Spirited leaves | Stories and poems

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The University of Montana

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SPIRITED LEAVES
stories and poems

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THE LIGHT CHANGES
She breathes into sleep. He can't. Congested. He goes to the sliding glass door, large and fluid with shadows and light outside on the porch and two stories down and the city beyond. He watches the motel sign twenty yards into the parking lot blink back yellow and blue. His shirt slips from the chair his hand brushes against. He picks it up, slides into it—a sleeve sticks to his moist hairs—and he searches for his pants.

She rolls left, asleep, her arm swinging over the side, her hand hanging just above a pile of clothes and almost fingering, he sees, his jeans. He moves in his underwear in the dark to the bed, bends, and eases into his jeans. He scratches out a cough and checks the bed, the sheets falling, rising, falling.

She draws her air in slower now, relaxed, comfortable, her muscles puddling over the mattress, undercover. His socks on, his shoes snug, he grabs his jacket, leaves his keys, and tugs the door open. The sky is clear black, the city too lit for stars to prick the night, and the air is heavy and warm. He brings the jacket back inside and drops it to the couch. He takes a couple complimentary nuts from the endtable bowl and sets them on his tongue, sucks the salt, returns to the
door and steps outside.

She wakes slightly, hears something press softly shut, and pushes back into the pillow, inching back into sleep. He walks down two stairs at a time, glances at the porch, once one floor down, then again on the ground near the ice machine—its hum, its whirr, its clank of cubes—and finally when passing under the blinking motel sign. He sees his arms glow blue and yellow and blue and the room upstairs is settled and black.

She begins to whistle through her nose, her mouth closed. He waits at the light on the corner, pushes the button again. The street is empty, only wet with a thin sheen from street cleaners and streaked brightly with rivers of reflected lights, but the stoplight stays red and the pedestrian signal in the metal box across the way remains an open red hand. A pink Volkswagen convertible, loud with music and three girls, turns a corner a block up and speeds by and on through the green.

She snores briefly, her mouth now an O, shifts and is silent. The light still red, he steps off the sidewalk, hears a siren far off and he jumps back to the curb. He shakes his head, smiles, knows the cop is miles away probably chasing some thug. He jogs across the street diagonally to the white light and bold ads of a convenience store. Behind him, back on the street, a police car, quiet, coasts by.

She dreams a man slipping from a branch, falling fifty feet into an ocean, drowning, swimming to shore and asking a plumber if he might know the way north, the way out, the way home. He walks inside and a beer clock flashes 3:11 then changes to a golden mug overflowing with a healthy head. The clerk, on
his knees stocking shelves, looks up, Good Morning, I'll be with you in a sec. He smiles, No rush, no rush. The clerk smiles back and stuffs another few boxes of crackers next to the peanut butter cookies.

She turns onto her back, dragging the hand that pointed to his pants beside the bed minutes ago across her chest to rest palm up above the cool sheets. He walks past the stationery, the yellow pads, pencils and paper clips. The clerk pops up from the other side, scares him, and asks, Can I help you find anything? He thinks of a familiar name but can not place the face as he stares at the white, lined paper in packages of 500 sheets. Uh, no, he says, I'm just looking, and turns toward the cheeses and soda pop.

She bends one knee, hooks her foot on the warm calf of her other leg. He takes a package of six silver dollar Hostess donuts from the rack, passes on the milk, and goes to the counter, the clerk close behind. Will that be all? he says, and outside a car, a blur, crashes into the corner stoplight. Metal tears, sparks shoot, the tires spin, the hubcaps snap off, and the stoplight changes to red.

She sniffles in her sleep, her closed eyelids twitching. He pushes through the door and the clerk jumps the counter, kicking off the donuts. They run past the gas pumps and slow ten feet short of the car. No fuel, the clerk says, I can't smell fuel, and they race to the crushed front door. Large triangles of broken glass and even the slivers light up on the hood and at their feet like jewels.

She brings an arm behind her head, beneath the pillow.
They reach the man inside, the window rolled down and blood from his forehead and neck flooding his white polo shirt. The clerk tells him, almost yelling, Go back and call someone. He runs to the store, finds a phone half-hidden by a tennis magazine, and dials the emergency number taped to the cradle. Outside, the clerk touches the driver. A motorcycle carrying two guys and sleeping bags pulls up to the crooked car.

She feels her arm fall asleep, tingle, and she turns onto her stomach. He doesn't know what corner he's on, can't make out the names on the street sign inches from the car, so he tells the operator the name of the store. But you don't know which one, she says calmly. Yeah, I don't live around here, he says and then gives her the name of the motel. Got it, she says, thanks, hanging up.

She dreams she dies, shot on a mountain trail, birds crying like sirens overhead, but when she looks up, she finds only kites flying high with long, cloth tails. An ambulance, a police car, and a paramedic unit scream in. The driver lies dead. They cut the door open, and a few people walking over from the motel watch, wide awake, a red man, dripping, lifted from his car and carried into the ambulance. It drives off. The police talk with him and the clerk and take notes. A fireman stands in the intersection, asking any traffic to drive on. The two on the motorcycle say what little they saw, hop back on and pull away.

He shifts elbows, leaning on the counter, looks around and catches the sun crest the hill a mile away and explode in
the window near the bookstand. The rush of warm water bubbles
the small soap to suds in her cupped hands. She nudges the
shower head up an inch--the spray splashing her chest--and
washes her belly and back and the bottom of her feet. She rins­
es, steps out, dries and dresses, her short hair misted at the
ends.

He turns to the beer clock, reads 7:32, and says to the
clerk across the counter, Well, thanks for the company. The
hot pot hisses, and she reaches for the plug, pulls, and pours
herself some coffee. She brings the warm styrofoam cup to her
lips, purses them, sips, and looks out the sliding glass door.
The parking lot empties of a couple cars.

He pushes against the door, remembers the donuts, sees
them intact on the floor, drops a dollar to the counter, and
the clerk rings up his change. She shoves another pair of slacks
inside one of the suitcases and then zips the two of them shut.
She carries both to the couch where she sits deep in the cush­
ion, fingering in a few nuts and finishing her coffee.

He leaves with the donuts in his shirt pocket and thumps
twice on a pump. She drags the luggage down to the car, packs
it in the trunk and sees him walking into the parking lot,
zigzagging through cars. Where'd you go? she calls. He pulls
the donuts out and waves them. Just a little hungry, he says,
that's all. She moves toward the passenger side. Everything's
packed, she says. He smiles thinly, Sorry about the luggage--
would you like a donut? No, she says, just had some coffee.

He says as she leans into the seat, Could you drive some?
I'm a little tired. Sure, she says, and scoots across the
vinyl to the wheel. He walks around the car to the other side and sits, Thanks. He adds, It sure is warm. She starts the car, backs up, and turns to him, Didn't you sleep well? Yeah, not too bad, he says, looking out his window and resting his head on the seat, not bad--and you? Okay, I guess, and she accelerates onto the street then slows to a stop at the corner.

He drops his ear to the window and sleeps. She flips the air conditioner on, waiting for the light. Behind her, several cars line up and edge in. A kid leaps in front of her car and races to the other sidewalk, picking something out of the gutter fast with water. She follows him to the corner and watches the light stay red. She thumbs the latch of the air conditioner another notch over, and the car finally cools. The light changes, but the car ahead does not move. She honks--and next to her, his arm jumps.
POSTCARD: KYTHE: POSTCARD
The wide scope of landscape opens:

Eyes roaming left to where an overglossedover white bathtub gleaming with sun sits yards away from the dense wooded right right in the middle of a lone clearing of peat and wheatlike stalks sticking through clods of mud with a smooth woman inside her body turned away and frozen there one arm raised the other scrubadubbing underneath as her hair touches perhaps an inch of her shoulders all within this lighthearted souvenir for someone somewhere else. A high female voice calls out in her language what he translates as Closing time please then sure enough a tiny delicate bell rings a couple times so he takes it from the rack to the sharp colored fingernails of the cashier who in her high tone charges him twice the cost. The mistake a tip he goes out to the night pockets the card sensing the lights of the shop flickflutter off and the lady maybe chuckling enchanté one coin better.

She picnics slowly sometimes placing her sandwich or apple down to write
another line of a letter
or a poem or a story or just a little
of nothing.

Only a postcard lies angly there to be pulled out. He lifts
the lid back up clamping the mailbox snug and stares and won-
ders at the shiny photo of a bathing woman flips it and reads:
Nature meant woman to be her masterpiece G. E. Lessing and I
hope this finds you well it found me. He turns it back to where
he admires the fine blend of flesh and foliage and fields and
remembers how cold the day is today and returns one hand to
his pockets the other edging up in his sleeve a corner of the
postcard disappearing.

II

Three lit lamplights on he nudges a form with his foot but it
does not give over the iron grating warm enough for sleep. It
could be dead for all he knows as he steps around it and across
the street to the glow the flow of an open cafe a lemonade and
his accent cracks as the waiter waits grins thinly nods and
places a napkin down before him with a miniature female print-
ed as a silhouette with her hair done up larger than even her
full profiled breast. The two men exchange smiles then the
waiter leaves and he turns the napkin carefully over.

On a bench lying drunk
with fullmoonshine she sits
with the nape of a neck that shimmers
through the various falls
of her hair.

He never did like the little brown dog nibbling at his pantcuff.
He returns to the porch with the puppy still nibbling and squirming and lapping its nose glancing up: he sticks his tongue back down at it and leans through the doorway shouting Nothing hearing Nothing? come from a woman in the kitchen and he then says nothing back: he slips his leg into the house and shakes the puppy from his foot and gently closes the screen door not bothering to latch it and again he hears the woman say Nothing? so he says Yes and it seems then some cupboards shut and the running water stops: Oh her voice lightens though still loud so we did get something? but by this time he is down the steps down the walkway down the street a ways shaking his head but smiling at the voice yards behind him calling Where you off to? What about the mail?

III

Sipping the iceless lemon drink the glass alone almost cools him as much as the liquid in an otherwise warm evening or morning not sure but the night sky hovers static starred and dark anyway so it makes little difference. He places the lemonade back on her lower torso or so on the napkin his fingers still wrapping over half the small glass he assumes feels like the hard skin of the lady behind the bar turning to take a bottle from the shelf and catching in the mirror on the wall his eyes her way then falling down to the drink on his table till he lifts it to his lips sliding his gaze away to other tables. All he had to do was smile at her: he returns his eyes toward the bar thinking maybe now but she is laughing quietly eyelids winging as another man talks occasionally squeezing her hand.
Through the window she lays the book down and stands moving from the table away to a dimmed far wall diced with frames probably paintings probably oils.

One hand still in one pocket and the other with the postcard up at his face his walk is awkward twice stepping off the curb but the photo blazes so clearly in the cool windless clouded afternoon. He has never heard a lot about G. E. Lessing much less what he had to say and he busies himself with the quote about Woman or a woman or is it merely a misspelling of women? nor has he ever seen a photo quite like this one resting nicely in his palm whatever is meant by it by her by the bathtub by the mud and by the several Lessing words behind her.

IV

He drinks what little is left in one quick swallow and throw of his head: very very warm down through his throat and acidy in his belly and then he scratches the chair back and steps from the table leaving two small coins in a tray and not trying to look back to the bar but he does. She is not there anyway. Just an elderly woman serving three old men their drinks along with her yellow teeth so back on the sidewalk he thinks of the card he just bought and takes it from his back pocket and sees how it curves from his sitting down and he straightens it as best he can without creasing or chipping the sealant on the one colorful side and hopes the carriers will be just as careful and chuckles to himself to think how his sentiments would have wrongly amused that lady at the bar who is surely too busy
worrying about whom she will love tonight or how she will make it north for a week vacation.

She walks lightly
turns on her toes
into an alley up ahead
and does not return
to the sidewalk and the sun has one less shadow.

A third time off the curb and he drops the hand with the card to his side and follows the cars as they pass and several of them check him as they continue or turn left on the next street and those cars he decides to believe are parking and waiting for him to step into their line of gunfire. For a moment the street is bare save for a little red wagon in the far gutter with what appears to be a doll doubled over its dress torn and the lace loose and draping one side of the wagon and he crosses the street still empty of cars bringing the wagon back up to the sidewalk and then looks either way for someone to cry out and claim the doll and wagon or to come forth and plead guilty or worse: both.

V

His feet start to feel how long he has walked flexing his ankles and calves while pulling the map from his other pocket. He unfolds it open holding the postcard behind the hotel several turns and blocks away then he tucks the map back neatly away. It has been a very fine night and walk and his strides are deliberate and slow since the middle of night stays that way for some time and he finds it difficult to make out the
wee details of the card now among the dim yellow lamplights though he is deep down not wanting to study the card again but instead wishing he forgot something back at the cafe so he could try to please himself knowing of course it would only hurt. She seemed very nice nevertheless. Windows reflect foggily when he walks by and they reveal foggily what he walks by: fruit clothes cheese chocolate bicycles cheese leather bread meat all streaked with yellow behind the yellow glass.

The yellow grass is pressed softly down where she stepped to where she lies on her stomach now with her blouse untied at the waist spreading out from her sides.

A door squeaks open and he looks up the walkway of a house. On the porch stands an old woman one hand fistng the doorknob and the other with wide ringed fingers slightly moving twitching covering her sweatercovered chest. When he does not turn his head back she releases the door her chest fingerwriggling even more and shuffles to the end of the porch and checks the sky he would not doubt was checked by her an hour ago. He leaves all the same smiling as the old woman smiles too faintly edging back almost backing through the door into the house and walking away he never does hear the door close but just the voices of children darting out from a nearby yard racing his way and past him to where he guesses and he hopes the wagon lies abandoned and will now be claimed. To satisfy himself he turns to find out and they do slow to a fast walk by the wagon pointing inspecting and wondering but then just as suddenly they kick up their feet and laughing continue on.
VI

In a very narrow street with two unbroken steps or so it seems on either side instead of sidewalks a raindrop pats his ear and he knows it has grown more cool or just less warm but he does not recall any clouds from the last time he looked so he tilts his head back and the sky is as he thought and remembered black with clarity and not dulled with white. Still he does notice movement his eyes focusing on clothing dark and heavy wet with washing on a taut line strung from one window over him to the neighboring building eight feet across. From that rain-shower on he walks cautiously wanting to stay dry and he thinks of himself as silly anticipating any other clothcovering that might storm his way.

What looked like a dead bird she tenderly picks up and probably cradles in her shellwhite hands with the care of an unnecessary nest.

It is a very well kept and colorful rose garden but the tiny wrought iron fence should not be there. It should rather surround the dying nameless bush in his backyard he keeps forgetting to prune. He bends over to smell a few: two petals float soundlessly down to the concrete and he lets the flowers go and takes the red skins from the sidewalk and slips them into his wallet in a plastic frame enclosure in front of a distant out of focus picture of a lovely girl with now her neck down unknowingly stained with flowery blood. He slides his wallet back into his pants remembering how only minutes ago when he was crossing that street he was not shot dead.
The station jumps at him when he turns a corner and he digs into his pocket to the jingling of more change than he expected to find and trots across the street just before the next rush of traffic rolls by and searches for an attendant tapping one on the shoulder and makes a motion with his fist at his ear and the man nods pointing down a line of newsstands and vendors then crooking his index finger to the right so he thanks the attendant and passes all the headlines and lustrous nudes smiling at him and some showing no faces at all just glossy bodies and faceless and then he races past different ices and candies cooling in glass cases and only now does his heart veer: he places the postcard in his shirt pocket to purchase a small piece of fried dough and he bites inches into it as he turns right where the attendant said to and tastes chocolate and pleasantly surprised he looks inside to where a dark thin wafer lies amidst the golden fluff. It is delicious and he will have to buy another one soon.

A moonless night hangs tight over her house she resting in it and doing whatever she wants maybe even sleeping.

My my my a postcard and two veils from a rose and not even shot at from a row of parked cars waiting poised near that street corner all in one day and to think he also could have had a wagon with its doll already inside is enough to line his face with a grin even though he would not dare take the latter two of course and waits at the light where across the
intersection sits the store he crosses to when green. He walks inside all walls jutting out with shelves of old old books crinkled paperbacks and those with fraying cloth hardcovers and then some more current selections scattered about.

VIII

He squeezes through a crowd and inbetween two partitions to the phone and lifts the receiver dropping several coins into the slot and he waits then his mouth moves for twenty seconds his eyebrows rising and head shaking once and nodding lightly twice. Then he waits again for three minutes. He leans against one wall watches a little boy in the booth next to him finger for change in the coin return. He waits two more minutes then hangs up collecting back all the coins chingalinging down pockets them and steps aside to allow another person in while the faint flavor of chocolate on his palate returns returning him to the vendors outside near the exit to the platforms and he finds the one selling fried dough with a surprise and buys his second piece. The man recognizes him and says something to him with a smile and a pat on the back.

Her toes bunch up two small mounds of dirt as she on her knees bends over the vegetables pulling the cracked leaves off some and others completely root and all out.

The door ringing shut behind him he nods Hello to the dried skin gentleman he knows by name at the counter hooked over a newspaper with one elbow on an advice column and the other on
a crossword puzzle. He says Hello back with eyes looking over the glasses held low on his nose following him past a display stand of new books where he pivots toward the counter and the two shake three hands both hands of the clerk clasping his one and they laugh about the foolishness of the most popular book in the country now and to think they say how much money it is making and then they quiet down talk a little about the weather and how their weekends went not knowing much else to laugh and shake their heads about.

IX

The second dollop of dough tastes just as good as the first and he rubs his hands together feeling the grease or butter. The flecks of chocolate left he stabs with his tongue. He leaves the station and crosses the row of taxis and bag ladies and beggars and performers and heads for the park where he sits on a bench. Lazy lovers hand in ladled hand stroll by with the women nuzzling their noses into the shoulders next to them and one lady glances at him and then shuts her eyes. He shifts his feet under the bench looking elsewhere and observes a street painter several yards away taking down his easel and collecting his paints and brushes and tins: he remembers the postcard in his pocket and pulls it from his shirt nice and straight this time along with a pen and he writes.

In the bigger room everyone gathers around something grand while with her hands clasped at the rise of her lower back she occupies herself with a wispy wire sculpture of a fish.
He says Well and the clerk Yeah and goes back to the newspaper below him and he zigzags through other stands to a flaking cardboard box on the floor full of postcards placed immediately in front of the minimal travel section of the bookstore spotted with maps and books and guides always thinking how appropriate but still he never goes anywhere. He does muse about the possibilities and all the chances he could take and all the postcard sights he could really see and how just to muse to mull over touched-up pictures is easily the safest the cheapest and yet the most frustrating mode of travel as he begins to flip slowly through the cards as the colors and shapes graze his fingertips and wash his eyes.

X

The ink clogs once and he shakes it to write the last few words: well it found me. He reads over what he has said wondering if there is anything else to add when he sees a police car crawl by with the men inside looking back at him so he writes the address and clicks the pen putting it in his pocket and stands. From his wallet he tears a couple stamps from a square sheet then returns it to his pants pocket and applies the two miniature unfamiliar though obviously famous in some fashion portraits to the postcard and turns it over noticing how the colors of the stamps and of the photo rather complement each other as a nearby lamplight burns out and he must shift the card forward toward the burning of another lamp across the street. He loves the way her body is delicately angled almost liquid as he comes to the mailbox and drops it in to a metallic ting then the cry
from a darkened window two buildings down and some stories up of a baby needing milk.

Her arm is raised
fingers stretched as droplets of suds of sun run
down her skin when
a shutter clicks and tense she turns her head.

A Picasso reproduction a photographic collage of his hometown an apricot and vase a flower with two bees busying themselves within as he fingers through more postcards and there are hundreds still left but some have fallen flat to the bottom and other he simply skims over such as a cartoon cat chasing a polkadotted butterfly a sunset a quartet of crows framing a cloud. He pulls out a barren playground and he turns to the clerk lifting that card high and he asks him Where in the world are the children here? and the clerk calls back What is a five letter word for pointless? He shrugs and returns to the card board box replacing the playground and looking at the ones remaining: assorted animals some different shots of the same civic building on the same postcard a selection of cute designs and then he stops at one with a closeup of an old man his head thrown back with his mouth strained wide open laughing or singing or yawning and he thumbs it into his palm.
DISTANCES
Most who pass it, most doing seventy, want to stop in not to warm up if wintertime, not to relax if July, not to eat, not to fuel up, no pumps anyway, but to ask the owner why it's kept open, the sign says We're Open 24 Hours, twenty-four hours a day, why the owner doesn't locate elsewhere, at a crossroads perhaps, at the very least, or better yet, on a busier highway, near a larger city; to ask if truckers must've pulled up at two, three a.m. or something for donuts, there's got to be donuts, and coffee of course, feeding, sipping endlessly, keeping themselves wired for the road, pulling, full, back out and away, the sun maybe even rising hard by then, harder than hot stone; to ask how long it's been operating, and where the owner lives in this vast countryside if not inside upstairs at the southwest corner with the broken window, the one briefly visible though blurred when passed by fast, the one with drapes flapping, when windy, out through it jagged glass.

--Are those the only tapes you got?
--You drive. I'll play the . . . Hey, watch out! . . . and I'll play the music, okay?
He sat, looking from his desk over to the broken window then back down to the blank page. This will be a conventional narrative, he wrote, third-person, singular past. (Hhmm, this was a conventional narrative, etc. . . ?) Quotes, no doubt, should have been placed initially around the second independent clause appearing in this paragraph as well as around the adjectival phrase which immediately follows (followed?) the two-word description attributing the act of writing—in, as it should be, the past tense—to a rather ambiguous third-person male designated only by its appropriate pronoun case, i.e., "This will be a conventional narrative," he wrote, "third-person, singular past." However (Furthermore, he wrote, he started to wonder how business was downstairs, and where the extra roll of register tape was misplaced, and when the clerk would, if he hadn't already, mop up the milky mess in the storeroom, and if the dill pickles were still crisp.), because the entire sentence in question had just been re-stated, it should've appeared and will now appear thusly: ""This will be a conventional narrative," he wrote, "third-person, singular past."" Therefore, the first parenthetical aside in this paragraph needed to have been read as such: ""Hhmm, this was a conventional narrative,"' etc. . . ?"" Or something like that. He moved—check that—"He moved uncomfortably in his chair," he wrote, "and continued." No no no no no. But, indeed, he was, he wrote, very uncomfortable.

*

The front door ajar several inches, maybe a foot, and the
lack of a screen door allow flies to buzz in, and those that are already in, for hours, possibly days, to buzz out. The door's often jammed open, and only when it's freezing outside, blowing snow and all, does it ever get yanked shut, only to have the next patron enter, however seldom this may occur, returning the door to its former and present position, only to have the clerk request the guest to kindly close the door to the cold: Where were you born? In a barn? and they would all laugh, even though the clerk would chide himself inwardly for having forgotten to post a sign on the door asking people as soon as they approach the store to please shut the door behind them. But such an informal introduction would also break the ice (ice, all the while, would be glazing the store windows white at their corners), and there would follow some chatting, an exchange of names, and an offer from the clerk for a free cup of coffee, and the patron would feel so welcome that he or she would end up buying more than what would really be necessary, and, in fact, he or she only stopped in out of--what else?--curiosity, but nevertheless, a danish would be purchased (and why not? it'll go well with the java); or a small package of paper plates; or some shoelaces; or a pen. Yet, while questions such as What brings you here? This far out? This way? and Where to? would arise and give way to answers like Fishing, and This area's mighty nice, and The snow, and Northwest 'bout thirty miles, other questions like Y'get much business out here? How can you stay open all the time? Or is that just a gimmick? and You live here? would prompt little more than shrugs, not really, and an occasional yes. In
the meantime, the coffee would warmly disappear and the danish would end in crumbs on the customer's chin.

--You'd think there'd be some place to fill up out here... --I told you we shoulda taken the other highway.

But, he wrote, shouldn't even this presently progressing sentence, the one being written and read right now, if only by me (him?), be in quotes, he continued to write, wondering, but it's too late to change, and time should not be toyed with anyway in a story such as this--should not have been toyed with, etc...?--oh, he groaned. "Oh," he wrote, this has got to be discarded, this obsession, this confusion, this. Ah, yes, Once upon a time, he wrote (finally smiling), to simply write and plot and read on through the middle until the happily ever end.

* 

A westerly wind winds through some brush, scratching twigs across the skins of greenery, funneling loose dirt up and about, and takes a thin, shiny, white tissue-square, one for a donut, or some such treat, and carries it some distance, through a fence, around a telephone pole, and into an up-ended garbage can spotted inside with clumps of trash, ripped wrappers, and small, colorful puddles. It is lying beside the southeast corner, near the entrance, the yawning door, still breathing flies in, out, in and out, one fly busying itself over to the fallen garbage can, winging inside, and perhaps finding crumbs, a tasty stain, or the particular tissue's
aroma of dough, if there remains an aroma, assuming it once held a donut at all and not something else like caramel.

--Check this out. A house is on fire. See it? Way in the distance . . .
--Right now, I'm kinda busy watching my gas gauge. Hey, you wanna check the map for me?

Up, and nearing the window, a refreshing rush of wind reminded him, he wrote, to fix both the door downstairs and the window at his nose, his eyes fixing themselves on smoke far off in the mountain miles away, smoke curling like hair up into a loose braid. He needed, he knew, he wrote, to ready the works for winter this year and not put it off any longer, sick as he was of boarding up the window during December, blocking out the white waterfall of flakes and the ever green across the way. Although the clear, hot road outside and the watery rippled mirage glistening in the flat distance of the highway suggested no immediate need for such repairs, he realized winter always arrives. Always. He edged, he wrote, closer to the glass, his fingertips pressed on either side of it, on the wood, and looked down diagonally across the face of the front of the store, through the glass-stabbed hole in the window, watching the garbage can buzz alive with flies, now five or six of them. Damn dog, he thought, he wrote, now's the time for a leash. Definitely. He placed the notepad on the sill, still writing, near the window's hole, he wrote, and eyed two cars speeding suddenly by, one tailgating the other, the people inside little more than solid shadows from this
angle, and they were turning toward this store, maybe this window, even this man, this, he wrote, backing away from the gla

* 

A pad of paper drops from the southwest window, bringing up a breath of dirt, fogging momentarily the air near the tight, rectangular, black mouth the rain gutter opens at its dry, chipped end inches from the ground still thundering from the cars racing past, almost kissing chrome when the green one finally passes the red one and the two disappear in the bend of the road, behind the trees, the roar of their engines a wheel's revolution (or so) slow. The window upstairs coughs out the slamming shut of a door, and the clerk downstairs, ear to the news on the radio, the scores, the high pressures and lows, at last hears steps falling closer and he looks up, finding feet on the staircase.

--Anything?
--Just elevation figures. No crossroads for another 50 miles or so.

He picked up the pad, he wrote, and walked back inside, saying to the man behind the counter, nose for news, Here it is. He dusted it, no sheets torn or crumpled, and the clerk said, Not much business today. "Not much going on this afternoon" was what the clerk, he wrote, actually said to him, and he returned to the stairs, pad in hand, pen busily writing this. Stepping up, he said, I'll be down in awhile. "Okay?" he wrote. At the top of the stairs, he heard the radio station
go static, the clerk go "Hey, what the" and then the program crackle back on. He went, he wrote, into his room--"... and it looks like more sunshine," he heard, "is on tap for the weekend with high temperatures reaching up to"--and he closed the door.

* 

Four hours into the afternoon and only three people have pulled in, one to say hi to the clerk, his friend, another to buy a six-pack of coke and some chips for her daughters in the car who were good enough for some munchies but much too noisy and irritable to be allowed to come inside, smell the cheese, and scamper through the aisles. Maybe next time, she told the clerk. He nodded, I'm sure they're wonderful kids. She replied, Yes, but you know how little ones are during long drives in the car. He nodded again even though he didn't have any children himself. And the last person to stop in stopped in only thirty minutes ago, looking for directions. Directions, he said, to that, you know, off-road place somewhere, like, you know, around here, where some people, you know, someplace were supposed to--uh, unless, like, my friend back home gave me bad, you know, directions, but are you sure there's, you know, no place like this nearby? The clerk said, Sorry, but could I get you a cup of ice tea or something? No thanks, this lost gentleman said, but I will try a scoop of chocolate ice cream if there's any left. On a sugar cone, he added, please. Fortunately, there was some left and so the guy wasn't all that disappointed when he drove off. Three people--one run batty by her brats,
the last lost in the roadmap of someone else's mind, and the third simply having paid a friendly visit—all day so far. No need, he knows, to stock the shelves with lemonade and insecticide and suntan lotion (no need, indeed) because none of it has moved. The register tape reads $1.96 for the coke, $1.50 for the chips, and 50¢ for the cone, when out of the corner of his eye, through the picture window displaying so proudly and so brightly fresh fruit, and onto the highway, a car curves into view.

--Hey, look... 
--Great. Maybe we can pick up something to eat, too.

He was going to put the pad down, he wrote, to nap before dinner, but he noted a car turn into his lot. Two guys got out and looked around, one of them snapping his fingers to the music they decided not to turn off, before walking inside, he wrote, now under him. He moved to the door, opened it, and listened to someone, not the clerk, mention gas, why this place had no pumps and that he doubted he and his companion could make it to the next town as they were very low on gas. He heard the clerk offer them some coffee and donuts, and excused himself for a moment, he wrote, and came upstairs to this man, pad in hand, waiting at the door to his room. Once upon a time, he said to the clerk, he wrote (smiling again), there was a gas can for that lawn mower out back that hasn't been used in years. So maybe, he wrote, telling this to the clerk, there's enough left to carry these gentlemen the last leg to town. "Do I sell it to them?" the clerk asked quietly, the staircase
understood to be an open throat swallowing everything. In fact, he wrote, a burp of words between the two waiting downstairs traveled up: soft talk about how strange it was not to have a gas pump out here ("These guys," he wrote upon hearing it, "could make a mint."), and how they were glad to at least notice a telephone behind the counter "just in case." He wrote that he said, Yes; but he really said, "No. Give it to them free."

*

Downstairs, the clerk directs them to the back of the store and out the rear door to a shed, shoddy and red with rot, no lock, the hinges rusting loose, a few screws missing, probably buried in the cracking of dirt at their feet. The gas mower is behind the push mower, and the gas can is at its side, so the clerk leans in over the blades, the various ropes, and all the tools on the floor, the ones shaken from the shelves two storms ago, and he reaches for the can's handle, lifts—it's fairly light, but some gas splashes within. All three of them smile while he shuts the door to the shed, the latch falling with a dusty thud, and they walk around the store to the car. One guy removes the cap on the car and the clerk fits the spout into the 0, eases it down, tips the can up, and the gas streams a couple gallons in. Thanks. Thanks. The clerk nods. Glad we could find you some, glad to get you back on your way. How much? Yeah, how much? they ask, and the clerk shakes his head, It's yours. It was just going to dry up anyway. Everyone chuckles. Go ahead, he says, it's yours. Thanks. Don't know
what to say. Thanks a lot. Well, gotta run, and they get into the car. Thanks again. And they are off, the clerk waving.

--Good donuts, if you ask me. . . .
--Yeah, and I think we'll have just enough to make it to the crossroads.

The clerk waved, then bent over and, he wrote, picked up the gas can. He took a few steps backward and followed the car blaze into the bend of the road nearly a half-mile down. The clerk, he watched and wrote, turned on his heels and glanced up at the window, this window, shaking the empty gas can high in the air and asking if he could take his break "after I return"--he wrote what the clerk said--"this can to the shed?" He smiled back down to him, nodding, then raised the window and pointed to the tipped-over garbage can, then pointed to his notepad as he wrote. The clerk caught on and went to the garbage can and righted it, replacing a few stray bits of trash that had tumbled out. He stood behind it, waiting: He threw the notepad out the open window toward the garbage can, he wrote on his notepad still in hand, in hopes that it might land dead-center and be done with, in hopes that the clerk, when coming back inside, would disregard the warm weather and shut the door behind him, while far in front of this man the fire still burned, he wrote one final time, on that mountain miles away, and he knew he had a call to make.
The name escapes you but God the deal
they had: steak, two eggs, fries, fruit, bread, and
dessert at, in American coin, a buck twenty-five. Even
the wine went cheap in 90¢ pitchers, the unbreakable
plastic Kool-Aid kind that keeps drink
cold. You ordered a chablis, rosé, another
chablis, the three of you so thirsty
your glasses of water were, however warm,
not overlooked.

Nor were you, served in minutes
with smiles. Had you known their language better
you'd have pointed to the menu
less or, at least, offered upon leaving a clearer thanks.

Your steaks, though magazine-thin, tasted fine
alone, no sauce, no salt, and all
the fries you could eat came piled on
separate plates. The eggs were not the eyes,
sharp and yellow, most insist on, but what ran
around the meat into the fruit was easily cleaned up
with bread. The butter too disappeared in this
dinner bound to go well with all your drinking.

The room rang with silver, and the chatting back
and forth that always attends the communion
of appetites grew loud as the cooks
belting out continuous tunes none of you, humming,
dared to forget but did. It's odd
what details you claim, what features slip by.
You still see in other women the freckled lips
of the waitress who checked back every ten minutes hoping
everything's okay while the line outside backed
to the curb. Single customers, grouped together
near you, turned friendly--in fact,
somewhat noisy. But noise was nothing
in this atmosphere far more comfortable than the beds
the overpriced hotel crosstown provided. These
cushioned booths could've swallowed you
whole but you'd have missed the rest
of your meal, your friends, and hated yourselves
for failing to tip. That's why
between bites you held on with your elbows firm
at the table.

Who cares if the peaches were canned
when the syrup's that honey thick?
The name may come back the next time, if ever, the owner decides not to close till the crowd thins out if ever the moon pours in long before the pie arrives.
At Your Cabin, Chopping Wood For The First Time

My first swing leaves
the wood still
untouched on the block, my heel
inches from the blade. Your wide eyes
show how close I came
to blood, to bone. I heave again, again,
finally striking, and you whisper,
"gentler," drawing back behind
the door to a warmer air
fueled from some earlier wood
of yours.

This axe
sticks, and you suggest gentler?
Shouldn't I attack instead,
the wood explode, and splinters
fly to my hair? Shouldn't birds
take note, even in midflight,
and worms shudder underground?
I can't ignore the brief,
fierce rush of spirited leaves
flaring at my feet
between swings, how
it generates this chopping,
keeps me feverishly
chopping to the minute
those flames inside burn
low, when you'll return
to the porch, arms wide, saying
the fire's dying
for more wood, my wood, wild wood,
and I will bring you bundles.
SITES
In the silent shadowed corner of the hallway the little boy fingers the brass handle of a door to a place a room? another hallway? a place he has never been

I turn to you in this warm timothy grass and say Columbus will never be alone and you smile that smile teeth are proud to take part in

Twenty miles to the north an old man with a worn-down soul and a worn-out sole on one of his shoes knocks at an inn and the two knocks echo back no footfall falling

The boy polishes the handle with his hand and its cold sleek quick as a coin through fingers milling about in a jar of change and invisible out of place foreign in the dark realizing now he has noticed it shimmer many times when dawn upon waking he turns up the hallway There There and then down the stairs to eat

Where is he Father thinks resting downstairs inbetween smoke rings and coughs and he glances with a cocked head at the woman
at the cabinets at peace with tugging at her sleeves replacing
a dish or pot he cant be sure as he remembers something: an
owl from the evening before and how dark and fat it lay on
the oak branch out in the back out over a younger tree near
the bedroom window and how it didnt move till he dreamt it
move in his sleep then to his amusement the woman turns slight­
ly lightly on her heels and he sees just how really palesmooth
and daintydo she carries herself: moves like wine: no: loose
and quiet as disturbed dust but he wonders again where is he?
in bed? so soon? and without a word

II

Never thought to search for it feel it at night like tonight
and he presses down slow and it something clicks sticks and
stuck he swallows looking to the yellow light behind him at
the end of the hallway where the light drops downstairs to
its source to where his mother is clearing the table and his
father his throat

The old man sets his head against the door with his hands flat
against the wood by either ear and he thinks it will help to
close his eyes and even if it doesnt help he can always imagine
someone calling coming coming

At the table Father crosses his legs and the table itself is
spotted nicely neatly with three plates and four wooden cups
one for the sugar two with drying drops of milk like warm snow
thinning at the bottom and the last empty of any trace of cof­
fee other than the aroma remaining because the brew was espe-
cially mild: sugar and a spoon or two of cream and he holds back a burp as he puts the pipe to his mouth

The little boy hears them talking but the smell of bread and beans and leaves and the dimmed hallway and the metal in his fist muffle their voices into: weather good carriage blacksmith late tired going supper you? late night yes

The moon above us is a fingernail clipping as Orion watches over with the Dog only inches away and all you do is agree just like I was hoping you would whispering I know what you mean and grinning in these fields waiting for sleep for dreams for more of my words if neither

Hand at his mouth no phlegm this time Father tells himself Ill quit Ill quit but its so mellow so so good so there he laughs inside and returns it to his lips and sucks

Imagination has indeed no limits but the door to the inn never does open and no one has welcomed the old man in with an offer to take his coat to take him in so he steps off the porch and limps across the dirt road to the other side to the other inn to another chance to find a bed on which he could finally lay himself down and remove the cobble from deep within his only good shoe

III

Father with umyum in his tummy says Thank you to the woman closing the cabinet door on the last dish or pot he still isnt sure which and sees her walking near and he stands and they
hug he caring for her like a ladybug gentle fragile and much
too light in his arms while in this silence he also becomes
very much aware of an absence who is the little boy his son
who couldnt have finished supper more than five minutes ago

You nap I know you do and you just as well should seeing how
I love to lap with my fingers at your locks flooding my lap
while you rest dont ever wake never wake simply dream that I
continue with you and this forever

His hand still fumbling fondling the handle he hears the wooden
staircase bend stretch and crack a bit under footsteps and
he drops the hand to his pocket and the lint inside balling it
seeing the yellow light grow sharper and brighter then two
figures stepping into the hallway their bodies sidehighlighted
by the lantern in the taller forms hand and both start toward
him

There There he is drowning in this yellow light Father sees
smiling at him almost relieved almost haunted by the revelation
the nightmare standing like stolen gold in the corner of
the hallway way in the corner

The little boy looks to his father and the other smaller form
and he shields his eyes: it is all too sudden the light the
noise the company as his eyes slowly adjust and he watches
his father walk a stride ahead of the other his mother

Still sleeping I see I feel your breath and chest rise evenly
like the fine white cuticle moving across the stars
Cobblehobbling to the other inn he walks up to the door and knocks twice as usual and twice again just in case and the echoes return as usual as does a voice ah a chance

The lantern feels heavy in my hand Father thinks with it swinging barely brushing his leg and he notices a woman out of the corner of his eye walking a little behind and beside his steps his heart jumping once before he realizes her as his wife and he continues down the hallway to the corner to the little boy There There

IV

My hands warm easily in your hair too easily I feel Im taking advantage of your sleeping beauty your tendrils but you are resting across my legs and dreaming I hope of doves floating in your hair lifting you skyward while I awake watch a dream of my own take place right here in my lap at my touch

The boy hears his father question Sleepy? and he nods Yes Father and looks to his mother as his father says something like Tomorrow again son and the little boy smiles and feels a patting twice on his head twice on his back while his mother whispers something low then says Good night and follows his father around the corner into their room with the lantern glare and the light squeezing thin with the closing of the door and the hallway is dark again and the boy strains his eyes and waits

The door of the inn makes a few noises before opening: the unlocking of locks the old man believes and he sees another old man standing inside holding a lantern looking out looking back
at him as if he were a mirror: a brother only the old man on the outside has no yellow glow pouring from his hand.

Her breasts her belly and back are framed perfectly in the window as she undresses then slipping on a longlacy she glides beneath the sheet without a sound and Father doesn't know quite what to do with his hands even though he has lain down with this lady for nights for years forever he wishes but why am I shaking so and why now: he wonders.

The little boy pulls out his hand back into the darkness and squints tightly and seeing nothing he closes them as his fingers flow slowly about touching wood turning air then grazing familiar metal and he turns the handle down pushing the door in and it something again sticks and pushing still almost on his toes the handle goes down farther and he pulls the door back.

V

Sleep enters the open window into her eyes and the bed is very still and he moves across to the window and the evening there catching a falling star in its fading fated flight and gone before the distant hills can catch it catch fire and spread till the brush and breeds vanish and then itself extinguish.

The owner of the inn invites the old man in and he is so thankful: You know the lateness of the hour and such but the owner shakes it off waves him in saying Its nothing its nothing welcome welcome welcome well come on in for Gods sake and take off your coat but the old man says nothing: he would rather take off
his shoes take out the cobble from way inside the toe and he sits down in fact and does so

You stir like a kitten with eyes opening waiting for milk but I can offer you nothing more than this evening this lap and you lift your head and search for a vantage point a focus and you close in on my arm stretched out to and in your hair my fingers still swimming and then your eyes find mine and light up with a fingernail white

The door swings quietly open and he sees nothing feels narrow blocks of wood two feet in: a ladder he thinks and touches two rungs looking up to black and still nothing but something he simply knows nothing about and climbs

Sometimes like this time tonight Father finds himself wishing the world would end for no apparent reason at all and he feels so strange so unkind watching the dark sky pass in the forms of a few formless clouds and unnamed birds probably owls and it is all so beautiful so why? how?

You wonder if you've been sleeping and I say Yes for awhile at least and you ask what I've been doing and I smile not daring to tell you if you don't already know and a breeze blows in around us tying our bodies closer together pulling away pull it snug

VI

The little boy climbs slowly with one hand above his head below the something at the top of the ladder in the bottom of his
desires at one time now gently rising as he rises from the hallway and his hand hits wood eight rungs up

He places the few cobble into a little pile by the leg of a chair and returns his feet to the more comfortable confines of his shoes: ah

This close what could be better than the exchanging of secrets me to you and you to me and I start by saying The faraway horizon is actually the horizon of the sky and the land we lie on in fact circles the night and day skies and you and I should be falling up as I speak but seeing how that would disturb many many things we dont so mum is the word and you lean to me and whisper back how you dont believe a thing I say but understand wonderfully everything I mean and that by the way let us do fall up you continue in my ear Let us do sometime because thats just what the world needs and I laugh saying Okay

He pushes the wood up and finds it simply a light slab unhinged and he eases it to the side putting his head through the opening still black wishing he had gotten a lantern downstairs but climbs all the way up anyway and onto the floor moving very carefully and very scared

Father sits on the sill flicking splinters and twigs from it losing sight of them in their drop down and down he looks to the toolshed with the doors swung open remembering he forgot to bolt them shut today but the sky and few clouds appear calm so no loss no worry
The old man follows the owner into the kitchen where four lanterns none lit are arranged in a line on the counter and he hopes he will get one: not that he is afraid of the dark just that he is getting on in years and wishes to see where he might and might not go and how neat it might be to look at while the owner sets down his lantern changing the pattern of lanterns to something a bit different and reaches behind two large bowls of nuts and brings out a loaf of bread.

The grass is more moist now under our legs and I don't know whether it is droplets of dew or us warm and loving and you suggest we take a walk through the town as you stand on your feet looking down with your hand waiting for another for mine I assume and I take it.

VII

The bread is just tasty fine and much better than the fiddlesticks he had this morning at an inn too colorless to remember and the old man tells the owner so.

He pulls the window down and he returns to the woman and the bed and sits at the foot of it undressing pleased that he can't be seen even though the only person present lies in lovely sleep dreaming about butterflies fluttering by and through the ears of laughing children in school with the teacher tapping her desk with a pointer insisting on an explanation.

The little boy is on his knees on the floor and feeling around for anything kicking something with his heel and it falls and he searches behind him and finds a lantern and he takes out
a match from his shirt pocket and lights the wick the attic filling with yellow and shadows.

We cast shadows too and shadows thin as the moon at its peak coming down as we stroll about and the town only minutes and one fence away and only minutes big as well so I tell you the trip will be brief and that’s okay with you because that leaves more time to dream you say and oh my I sigh how you charm me.

Father lies down beside his wife not too close not as close as last night when the lovemaking was long and sweet when the bed was water and he turns away from her on his side and lowers his eyes to the blisterbloated hands tucked under his chin and wonders how they were ever able to make a woman move as she had last night and he knows they will never be able to do so again.

Over the fence we go and here we are.

VIII

The attic has boxes and assorted lengths of wood in assorted positions across the floor porcupined with splinters and filmed with dust probably part of the wood itself by now except for a few footprints glowing with the angle of the light but my goodness the shadows and how they dance off the walls.

The owner and the old man talk very casually to each other but they cannot bring themselves to talk about women whether if either man is married or not or when was the last time they gave a woman a flower or a handkerchief.
The bed is too quiet too still to be moved into sleep as he and she were many times before too silent to be led by waning sounds into slumber so Father turns and touches her hip: she on her side facing away sleeping away dreaming far far away and his fingers trace her outline down easily and slowly and he flows as his hand flows finally into sleep.

The little boy steps over a crack in the floor he didn't want to fall through to who knows where and where is he anyway he thinks and what is all this for and he crosses to the far wall to a ricketyracked stack of small boxes each no more than ten inches square and setting the lantern down throwing flittering shadows up to the rafters he takes one in both hands: careful full of thoughts about someone hearing climbing seeing and bringing him outside to be hanged on the branch an owl will abandon for the occasion.

I brush from your bottom the dust it must have collected from climbing the fence the one I used one hand to scale and you say So you can climb things well well I have beautiful eyes: and that satisfies me you know they're my weakness.

Thanks for the bread and again thanks for letting me in the old man says you know the lateness of the hour and such as the owner of the inn simply smiles not listening all that much anymore and gives the old man a lantern while taking one for himself and they walk sleepily full upstairs the old man yawn­ing his eyes wide open to watch where he might and might not go.
IX

The woman beside him wakes just as he falls to sleep and she brings the back of her hand to her nose to rub an itch there and even in his early sleep Father knows she is doing all this and he is relieved to be isolated from it somewhat.

Your eyes take us through this street with the grace of a curt­sy and I point upwards where the little boy works with his mind and an object in his hands and I suggest we sit down and imagine but you'd rather continue and by the perfect blue of your eyes I know you mean it.

The old man is given his room: it lies before him quaint with one wall bent unnoticeably in and he can't figure out what the simple subliminal structural matter is so he leads it quietly out of his mind while the owner mumbles about the washpan at the bed and a sink down the hall and leaves shutting the door behind him and when the old man turns to say thank you he stops himself then whispers it to the door.

He kneels bringing the box down to the lantern and he removes the cover and inside is a tissue crumpled up and he opens it as delicately as water meeting feet in a puddle and cradled there in the tissue is a brittle spider and the boy wonders why he ever came up here when sleep is so near but not tired he returns the gentle folds back where they belong back when they were keeping an old dead insect hidden and he covers the box placing it at the side of the stack.
X

The grocer lives there above his store with a plump wife I lean and tell you and he is sleeping delightfully now in a fruitful sleep playing tag in his childhood in the garden where he first grew to love both nature and friends several years before realizing he would have to choose only one and which one do you think he chose I ask you and you decline to answer saying you hope you never have to make such a choice because they're both too wonderful too necessary you say and we walk on and on

Father is dreaming at last but about noises as his wife falls back to sleep dreaming again of laughter and little kids

His old wearywary body sits on the bed with the rusted coils chipping and squeaking under him over and over at his testing and off come his shoes and shirt and pants in a ragged hill of linen and worn leather and as soon as he lies back on the pillow there is a knock at his door

The little boy is opening his fifth box the second having a set of jewels for a woman and gowns the third with balls of white and yellow string the fourth was shakyful of keys and old coins and this fifth box feels solid in his hands not heavy but weighted and he lifts off the cover seeing books six or seven in number

You kick a pebble yards ahead of you and lose it in a cloud of dirt but how you search

XI

The old man goes to the door and opens it where a young lady
stands with a handbag clasped in both hands below her stomach and she stammers that she was sent up to him by the owner in case he gets lonely and imaginative tonight.

I think about how long I've known you walking with you in this town and you merely wonder back with a tiny shake of your head and I realize it is not as vital as the moon edging over us or as willed as the flight of a hawk or as enjoyable as your company now.

The two top books are thin and fragile with pages dogeared torn and loose and the third is uncut and the fourth has a funny design on the cover: the scrawled initials of someone too faint to make out in the firelight and he opens the cover to see in the pages other inserted pieces of paper throughout the length of the book and they are full with notes and scribbles.

Father dreams on about general noises then it sharpens its range to the call of an unseen bird and the scuffleshuffling of feet and the crackling of wood on fire and the scratching of metal on metal all while his wife's sleep whispers evenly on.

Tired we turn and you step away and run to the side of the road and I catching on move to the other side you looking straight ahead and I too do the same but occasionally I cheat weaken stealing glances your way and you kindly never notice or you pretend fairly well that you don't and there thirty feet away from me you can't hear all this so for my own ears on my own account I'll make it short so I can get back to you and as I listen to myself I trip over something no one could've seen and
you finally look this way with your teeth gleaming

His arm drops from the door and his eyes try to stay with hers but they too drop down past her neck and: and: and: over parts of her body he has no names for

The boy reads what words he can: he didn't know what he was talking about that night in the fields doesn't matter anyhow: and he turns the page

XII

His dream quakes with movements and the cawing of birds his head shifting to the left and his wife there although he doesn't see her sleep asleep himself

He invites her in and she immediately coyly goes to the bed and the old man pulls a chair from the desk and drags it near her and sits gingerly down where they try talk of the past and form ideas of the future making a strangely odd couple of beings especially this late in the evening

The little boy turns another page and reads on about: how upset he got me: and the next note: the firelight painted his face evil with quick shadows he stirred the pot of stew so gently though as he talked: another page another note: then I stood up and looked down to him he still working the pot as if he were making love: and the boy sits bringing these words closer to the light to his eyes

We meet in the middle of the road and clasp hands behind you at your waist and return to the fence the crossboard you so
kindly dusted with your bottom climbing over and we straddle it face to face and I see you see something bubbling in my eyes and of course it is you

The stew ladled thick into the bowl: and the note below gains stronger strokes: he handed it up to me that smile I never liked and the bowl was hot in my hands

XIII

The dream changes to birds rushing up to a moonless clear sky scattering the winds into little breaths of breeze and Father is sweating at the brow

Another page more scribbling: he said one more thing I jumped on him: while the boy turns to the entrance in the floor behind him then: we rolled on the ground and he yelled for me to get off I even think he apologized but why did he continue to fight me he couldve just surrendered: and hurriedly to the next page: and I moved up to my feet I dont know why and taking my rifle to my eye: and there on the following page: a bird sounded overhead

The couple talk themselves into bed and they lie cuddly under one cover with her hand flying down the length of his arm like a bird sailing in to nest and this fleshy flight scatters goosebumps across his body

A bird glides lowly by us and we watch it sweep over the road into the town we just left and it disappears but what it does I know is catch sight of the sweet and sour produce in a store
window and wheels toward it crashing into the glass scattering pieces over the red and orange and yellow foods and the grocer won't wake won't find out till tomorrow but he does in his deep sleep dream another dream about infidelity this time and his fingers will curl

Father jumps awake and up in his bed the crack echoing in his head the crash of glass and the woman at his side still sleeps the sheet and his sweat scattering from his chest

The old man is reliving in his mind the first time he bit into an apple slurpsucking the juice as the bird continues grazing over the little hairs of his skin

With the crash the boy drops the book loose pages scattering over the floor one almost falling onto the lantern and he gathers them quickly frightened by the branch outside waiting for a victim and the owl growing impatient not knowing if and when it should leave and he replaces them and before closing the book he notices: birds scattering from the faraway trees and he fell at my feet

XIV

You seem surprised and you nudge closer to me on the fence and lay your head on my shoulder and I rub your smooth hair once again as if it really needs me

Father returns his head to the moist pillow and burrows a nice hollow spot there for his sleep which comes soon this time but never soon enough he thinks with a woman one foot away yet
tonight it feels like worlds away and is

He sets the book back into the box and he lays the other three on top and replaces the cover lifting the box back to the stack of the other boxes: the spider the jewels the balls of string the keys and old coins on top and he blows the lanternlight out and edges quietly back to the square hole leaving the lantern near it where it probably was when he kicked it over and he bends into the hole the entrance once but now the welcome exit then he climbs down the ladder and closing the door to a place he had never been he tiptoes past his parents bedroom into his own and onto his own bed with his clothes still on he falls asleep to the thoughts of the evening and the sound of a bird perhaps an owl scratching on the sill

Tired and very frail in the bed the old man is reminded of a daughter he never had but always wanted and he falls asleep snoring lightly in the arms of a young lady who stays with him and his dreams

Acres

I

Through the window the little boy follows the morning rising faster than he but finally he crawls out of bed and only then does he sense yesterdays clothes sticking to his body and he changes and only then does he remember last night wanting to believe it was simply a dream which will be as fleeting as smoke or a bird

As I whisper you slowly wake and fistling one eye you find your-
self not on a fence but back in the timothy grass yet your head remarkably still at my shoulder and you flit your eyes at me and wonder if that fence any fence was but a dream last night and I say chuckling What fence?

Father shares his slice of ham with his wife across the table because of how full he is he groans smiling how much of that great food he ate at supper last night making sure not to mention how little he slept and what little appetite he has and the woman chews her meat especially hard and slow

His arm falls across the other half of the bed and the old man wakes to the lack of a bosom a supple neck a tapered waist the taut flesh of an arm at his side and he looks and the young lady is gone and he is very curious about whether or not his companion last night was solely but beautifully a fantasy

You and I share cheekrubs and fingerfondles and two short sweet goodmornings marveling at the developing colors in the east and waiting on the sun

II

The old man lumbers from the bed to the window to see how clear a morning it might be although some clouds are forming and he dresses still thinking of a young lady he is sure that he held in the late night hours only several hours ago: yes yes I did he widely smiles

The little boy steps into the hallway and sees their bedroom door open with no one inside then walking past There There in
the corner the shiny handle he has noticed so many times before but this time remembering he actually opened that door last night ascending sneaking searching reading wondering and wondering

You are touched by a chilling wind and you huddle in closer more than welcome more than ever because it chills me as well

He peers up the stairs hearing something move then pause then move again and it is the boy coming downstairs wearing a bulky tanhide jacket with a wide thick collar and gloves poking out from its pockets and Father nods Hello are you all set? and his wife says quickly He should eat first and she taps a chair for him

The little boy mutters Good morning with his head down and then turns to the chair with his mother waiting behind it and he sits she pushing it toward the table where he starts eating but in very little and precise bites his eyes not looking up

You shyly tell me about the dream you had last night as I nibble your neck and ask you if it was anything like this like now like me like you like this dawn and you shake your head saying It had a small mare two marshmallow clouds a leaf or two a most elegant sunset and oodles of taffy and I grin and say Exactly it was just like this like now like me like you like this dawn and you ponder that for a bit and say I guess so yes in a strange kind of way

III

The ham is salted well and very savory and he finishes his
milk afterward in one long drink and wipes his mouth standing from the chair thinking of the morning ahead and the night behind him as his father bends over and tightens both his own and the little boys shoes and the two look at each other eye to eye for the first time today wondering just what the other one is feeling.

The old man makes the bed with care tucking the sheets in and at the corners as well and folding the sheets back at the head of the bed and fluffing a pillow that has never been so happily handled before and his shoes dont even feel halfbad this morning in fact he has to lift one foot then the other to find out which shoe is nursing the worn sole.

Father squeezes the boys shoes pats them and moves across the room to a bucket of fresh water where he rinses his hands seeing the boy trail him as the woman clears the table supping up slowly her own cup of milk.

Breakfast for us is simple if you dont mind munching on grass and little bumpy berries Im sure are okay but I apologize anyway for not bringing some wine along nor a comfy blanket to lie on not that the latter matters seeing how well you complement nature how you nearly by God complete the entire picture and also I didnt think we would spend the whole night here.

One sole is worn but thats fine with him this morning as he reaches into his pants pockets his hands going down and through holes and down touching the gristle on his thighs and he remembers the young ladys hands feeling much better than his own.
but wonders just when his pants had gotten holes in his pockets
then he realizes he had purchased them this way from an even
older man: that tricky fellow

Father leaves the kitchen and is gone for a few seconds return-
ing with a coat on saying Just in case just in case it turns
cold probably not and he also has a rifle in his hands and he
looks at the boy standing near his wife and Father finds him-
self staring

IV

No wine no blanket but these flowers here and you pluck them
while I form a vase up from the loose still damp soil and there
slip them down into it and now we have an attractive center-
piece or at least you get the idea

He reaches for his coat draped over a chair and pulls out several
coins and fingers them thin across his palm selecting two un-
usually bright large ones and walks to the mirror on the far
cabinet and reflecting his happiness where he lays them down
with the delicacy of a snowflake wishing the young lady will
sometime return to collect his gratitude

A fly threads by and of all things you hold out your hand and
this insect cant seem to decide where to light: to light on
your placid palm or to light on any one of the delectable
flowers we have arranged at our feet although the choice would
be very clear and easy for myself

He kisses his wife on the cheek and she gives the little boy
a kiss on his forehead and brushes his blond hair back and she looks very peaceful rested that she must've slept well last night and Fathers eyes feel quite heavy in this morning light which is starting to bleed through the misted windows of the kitchen

The little boy sees the fatigue in his father and feels his own roll through his head in wakes from last nights plunge up into the attic

V

Another cup of coffee may help Father believes and he pours himself just one more drinking it briskly and he takes the little boy with his arm behind the boys shoulders and they leave stepping out into the faint flush of the morning and flipping their collars up

It wings near your hand then to the flower circling and then it zips away but all I did was blink and nothing more I swear to you and slowly your hand falls back not to your lap but to mine

The old man crosses back over to the washpan next to the bed and he dips his hands in thinking he should have them washed although unable to recall when or if they ever got dirty

He walks with his father down the warped steps of the porch and onto the road and walking to the right he looks to his left behind him and catches sight of a broken window and triangles of glass surrounding a black feathery object in the
midst of fallen fruit and the feet of the grocer who is standing there with his hands on his hips eyes searching for the strength to continue or the strength to end it all

You ask me Now what and I must admit Thats a good question that has no answer: only this morning ahead but I will say that the sun along with three clouds are tipping the horizon just as we should rise from our breakfast and move on

VI

He eases down the stairs with the lantern lit in his hands even though its not necessary with the morning light thickening as it has been then he sees the owner seated at the table with the rest of the lanterns in a line and he thanks him and the owner nods that he was happy to help and the two men never mention anything about the young lady while the old man clinks many more coins out of his pocket and onto the table asking if that is enough the owner smiling Just fine thats plenty and that he was more than welcome last night and is welcome to drop by again the old man saying Yes of course Id like that

The little boys strides are three to every two of his fathers but he stays beside him steadily looking up to the sky with eyes that seem to want to make sure the sky lightens like the day before: especially after such a dark night: and his eyes can even feel the change

But the breakfast was so good and sweet and dewy you plead and that you want to lie here till at least noon but I tell you that the little rabbits in their depths around us are
waiting are spying on us are hoping that we leave now so they may as they always do make their early morning love for they appreciate dawn the most and strangers like us the least

Father too looks toward the grocer and his condition and shakes his head for him and all the future sweat ahead in the cleaning and rebuilding of the display and a handsome one it was at that he remembers but shakes his head for himself as well and the sweat he experienced just a few hours back in his sleep

The old man takes the owners hand and they exchange smiles like names and he walks out looking over himself to make sure he is wearing everything he came in with while deep in his mind wishing he would forget his shoes at least the worn one so that he would have to get a new pair but recalling his past ill fortune he would probably barter with another old cobbler like the one two years ago and so he steps out onto the road content with whats on his feet now and notices a church fixed heavy across the way

They dont mean harm by it and you agree and I suppose it is just some privacy and a soft tuft of grass they need so although they wont find any spongy green under us after our own fanciful stay here we will surely give them their requested area and solitude and we stand together to leave leaving the vase of soil with flowers behind for the rabbits to enjoy

VII

Father shifts the rifle to the other hand feeling the butt slick with sweat and cant remember when his skin has been so
moist and his head so dense with thoughts of his wife of the little boy at his side and of himself

He walks down the road almost past the church and then turns and wonders whether it is Sunday or not or even a holiday of some kind and decides he just doesn't know but still he moves toward the building and tries the door finding it locked and calls to mind his childhood when he would be sitting next to his father in the pew fidgeting waiting for the collection plate to arrive then dropping two coins into it and sighing relieved that it was over with for that week

The boy wants to remember what he usually does during these short walks to the fields through the morning and he occupies his mind his eyes by counting the seconds between cries and whistles of unseen animals and how the periods of silence grow longer as he and his father near the fence

You want to turn around and take a sneakypeek and you almost do before sensing how you felt the last time we made love and how cozy comfortable and nice we moved knowing the stream and the willow tree above were our only company and even they were busy being stirred in the daytime winds

The old man reaches into his pocket for the third time this morning feeling almost wealthy and he finds a coin and places it at the foot of the door and turns thankful and somewhat appeased as the sun and gathering clouds push higher

VIII

Father scans the sky and consoles himself in the fact that
whatever cloudcover there is will hang over them long enough so that they may return home very shortly where he will be much more at ease than he is now where he will shut the doors to the toolshed where he will hug his wife and where he will try to start the whole day over again chat with his son without the thoughts or the sweat he woke to and he can reassure himself of all this in the clouding of the sky.

You avoid the lovemaking behind us and look to me asking what the father wants and I say It really doesn't matter probably just peace of mind but still it is best if we go to the woods for awhile while they use these fields and you say you care about the bunnies asking if I remember them and I nod But dont worry these bunnies are used to these human folk just like our stream and willow tree and I ask if you remember that.

He has taken only seventeen steps when he hears the rumblechurn-ing of an engine and smells the tumbleburning of smoke and a few more steps he spots around the corner a train station with a train stationed at the narrow platform with two people boarding it slower than syrup and the old man assumes its because of the earliness of the hour and such and then he hurries to the ticket cage and slides three coins to the man inside who smiles: Where to sir? and the old man shrugs as the man inside pushes one of the coins back through the bars along with a ticket and the old man mumbles back Thanks pocketing the coin and he turns to the train with the paper in his hand feeling like a feather or some lace.

The little boy touches the fence first and climbs over reliving
the climb last night while he watches his father toss his rifle over then follows him scaling the fence and stooping for it in the grass

IX
The sun shinnies up the trunks of the trees as we see it and I tell you about a letter I once wrote on a freshly fallen leaf still green and how it webbed the ink into its veins and then I dropped it from a cliff hoping someone with a leaf of their own would be walking wherever to whatever and come upon it as if it were a silly gift much appreciated however accidental but I suppose no one has found it yet or maybe someone has and I havent been lucky enough to find the reply or worse: perhaps someone found it ignored it

The boy slides his eyes over the fields striped with the long morning shadows thrown by the woods twenty yards to the east and he crosses them from light to dark to light to dark to light to a large patch of dark where he turns to his father kneeling behind him and he waits for him to open the chamber before kneeling too thinking that his father may change his mind or at least change something

Father slips a bullet into the chamber and thinks of his wife back home when they would be lying in bed before and after sleep talking of enchanting insignificant things about the day coming or the day gone and he remembers also slipping papers into an unread book and how he forgot about it for years till now and without looking he listens to his sons breathing lengthen
The man at the edge of the platform at the door of the train takes the ticket but not as he would a feather or some lace and the old man searches for the reason why until he notes that all it gives him is an uncomfylumpy seat but he does have a window to watch change its colors and contents as the train begins to jerk forward.

Your hand begins to shake in mine and I suggest we walk deeper into the woods where the morning wont worry you as much as it shouldnt because the day is going to be magnificent when the clouds float away and the sky starts to blue around the sun and thats all you need: your hand calms.

X

There are many empty seats in the car but a young boy sits down beside the old man and he looks to the youth and hears several seats toward the rear of the car an older voice calling up in loud whispers that the young boy should please stop annoying the gentleman and that he shouldnt be up there he should instead return to his seat to the voice calling him or go to the restroom like he said he would and the old man cant help but grin not annoyed in the least except he doesnt know whether to say hello or goodbye as the boy turns to leave.

The little boy watches his father grab a rock from the grass then straightening up he looks to the woods and pitches it into the treetops and leaves scatter as does one blue grouse but the bird circles back and disappears and his father looks down to him and utters something harsh something he wouldnt dare say.
at home and the boy almost shivers as his hand combs the ground for another rock

Another rock flies up to the window nicking it and the old man flicks his eyes away and his head back but he is getting used to them he lies to himself as he searches for the stunted sections of horizon falling between jumps of oak and of hills in the distance and he feels in his legs and feet the ride turning smoother

There will be other birds for Gods sake he tells himself as he recalls the sound of footsteps: was that it?: footsteps planting themselves across wood last night but were they in his sleep? in the hallway? of his son? of his wife? or something worse thats named but out of reach? as he lowers his rifle

He looks to his father just standing there two feet to his left with his rifle hanging down pointed to a rabbit hole and the little boy pokes through the grass and soil for another rock for his father in case he turns to him but another shot is already fired and the boy jerks his head up the gun still down the barrel smoking

The bunnies you say where are the bunnies? and I say Theyre fine just a little frightened by the thundering in the ground but of course they have stopped making love dont like explosions and are now simply munching on earthly goodies

XI

The old man loves how the window evolves from flat land to a
swelling to a hill then back to a valley and he thinks of his young lady but then everything is stabbed with trees and more trees and now he thinks of when he woke up without her as the train rolls uniformly on

You wish to head back for the fields and I ask Why? we will only get in the way so you suggest we at least go to where the fields and woods meet and watch and I tell you it is only hunting and they'll be finished soon probably by the time we get there and you imagine something more but you won't tell me and I remind you of us just you and me and this walk of ours

Glancing down he first believes the crater there at his feet was forged solely from the bullet and then he feels disturbed that actually he had shot into a home a home smaller than his shoe but very deep but he reloads his rifle pulls another rock from the grass and hurls it and again the leaves fall and several birds this time wing out two flying overhead and Father aims and shoots hitting one

And feathers pop from the grouse as it flips jumps and dives to the ground then the boy sees his father insert another bullet into the chamber and after shutting it turns down to him and the boy gives him a rock

XII

See the birds fly above us in bursts and how clumsy they can be and you say It is because they're scared as you are and I say No it is nature and they're searching for more food and those loud sounds were clops of thunder nearing
Father hits another tree with a rock and four grouse shoot out from it and he follows one then fires hits loads aims at one almost gone like a seed in the clouded sky and hits again both birds landing seconds apart and he thinks one or two more would be enough as he loads his fifth bullet in

The old man sees the cloudcover breaking with some sun falling from the gray in slanted columns to splotches across the land and he leans forward turning his head back and finds the sun almost directly over where the inn and the owner would be in addition to a young lady hed never forget

The little boy realizes this should be the last shot of the day of the week and he is glad to be going home soon although last night still rattles in his head wanting someone to blame for it himself for going up there in the first place and he begs for it to stop or maybe he shouldve eaten more this morning to please his mother if nothing else as he sees his father pick up a bigger rock heaving it and breaking a branch with it the boy believes

We hear a hard crack and you wait for a shot to ring out and nothing does and you ask if this gun thundering is over if theyre finished and I say Almost and you sigh your head tipping slightly and I wish youd walk on without me and Id catch up with you in a couple minutes but you decline Weve been together this long

He marks the flight of one of the birds but he loses it in the full sun coming through the clouds and he holds back short
on bullets anyway lowering the rifle to his side and looking forward to returning to the woman at home to the softness of her shoulders.

The old man trails the sunlight down and it captures a bird far off in the sky flying back over some woods and as it glides gracefully up his head slides gracefully down the glass nearly into sleep.

XIII

Let's lie down and you can wonder what we will make tonight aside from love while I whisper nonsense things to the winds things no one should have to hear especially someone like you.

Father turns to the little boy and raises his eyebrows breathing out the air he held for several seconds while sighting that last grouse and he hands the boy his rifle and he finally takes it as Father walks away to gather up the birds coming across the first one and he brushes the dirt off: blood from the wound is drying nicely and he looks back to his son remembering that the boy doesn't really know how to handle a rifle yet then turns his head again to collect the other two.

The rifle sets lighter in his hands today and the wooden butt feels much smoother like the metal of the barrel itself or of brass and he watches his father after finding the first one zigzag through the fields searching for the second and the boy raises the gun carefully to his eye and fixes his father's back at the tip of the barrel and traces his path along as he retrieves the second bird and approaches where he thinks the
third must be and the boy tests the tension of the trigger
hearing a bird sound overhead followed by a steady pounding
and it is a train acres away passing through and the rifle
drops to his side as his father turns waving the three grouse
in the air yelling something pleasant back to him

Father returns and his son is shaking as he hands him the
grouse and takes the rifle to his shoulder rubbing the boys
back saying It will warm up some see the skys clearing and
it should be another sparkling night tonight and he watches
the boy nod his head while his hands hold the birds one foot
in front of him and Father looks away to the east noticing a
rabbit jump

The train shakes the old mans eyes open and he looks around
to see if anyone is staring at him and he smiles then gazes
out the window and while jingling the last coin in his coat
pocket he sighs breathing on the window and two figures far
in some distant fields fade into the clouded glass

After so long without one you finally smile and your eyes ap­
pear wider and Im not really sure why because everything was
going to be okay from the start: maybe it is just because Im
so tired as I lie here in your lap falling slowly asleep with
your hands in my hair and dreaming the sounds of a willow tree
and a cold clear stream with small pebbles shifting clicking
kicking across its rock studded bottom
I. There's this painter.

A. He will live to be a hundred.

1. He has told many people that he would kill himself when he turns fifty, or the first time he gets a tie as a gift from someone.
   a. Socks he can always use because he goes through them like mad, but he's only worn a tie once before, a bow tie for junior high school graduation, and he hated every minute of it.
   b. When he does, in fact, turn fifty he will seriously reconsider the options available to him.

2. Presently, no immediate relative of his is over 57 years old, and only his late great grandmother reached eighty years of age. She passed away at eighty-one.

B. His name's four syllables long, last name included, and these sound units are poetic—liquid or harsh, who knows? His name was ridiculed when he was young and not even pimply or particularly ugly; his name was musically strange, nothing more, nothing less.

1. A name lilting like Blyden Lorume or something crackling like Cafit Pectchax.
   a. Perhaps its unconventionality was the reason behind the mockery and not its sounds (cf. I.B.).
b. Perhaps the alliteration was rather admired, but God forbid the rebellious stance, willed or not, against the likes of a John, a Tom, Bobs, Dicks, and Pauls.

2. A name he wouldn't feel right changing, especially since he might be famous some day, and the name he bears would definitely call out loudly for attention.

The brush is dipped deeply in the mound of blue, returned to thinned mauve—a color difficult to find but much easier to enjoy—and the two on the palette streak with each other. Toothpaste, he smiles. Better that than a pure blend for the next shape he'll make.

3. His parents are dead, can't defend or be ashamed of their naming of their then child now painter whose actual name doesn't much matter.

C. Two cats were run over by him one year ago while they were crossing a busy freeway.

1. Their owner never has found out what happened to Kitty and Cat, even though he drives unknowingly by, and sometimes over, the scene of the accident several times a week on his way to and from work, and also when he decides to golf at the lush course only minutes away, but his house and family have since been blessed with two more controllable, less demanding pets, parakeets.

a. Birds: Fiesta, a colorful one, and Billy, named after an insistent son in the family.

i. They, too—birds, Billy, and the whole family—will die tragically some sunny day.

ii. The painter's father, alive, worked at what were called "fiestas" held yearly outside their church. His father ran the Italian sausage stand, and it was all strictly volunteer work.
b. Their house was built within the last decade, and the stylishness of the back porch and the sunken living room is very clear evidence of this.

c. This golfer, a lover of cats and now birds, sports an enviable five handicap.

2. He still drives the same car, but for some reason he thought it best to buy brand new tires.

3. Blood remains visible on the grooved concrete because the highway workers could not decide what to do about it.

   a. It looks like pale, scattered catsup in the shapes of splotches and blobs.

   The brushhairs are pushed and turned on the canvas where each movement flowers a new growth of colors.

   b. He gave a pint of blood once and received enough money to buy a roller.

4. One cat was blinded by the glint of speeding chrome, and, frightened, it darted across the white lines, the other, confused, following.

D. He has never been a radio talk-show host.

1. A while back, a lady called into a live, nationally-aired rock program, and during her rather irrelevant comment she was able to say shit and some other inaudible string of obscenities before the moderator could cut her off the line, but as it turned out, not one listener in the entire country heard the outburst because it seems that all stations now are equipped with a recording system that delays the incoming calls for a few seconds so they can be screened, edited, or erased completely if necessary.

2. His radio is tuned into the classical music station
six days out of the week, and the other day it's turned off.

E. His weight is average, his annual income insignificant.

1. Studies done on the subjects show that a 175-pound, six-even man is proportionately fine, and that $3000 is poor in several senses of the word.

2. Outside of his present relationship, a relationship which will be looked at later in depth, his physical stature has attracted a woman or two this past month alone, and his money is held snug between books on a shelf.

   a. One lady was elegant but married, and she was in a bus anyway, quickly passing him by.

   b. Snug, puddle, cuddle, and lithe are just a few of his favorite words. He can't stand the word butane.

Blues blacken with the darker colors, and he scrapes this mess unevenly off till the remaining visual insults turn weak and humble, and the so-far whole balances again its poles of paint. He returns the blade to the floor and chews on the flesh in his mouth, backing away.

F. No school accepted him until recently, and even that school, upset with his output—not lack of but quality of—discouraged his continued academic career, so he dropped out, left the dorm, and found an apartment just two blocks from the university. He's in a somewhat smaller city now, 2000 miles away.

1. The trip was four days long, and 35 hours of it were behind the wheel with his belongings in the trunk and on the backseat. The passenger seat next to him was empty.

   a. He didn't pick up any hitchhikers, and he had seen only one anyway.
b. The tires on the car at that time were the originals, and as it turned out, they had been rotated just once, two days before the killings on the freeway, and not since.

2. The city's not important because he spends most of the daytime inside, and his nightly walks don't offer all that much to see. He could just as easily live in a cabin up in the mountains and there would be little difference.

a. A-frame cabins used to be very popular, but now people are realizing how poorly the slanted ceilings utilize space. They'll always look nice, though, whatever their failings.

b. He could live in a cabin up in the mountains where behind the trees a dog barks and breaks a twig while peeing. "Sam," a kid might even call out, and another twig would, indeed, snap. Another. "Here, boy. Here, boy." More twigs, more, a bigger one, a fallen and blown branch brushes fur. "Rowf." "Thataboy." And dried bark is probably petted or patted from his coat.

A twig falls in through the window--the winds are picking up through the streets--and he stopped working anyway minutes before so he retrieves the stick and picks up some paint with it and scratches it across ten jagged inches of the leaning canvas: rough lines and blue-cheese chunks of oil in the still-wet colors from the past hour. He wipes the rest from the twig on a towel and places it in with the brushes, knives, pens, charcoal, ink, and a razor blade. One twig. One twig already covered unnaturally brown and pink.

G. At thirteen he wanted to be an architect.

1. To think that only a small number of the thousands of kids making sandcastles along every shoreline today from Timbuktu to God Only Knows Where are going to actually end up making a living doing something vaguely similar to that but a lot less messy and a lot less fun.
2. Oftentimes, what one wants can never, for whatever reason, be realized while what one fears occasionally enters through the backdoor.

a. Screendoors are usually limited to the rear of houses so that parents can keep an ear and eye on their loved ones playing army in the backyard and still prevent flies from raiding the fruit pies.

i. Pudding is his least favorite dessert; he wouldn't buy pudding if it were the last thing left in the aisles. And he can't imagine homemade pudding tasting any better.

ii. Many people, as kids, were upset with the fact that when they wanted their plastic, green men to travel in the Jeep across the rugged, never-before charted terrain of the lawn, these miniature combatants had to unrealistically stand on the seats!

b. But then again, what one fears initially might very well become that which magically opens up the world for him or her.

H. Every other day he must get more paint and oils, sometimes a dozen gallons and a dozen tubes, and he's pleased to do so, pleased to be finally working again, pleased to see what appears and changes in front of him, and pleased too with his taste in women.

1. He misses, silently, a lady he met nine years ago last summer when he backstroked into her body while swimming a busy stream. The splashed, quick water on her above-water body shone and he reddened.

2. Every other week he purchases another gallon of milk, every other month another tube of shaving gel.

I. His paint's, for the most part, thick, and dries slowly
in hardly discernible lumps.

1. Colors matter most to him, one could conclude in regard to his work, and the colors seemingly stretch from the center toward the edges.
   a. The edges of all his finished paintings are white—not white with the color of paint but white with the color of canvas.
   b. Blues and crimson use up the majority of his money but the least of his time, what with the rapid manner in which he applies them.

2. He tries not to create anything symbolic with his shapes and colors.
   a. The shapes he forms, the forms he shapes, if anything, remind him of Rorschach blots in the way they often mirror themselves from left to right yet remain mysterious in the middle, top to bottom.
   b. He insists on being in complete control of any symbolism that might accidentally appear and refuse to leave.

The late twilight through the window splinters on his newly spread blue, a lake maybe with a surface flashing something like coins, and a lone, bent figure of black is Woman at the blue lake shoreline washing surely a cloth and her feet, each foot leading into its own separate orange circle, each circle's orange subtly different from its counterpart: one is the sunrise; the other, of course, set.

c. See I.1.2.b.

3. His favorite painter is a little-known writer, and his favorite writer is Rothko, the maker of narrative blocks freefloating in fields though held in varying degrees of tension together.
   a. He owns three originals, paintings, none of which are Rothko's, and has numerous prints,
some of which are Rothko's, and all of which are, of course, concerned with color.

b. He has twenty or so books near his bed, reads them, sells some, buys more, reads those, and sells again, always keeping ten or so of his favorite writings at a time on the left side of the shelf, the same shelf where he stores his money.

i. The year his currently-favorite book was published he was born and breastfed by a loving mother now dead and in the moist earth among apple tree roots and buried garbage.

ii. The two literary puns that amuse him most are those he would like to believe he originated and probably did, and they read: What are words worth? and Just what does wit mean?

J. He's had just one job before becoming a painter. It required him to make tiny, electronic components that triggered a beeper to go off in the cab of a garbage truck telling the men with the dirty blue uniforms inside that their load was near capacity. He kept the job for three years.

1. The company went bankrupt, and the vice-president killed himself two days later with a .38.

a. There's still, of course, a great controversy troubling the nation concerning gun control.

b. A family fitness center has since moved into that building.

2. Long ago, his mother gave him an apple for taking out the garbage to the sidewalk for the first time, and for many years following he wondered how many apples his father must've received from her and
just where on earth he had kept them all—or how on earth he had eaten them all!

a. The earth does have quite a few acres of open land available for anyone wishing to collect piles of fruit, and, though not nearly as big as the earth, his father's appetite for apples was tremendous.

The usable red is gone with his last stroke, and the rest of the paint has dried flat on the palette. He looks over the length and height of the canvas, then turns to his food.

b. For the past couple of years, when enough pennies accumulate in the porcelain, hollowed-out apple-half on his dresser, he rolls them up. But he always puts in only 49 rather than 50, and the banks haven't caught him—or, he thinks, even on--yet.

c. He saw a real red apple a couple weeks back in the form of a core growing thinner still in the paws and jaw of a dimly-lamplit mutt in the gutter he often follows when he walks for blocks at night.

K. Only one of his paintings went for over $1000 dollars.

1. Three others he sold together as a package to a self-proclaimed princess for the mere price of $225.

2. He once broke down and left during a local public lecture on the sorely-needed benefits of capitalism. Occasionally, perhaps, he's a bit too emotional. He often cries watching funny movies.

3. The thousand dollars could've been donated to a worthy charity, but he didn't even think about that—he paid some bills with it instead; he was making ends meet.
L. Right now, he's in the middle of a fair relationship with a woman who's a half-inch taller and who makes hundreds more than he does a year.

1. She dislikes his work, dislikes the time lost in it, but likes the way he loves her so nicely every now and then.
   a. An attraction to her of any kind--physical, emotional, intellectual--was the furthest thing from his mind as he passed by her in a crowded street several years ago, on his way to buy some crackers, just about to cross through some 5:15 traffic while she, standing near the curb, was waving down the taxi that missed his hurrying legs by inches and honked. Neither one recalled this brief non-encounter, nor should they have been expected to, when they met just two months ago in a park on a bench.
   
   b. In high school, she created a few things herself: once, she marked up a sheet of paper with scratchy circles (top-views of tornadoes?), rounded triangles (bottom-views of mountains?), rigid boxes (side-views of boxes?), and many straight lines acting as thread (thread?) tying everything perhaps together. Also, recently and alone, she visited a museum whose exhibits included ancient tablets.
      i. Though a big city girl, she has seen a tornado or two on the news rip houses from their foundations, and, of course, there's *The Wizard of Oz*, and everyone's seen that.
      ii. He has begun to wonder why she mentions Egypt so often when they talk about communication.
      iii. Another new museum just went up three miles
east of downtown St. Louis, and its in-
augural celebration was reluctantly at-
tended by a very thrifty city council.

Some of the yellows and greens drift bottomward and run off
the canvas onto the floor where he rubs the few drops thin and
dry like a cigarette with his shoe.

c. They've made love several times while the moon,
whatever its phase, lies in the frame of the
window; they like it that way.

M. M could be the street he lives on or maybe the one his
parents lived on or it could even be the letter in the
city's Yellow Pages under which the 4th greatest num-
ber of food items can be found advertised or perhaps
it's the nickname of a close friend he had not too long
ago.

N. A rock the size of an orange shattered his window yes-
terday.

1. A boy was racing away when he, jarred from a nap
after an afternoon of painting, reached the window
and looked through the jagged, framed remains of
glass. He felt stupid yelling Hey as the boy bolt-
ed across the street, never breaking stride.

a. Now, three blocks down and a turn several
steps to the left, flaps a deflating balloon
dropped by the same little boy whose mother
just explained to him that he doesn't know
where that balloon has been!

b. Several passersby glanced up and knew they had
nothing at all to do with him and his window,
knew they knew nothing about it.

2. About as many oranges as apples are purchased by moms
but not, indeed, as many pears.
As he lifts the right end of the canvas, a wet bit of white thins, curves an inch. He then returns the painting flat back against the floor and smudges the tip of the curved white in with the background blue, but something he wished to be red is now lime-green. He lets it be. The grass outside is appearing in patches now that the cold has gone and the concrete is cracking.

3. His father started collecting rocks on his 8th birthday after he received from a younger sister, who didn't know what to get him, a small canvas bag with his initials sewn tightly in.

a. A place to begin, to begin something, a place to add things and to take from, to have a beginning, to begin something in some manner, to give some time, some shape to some, perhaps, end.

b. The painter has one blank, stretched canvas lying under his bed, a canvas the width, the length, the touch of his bed.

II. A blank canvas lies under a bed.