Mottom

Richard Cortez Day
Midway through Philosophy, Willy Mott emerges from the stacks not far from a table where a red-bearded man is reading. With a day left of final examinations, there are still quite a few students at the tables or sprawled on the blue vinyl easy chairs and sofas. Willy’s gaze passes over the man to a girl three tables away. Blond, just a bit of a thing, she’s in an agony of prayer. Her lips move, her tight-shut eyelids tremble, and her fingers are clenched beneath her chin. Willy smiles. Tomorrow, with all this pain behind her, she can head home for Christmas and have some fun. On Sunday, Willy himself will fly south to Los Angeles, to spend the holiday with his daughter and her husband and the baby grandson. His wife, Sarah, has already been grandmothersing down there for a week.

He pulls the canister into the next aisle. The third floor south, Humanities, has 24,600 square feet of rust-colored carpet. After eight years of practice, he can do the space in his sleep if he has to. The vacuum motor buzzes behind him. When he comes to the study tables again, he sees that the girl isn’t praying after all; she’s memorizing from a notebook. She concentrates on a page, then shuts her eyes and mutters to herself. The red-bearded man continues to read, as still as a stone.

At eight o’clock, lunch time, Willy shuts off the vacuum and goes around to the storeroom, where he finds Joby Johnson already at the square table, lunchbox open, his food spread out in the order of eating. A raisin of a man with a pinched-in face, he is half Willy’s size and eats twice as much. Tonight he has soup, two sandwiches, cherry pie, and coffee. His wife Allie is a rolling fat woman who loves to cook. If Willy lived with her instead of with Sarah, he would be an elephant. Sarah, built like Joby of bone and string-muscle, keeps Willy’s weight down with greens and lean meat.

But Sarah is out of town. Willy packed his own lunch, laying extra ham and cheese on thick slices of bread. He sits down across from Joby and pours coffee from his thermos. Joby chews, swallows, and says, “I been thinking, we could use some exercise. What say tomorrow we take a run in the hills, maybe catch a fish?”

“It ain’t fishing season.” The fish Joby means is mountain salmon—illegal deer. He never hunts in season: too many fools in the woods, letting off every which way. But out of season he likes driving up a logging road to bag some meat. His old .30-06 whangs and echoes like a world war, but he’s never been caught at it. Before Willy’s legs went bad, he used to tromp the upland brush with him and come back money ahead on groceries. “Anyway,” he says, “I got to pack for L. A.”

“Two shirts and a razor. Take you ten seconds. Tomorrow is Friday, you don’t leave till Sunday.”

“I can’t get to L. A. from jail,” Willy says.

Joby cackles. “Shoo, you ever see me in jail?”

“You ain’t too young for it,” Willy says, “nor too old yet.”

After the break, they wheel the broomcarts out and Joby heads into the north wing, Special Collections. In Humanities, Willy parks his cart at the west end and goes back to vacuuming. His next pass through the stacks brings him out a little farther from the girl. She has fallen asleep, done in by memorizing. Her cheek rests on her notebook and her arms make a circle on the table. A silver string of drool connects her mouth to a small puddle on the page. She looks dead. Off to one
side, Redbeard turns a page, and Willy thinks he catches a flash of red.

His memory clicks. He stands up straight, takes a good look. The man is wear­ing a blue-checked shirt with the cuffs folded back, bluejeans, blue running shoes. That red patch on the back of his hand: a tattoo? The red hair is longer than Willy recalls, but hair grows, and a bare-faced man can raise a beard to hide a scar. Is it the same man? It can’t be. Only a fool, only a man bent in his mind, could come back to where he’d done a thing that awful.

Willy vacuums around to the left side of him and sees a tattoo on that hand as well: a blue Jesus-on-the-Cross. The right one has a big red broken heart, with a red MOTHER below it. So close now that he sees blackheads in the crease of the nose, Willy catches the stink of cigarettes. He shoves the attachment against the shoes and says, "Feet, please." The shoes move over. He shoves the attachment again, and this time Redbeard looks around at the annoyance. Right before Willy’s eyes, half hidden by facial hair, is a wide, white, scoop-shaped scar.

Willy’s eyesight alters, his heart thumps, and blood booms in his ears. His arms feel heavy. "It’s come," he thinks. From a tight throat, he whispers to the man: "Amy Phillips, June Fourth, that van."

The man jerks back. "What are you talking about?"

"The little puppy. The Jesus girl."

The blue eyes shift. "You’re crazy," the man says, but he can’t wait to get out of there. He stands and snatchers up his jacket and hurries off toward the stairs. Oh, he’s the one all right. Willy follows but the man moves fast. He’s gone before Willy gets to the stairwell.

He explained it to Sarah this way. The Universe is totally black, and it surrounds us on all sides. It presses close at night and retreats in the daytime, held off by light. But sometimes it leaks in even in daylight, pokes a dark finger through the bright layers, and touches someone, calls that person to a special purpose. The thing that had happened to him on that sunny June afternoon: what could it have been but the Universe touching him with a long finger from outer space?

He held a hand-mirror to the paper and demonstrated it. On the paper, he’d printed MOTTOM. "Look, woman, it’s my name. With a mirror or without one, inside out and inside in, it says Tom Mott. If that ain’t a call, I don’t know what one is."

"Your name ain’t Tom, it’s Willy," she said. She took a drink of grape juice and looked at the television.

"My middle name is Thomas," he said. "Tom was my daddy’s name. He named me for hisself."

"Willy, I plain don’t believe you saw a chariot, or whatever it was. You’re a fifty-three-year-old man with a child’s imagination."

Chariot was her word, not his. In telling the story, he’d doctored it some, had said that the van coming up behind him, as he drove to Acme Plumbing for a sink-trap, looked like a space capsule with flames licking the heat shield. In reality, it was a custom-deluxe van with smoked-glass bubbles on the sides and painted across the front with red, orange, and yellow fire. In his rearview mirror he saw the van and saw the license plate that called him by name.

"Guess what happened then," he said.

"Hoo, the green men took you for a ride to Mars and gave you green ice-cream."
“Mars is red. If you're going to act that way, you can wonder. I won't say a word more.”

“All right,” she said. “What happened?”

“It just disappeared. Poof. Gone.”

She shook her head and had to laugh. “Willy, how come I met you in the first place? I don’t understand it.”

“I don’t know,” he said, “unless the Universe reached in and tapped you for it.”

He had kept part of the story to himself. What he hadn’t said was that he almost wrecked the car. Looking too intently in the mirror, he glanced ahead just in time to see a white sports car stopped dead at a traffic light. He hit the brake and the old Dodge slid screeching. He ended up sideways in the street, looking down on a white trunk lid with a red disc on it. He was so close he could read the word FIAT on the disc. Shutting his eyes, he gave thanks. If he’d hit that car, Sarah, for all her small size, would have wrung him out. When he opened his eyes, the flamewashed van had disappeared, warped to nowhere.

That was Saturday, June 4. The next afternoon, when Sarah was in the kitchen and he was watching gymnastics, a news ribbon ran across the screen. The ribbon ran again, and he called out, “Sarah, come in here, quick!”

She stopped in the doorway. A muscle-bound girl in tights flip-flopped off a high bar and landed safe on both feet. Then the ribbon said that a girl’s body and the body of a dog, both with their throats cut, had been found that morning at the town dump. “It's the girl I saw yesterday,” Willy said. “She got in the van with my name on it.”

“You didn’t say a girl. What girl? How do you know it’s the same one?”

“She had a beagle pup tied to her wrist with cord. She had her thumb up, and a cardboard sign with Jesus on it. Whoever heard of hitchhiking to Jesus?”

“Did you see the driver?”

“I ain’t blind. Sure I saw him, shoot.”

“Watch your mouth. Don’t you swear at me, Willy Mott.”

“Swearing is taking the Lord’s name in vain. Shoot ain’t the Lord.”

She crossed her arms at her waist. She pushed out her lips. “Well, don’t sit there. Call the police.”

“Aw,” he said.

“Get on the phone. What if the next one was Cindy.”

“Cindy’s married in L. A. What would she be hitchhiking for? She’s got a baby coming.” But he heaved himself up and made the call.

When the police arrived—two of them, Sergeant Townsend in a blue uniform and Lieutenant Winston in an ordinary brown suit—he seated them on the sofa and told what he’d seen. The girl was blond, and besides the puppy and Jesus-sign, she had an orange backpack that looked too big for her. As for the driver, he was red-headed and had a crescent-shaped scar under his right cheekbone. He smoked cigarettes. When he brought one to his mouth, Willy had seen the red splotch of a tattoo on the back of his right hand. The license plate on the van, he said, read MOTTOM. He spelled out the word.

The sergeant said, “You saw all that in the rearview mirror? You’ve got some pair of eyes.”

“Shoot,” Sarah said, “he saw what he saw.”

The lieutenant asked a few more questions, mostly to get a fix on Willy—where did he work, how long, how long they’d lived at that address—and then he stood up. “Thanks for the information, Mr. Mott. When we need you, we’ll be in touch.”
The sergeant stood. He didn’t put his hat back on because he hadn’t removed it in the first place.

The Monday paper carried the story on Page One. The girl had been identified as Amy Phillips, age 18, from Portland, Oregon. She’d been on her way to the Apple Bible Camp near Ukiah, by bus her parents thought, but she must have gotten off, maybe met some Christians to talk to, and somehow ended up hitchhiking. She was a trusting girl, her parents said, who would talk to anyone, anytime, about the Lord. This time her trust got her raped and murdered. A van found abandoned in the river near Bridgeville had been linked to the crime; it had been stolen in Crescent City the day before. The police were looking for a red-haired man with a facial scar and possibly a red tattoo on the back of his right hand.

For a week the story ran in the paper and on the TV news, growing less frantic each day. Then it dropped out. After two weeks, Willy called the lieutenant, who said, “Well, Mr. Mott, we don’t have much to go on. No weapon, no fingerprints. He left that van half-submerged.”

“So, what do we do?”

“You don’t do anything. We keep an eye out for him. We’ll have to wait and hope we get lucky.”

“When he gets another girl?“

“That’s the way the world works, Mr. Mott. We’ll catch him sooner or later, if he makes a habit of it.”

Weeks slipped by. On July 19, Willy’s birthday, Joby and Allie gave him a party at their place, and after a big dinner, with cake for dessert, they played pinochle. Willy couldn’t concentrate. At one point, Joby leaned toward him and said, “Do you know what renege is? You just did it. What’s wrong, you worried about old age?”

Allie said, “You ain’t but a year younger, yourself.”

“At least I know a club from a heart.”

Sarah said, “He’s thinking about that little girl. It’s been on his mind.”

“That’s bad, all right,” Joby said. Allie said, “They won’t catch that man. He’s in Mexico or someplace.”

“Hey,” Willy said. “Are we going to play this game, or not? That girl is long dead. Let’s get on with it.”

Eventually, he didn’t think about it so much. As time passed, Amy Phillips dropped behind him in the stream of life. He heard no more from Lieutenant Winston. The call from the Universe turned out to be nothing at all.

The stairwell is empty all the way to the bottom. Willy stands at the top railing, looking down. To have seen the man once might be coincidence, but twice makes proof. The world has shifted by a fraction, and everything is in a new relation to everything else. Although a telephone is only a few steps away, he won’t call the police. This is deeper than police. The police are children playing in a sandbox. They’re off to one side, out of the direct line.

The line goes past his thick hands on the railing, past the flights leading down from landing to landing, and past the moth fluttering in the well of air two floors below. Willy’s sight follows the man across the lobby on the main floor and outside to where he’s hiding in the rhododendrons beside the Theater Arts building. There in the bushes, he’s trembling, ready to run. But no police arrive. He waits longer to make sure, and then reenters the library, as cocky as a jay. He picks up a housephone and calls the reference desk. “What’s that janitor’s name on
the third floor, the black one, big?" Reference tells him Mott, and he looks up the address in the phone directory.

Willy sees him trying a rifle from a distance, a handgun at close range, and a knife from closer yet. It makes no difference which version is true, for Willy sees the outcome in advance. He brushes any weapon aside, takes the man in the circle of his arms, hugs him in until the ribs snap, giving him the right taste of what it was like for that terrified girl in the van.

He blinks his eyes and the second-sight is gone. He can't see the moth down below, if there was one. He has no idea where Redbeard might be.

Returning to the study area, he finds the vacuum humming where he left it, sucking carpet. He works through the rest of the stacks and study areas, sweeps the offices and seminar rooms, then puts the canister away. When the two-toned bell peals for closing, he tours his space to rout out the sleepers. The blond girl, still dreaming at her table—he nudges her, and she jumps. "Get on home, now," he says.

He glances behind him, looks left and right in the cavernous space. It might be that the man is hiding inside somewhere. In those running shoes of his, on the soft carpet, who would hear him? Not to be caught short, Willy goes to the storeroom. From the tool rack he takes the claw hammer, sticks it in his belt.

At one o'clock he starts around the perimeter with the broom-cart, emptying wastebaskets into the large trashcan. At 1:15 he fills his mop-bucket and enters the men's room. He brushes and disinfects the toilets and urinals, cleans the basins, and sprays and wipes the mirrors. In the glass he confronts his own stolid reflection, the down-turned mouth, wide cheekbones, and eyes cloudy in the whites. In the time he's worked here, the hair has fallen from the top of his head, leaving the scalp as shiny as leather, and the fringe that remains above his ears has gone gray. He looks like his uncle used to look, an ex-heavyweight boxer back in Chicago, who has been dead now for 20 years.

He sprays and wipes the chrome fixtures, puts towels and toilet paper in the dispensers, and shakes the wastebaskets over the can on the cart. He swashes the wetmop around on the tiles.

Joby finishes the women's room as Willy is finishing the men's. Without a word, they tie off the trashcan liners and set them by the elevator. In the storeroom they put new liners in the cans. They empty their mop-water in the deepsink, put their jackets on, and pick up their lunch pails. Willy transfers the hammer from his belt to under his arm, inside the jacket.

In the basement, there's a brief convergence—Willy and Joby, the Rodriguez sisters who do the main floor, Johnny White and the Turk from the second—and then goodnights all around as they heave their trashbags into the dumpster. Outside, a fine rain is falling. Around the arc-light in the parking lot hangs a green nimbus of droplets. Willy and Joby pass beneath the light and get into Joby's pickup. As they cross the freeway bridge to the main part of town, they're alone on the street.

Passing the town square, they see a red and orange whirligig flashing: the local police nabbing someone. It's a woman. The door of her little Honda stands open, and she's out and on one leg, eyes closed, trying to put a finger on the end of her nose. Joby laughs. "Here I got a thief in my truck and they're out busting drunks. Officer, this man stole the university hammer."

"I borrowed it," Willy says. "I lost mine."

Joby lives on Fifth Street, behind Safeway, and Willy lives farther along, in the lower part of town. As they turn into May Street, he's all eyes. On one side of his house, an alley runs back to the rear fence of a lumberyard; his garage opens onto the alley. On the other side, there's an upholsterer's shop. Joby pulls up in front.
“Come to supper Saturday,” he says. “Leaving next day and all, there’s no use you cooking for yourself.”

Willy scans the bushes beside the house. “Maybe,” he says. “Saturday’s a long way off.”

“You sick or something? You don’t sound too good.”

He could sit for five minutes and tell Joby about it, sharing the load. It would feel like spring after a long winter. He wants to do it, he’s right on the edge, and he even says, “Joby.” But then he recovers. He says, “My turn tomorrow. I’ll pick you up if the car starts.”

He gets out, slams the door, and stands there while Joby drives away.

He is still blind to the man, who might already be in the house, waiting. There are windows on the ground floor, maybe locked but maybe not, and anyway, what’s a lock to someone who really wants to get in? Maybe he’s upstairs in the bedroom, or watching this minute from the window of Cindy’s old room.

The porch groans under Willy’s weight. He unlocks the door and, hammer raised, steps into the dark entryway. A little ahead and to the left, the living room; to the right, the dining room and kitchen. No one’s there, no one’s in Sarah’s sewing room, and all the first-floor windows are locked. He climbs the creaking stairs to the bedroom, bath, and Cindy’s room. With the hammer he pokes among the clothes in the closets. There’s nothing.

“The night ain’t over yet,” he says. Downstairs again, he puts water on for instant coffee. While it heats, he makes a cheese sandwich. He eats standing by the counter. From the living room he drags his armchair to a point just beside the front hallway, and brings Sarah’s afghan off the couch. With a cup of coffee in his hand, he sits down to wait, the afghan across his lap, the hammer there and ready. The unlocked front door is the lure, the porch his watchdog. One squeak of a board and he’ll be up beside the doorframe. The man won’t know what hit him.

For a while, as he drinks the coffee, he listens hard. He tries expanding his mind to include the man, to get a sense of his movements. But gradually other pictures begin playing in his head, the blond Jesus girl smiling at the driver of a fiery van that has a huge MOTTOM lettered on the side. Then he sees the girl forced down in the semi-dark, a knife point at her ear. Her eyes roll in terror and a puppy whines.

He shakes himself to drive the picture away. He turns his mind, then, to a white boat on a blue sea. Foam blows in long streamers, and the white, triangular sails shine in sunlight. Where the waves slope, the water shifts from blue to green, with flashing sparkles. That bubbling sound is water rushing, the whining comes from wind in the shrouds, and those flapping noises: slack sails. There’s water and sea and sunshine, and the deck rocks him like a mother.

A voice in his ear says, “Tom!” He jumps awake. The windows have gray light behind them. The hammer fell to the floor and he didn’t hear it. Dead asleep, he could have been shot ten times over. But who spoke the name Tom? Hell, it was Sarah’s voice, calling from a dream.

Oh, but he’s stiff. He labors up the stairs. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he bends to push his shoes and socks off. He takes off his shirt and undershirt and pushes his pants off. Grunting, he lifts one leg onto the bed and then the other. It’s dropsy. His legs are swollen, ugly things—bags of water. After a quarter of a century as a cement finisher, he had to give up his trade when he could no longer work on all fours, and now he has arthritis in the hips as well. This heavy body is the curse he has to live with.

When he awakens again, it’s past noon. It isn’t until he’s dressed and downstairs eating breakfast that he thinks of the front door. He forgot to lock it. A child could
have walked in, come upstairs, and stuck a feather in his nose. "Jesus, Willy," he says, "you’re too stupid to live."

But in daylight the world looks different. Last night he was certain, today not. Last night he was crazy. It seems like something that happened while he was drunk. Common sense says that the man ran like a rabbit, scared shitless. If not, Willy wouldn’t be here, hammer or no. What’s a hammer? The man wouldn’t walk in. There are better ways. Throw a pail of gasoline through the window, touch a match.

He looks outside. The rain has stopped, and through a break in the clouds the pale winter sunlight silvers the old garage out back. He feels a lot better today. Before stopping for Joby at 4:45, he has some things to do. He wants to price some batteries; the one in the Dodge is dying. He has to shop for presents for Sarah and Michael.

He replaces the armchair in the livingroom, folds the afghan, and puts it on the sofa. The hammer, an embarrassment, he lays on the counter beside his lunch-bucket. Since he might not return home before work, he makes a sandwich of the last of the ham and fills his thermos with the coffee left from breakfast. This time, he locks the front door, and lunchbox under his arm, the hammer in his hand, he goes out the back way. If only the Dodge will start once more, he’ll consider it the week’s good luck.

As he opens the garage door, the rollers skreak and yowl. He glances up. For a year he’s been meaning to buy grease, and today he’ll do it. As he steps inside, the corner of his eye catches movement, and he is hit while turning toward it. The blow is tremendous, knocking him against the car, sending the lunchbox clattering. The hammer spins away. He gets his hands out to defend himself, and the left one clutches cloth, slips, then holds.

He pulls down and gets both arms around the man’s ribcage. He feels hair on his forehead, opens his eyes, and sees the red beard. He tightens his grip and, grunting, lifts him off the floor.

The arms flail, striking his back. He can’t tell if he’s being stabbed or not. But he has him in the circle, squeezing, pushing his forehead up against the chin. He jacks more strength into it, jerks hard at the backbone. He catches the stench of cigarettes as the man gasps and kicks at his legs.

Willy pushes him backwards, falls on him with his bodyweight. From behind he reaches one hand around and up, finds the windpipe, shuts off the air. The man thrashes under him as he hunches and bears down. He gets his other hand on the throat. His own breath whistles in his nostrils. He bears down and holds.

When it’s over, he rolls off and lies panting. The garage has gone dark. His hands tremble and his right leg twitches. "Oh, God," he says. When he can control his hand, he puts it inside his jacket, on the wetness. He still doesn’t know if he’s been cut on the back as well. As he turns over and gets to his knees, he almost faints, but using the car for support, he pulls himself up and stands until the light comes back. Then he limps across the yard and into the house. The telephone is ringing.

He manages to climb the stairs to the bathroom. He strips to the waist. The wound is more a gouge than a cut; there’s a ragged furrow along his ribs, but the blade didn’t slip inside him. On his back, not a mark. The smear of blood on his face, he finds, isn’t his own.

With hot water and soap he scrubs the wound and then works iodine into it and bandages it with gauze and tape. He washes his face. Where he barked his knuckles on the concrete, he swabs on the iodine. He runs cold water in the tub and leaves his bloody jacket, shirt, and undershirt soaking.

In a clean sweatshirt he goes downstairs. The phone starts ringing again. He
crosses the yard to the garage and, from inside, shuts the door. He pulls the light-string. The man lies spread out, head thrown back and tongue protruding. He has chewed himself; the beard and blue lips are streaked with blood. The eyes look in different directions.

Willy finds the hammer over in the corner. Against the wall he finds the dented lunchbox, the knife through both sides with an inch of blade sticking out. "God Almighty," he says.

He turns off the light, lets himself out, and shuts the door. Before anything else, he has to sit down somewhere, get his mind back, and think. In the kitchen, the phone starts up again, and this time he answers. Where was he, she wants to know—she's been calling and calling. What's he been up to with her away? She reminds him about buying Michael a present. She has already bought the rest of the presents at the big discount stores. She tells him about the things she bought.

There's nothing important on her mind; she has called just to gabble. But for once it's a comfort to listen. She warns him not to miss the plane; Robert will meet him at the L. A. airport, and he'd better be there to be met. "All right," he says. "Hush. I'll get there."

He could call the police now. What has happened is the law's proper business. A man attacked him and got killed for it, so the law would equate the one thing to the other and mark it finished. But that finger, having touched Willy twice now, still lies lightly upon him. He feels its pressure. He isn't done with this quite yet. He prays that the Dodge will start.

Right on time, he pulls up at Joby's house and taps the horn. The curtain moves and there's Allie's big smile. At the same moment, the garage door opens a crack, and Joby's monkey face appears grinning. He motions for Willy to come. With more gas than battery, Willy leaves the engine running.

In the garage, that's no deer hanging from the crossbeam, but a bear, gutted, headed, skinned, and strung on a rope run behind the ankle tendons. "I caught him rubbing his ass on a redwood," Joby says. "Stick your hand in that hide, fleas jump all over your arm."

The thick black pelt, with part of the head, lies piled on the floor. The rest of the head is pulp. There's one cloudy eye, the black muzzle, and a tongue lolling out. "Jimbo the Rassler," Joby says. "I had to winch him through the scrub. Fleas like to eat me alive."

Skinned out, the bear looks like a man, has a man's arms and shoulders. There's a white layer of fat all over him. He's still dripping at the neck, into a green plastic bucket. Willy clenches his teeth.

"What's the matter?" Joby says. "You look hangdog."
"Are you going in to work?"
"Naw. I got to get this sucker in the freezer."

The carcass has a raw, greasy smell. Joby picks up the butcher-knife, puts the steel to it, and makes it ring. "You want some backstrap?" he says.
"I never did care for bear," Willy says.

Joby feels along the chine, then places the blade beside the backbone. When he draws it down, the fat parts in a V.
"I got to go," Willy says. "See you later."

The smell, somewhere between wild and rotten, goes outside with him, stays
in his nose, and at the library, in his mind. He sniffs his fingers. Is there a smell? How could there be? He wore gloves the whole time.
Half the time. The other half is still to go.

It is a cold Sunday morning. Willy, in a green summer shirt, brown pants, and brown-and-white shoes, waits on his front porch for Joby to come by and drive him to the airport. In his suitcase he has other Los Angeles-type clothes and a gift-wrapped, oval handmirror for Sarah. The cardboard box beside the suitcase contains his present for Michael, a globe-map of the world, something he can find new sights in the older he gets.

But when Joby rounds the corner, there’s a black-and-white behind him. Willy lifts his bag and the box into the truck bed. “Wait a minute, Joby,” he says, and walks back to the police car. Lieutenant Winston is alone in it. He lifts his chin toward the pickup and says, “Leaving town?”

“Going to L. A. for Christmas,” Willy says. “Be back this Thursday.”
The lieutenant looks at the house, then up at Willy. “You know, you worry me a little.”
“How’s that?”
“In this country, if someone comes after you with a knife, you have the right to defend yourself. Self-defense is justified.”
“I’ll remember that, in case it happens.”
“But if it does happen, you should tell us about it. Now that man we found on the dump yesterday, red hair, tattoo, scar on the right cheek—we really would like to know who he was. Someone lifted his I. D.”

“Did they? The news didn’t say that. You ought to put a guard on that dump out there.”

“His wallet had money in it, but nothing with his name on it.”
“Maybe he was a nobody.”
The lieutenant’s voice tightens. “We can pursue this, you know. We can get a warrant and turn your house upside down, vacuum your car.”
“You want my keys?” Willy says.
“Not at the moment,” says the lieutenant, “but I’ll be thinking about you. Have a good Christmas.”

Willy steps back as the car pulls away. He steps up into the cab of the pickup. Joby says nothing until they’re halfway to the airport. Then he says, “Trouble?”
“Maybe,” Willy says.
“About that body at the dump?”
“Might be.”
“Anything Allie and me can do?”
“No, it’s done already.”
Joby looks over at him, starts to speak, then shuts his mouth.

By Thursday, the stream of life will have carried him past Christmas. He and Sarah will return, carrying gifts, talking and talking about Cindy, Robert, and the baby. Whatever lies ahead, it will disclose itself when it’s ready to. For the time being, there’s not a cloud in sight. It is a sunny morning. Off to the west lies the cold sea covered with sparkles. The Universe has sucked back into itself, withdrawn into the ice above the sky.

Richard Cortez Day