk ass, and Johnny says it might have made no difference and doesn't point out that Brian has never invited him anywhere except the bar at the mall on the other side of the overpass.

Before they met, Johnny used to see Brian around Village Green, the complex where they live, taking out his trash, sometimes shirtless, or sometimes just baking in the sun in a camp chair, beer in the cup holder. Home to low-level professionals, nurses, and bank tellers, Village Green is usually desolate. Here and there Johnny sees a figure in scrubs or a blue Chase Polo slipping into or out of a car, but that's all he knows of his neighbors, so Brian was an anomaly with his cap and rubber sandals, cargo shorts and Bucks T-shirt, and his habit of shouting O-H at anyone wearing scarlet and gray. Johnny would've said little to Brian beside whatever how's-it-goings necessary to maintain a neighborly existence, except there was something going on in the apartment between theirs, something criminal maybe but at the least downright noisy, and with the walls thin as sausage casing, as Brian had said, and Johnny had laughed at the particularity, that was how it all started, Brian and Johnny exchanging details, because there was a kid involved, sometimes there and sometimes not, ten or eleven,

and that was what got him, Brian had said, knocking his chest with a fist, because that was some fucked up shit.

Late one night that noise culminated in a gust of insults pelted at the walls, a woman hanging from the window with an old stereo speaker grinding guitar and static into the brittle night air. When Johnny heard the voice declare she was going to kill all these mother fuckers, she had a gun and was going to do it, he opened his door to find Brian had done the same. They faced one another for a second before they met in front of the offending apartment. It was Brian who pounded, and Brian who took the boy by the collar when the poor kid opened the door, and Johnny who followed him in as Brian led them all into his apartment, where Johnny fed the kid Skittles and beef jerky and Cheetos, which the kid took piece by piece the way a small animal might while they waited for child protective services.

Once they were alone, it was too quiet, Brian said bitterly, like that lady fucking ruined quiet forever, like from now on quiet would only mean the absence of batshit crazy screaming. He opened a bottle of Jameson which they shared without glasses while Brian talked in a kind of steady flow like a tickertape, mostly about his buddies from college and his job at Nationwide, not the work but the people who would buy you a drink and who had sticks up their asses and the particular ways he imagined they each had sex, all the while inserting random observations about the kid, how his shoes were newish Nikes or how he had dirt under his fingernails, as if any detail might assign moral triumph or disaster to what they had done.

Johnny said little, but found he could not leave, bound by the spell of so much talk. When he finally made it to his apartment, it was nearly four, but he called Kayla anyway, feeling as if he'd wronged her personally, and she breathed into the phone, "Jesus, Johnny, be careful." After that night, when Brian saw Johnny they might go for a drink, and eventually it became routine, like anything you do without thinking.

JOHNNY KEEPS TO his routines because that is how life is lived, on a scaffolding built by some force other than your will. Each morning he spends an hour on the bus up 33, lumbering past sprawling tracts of development, houses in various stages of being built. He cuts across the easy geometry of the parking lot and holds the door open for the receptionist, who averts her gaze. He takes some time to settle in before finding his way to the break room for coffee at nine in the morning, expecting to negotiate small talk with Barb, Devita, and Laurel, but this morning finds Ken Blazer fiddling with the pieces of the coffee maker, saying the ladies usually beat him to it and his wife does it at home. You better not *look* at her before she's had her coffee, he says, and laughs conspiratorially as if they both know what his wife is like, then adds, "It doesn't work right," just to be sure Johnny understands it is the coffee maker itself that is at fault.

Johnny retrieves the decanter from the drying rack and fills it at the water cooler, conscious of how he bends, arranging the filter and scooping the Folgers slowly enough to make clear he's in no hurry to fix Ken Blazer's coffee.

“You good with your hands?” Ken has made a point to try and identify Johnny’s hobbies, to understand who he is and where he fits into the world.

Johnny shrugs, flips the switch, then turns toward the door, but Ken clears his throat and asks how Arrowhead is coming.

Still facing the door, Johnny hesitates, allowing Ken Blazer to step in front and hover close enough to share a waft of cologne.

The survey data is compiled, Johnny tells him, and focus groups are next week.

Ken is nodding and Johnny suspects he already knows whatever he wants to know about Arrowhead. Ken breaks into a smile, says you’re the demographic they want, not that guys care about clothes. In the millisecond between sentences he makes a face, the slightest squint and lift of one shoulder. Arrowhead’s after all-American kids, he says, camping or at the beach, having a good time. You still like to see a girl, right? Towel around her shoulders, fresh face and wet hair, she’s got all she needs because she’s young.

Johnny doesn’t say anything and Ken sniffs the air a moment and Johnny thinks he is smelling the burnt odor of coffee, but then he tilts his head down and looks at Johnny as if over a pair of glasses.

“You smell whiskey?”

Johnny shakes his head and slips past before Ken can explain himself, but doesn’t stop at his cubicle, and heads to the bathroom where he splashes water on his face. On his way back he takes the long way to BNR, outside and around the perimeter of the building. Sun filters through a haze of

cloud cover, and bits of fuzz drift along the air, accumulating at the curb like snow. He names what he sees, the glimmering metal and glass, the lush treated lawn, the manmade lake across Innovation Drive, a tower of water shooting into the air, words unspooling in his mind the way words do when he and Brian come back from Bar Louie and practice their automatic writing, pens to paper, the sentences rolling in, a whole ocean of words filtered through the pen, one at a time until they've each filled their pages, Johnny's idea, instead of hitting up Scores after the bar, because fair is fair, Brian says, they each get their thing, although these days more often than not Johnny gets his thing, maybe because Brian can't drive for six months or because Scores was part of Johnny's hazing and the hazing is over and done with. Brian and Johnny are friends and Johnny no longer needs to prove he can get turned on by topless women gyrating to the thump and spit of electronic music, now they can sit on his living room floor writing an hour or two until his hand is trembling and achy, until they are exhausted and fall asleep and he wakes to Brian puking in the bathroom.

The first time Brian asked him where the hell he learned it from Johnny told him it was what the surrealists did, according to his art history textbook in college, which is a half-truth. He can still picture that textbook, which must have said something about automatic writing, behemoth thing, bound in gray cloth with red lettering stamped on the spine, an impressive brick of information with little charm, long on dates and techniques but short on story. Just who was Max Ernst, and how did he spend his evenings, what shoes did he wear and did he get nervous before an opening? But

none of that was in the book, and apparently, neither was Max Ernst's companion, a painter in her own right, because while he was staring at a plate of *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale*, vaguely following the lecture, a girl beside him who'd been flipping through the index suddenly blurted out, where is Dorothea Tanning? The professor paused and the girl, who might have liked the sound of the question, said it again. Where is Dorothea Tanning?

Taken aback, the professor, a portly man who lisped, said, making Max Ernst a sandwich.

Everyone except the girl laughed, even Johnny, although maybe it was just the image of a surrealist eating a sandwich. That girl, Kayla, he might never have spoken with after had he not become curious, gone online and come up with a painting at the Tate Modern, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, two girls menaced by a sunflower.

He could feel the swelter, the soft ropes of hair climbing off one girl's head like charmed snakes, the thick and meaty stalk of the flower, itself huge and gaping like the mouth of some creature, all in the blank hallway of an apartment building, so that, after, he went to the library and printed out the image and taped it into his textbook, right over *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale*, and at the next class he made sure to sit beside Kayla and he tilted the book so she could see and her startle turned into a sly smile and after class they bought coffee and went back to her room where she taught him automatic writing.

She had a single twist of hair bleached, a foreign coin with a hole at

the center turned into a necklace, a pointed nose that seemed to dare him.

As they sat on the floor beside her bed, she told him what the painting meant, that sinister, creeping flower and the girls in a trance, how it should tell him something about girlhood, constantly menaced by the specter of one's own sexual promise.

Johnny wondered if she had invented that line herself or read it somewhere, but he didn't care. He liked the way she said *sex* without hesitation or embarrassment. When he reached to examine the coin around her neck and his knuckles grazed her collarbone, she looked surprised. He knew that look, the inevitable reassessment of his manner, and didn't let it stop him. She wrapped around him with ferocity he hadn't anticipated, and they had quick, almost noiseless sex on the floor behind her bed, his excitement heightened by the fact that she'd left the door to her room open.

He was only her second, she confessed when they were done, and he said his third even though it wasn't true.

Like so much else, he did not do sex the way he ought. Too indiscriminate, too thoughtless. Erin whose legs glimmered in the sun after cross country, Sherry who wore bright primary dresses and gave the finger to anyone who called her fat, Nora who was missing teeth her mom could not afford to replace, Diamond who cut herself, or so someone said, not that he'd seen any scars when he'd peeled off her shirt and smelled the vanilla bean lotion, heavy as a family holiday.

BRIAN IS WEIRDLY good at automatic writing, even drunk, and yet his

purpose is not the process but the end result, which he insists on reading aloud during breaks in a voice full with the rhythm of a rapper. Brian is a rhythmic person, and therefore predictable, a person of circling speech patterns, a body that can break into beat at a moment's notice when he suddenly drums the table or bobs his head. He is the loud staccato to Johnny's soft glide. But tonight Brian is almost too drunk to hold his pen, the harrowing walk back across the highway overpass still zinging through Johnny's memory, his heart rate snared every time Brian flung himself at the chain link, and still Brian insists he read aloud, the words foaming out of his mouth, words he can hardly form until, finally, he hangs his head and, without any warning, throws up over the front of his shirt.

Johnny takes the key and lets himself into Brian's apartment for clean clothes, then returns and tackles the gradually crumbling wall of Brian's body. He wipes him down and helps him into a new T-shirt, puts a trash can beside where Brian sits propped against the front door, then sets to work scrubbing flecks of puke out of the wall-to-wall, the sour stink enough to nauseate him, all the while grumbling, you piece of shit, man, you stellar piece of shit, while Brian laughs, until at last, Johnny lays down on the floor and stares at the dark blades of the ceiling fan against the white paint, and Brian, who has started a slurring rant on his father again, interrupts himself to snort back phlegm and says, hey you never say shit about your family, and Johnny says, what does that tell you, and Brian asks, you even got family, and Johnny tells him, yeah out in Zanesville, and Brian says, your dad a prick, and Johnny thinks, here he can do any number of things

but it won't matter because Brian is too drunk to remember, so he says his father isn't in the picture anymore and his mom's still pissed and his brother started lining up his toys in straight lines when he was two and didn't talk until he was five, and Brian makes a low sound then slumps forward and crawls across the floor on his elbows like he's a soldier. Johnny, he says, you can tell me, and Johnny says, tell you what, and Brian puts his head down on the floor, says he hates the spins, and then, whatever you're hiding. Man you're lit, Johnny tells him, lit as a wick, and Brian says, yeah, and flops onto his back beside Johnny so they're both staring at the ceiling, and then Brian starts singing, Johnny-oh-Johnny-be-good, over and over until Johnny says to shut the fuck up and Brian laughs and for a long time says nothing and Johnny realizes that Brian has passed out on his back. He could choke on his own puke, and Johnny has to do something, so he rolls Brian onto his side and props his own body against Brian's back, wedges himself like a doorstep and closes his eyes and sleeps like that until the sun winks between the vertical blinds sending in needles of light and Johnny feels distinctly a hand in his hair, groping as if for clarity, and it goes on a little longer than he expects before Brian groans and curses, says what the fuck I thought maybe I got lucky, and Johnny snorts, who says you didn't, and Brian moans, you shit, he says, why do you let me drink so much, for the love of Christ just stop me.

SLOUCHING IN THE dark behind a two-way mirror, his fingers flicker over the keys of the company laptop, transcribing only the weighted words,

building phrases free of articles and conjunctions while the focus group plays association. *What story photo telling? Friends drive lake long weekend swim dock tan boat tip drink fire dusk. How photo make you feel? Fun young friendly fashionable warm willing. Willing? Open, don't know, wide open, maybe water sky escape.* That's the blond with the pencil-stub ponytail, his T-shirt faded, bearing his teeth whenever he grins, which he does often. By now, Johnny can disassociate from his typing, the opposite of automatic writing, words spilling from the mesh of the speaker straight into his fingers. Focus groups are filmed, but Ken Blazer insists junior staff take notes, old school, he says, training them to think and listen and look. On one side of him Mark from Arrowhead perches on the edge of his chair, hunched over the counter like someone anticipating a large meal, while on the other side, team lead, Cory chews caramel corn as she watches, and he hears her nails in the bowl, her teeth working a kernel, each sound a painful glint, his paper tongue and sour sweat all that's left of the night before.

Inside the room with the focus group is Tanya, a twirl of hair over one shoulder, barely five feet in heels, her voice a big red balloon. She asks questions the way his youth pastor in Zanesville did, like the guy expected you to testify every time he clapped you on the shoulder and demanded, "What's the word out there?" Everyone wears name tags: Danielle emphasized with a little curlicue, Nick and Daryl, the bulk of their block letters like their shoulders, narrow Colin at a tender slant, only Desi in precise script clearly the name at the top of an exam she is well-prepared to take, and the tail on the end of Olivia dangling like her foot in its stylish sneaker.

“What about *this* one?” Tanya is saying. “How does it make you *feel*?”

Twenty-two photographs and they must be waning because Danielle snags a plated cookie and says, *creeped out you know hotties go up lake house serial killer picks off one by one*. Daryl snorts, but now that it is clear they can be themselves, they start to riff on Danielle’s idea, pointing out the couple who will be killed while doing it on the dock, the lonely kid who will disappear into the woods and won’t be missed for hours, the good girl who will escape.

Tanya grows impatient, and flips to the next slide, a row of shirtless muscle, arms slung around shoulders, the lake glistening in the background, the honey-colored light.

“Gay,” Nick says, and Daryl snorts again, spitting a cookie crumb across the table.

Beside Johnny, Cory shifts in her seat. “That’s inevitable,” she says to Mark and pops a caramel corn in her mouth. “But I don’t think it hurts you.”

Colin, the toothy blond, is laughing again at something Danielle said that Johnny cannot remember. A little awkward, he hides his mouth behind his hand when he realizes he’s smiling. Someone must have told him his teeth were large, that he smiled too much, and Johnny wants to tell him otherwise. He imagines Colin owning a kayak and a mountain bike, going into the woods alone, a thing his mother worries about but which Colin says he needs, the escape rewires him. He would describe for Johnny the arch of the sky like the perfect surface of a bowl, the stippled color of a crest

of trees, and Johnny would watch these details play out in the gentle shifts of Colin's face, like light playing against rock.

Someone is tapping, saying his name, and in a half-dream he sees Colin knocking on the two-way mirror.

Johnny opens his eyes. He'd not realized they were closed. It is Cory tapping her painted nails against the plasticine countertop. His hands are in his lap, not at the keyboard. Beside him, Mark from Arrowhead sniffs. For a few minutes they sit in silence, and the weight of Johnny's hangover grows until it clings like humidity, saturating the room. Finally, Cory snaps up another piece of caramel corn, still huffy, and says, "Well, Danielle nearly derailed them with her serial killer bit, but see how Tanya brings them back in line?" Mark makes a noncommittal sound. "It's all in how you handle them," she says. "Like taming animals."

JOHNNY, WHO'S SLIPPED outside and walks the perimeter of the building, lingers in the parking lot under the blare of sunlight, sucking in mouthfuls of warm wind to dispel his nausea, until he hears the eager ascending notes of the tornado sirens wailing, tested every Wednesday at exactly noon, and knows he has stayed out of the office too long. Sure enough, when he returns inside, the receptionist tells him Ken Blazer was asking for him, keeping her gaze on her computer screen, shy as she is around him.

Johnny meanders to the back office and stands in the doorway expecting to deliver an update on Arrowhead, except Ken Blazer tells him to close the door, have a seat. Is he Reds or Indians, Ken asks, and Johnny shrugs and

says, neither, really, and Ken nods as if he has just confirmed something he already suspected. Where was he just now, Ken wants to know, and Johnny considers his options. He could claim the restroom, although that might lead to more embarrassing questions given how long he was gone, so he lands on honesty, he was taking a walk. Getting up to stretch his legs, Ken asks, well that's allowed, but he seems to need a good deal of leg-stretching, and Johnny is about to point out that the leg-stretch is company practice, that you get a few dollars knocked off your health insurance premium for taking on certain health challenges, and walking is one of them, so almost everyone has started looping the atrium or the parking lot, walking in little groups of three or four, but saying so now sounds like he's throwing everyone under the bus, so Johnny leans back, extends his legs out in front of him, emphasizing the sizable task of managing such limbs, and tells Ken Blazer he understands, he'll keep his leg stretching to the bare minimum.

You need a new chair, Ken asks, maybe one of those ergonomic deals like Barb requested, there's money in the budget for accommodation.

No, Johnny says, his chair is fine.

The ladies a distraction?

Johnny sits up straight again, cocks his head as if he hasn't heard.

The ladies, Ken Blazer says, he's seen them chatter with Johnny, he can tell them to stop if it's interfering with work.

No, Johnny says again, there's no problem there, and Ken laughs, and says that's fine, but there's something, isn't there, something that's slowing him down or keeping him from firing on all cylinders. Ken suspects he

knows what it is, and here he hunkers forward over the desk like what he has to say is in the strictest confidence, and Johnny finds himself closer to Ken Blazer's face than he'd like, enough to take in the glisten of his nose. Look, he says, he knows Johnny is young, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have to abide by company policies, and it hasn't gone unnoticed that sometimes Johnny comes to work smelling too much like the night before, does Johnny know what he means? And he's tried to hint at it once or twice, but now he has to write him up for dozing off during a focus group. Whatever goes on in the after hours better stay there, because he can't smell like a bar with clients around. And Johnny finds himself looking past Ken Blazer through the window out into the woods, a thin strip of trees left after the land was cleared, an overlap of green and green and black, jewels of sun between the branches.

Last summer at Emerald Lake Johnny met Mrs. Audra Blazer, who shook his hand like a mechanical doll, saying oh, you're Johnny, before he had the chance to own up, leaving him to wonder how she could possibly know. Well, come *on*, she said, all blond bob and tan capris, and Barb leaned in to save them by saying, he's the baby, but the Wife wouldn't stop. She said Ken had a knack for describing people, really, you should hear him, and Wife squinted as though trying to see Johnny at a great distance, but Johnny said nothing, just let himself be seen, aware of his posture, the placement of his hands, every part as neutral as he could keep it, but then his phone buzzed against his thigh, startling him into a little sway, and Ken laughed, clapping him on the shoulder. Watch out for the bees around here,

he said, they'll get you.

WHEN HE WAS growing up, yellow jackets built a hive in one of the rotted out pillars on their front porch, and Johnny's brother, Will, who had the habit of kicking things repeatedly, took to kicking the pillar again and again until, one day, bees swarmed out and attacked Will and Johnny had to save him, so he jumped on him as if he were on fire, like he'd heard at school, stop, drop, and roll, and the truth is he has no visual memory of that moment, although it must have been terrifying to see those bees move like that, suddenly of one mind, but maybe beautiful, too, like flocks of birds changing direction, a black ripple in the sky. All he does remember is the feeling of those bees' bodies vibrating against his skin as they rolled, the pricks of pain that turned warm, and the dead bees hanging by their stingers from the front of Will's T-shirt, how Will shrieked with his hands over his ears, and the way his father sat in a lawn chair laughing at the spectacle, until he finally went around the side of the house and came back with the hose, not laughing anymore, but resigned, spraying them down the way he might two cats fighting. While Johnny and Will sat in their dripping clothes, their father kept firing in little bursts, teasing them, saying, "You two, you two," linking them inextricably, and maybe because it was one of the last times he could clearly remember his father in their house, Johnny thought of it like a final proclamation on them, his two weird sons, Will marked by his disorder, Johnny by something else.

BRIAN'S VOICE REVERBERATES through the walls of the now empty apartment, a burly, fisting sound, but no one answers. He must be on the phone, cursing and laughing. It goes on so long that Johnny stands outside his door, listening to the undulations, and in a sliver of silence tentatively knocks, and just as tentatively the door opens, and Brian clings to the doorframe, his watery gaze and ruddy cheeks, and Johnny can't help that crumbling feeling, says in an unguarded way, you drinking by yourself?

Brian breaks into a smile. Shit, man, his brother is here, he says, and sure enough Johnny sees a slightly larger version of Brian in the recliner, watching with the detachment of someone who has no skin in the game. There is something in the doubling, the echoed masculinity, that signals Johnny should go home, but, as it sometimes happens, when that little nudge tries to save him, he calmly says no and does the opposite, (in college when he joined a football game because the muscled junior he'd been tutoring at the writing center called from across the quad, Johnny-oh, and he should have understood the complicated layers, but instead proceeded as if it was merely an invitation, slipped into that ring of meaty forms and felt his own body in a way he did not like, as if gravity itself had shifted) and now standing between Brian and his brother, he feels it again, and maybe it should frighten him, but that's the difference between them. Brian, who labors around and around the same injustice, will not let anything go, and Johnny is so fucking good at letting things go, so now that he's here he says, I can hear your drunk ass through the walls, and Brian laughs and punches him in the arm and says, see this kid, he's got a mouth on him. Drew, this

is Johnny from one over.

From there Brian spirals out, back into monologue, stories from high school, someone drunk at a party pissed in Misty's father's golf bag and no one realized so she blamed it on the cat, and Dan Hazard, that was his fucking *name*, they found him half naked in bed with Ashley who said he just passed out and so Brian and Dave Handleman found a Sharpie and drew all over Dan, titties with big nipples and hair on his ass, made him the ugliest woman, that kid was sick, Dave Handleman, that kid was a beast.

After a while it becomes clear that Brian's rant is a list of the many drunks who have fared worse than he has, but his brother Drew remains unimpressed, interjecting only once to point out Brian's being an ass, and Brian lunges at him, slaps his head, calls him cocksucker and pin dick and goes back to his story.

A moment later, Brian stumbles to the bathroom, moving like a buffalo wilting under its own weight the way Johnny saw on a nature documentary once, legs giving out and beast crashing down. Without thinking Johnny goes to right him and they get a little tangled, Johnny's long limbs snagged by Brian's awkward flailing.

When Brian finally crawls to the bathroom, Johnny is left alone with Drew, who says nothing, so Johnny says he's going to grab a beer, and Drew snorts and says, you're the one he drinks with, and Johnny gives him a look because he doesn't feel he's earned that title. To be fair, Johnny says, Brian would drink with anyone. He's got his buddies from the baseball team and some friends from work and now one of the guys from his sober driving

class, and only mid-sentence does Johnny realize that *he* sounds like an ass because what Drew is trying to tell him is they want Brian to stop, and Johnny says, you want him to stop, and Drew snorts as if Johnny is the most egregious moron who has ever had the nerve to exist. When Johnny pictures Brian sober, tight-lipped and on guard, he understands he doesn't want Brian to stop drinking, not for now at least, and before he can say anything, Brian comes lurching back into the room, moving from one piece of furniture to the next, clinging the way survivors of a shipwreck do, and brother Drew gives Brian the longest, hardest look, shifting his jaw around and flexing his right hand as if he's preparing to fight.

He's been good about the driving, Johnny pipes up, he hasn't tried to drive once, but Drew says that's because they took his keys, stole the battery out of his car.

Johnny hardly hears it. Brian is staring at him warmly, as if he's just figured out Johnny is on his side, and Johnny returns his smile.

Brother Drew snorts again, oh Jesus, he says, look at these two, and Johnny hears it before Brian does, because Brian is still smiling.

Drew sits up straight and crows, you know he's still a virgin? Says it's because he drinks too much to get it up, but he can't get it up sober, see I seen the way he is with guys like you, he's always got one around.

That's when Brian's face changes, and in that moment Johnny recognizes the look that muscled senior had, the look Ken Blazer had during the ice-breaker on team-building day when they sat in a circle tossing a tennis ball. When you threw the ball to someone you had to say a fact you knew

about them, and soon it was just Ken and Johnny, Ken stranded with the ball, waiting to throw to Johnny, and Johnny realized he was last because no one knew a thing about him, and Ken's look said he knew he had the power to cause harm. That's how Brian is looking now at Johnny. It's hard to say what happens next. Brian lurches, throws his body like a sand bag, weight his only asset at this point, collides with Johnny, and when they go down it feels like a wall caving in and crushing him. But then Brian rears back, his arm arched behind him, the last thing Johnny sees before his face pops, once, then again, then again, pain on top of pain, his cheek, his eye, a sound wadded up in his throat.

ALL NIGHT RAIN pelts the windows and in his dream it is insects, a swarm of locusts blotting out the sun. When he showers, he is careful to keep his face out of the spray, dabbing with a washcloth that comes back flecked in dried blood. He dresses in his work clothes and goes to run a comb through his hair. He can hardly look at himself. Steam fogs the edge of the mirror, a haze around his face, one side purple and lumpy, the white of his left eye slimy red where blood vessels burst.

His bus plows against a building wind and the driver swears two or three times at debris kicked up, a trash bin that blows onto the road. The sky is a tarnished silver, and someone mumbles in awe, but the other passengers remain quiet, convinced that his ghoulish face is some indicator of his intent toward them. Maybe what he wants is sympathy, and boy is it heaped on him, Barb a little teary when she comes around the corner of his

cubicle, Laurel in tow, what happened, what happened, the flurry of female voices drawing others from behind their dividing walls. Johnny mumbles he was punched in the face, hoping the pure, physical reality will stand in for a story. Did he go to the hospital? Did he file a police report? Laurel says she'll drive him to Riverside and Barb says her brother-in-law is a police lieutenant, she'll give him a call and get an officer out, but Johnny says no, he's embarrassed, his friend got drunk and hit him, he's not pressing charges, and that's when the questions dissolve and the murmurs of sympathy evaporate and Devita steps in, says she wants to talk to Johnny alone, and the crowd defers to HR, parts to let them out. She walks him back to the conference room, her hand on his shoulder even though he's that much taller, and on the way they pass Ken Blazer leaning against the door of his office, arms locked tight over his chest. Devita settles into her chair and looks at him intently enough he has to look away, down at her hands flat against the table, urgency in her spread fingers, pronounced bones. Johnny, she says, like she might sing to a crying child, and Johnny feels himself melting into the chair. Johnny, she says again, there's only so much I can do, up to a point. Johnny, sometimes we think we are managing when we are not, does he know what she means?

Johnny takes a long time to answer because of course he knows what she means but knows, too, if he says so then he will have confessed to her particular view of the situation.

He has opened his mouth, still not sure what will come out when all at once the power snaps off, abandoning them in complete darkness. Devita

utters a surprised “Oh.” They feel along the wall for the door and emerge into the garish suspension of the emergency lights, everyone gathered in reception, tapping at their phones, calling out bits of information, windspeed and inches accumulated.

Johnny exits the suite and weaves between the people huddled in the atrium, interrogating one another on the severity of the storm. When he opens the front door of the building he anticipates a blast of wet wind, but finds the air is still and the rain has let up, merely dotting his shirt and bare arms as he descends the steps. Above, the sky churns a sick yellow-green, and beyond the parking lot the trees breath their rain-like sigh. The road and patches of grass, the sea of pavement all around, is littered with branches and tumbled garbage, at his feet a split-open inedible tree fruit, husk of skin and meaty middle. Then, out in the empty field that borders the adjacent property, a wall of wind appears, the gray of stirred up dirt, here and there a flash of metal like lightening, the green of a mangled tree or a sheet of grass. The wall appears to grow and he knows he should retreat, warn everyone inside, crawl under his desk the way he did in elementary school, tornado warnings, but he stays where he is, ready to face down the storm with his damaged face swelled up like a piece of ripe fruit, the whooshing in his ears like the thunder of a heartbeat.

He cannot ignore his desire to stand his ground, his presence so solid, for the first time maybe, as real as anyone, real as Ken Blazer, who on team-building day finally tossed that ball to Johnny, said in his weird Ken Blazer way, I’ll bet he’s a heartbreaker, bet no woman is safe around him, and

while it was just Ken Blazer's attempt to remake the world in his own image, now Johnny hears it differently. He knew what Erin and Nora, Sherry and Diamond, and all of them did in girls' group at Tree of Life, everyone passing around a cup to spit into or a chewed piece of gum, all the while the youth pastor demanding, would you drink it, would you put that in your mouth? He has tried to answer the question Kayla has spent two years asking with his body, a question Brian has never asked but Johnny longs to answer anyway.

The wind turns to suction that batters his already battered face and sprays his back with a ripple of rain. But he will not move on his own, and he knows if Brian came slinking back, if he hung his head and said, I hurt you, Johnny wouldn't do what he should, wouldn't turn into the air or the sky, but would hold his form and say, fix it.

And Brian would say he can't, would say Johnny's lucky he can get it up for a girl so he can hide.

And Johnny would laugh and say, I can't hide, man, you know I can't.