CutBank 49
Spring 1998
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On the front cover:
Brian D. Cohen
Flowering Tree
Multi-plate etching
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Brian D. Cohen

*Steel Bridge*

Etching, 14" x 2"

Spring 1998
"I am German." When Gray opens his chest's
Skin-flap, he can watch his heart's black
Gears grasp: no problem,
All's forgotten—what is German
Surrounds him with its

Fuzzy dusk rolling up a flag. Car lights
Cut across the whole
Plaza. He is German: black
Iron skillet burnt blacker from grease, two
Sharp white collar-points

Aimed like two knives straight at his stomach. German,
German: black tree trunks holding back
A river, the worn
Terminus of brick buildings, lodged
In his throat, city

Carved from a stone tear. A photo dissolves, fire's sucked
Back into a house. Between teeth, memory's stuck.
GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS

“I am German.” This is the central meaning
Of the century in which Gray
Landed, and spent one
Entire life in its minutiae
At a teardrop’s end.

Is this it? To look back 30 years hence
And realize these dim
Days are it, were it, that things go
On like this awhile
Then stop? Every star is a plane.

They move further away, a house lit up
Inside. Gray is hanging next year
Beside files silent
And white, stuffed with good news and bad
Crumpled together:

Photographs of the doomed captioned with wedding names.
The anonymous witness’ face a vague stain.
**SOMETHING DIFFERENT**

Still, still Gray keeps waiting for the future
To begin, like a marked-off day
That rolls by alone
And individual amid
Thin black trees and then,

Then, something different begins. Gray awaits
The background humming
Of microphones and white tables
To unfold. Meanwhile
He’s between things: on a train, in

A restaurant. He keeps a capped pen next
To his heart. When the train windows flash
By, opposite, Gray
Catches glimpses of another
Time, space. He can’t wait

To be taken to it. “Let me see. Fifty more
Years, maybe, times three-six-five looks at the river—”
Still, when train windows flash past the river’s
Darkness, Gray has to look up each
Time: “Is it still there?
Do the buildings still reflect? Should
I start counting back

To zero, like pills in a bottle, each
Time the sun bounces
Off my glasses? And when I reach
It, then what happens?”
The phone rings—more bad news. The phone’s

Leaking again. This is the time for screams.
When everyone is looking at,
Into, the blue soul
Of their computer screen. When small
Issues headline for

Crack-downs, or -ins, -against. Maybe crack-away-from.
When what’s important lies there untalked about, numb.
Scream

So, this is the time for screams. At doctors,
Each doctor's pain, schedule. Gray's life
Will become a scream.
At politicians in café
Booths, standing outside

Factory gates. At what goes on and keeps
Going on. Nothing
Else can possibly do any
Good. It's late. A fire
Shouts, a sandbag wall splits—run, bring

The umbrellaed tables in. It's late. Each
Car carries a rim of brightness,
The flag folds on its
Pole. Then, from everywhere, nowhere,
A piano drifts

Till Gray can't breathe, speak or remember when he fell
In. A cup, crimped napkin, his testimonial.
**Passengers, Remain Calm**

_Here is a snake with a girl in his mouth. She is a little blonde girl, about four years old, and he is a rare albino anaconda, pink and white, about three feet long—just a baby, really. Nevertheless, he is trying to eat the child; her hand and forearm have disappeared down his throat, and he has coiled the rest of his body around her bicep, trying to constrict it. His wide mouth gives the impression of gloating merriment; she, of course, is screaming, and Hollis and his young nephew draw closer to the small circle of bystanders who have formed around her. “It’s all right,” the owner of the Reptile Petting Zoo tells the gathering as he tries to unwind the snake’s coils. “Everything is under control.” The girl is apparently the owner’s daughter. “Just calm down,” he says. “Didn’t Daddy tell you that you should always wash your hands after playing with the gerbils? Now Rosario thinks that you are a gerbil!”

“I hate Rosario!” the little girl wails.

“There, there,” her father soothes. “No, you don’t.” He speaks in a soft voice, but he grunts with exertion as he attempts to untangle his daughter’s arm from the snake, whose tail whips wildly when it is disengaged. “Damn, damn,” the man whispers, sweating.

“My God!” says a woman in the audience. “Kill the thing! Kill it!”

“Please!” the father cries, struggling to maintain his jovial, showman’s voice. “Stand back, everyone! Everything is under control!”

For a moment, Hollis wonders whether his nephew ought to be watching. But then a uniformed security officer arrives, and with the officer’s help, the girl is pried free. There is a smattering of applause. The girl’s hand is red, a bit swollen, but not bleeding. Hollis watches as the owner returns the snake to its glass cage. The owner presses the snake’s snout into a dish of water. “Here,” the man says. “Have a drink.” He holds the snake’s head under
water for a few moments, and though the man’s voice sounds placid, even gentle, Hollis can see his jaw tighten with rage.

Hollis has noticed that he always seems to witness these weird little incidents, more than other people.

This is at the town’s yearly carnival, which, along with the Reptile Petting Zoo, features the usual menage—a hay ride, a carousel, a Ferris wheel, a few scary rides like the Octopus and the Hammerhead. There are a series of game booths, at which children gamble for stuffed animals and plastic trinkets. At two in the afternoon, there is a pet show; at five, there is a raffle for a brand-new Kawasaki motorcycle; at dusk, there will be fireworks. Hollis’s nephew is deeply engrossed, running purposefully from exhibit to exhibit, and Hollis follows thoughtfully, still occupied with the image of the girl and the snake, which he plans to write about in his journal.

Hollis has been spending a lot of time with his nephew lately. Hollis is twenty-two years old, and the boy, F.D., is eight, but Hollis generally finds the child good company. It gives him a chance to do things he wouldn’t otherwise, like going to matinees, or ice-cream parlors.

F.D.’s father, Wayne, has been gone for over a month now. Wayne is Hollis’s older brother, and though Hollis had known that Wayne was unhappy, he’d never expected him to do something so drastic. No one knew where Wayne had gone—their mother had gotten a postcard, and so had Wayne’s wife, Felicia, but Wayne had offered no explanation, only a kind of vague apology. “Everything is okay,” he’d written to their mother. “Sorry for any worry, will contact you ASAP. xxxooo Wayne.”

Hollis hasn’t seen the postcard that Wayne had sent Felicia, but he suspects that she knows more about Wayne’s disappearance than she’s told anyone. She’s been in an odd state since Wayne left—not outraged, not hysterical, not desperate and furious, as Hollis might have expected—but subdued, moody, distracted. Hollis thinks that she might be taking some sort of drug. Her eyes have that floating, somewhere-else look, and on weekends she never seems to get out of her pajamas. Her beautiful dark hair wants cutting, and she has been biting her nails.
But she appears to be functioning: she goes to her job at the supermarket, and F.D. and his little sister Hanna are clean and make it every day to the school bus, but it’s clear that things aren’t going well. Last Friday night, Hollis went through and collected all the dirty dishes that were lying around, empty cereal bowls in the living room, half-full coffee cups on various surfaces, plates still left on the table from two or three suppers back. He gathered up all the dishes in the sink and washed them.

“You’re a nice guy, Hollis,” Felicia had said to him, as he stood there at the sink, and he’d shrugged, a little embarrassed. The truth was, he felt a little guilty and ashamed of his brother’s behavior. Somebody had to act like a decent person, he’d thought, though he didn’t say this. “You are,” she said. “You’re a nice guy.” He’d just shook his head. “Not really,” he said, and after a moment she put her hand on the small of his back, low, right above the slope of his buttock. Her hand seemed to tingle, and the air was heavy with the idea that she might kiss him, or he might kiss her. Then, she backed away.

“Hollis,” she said. “Let’s forget I did that, okay?”

He nodded, and she’d looked into his eyes in a way he found inexplicable. He knew then that there were a lot of things she wasn’t telling him, and that Wayne hadn’t told him either. “Okay,” he’d said, but it wasn’t as if he could really forget it, either. That night, he’d written about it in his journal, just a little paragraph. He doesn’t write about his feelings or thoughts in the journal. He just describes stuff.

F.D. does not know what is going on. The whole family, including Felicia, seems to be colluding to keep it from the boy. Hollis thinks it is wrong, but he hasn’t been given any official say in the matter. The story that F.D. has been given is that Wayne has gone on a long trip and will be back soon. (“Will he be back by my birthday?” F.D. had asked, and everyone agreed, yes, certainly by F.D.’s birthday, which is October 31st, and which is now beginning to loom ominously.) It is criminal, Hollis sometimes feels, to play with the boy’s mind in such a way. F.D. must know that something is wrong, Hollis thinks.
But if so, he never asks. He seems, as far as Hollis can tell, pretty cheerful, pretty normal.

Still, Hollis thinks of this as they sit on the hay ride, listening to the horses clop heavily along the pathways of the park. They are being driven around the circumference of the carnival. They pass by booths of politicians and county agencies: people running for city council or school board; people that represent the county recycling effort, giving demonstrations on how to create a compost heap; people representing the Department of Human Services, handing out pamphlets that tell of how to avoid abusing your children. The fire department is handing out Rescue stick- ers for children’s windows, florescent circles that will identify their rooms should their house ever catch afire. He recognizes a few of the men, from the brief time he’d worked at the fire department, but he doesn’t wave.

But the people on the hay ride do, and the people below wave back, smiling. “Hello! Hello!” the children call. F.D. occupies himself with this for a while, solemnly lifting his hand over his head in a way that makes Hollis sad. F.D. is holding tightly to a small stuffed animal, a furry blue snake with a wide, red felt mouth and google-eyes, about six inches long. F.D. won it by throwing a dart at a corkboard wall lined with a row of balloons. When a balloon had popped, he’d crowed with triumph and done a little dance. “All right!” he’d said, pumping his fists as athletic champions did on television.

Now, F.D. dotes over the toy snake thoughtfully, smoothing its polyester fur. “You know,” F.D. says. “Someday, I’d like to have a real snake as a pet. That’s one of my dreams.”

“Yeah,” Hollis says. “That would be cool. As long as the snake didn’t try to eat you.”

F.D. snorts. “That little girl was an idiot,” he says with dis- taste. “I felt more sorry for the snake than I did for her.”

“Well,” Hollis says. “She was just little.”

“I suppose,” F.D. says. “But she should have listened to what that man told her, that’s all. Most snakes are a friend to Man.” He looks solemnly across the hay ride to where sits the woman who had earlier shouted, “Kill the thing! Kill it!” in the Reptile Petting Zoo. She is a plump, round-faced woman with shoulder-length...
reddish blonde hair, bobbed in a fashion that is popular among women of her age and social class, and, like F.D., Hollis takes an instinctive dislike to her.

"I see what you mean," Hollis says.

*I see what you mean.* It was funny, because this was something he would often say when he was talking to Wayne. Wayne was a convincing talker, and Hollis, who was five years younger, would find himself frequently swayed by Wayne's views. It was Wayne who had said, for example, "Never assume that you know what goes on inside a marriage. Because I'm telling you, no matter how close you think you are, you will never know those people like they know each other. It's like a closed system. The weather inside a marriage is always different from the weather of everything around it." Hollis had nodded slowly, considering this. They had been talking about their parents that night, and Hollis had said that he felt certain that neither one of them had ever had an affair. Hollis had said that he couldn't understand why people would do that to their spouses. It didn't make sense, he said, and then Wayne swept in with his metaphors of weather. "I'm not saying that I've had an affair, either," Wayne said. "I'm just saying that you can never assume to know."

"I see what you mean," Hollis said.

He and Wayne had been sitting out in the garage, near the wood stove, in lawn chairs. It was winter, and they were feeding logs into the fire, drinking beers out of a cooler that sat between them. It was their Friday night ritual. Hollis would come over for dinner, and then they would sit in the garage and drink beer, sometimes smoking a little pot, talking. Wayne read a lot, and he always had something interesting to say. Wayne had hoped to be a lawyer, before Felicia became pregnant.

Sometimes, Hollis felt that his brother was his best friend, and he would go to sleep on Wayne and Felicia's couch with a feeling that there was one person on earth who understood him, one person who would always recognize him. Other times, less frequently, he would find himself driving home, his feelings hurt, driving even though he was drunk and afraid of being pulled over, or getting into an accident, and Wayne did not stop him.

Once he'd told Wayne that he thought more weird things
happened to him than to normal people, and he’d described that feeling he had, that the world seemed full of strange little incidents. He had expected Wayne to agree wholeheartedly.

But instead Wayne had looked at him sternly. “It’s not the world, Hollis,” he’d said, “it’s you. I mean, you’re an intelligent guy and all, but you’re sort of emotionally retarded.” Hollis was surprised by the irritation in Wayne’s tone of voice. “It’s like, do you remember the time Dad had a heart attack? And we were going to the hospital and you looked out the car window and saw a dog with a missing leg? All you wanted to talk about was that stupid dog, and you couldn’t believe that the rest of us didn’t see it. But we were normal, Hollis. We weren’t looking out the window and noticing goofy shit. We were mentally focused on something serious, which you seldom are.”

Hollis was stunned, as he always was, though he probably should have been used to it. Sometimes, for no reason, Wayne would attack, treating him like a criminal he was cross-examining during a trial. It didn’t make sense. What had he said, to bring this on? He had the sensation of shrinking.

“I didn’t know that Dad had a heart attack,” he said, after a moment, quietly. “Nobody told me.”

“Hollis,” Wayne said. He passed his hand, hard, through his bangs, an old gesture which meant, essentially: I can’t believe my brother is so stupid. “Hollis,” he said. “You never bothered to find out what was wrong. There’s a difference.”

Now, thinking of this, Hollis gets a hollow feeling in his stomach. He can’t believe that Wayne didn’t send him a postcard. It makes him feel hoodwinked, betrayed. But by whom? Wayne, or himself? He thinks that he should know why Wayne left, but he doesn’t.

F.D. looks like the paternal side of his family. More specifically, he looks a lot like Hollis himself, which Hollis has always found secretly thrilling. In his personality, F.D. is more like Wayne. There is an austere confidence which Hollis recognizes, an expectation that what he has to say is true and important, a certain way his grey eyes cloud with confidence, a way his mouth moves in judgment of other people’s ignorance. Most snakes are a friend to Man.

Hollis thinks of this as he and F.D. are sitting at a picnic
table, eating nachos. F.D. eats heartily, and Hollis mostly watches. They have recently purchased three raffle tickets, five dollars each, and F.D. is talking about the possibility of winning the motorcycle.

“Well,” Hollis says. “I don’t usually win stuff.”

“But if you did,” F.D. says. “What would you do?”

“If I win,” Hollis says, “I’ll give it to you. When you’re sixteen, you can drive it, and until you’re old enough I’ll give you rides on it. We’ll go on a trip on our motorcycle. Like to Washington, D.C., or something. Haven’t you always wanted to see the Smithsonian, and the National Monument, and all that?”

“And the White House?” says F.D., enthusiastically. At that moment, F.D. and Hollis love each other unconditionally.

“Yeah,” Hollis says. “All of it.” He smiles. “And when I’m old, you can take me for rides on it. We’ll have to buy helmets.”


“Yeah,” Hollis says. And they both drift into separate imaginings.

When Wayne wanted to analyze Hollis, he would say that Hollis was a dreamer, not a doer. “You don’t seem to have any plans for your life,” Wayne said, in a thoughtful voice that was meant to be constructive criticism. “You just seem to drift from one thing to the next.” And Hollis sat there, nodding, as Wayne talked about making up a Five Year Plan, setting some goals.

This was after Hollis quit the job he’d taken on with the fire department, and Wayne was disappointed. Wayne had liked the idea of Hollis’s job, and Hollis had, too, at first. But then he’d actually started going to accident sites with the emergency crew, and he changed his mind.

He had thought about telling Wayne this, but then didn’t. He didn’t want to talk about it.

There was one accident that he remembered. This was about midnight on a Thursday night, and he had been working for a month by then. It was a collision: this kid had rear-ended the back of a stalled semi out on the highway, and the kid’s truck had burst into flames on impact. The kid was about 20 or so, he found out later, and must have been going around 70 miles per hour when he crashed. That was it for him, of course. “A boom
and a flash,” said one of the firemen, Larry. “The fat lady sings.” By the time they arrived, there wasn’t much left, and even Larry said it was bad, very bad. He and Larry had tried to get the kid’s corpse out of the truck and onto the stretcher, but the body just fell apart, “like a chicken that got burned up on the barbecue,” Larry said later: cinders, ash, cooked meat. Hollis began to have nightmares, after that, and finally he went to see a therapist that the fire department had hired, whom the firemen could talk to, for free.

“You know,” the therapist said. “You show signs of being susceptible to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.” The man had a slow, affectless voice, as if he’d recently smoked marijuana. “If you’d gone to Vietnam, you’d probably have become a schizophrenic. Of course, no one can predict. You may become inured to it, after this. It’s hard to tell.”

Shortly after, he’d resigned. The other men at the fire station had known the reason, and he thought they respected the decision. He hadn’t explained the whole thing to Wayne, which was why Wayne became annoyed. But he didn’t know if he could make Wayne understand. He hadn’t even written about it in his journal.

Beyond the tent where he and F.D. are eating nachos, he can hear the voice of the operator of the Hammerhead, a tinny voice through a microphone, giving the ride a hard sell.

“Passengers, remain calm,” he says ominously, as if he is a pilot announcing an engine failure.

“Hold tight to your loved ones. Prepare yourself. Try not to scream.”

“This guy’s good,” Hollis said to F.D.

“What guy?”

And Hollis waved his hand, pointing to the air so F.D. would know to listen.

“This is what it feels like to be in a plane that is going down,” the operator of the Hammerhead crows. “Do you dare to experience it? Can you take it? Can you take this trip without screaming in horror?”

He grins at F.D., and F.D. grins back: they’re not going on the Hammerhead, they agree in a brief exchange of glances.
Someday, Hollis thinks, he will tell F.D. about the kid’s body that fell apart when he tried to lift it. F.D. would understand. “Passengers, remain calm,” the man calls in the distance, and Hollis feels for a moment as if he has half-glimpsed a secret, some hidden aspect of the world, something he didn’t want to know. He can hear Wayne saying, “It’s not the world. It’s you.” He can hear Felicia saying, “You’re a nice guy, Hollis.” He looks over to where F.D. is sitting, munching tortilla chips. His heart aches.

To a certain extent, he has a life of his own. He now has a job in a factory which makes paper tube products, and it pays pretty well. He has friends his own age, with whom he goes out to bars and such. He has girlfriends, too, though he has noticed that date number three always seems like the end, that things almost always peter out after that.

But the truth is, he had always felt most comfortable with Wayne and Felicia and F.D.—just hanging out, as if he were somehow one of them, as if that was where he really belonged. He has the image of the four of them, sitting in the living room, watching TV. Wayne and Felicia are on the couch, and he is in the recliner, and F.D. is in his pajamas, tucked into a sleeping bag on the floor. They are watching a comedy movie, something he’s seen before, but he’s enjoying it anyway. He likes to listen to them laugh. He feels safe and welcome: happy. It’s awful, because he now feels certain that this moment isn’t true.

There is a line at the bathroom, and they wait quietly, shuffling slowly toward a single blue port-o-potty. They are both quiet, and after a time, Hollis smiles down at F.D. “What are you thinking, Buddy?”

F.D. shrugs. “Nothing,” he says. He is thoughtful, and he hesitates for a moment. “Uncle Hollis,” he says at last. “Have you ever seen the movie Alien?”

“I think so,” Hollis says. “I don’t remember.”

“I’ve been wanting to see it for my whole life,” says F.D. “But Mom thinks it’s too scary. And I was thinking that maybe we could rent it and watch it at your house sometime. I promise I wouldn’t tell Mom. I wouldn’t get scared, either.”


“I don’t know” Hollis says. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“Okay,” F.D. says. His eyes rest on Hollis seriously, a long, searching, hopeful look.

After a minute, F.D. says, “I wish I lived with you.”

Hollis doesn’t say anything. He thinks it would be okay to say, “So do I, Buddy,” but he’s not sure. It might also be wrong.

They walk along a row of game booths, toward the rides. Out of the corner of his eye, Hollis can see a tent with a sign that says, “Psychic Readings.” A lady is sitting there at a card table, with her hands folded, waiting, a woman in her late forties, with a long, solemn face, stoically wearing a shiny turban, as if it is an affront to her dignity. He hopes that she doesn’t notice him.

He has always had a dread of fortune tellers and palm readers and such. He has always imagined that they would tell him something he didn’t want to know—that something terrible was going to happen, that he was going to die soon, that his life would be full of sadness. Maybe it wouldn’t be something bad at all, but the idea of it scared him, nevertheless.

Perhaps the woman can sense this, because she calls out to him as he walks past. “Your future, your fortune!” she shrills, and he smiles, shaking his head briskly: “No thanks!”

“Only five dollars!” the woman says. “I have important information for you!”

F.D. has stopped and is looking from the turbaned woman to Hollis, and back, hopefully.

“No, sorry,” Hollis says to the woman. He smiles apologetically. “Sorry!”

She smiles broadly. “Your son thinks you should,” she says, and addresses F.D. “Don’t you think your father should know his fortune?”

Hollis laughs. “You’re no psychic!” he says. “He’s not my son!”

And then he regrets saying this: the woman looks nonplussed, and F.D. seems to flinch a little. It would have been fun, Hollis thinks, to pretend that he was F.D.’s father. The woman looks at
him stonily, then turns her attention to a group of teenage girls. “Your future!” she calls to them. “I have important information for you!” The girls hesitate, giggling, and Hollis and F.D. move on.

Here is the beautiful carousel. The horses are all brightly colored, posed in forms of agitation. They lift their red mouths as if calling out, their legs curved into gallops, their manes whipping in an imaginary wind. The calliope plays a tune he recognizes but cannot place, something like “A Bicycle Built For Two,” but not. The ride was built in the 1890’s, according to the sign, and is the oldest carousel still in existence. As they get on, he sees the little girl from the Reptile Petting Zoo, her hand and forearm bandaged, sitting a few horses in front of them. A woman—her mother, probably—stands stoically beside the little girl’s horse. He and F.D. are astride their steeds, side by side.

“There’s the little girl who almost got eaten by the snake,” Hollis says. He gestures with his chin, and F.D. looks over and nods contemplatively.

“The snake couldn’t have actually ate her,” F.D. explains. “She was way too big.” He frowns, then smiles when he realizes that Hollis has been making a joke. “Oh,” he says. “I get it.” He beams at Hollis for a moment.

“Do you think it would hurt,” Hollis says. “To be swallowed?”

“Oh, yeah,” F.D. says. “Big time. The snake’s muscles contract and it crushes and suffocates you with its coils. Every time you try to breath, it tightens its coils, so finally your lungs can’t expand.”

“You know a lot about snakes,” Hollis says, and F.D. gazes at him seriously.

“I know,” F.D. says. He has told Hollis before that he wants to be a scientist when he grows up—a herpetologist, which is a word Hollis hadn’t even heard of before, but which means a person who studies reptiles. Looking at F.D. now, Hollis can see the scientist in his face. There is a kind of dignified intensity that Hollis admires. “Uncle Hollis,” F.D. says, after a pause. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, Kiddo. Anything.”

“Is my Dad really coming home?”
Hollis waits a moment. The boy’s scrutiny is hard to lie to. “I don’t really know, F.D.” Hollis says. He hesitates. The carousel has begun to move, and their horses dip and rise in time to the calliope music. What can he say? He waits, feeling the steady, insistent velocity as they move in their circle. He thinks of Wayne—out there, somewhere, driving, sleeping in the passenger seat of his car at some rest stop along the interstate, a Wayne he knows and yet doesn’t know. He’s never coming back, Hollis thinks.

When they get off the carousel, F.D. is quiet, lost in thought, and Hollis thinks that it might be best to backtrack, to take back the doubt he has planted, to reassure the boy. But he’s not sure of the right thing to say. After a moment, he reaches over and brushes his hand over the back of F.D.’s neck.

They sit there for a time, near the carousel, watching people pass, children awash in the urgency of having fun, parents following behind with indulgent, sleepwalking expressions. He knows that they cannot sense the dull panic that has begun to throb around him, beating time to the distant churn of the calliope. But it seems as if it must be visible, like a rash on his skin.

In his journal he would write: “Here is F.D. sitting in the grass. He is quiet, petting his stuffed snake. He won the snake at the carnival, by throwing a dart at the balloon. He looks at the snake as if he is going to talk to it, but he doesn’t say a word.”

In high school he had a teacher who thought he was a good writer. “You have a good eye,” the teacher said, “but you editorialize too much. Let the detail speak for itself.” The teacher had given him a story by Hemingway to read, which he hadn’t understood, but he thought he understood what the teacher was saying. It made sense.

Once, when he was in 9th grade, and Wayne was a junior in college, he had come into his room and found Wayne reading his journal. Wayne was home from college for Christmas, and Felicia was already pregnant with F.D., though they didn’t know it at the time. Wayne would soon drop out, though they didn’t know that either. At that moment, they were just brothers, and Hollis stood there in the doorway, horribly embarrassed as Wayne looked up,
smiling that knowing, half-adult smile, holding the journal loosely in his hand.

"Hey," Wayne said. "This is pretty good!"

"Yeah, well," Hollis said, and flushed a bit at the flattery, despite himself. "It’s also kind of private."

"Why?" Wayne said. "You don’t have anything to be shy about. This is really nice stuff. I’m impressed. I think it would be better if you tied things together more, though."

The thought of impressing Wayne so thrilled him that the sense of invasion and humiliation was quelled, momentarily. But he was cautious, thinking it might only be an elaborate mockery.

Once, when Hollis was ten, Wayne had convinced him that he was adopted. And though Wayne had eventually been forced to recant, Hollis still had doubts. He has doubts, even now.

"It’s just for me," Hollis said. "I don’t want anyone else to read it. I don’t want anyone else to know what I think."

Wayne had smiled. Wayne still thought, then, that he was going to become a famous lawyer, and he hadn’t yet envisioned a life with Felicia and F.D., working for the county as a clerk in the courthouse. Wayne couldn’t imagine what it would be like to not want others to know what he thought. "Hollis," he said, combing his fingers through his bangs. "That’s stupid. Why would you write stuff down if nobody’s going to read it?"

"I read it," Hollis said. "That’s all. Just me."

And Wayne shook his head. "That doesn’t make any sense."

"I see what you mean," Hollis had said. But afterward, he started hiding the thing; he still hides it, at the bottom of his sock drawer, even though he lives alone. Years later, when they were sitting out in the garage, Wayne had asked him if he still wrote in a journal.

"No," Hollis said, though he seldom lied. "I just lost interest."

"Hollis used to be a really good writer," Wayne told Felicia.

"I believe it," Felicia said, and Hollis was sure then that they really loved him. It was one of those moments he would come back to—Wayne and Felicia smiling at him kindly, their love for each other extending and encompassing him. Wayne rested a hand on one of Hollis’s knees, and Felicia rested her hand on the other,
and they all leaned close. Now he wonders if this meant anything to them, if they even remembered it.

“F.D...” he says. He has been sitting there silent for a while, thinking, mulling things over, and he knows that F.D. wants him to explain things. “You know, the truth is,” he says. “The truth is, I really don’t know what’s going on with your dad. Nobody has told me anything.”

“Where is he?” F.D. says.

Hollis swallows, thinks. “I don’t know,” he says.

F.D. says nothing, and Hollis feels sorry. He would like to be a real uncle, someone who could explain the world to F.D., someone who could make sense of it.

“He ran away from home, didn’t he?” F.D. says.

“Yes,” Hollis says.

“I knew that,” F.D. says again. He sighs heavily, and Hollis puts his hand on F.D.’s neck, letting it rest there, warm and—he hopes—comforting.

“I’ll always be here, though,” Hollis says. “I won’t leave you.”

He means it. But he is also nervous. What has he done? He hasn’t thought out the consequences clearly, and now a grey uncertainty begins to glide through him. He thinks to say, “Don’t tell your mom you know,” but he knows that it would be wrong. Then he realizes what he should have said in the first place: Ask your mother.

“You should talk to your mom about it,” he says. “If you... well, if you don’t mention that I told you, that might be best. I mean, maybe she wouldn’t have wanted me to be the first one to say something...” He hesitates, because he can’t read what’s behind F.D.’s heavy expression. “I’m not saying you should lie, or anything. You shouldn’t lie to your mom.”

“Well,” F.D. says, “she lied to me.” He looks at Hollis sharply. “She lies all the time.”

“No she doesn’t,” Hollis says, but not insistently. He is trying to imagine how Felicia will react. He is aware now that he has betrayed her, thoughtlessly, that he has treaded into a place where he doesn’t belong at all. He has always tried to think carefully about right and wrong, but often the grey areas other people see are invisible to him. He wonders if she will be angry. He imagines her saying, “How dare you tell F.D. such a thing. How dare
you make me look like a liar! What makes you think you know anything about it?” He cringes. And then he thinks, *what if Wayne really does come back?* Then he will have done a truly awful thing. Then he will have damaged Wayne’s relationship with F.D. No matter what happens, Hollis thinks, he has permanently altered things between them, and he feels a slow undertow of dread. Everyone is going to be disgusted with him, furious. He can imagine doors closing permanently, his excursions with F.D. ending, becoming unwelcome at Wayne and Felicia’s house. He and F.D. look at each other, and he sees that F.D. is quavering on the edge of tears.

“Oh, F.D.,” he says. “Don’t cry. Please don’t cry.”

And F.D. doesn’t. They get up and begin to walk, and he feels humble and clumsy in the wake of F.D.’s churning thoughts. Terrible, terrible, terrible, he thinks. He wants to slap himself.

“F.D.,” he says, after a while. “I think I’ve made a terrible mistake. I’m thinking that I shouldn’t have told you what I told you.”

“I know,” F.D. says. He is grim, though they are walking through a row of bright booths, through the hawkers’ promises of prizes and fun. He shakes his head heavily.

“How do you know?”

F.D. shrugs. “I just do. Mom wouldn’t have wanted you to tell me. She’ll be mad, won’t she?”

“She should be mad,” Hollis said. “I did something that was really wrong.”

“Oh,” F.D. says. He seems to consider this for a moment. “Why were you wrong?”

“Because your mom trusted me not to say anything. And I let her down.” He thinks for a moment, trying to explain it clearly. “It’s like that little girl and the snake. She’ll never trust that snake again. You see?”

“Oh,” F.D. says. “Yeah,” and Hollis realizes after a moment that the analogy is unclear; it doesn’t make a lot of sense. He lapses again into thought, looking ahead to where a group of people are beginning to gather around where the motorcycle sits on a stage. The stage is festooned with scalloped ribbons and Chinese lanterns; tiny disco balls fracture the light into spangles...
that glimmer brilliantly on the motorcycle's chrome, and on their faces.

"Uncle Hollis," F.D. says. "Who do you love more? My mom or me?"

"You," Hollis says. He doesn't even have to think. "I love you more than anyone else in the world. That's why I'm sorry that I did a wrong thing. I didn't want to make you sad."

"That's okay," F.D. says. And he reaches up and rubs against Hollis's arm, and Hollis can feel the eagerness of his affection. I have put him in a terrible position, Hollis thinks. But he doesn't know what he can do about it.

For the last month, Hollis has been trying to remember the last thing Wayne said to him. It was probably something mundane—"Goodbye," or "So long," or "See you around"—but of course, given that Wayne would disappear a few days later, even these pleasantries are potentially heavy with meaning. But he can't recall. It was an ordinary evening, like any other. He and Wayne had been drinking beer in the garage, and Felicia had stayed in the house, watching TV. She often did this. "You need your 'boy time' together," she'd always said, ironically, though Hollis always liked it best when she sat with them and joined in the conversation.

But in any case, there was nothing to indicate that Wayne was planning to leave. What did they talk about? Movies, mostly, as Hollis remembered. They talked about a recent plane crash, in Scotland, which had been all over the news; the plane might have been downed by a terrorist bomb planted in the luggage. Hollis remembered this only now. The operator of the Hammerhead had brought it back to him, and he recalls Wayne mentioning it. "What do you think goes through your mind when you're going down like that? When you know you're going to die?"

"I don't know," Hollis said. "But you know what I'd be thinking? I'd be thinking, 'This is going to really, really hurt!'"

Wayne had laughed at that, and had told the old joke they both loved in childhood: "Q: What's the last thing that goes through a mosquito's mind when he hits your windshield? A: his butt." And they'd laughed some more, full of beer and dumb camaraderie.
And it strikes him suddenly, a heavy blow. Wayne knew he was leaving, even as they sat there laughing and telling stale jokes. But he would have never told Hollis. Hollis can see himself as they see him, even as they are making their secret plans and living their secret lives. He is a distraction to them, an amusement, and he understands Wayne’s occasional flashes of anger, too—he can see himself as Wayne saw him, full of earnest, innocent stupidity, chattering vacantly about the “weird things he’d noticed,” not someone that had ever really mattered. His cheeks grow warm, and he wishes that he’d responded to Wayne’s question more seriously. What goes through your mind when you know you’re going to die? He could have finally told Wayne about that kid, that kid whose corpse fell apart when he tried to pick it up. He could have said a lot of things. And maybe then Wayne would have respected him. Maybe Wayne would have told him the truth.

He is so lost in thought that when the man on the stage reads the winner’s name, he begins to applaud with the rest of the crowd before he realizes that the man has just read his own name.

“Hollis Merchant!” the man says. “Is Hollis Merchant in the audience today? You are the winner!”

F.D. whoops, “That’s us! That’s us!” And Hollis is brought back abruptly from his reverie. The crowd has turned to look at him, their eyes wide and expectant. And miraculously, F.D. is healed, is made whole and happy again. He is jumping up and down. “We won!” he cries, his voice shrill with excitement, and he hurls his body against Hollis’s in a rough dance of joy. “You and me, Uncle Hollis! Remember? You and me!”

Hollis lifts F.D. onto his shoulders, and the weight of him settles easily into place. Despite everything, he can’t help but feel proud and happy, just as F.D. does. The crowd applauds as they walk up to the stage, probably thinking that F.D. is his son, and Hollis is willing to borrow this for the time being. Once F.D. is on his shoulders, he can stride to the stage.

And he has a vision, what he should write in his journal: What if you believed that everything in life was like a prize? What if you thought of the world as a big random drawing, and you were always winning things, the world offering them up with a big grin, like an emcee’s:
Here you go, Hollis. Here is a motorcycle. Here is a little boy who loves you. Here is a weird experience, here is something bad that you should mull over, because it will make you a better person. What if you could think that life was this free vacation you’d won, and you won just because you happened to be alive?

He is not deluded. He can see clearly that he is foolish, that his life is made up of a series of muddled interpretations and distractions, that he doesn’t know anything about the world he’s moving into. But he can also see the two of them on that motorcycle, in those golden helmets that F.D. had dreamed up, going somewhere. “You and me,” F.D. whispers, and the roads are clear, there are green fields and wild flowers on either side, and the motorcycle seems to be driving itself. He can even close his eyes for a moment, as the wind and velocity sweep over them. They fly down the highway, calmly, headed off to wherever it will take them.
RITUAL SCARIFICATION

I believe we may have met once
just outside the skin, in all

honesty, outside the skull, pulling
away each other's grin. Choosing

new identification resembles work.
The man in his fishtank thinks

sometimes pennies and marbles are just
illogical. It is swift, the movement from one chord
to the next, the background. His eyes calliope
in and out of caves. What do you think,

officially? Orchids alternate between hands
with many different sizes like the little sink

headed girl eating Campbell's soup, tomatoes
crushed beneath the ash bin. All morning long

people lift toenail clippings to their
noses and grope in a darkness

of the cottonwoods, grope for laughter. Threading
lovers' feet onto fish-hooks they throw one

another into slow upstream holes, making
meals from orgasm and other limitations of language.
Brian D. Cohen

Train Passing Station

Etching 18" x 24"
Disorienting

Most of our maps are personal. They are on an intimate, useful scale. My friend Clara, who doesn’t have a car and whose urban instincts don’t let her walk alone at night, imagines herself on a grid of bus lines and bus stops. She calculates how close she is to safety and how many rumbling bus rides she is away from home. My boyfriend’s landscape is emotional. He locates himself in relation to the house of an ex-lover, the first place he applied for a job, the state where his parents live. Audrey, who grew up on the Oregon Coast and now lives in Seattle, envisions herself in relation to bodies of water. In Seattle, she sits perched on the land bridge between Lake Washington and Puget Sound, too far away to feel the tug of the ocean.

In the East Bay, where I grew up, locating myself was simple. Geography was a process of linking known objects to imagined ones, until I had a picture of my neighborhood, my city, the world. To start, I looked up, found the water, knew that was west. Beyond the bay was San Francisco, the Pacific Ocean, Japan. In the other direction were the Berkeley Hills, Tilden Park, my grandparent’s house, and New York City. I fit snugly in between, in what seemed like the center of things.

Later, when I moved to Seattle, I had a harder time. The city sloped east to west and urban planners were so confident in people’s sense of direction that street signs warned “No parking south of here.” Since the water defined the west as it had in California, I could at times garner a similar sense of security, but in November, when the clouds were so low you felt you had to duck when you went outside, and then in April when the sun would break through and wash the city with an eerie blue light, I would remember how far north I was. When I imagined myself on the map, teetering at the northwest edge of the United States, I had doubts about the cheery round ball of the earth and began to wonder if it had edges after all, if I should watch my step.

As we came over the ridge, my stomach dropped. The hill, which I had hoped would descend to some landmark once we’d crested

Spring 1998
it, plunged thickly forested to a frozen lake that didn’t appear on the map. Then the ground rose again, and green hills bucked all the way to the horizon. Boulders covered the slope behind us—arrested, it seemed, in mid-tumble. The sky was a blank gray. Roots poked through the soil. And we were lost. Anchored only by a topographical map of the Indian Heaven Wilderness in the South Cascades and a compass that I understood more in theory than in practice, I wondered how far we could walk without becoming found.

Staring at the anonymous hills, I felt unmoored. All the ways I used to locate myself had fallen away. No familiar peak or rock formation told me that I was facing north. No sign directed me to go left or right. I couldn’t envision myself standing firmly on a specific point on the map because we’d left the Pacific Crest Trail and now were weaving among the topo lines. In some part of my mind, I held a tether that led me back to the house on Hopkins Street where I grew up in Berkeley, California. With no road or marked path to follow home, that tether was severed too, as surely as if the golden thread had snapped when Theseus wandered his way through the maze toward the Minotaur. I didn’t know how to imagine where I was.

Beside me, clinging to a fistful of grass so she wouldn’t slide down the hill, was my friend Karen, whom I called Karenina, because she had a flair for the dramatic. She experimented with her image the way some people experiment with drugs, trying to find the one that offered the best worldview. One summer I picked her up from a Buddhist meditation retreat in Orinda and was greeted by a woman I hardly knew, her round face glowing with inner peace, a long cotton skirt flapping around her bare ankles. Another time I met her at the airport. One of the last passengers off the plane, she ran up to greet me, looking like a movie star. Her California-blond hair had gone raw honey brown in the eastern climate, and she was wearing a leopard skin coat that hit her mid-thigh. But through all these permutations, one thing remained constant: I could call her and suggest almost any adventure and she would say “yes.” When I told her I planned to hike 500 miles on the Pacific Crest Trail through Washington State and asked if she wanted to join me for a while, she bought a rain suit at Target and got on the plane.
The first three days of hiking were miserable. The moment we left the Oregon border and started hiking north, rain poured down from a low-slung sky, pausing every hour or so as if to take a breath, only to continue with renewed force. Our packs were bulky and too heavy, resembling small walruses swathed in nylon. They cut into our shoulders, gaining weight as the water seeped into our clothes and food. Summer was coming slowly after a stormy winter washed out roads and bridges throughout southwest Washington. Though it was late June, buds were still knotted tight as fists. As the path ran along the mountainside it was easy to follow, but then it moved off the crest into a broad, snow-filled bowl. Trees poked through the white expanse, and we wove around them, making deep footprints so we could find our way back. Finally, it came to this: the trail was gone.

We camped at the spot where the trail disappeared. After a plateful of spaghetti, Karen pinned me into a conversation about what we would do if the rain continued and the snow obscured the trail for miles ahead. She wanted to retrace our steps to the last road we'd crossed, 12 miles back. But I insisted we go on, reluctant to abandon our plans, confident that we would find the trail tomorrow. In two days my friend Audrey was going to drop off more supplies and have lunch with us where the trail crossed Road 65. We could discuss the future of the trip then, I argued, if we could find the trail to that point. If we couldn't, the map showed that Road 65 was three or four miles west of us, on the other side of a ridge. We could just bushwhack to the top, see the road below us, and make our way down to it. It would be easy.

My confidence sprung from the notion that if we climbed higher than the land around us, we could place ourselves within the view. Vision dominates the human senses and most people construct their mental maps from what they see. But other animals locate themselves by sound, smell, vibrations, or senses we don’t fully understand. I once heard a story about a boy who collected migrating birds injured during a storm. The high winds blew the birds into a power line, and they fell to the ground, stunned. The boy put them in the back of his car and drove them to a nearby animal shelter. By the time he arrived, most of the birds had
recovered, and when he opened the trunk, they were all facing,
not the back of the car, not each other, but due south. The healthy
birds flew off as soon as they were free, and even the ones that
couldn't fly hopped out of the car and started walking south.
The boy grew up to be an ornithologist, specializing in naviga-
tion.

Some say birds follow the stars as they migrate thousands of
miles each year. One group of scientists put indigo buntings in a
star chamber, then revolved the stars, so south was no longer
south, west no longer west. The birds shifted accordingly, read-
ing the false stars rather than true north. Others say birds use the
sun or the topography of mountain ranges and coast lines to
find their way. Scientists have sought to prove pigeons navigate
by gauging the earth's tilt and the resulting geomagnetic forces.
Pigeons wearing magnets (which disrupted their internal com-
pass) had difficulty returning to their loft on cloudy days when
they couldn't navigate by the sun. Birds with brass bars instead
of magnets managed to find their way home, even under over-
cast skies. Photopigment in the pigeons' eyes may translate mag-
netic fields as well as light, telling birds whether they are flying
toward a pole or toward the equator.

Anyone who has watched Canada Geese "V"ing overhead or
heard their distant calls in the dark knows that there is a confi-
dence in these strong, sure, wing beats that we seem to lack.

The next morning I left Karen at the tent, reading the passage
on hypothermia in my first aid book. As I put on my boots, I
saw, not 100 yards from our tent, a Pacific Crest Trail marker.
And then another, on the inside of a tree. Soon I was strolling
through the snow, barely breaking stride to look for markers or
melted-out patches of trail. I found Blue Lake, cold water lap-
ingar at the base of Gifford Peak, and ran back to tell Karen. But
when we returned with our packs and pressed beyond the
lakeshore, the trail vanished again into ice and twigs and confu-
sion. If we needed to hunt for the trail every 100 yards, we would
average three miles a day and miss Audrey completely. After try-
ing three times to cross an ice-clogged stream, we agreed to bush-
whack.
When I suggested cutting away from the trail, I didn’t think it necessary to plot a compass point. But for form’s sake I placed the edge of the compass on the map so it ran a straight line from Blue Lake to the road, then turned the dial so the direction lines on its face were parallel with our chosen path. When I lifted the compass off the map and held it so the needle pointed north, an arrow on the dial pointed us the way we should walk. But it wasn’t the direction that I sensed was west.

We started to walk against my instincts, and I adjusted the compass, holding it flat and noting a landmark near where it pointed. We would then walk to that landmark and adjust the compass again. Our progress was slow and methodical. Tree to tree to tree. Big Douglas Fir to small clump of cedar to twisted stump, split by lightning. Moving sometimes five feet, sometimes 25, we inched the direction we hoped was west.

When the compass directed us over a frozen lake, I stayed on one shore with the bearing, while Karen went around, heading for the marked spot on the opposite bank. As I sat on my pack, feet in the snow, holding the compass which I pointed over the lake to a clump of trees, I heard a yelp. Then Karen’s shaky voice.

“I’m all right.”

She had fallen through the ice covering the water and sunk in up to her hip. Then another scream. Then a pause.

“I’m okay.” The words quavered over the ice.

Fortunately, the day remained warm, though not sunny, and Karen’s waterproof pants dried as we walked. Past evergreen trees tipped with tender new needles. Past quick streams connecting a small chain of lakes. I felt a flush of privilege at seeing sights not on the trail, not on the designated tour, and I remembered a man I knew who scorned hiking trails in favor of walking a compass line. Hiking for him was plotting a course and plunging forward down hills and over stumps until he grew tired, then turning 180 degrees and heading back. He returned from these jaunts full of stories of coyote pups squealing in their dens and moose knee-deep in muddy ponds. But I declined his invitations, favoring the trail and gathering a quiet joy from stumbling across a mileage sign. And now that I had veered from the path, the thrill of off-route exploring was blotted out by my persistent fantasizing about
the road. Over and over in my mind I crested the mountain, saw
the blacktop, felt the flood of relief.

Finally, after we had walked out of the snow, across a slick
rock field, past dozens of melting ponds, we crossed over the
ridge. Instead of the anticipated view down to the pavement, we
saw the boulders at our feet, the hills that went nowhere. To our
right the ridge curved, and when I checked the compass, it pointed
us across the steep slope and back to the other side. That couldn’t
be right. Completely discouraged, I sat down for a break. What
were we supposed to do? A new plan? I was out of plans. My
hands shook, rustling the plastic bag with our food in it as I tried
five times to undo the knot. Blood beat in my ears, making it
hard to hear my thoughts over the static. All decisions seemed
equally wrong, all directions seemed equally fruitless. I ate the
last of my graham crackers and peanut butter and wished I could
cry to loosen, if only slightly, the bands of anxiety that had wound
themselves around my chest. Karen had already cried twice, saying, “I’m going to cry now, but it’s okay, Kim, I just do this som­
times. I don’t want you to think that I’m not having a good time.”
And she would sob and the rain would drip off the tree branches
and run down the Ziploc bags, and I would try to think of com­
forting things to say, and fail.

My problem was a crisis of faith. Deep down, I didn’t believe
in the compass, this small circle that claimed to describe our world.
It was plastic. It cost 15 dollars. How was it going to save us? We
were far from the trail, I knew that, and the likelihood of anyone
finding us was slim. But Karen trusted the compass. And I think
she trusted me. I trusted neither and could only avoid panic by
never stopping long enough to think. We stood up and prepared
to go back over the ridge. Tree to tree to tree.

When I imagine a landscape more disorienting than rows of hills,
I think of the ocean. Undulating planes of blue reflecting the
blue or gray or black of the sky. Before compasses and Geo­
graphical Information Systems and satellite photography, sailors
would set out with knowledge of the wind and stars to help them
home. At sea, Greek mariners knew where they were by the smell
and feel of the wind that blew behind them or in their faces.
Boreas, the north wind, was the coldest, while Notus came from
the south and blew warm weather. The heavy wet breeze from the west was termed Zephyr. Apeliotes raged from the east. The stars also acted as a map, and if the rolling waves looked monotonous and the night was clear, sailors could look up and key on Polaris, the anchor of the sky.

When someone noticed that a needle rubbed with a magnet stone would point north, early mariners made their first progress toward the compass. They secured the needle to a piece of wood, floated it in a bowl of water, and followed its lead. It seemed more magical than scientific, but it cast a reliable spell. Sailors thought the needle pointed to the North Star rather than the North Pole, but either way, it guided them into port. As time passed, inventors refined the needle, enclosing it in a case inscribed with 64 directional points.

With all these refinements, the instrument was still only as good as the hand that held it, and sometimes sailors didn’t find the shore they wanted. Sometimes they never found land at all.

A “compass” is more than a navigational instrument. The mathematical compass has two legs hinged at the top. While one stays in place, the other moves around it, allowing the mathematician to draw a perfect circle. The term “compassing” or “encircling” describes enclosing, defining, circumscribing. In Milton’s Paradise Lost, Jesus creates the earth using a mathematic compass “forged in God’s store.” The poem describes the process:

One foot be centered, and the other turned
Round through the vast profundity obscure,
And said, ‘Thus far extend, thus far thy bounds,
This be thy just circumference, O world.’

Similarly, The Silva-brand piece of plastic I wore around my neck on a piece of red string claimed to map the globe, relating every object to its simple system of labels and directions. At the same time it made us the center of the world.

These tools make up for our flaws, our dependence on vision, our optimism. Psychological experiments show that when most people walk through a neighborhood then map it, they draw an idealized picture. They make acute angles right and straighten twisted streets. Without help from an objective source, they amend the landscape to their specifications. When the fictional scene intersects the actual, people become disoriented.
Even the word “orient” varies between the directional and the personal. Originally, it named the direction where the sun rises, the east. The word worked itself from a Latin verb “to rise,” to a noun naming a spot in the sky, back to a verb as worshippers built their churches with the altar in the east and buried their dead with the feet facing east. “Orient” eventually started to describe the placement of people, not just temples and tombs. To orient yourself was not only to know where you were in relation to the four cardinal points, but to know which way to point your prayers, to understand your position in society.

After pushing through underbrush that snagged our packs and scratched our arms, Karen and I followed our bearing into a grove of tall Douglas Fir. Though the ground had appeared level for the past hour, we must have been gradually descending, because we started walking through spring rather than winter. While our eyes stayed trained on the thick ribbed bark, we couldn’t help but notice the flowers on the ground and the rich smell of green. Then I looked up and saw that the trees ended. Instead of more hills, they were backed by a wall of sky. Karen thought we must be at a cliff. I had a brief image of a steep concrete drop-off bordering the interstate. But what we were seeing was simply distance. After focusing so closely for hours, our eyes couldn’t make sense of the miles of unobstructed view that opened up as we came to the end of the trees. We were almost in the clearing before I could see that the hazy planes of white and brown and green composed a mountain so large that it defined the landscape around it. The snow-covered cone whose shoulders ranged in all directions. The crater full of clouds. The pebbles on the ground, light as popcorn and blasted with holes. All the signs told us this was Mount St. Helens. A landmark.

We stood at the boundary of a wilderness area, at the point where the shady understory of the tall trees was replaced by a sun-raked clearcut, dotted with saplings only knee- and shoulder-high. And at the base of the clearcut, separating it from another logged area by 20-odd feet, a stripe of gravel coursed from north to south. Road 65.

After not trusting the compass, now I didn’t trust my eyes, and we followed the bearing all the way out to the road. Though
it was smaller than the highway of my imagination, bordered by horsetail and yellowed grass, it lead to bigger roads and an entire network of known streets and neighborhoods. With Mount St. Helens towering to the west and the gravel under our feet, we stood firmly on the map. I put down my pack and ran up a slight hill where the road curved to see if I could find the corresponding curve on the map and pinpoint our location exactly. Karen scooped up a handful of gravel and ran it through her fingers as though it were the bread crumbs set down by Hansel and Gretel.

We were not home yet. That was several adventures away. But for a moment, as the compass pointed placidly to the road, I glimpsed a world beyond what my senses could paint for me; my mental map stretched to a different scale, and I believed briefly and fervently in an earth with magnetic poles, scored by longitude and latitude lines. Then the valley closed in, the wind picked up, and we started north to set up camp for the night.
THE LONELINESS OF MY BROTHER

1
This is the loneliness of my brother.
Today I saw a woman sitting alone laughing at what she held in her glass.

My brother laughs behind a closed door alone in a room.
This is the loneliness of my brother. I dreamt we quarreled.
I picked him up and beat him against a brick wall until all that was left was a pair of pants.
This, too, is the loneliness of my brother. I dreamt he was a boy, drunk, laughing and stumbling against me. I held him in my hands. He became a rabbit made of ice.
I dropped him on the sidewalk and he melted into a pool of water.
How, I asked, can I tell our mother?
I see him in the faces of transient men.
I see him in the fearful eyes of boys.
I see him in my eyelids and muscles.
I understand he is almost entirely alone.
Imagine the loneliness of living on in the dream of your sister.
A rabbit of ice, a pair of empty pants.
I understand almost nothing about him. He keeps secrets.
The only time he wants to talk about anything personal is when he’s drinking.
Our last conversation he asked me if I’d considered suicide.
This from the man who gets a pistol in his hand and plays roulette.
Passes out on his desk at work with the gun in his grip.
Police break down the door. Everyone thought he was dead.
Lay on my parents’ bed shooting holes in the walls and ceiling.
This is the loneliness of the one who laughs alone.
The woman looked like my brother, propped on the street-reverend’s arm,
faded tattoos, red lips and blonde straggled hair. So pleased with everything
she laughed herself cross-eyed. Pulled way inside and shrunk into a ball.
On a shelf called emotion stands a frozen figure. Vomiting smoke.

Something flies into my house. Black feathers drift.
I call the dogs in and go looking.
In the silence of the fiddlehead and forsythia I look for the body.
Broken neck, I imagine. Tiny bones, eggshell skull. But nothing is there.

My mother told me that a bird flying into a window is a harbinger of death.

A black bird, she said, will throw itself at your house. I used to fight for intervention and de-tox. Now I only wait.

All I know is the summer went by.
Suddenly the leaves are reddening.
Ran into a local poet who referred to this suddenness and deepening as the August singularity then he snaked his arm around my waist & grinned.
Next night the meteorologist refers to these brisk evenings as the third week anomaly while I wonder if my tomatoes will succeed at presenting killer fruit red as shark’s happiness. The fair is over.
That black and white cat is back at the gate. She makes herself flat and slips underneath. Two big dogs live at my house. She will risk her life for curiosity.
Or maybe something winged lies hurt in my deep grass.
THREE TRUE ACCOUNTS

Husband

Has a bumblebee in the middle
   that hums in the mouth of the woman who pronounces it gladly.
   The first half of the word is a loose woman or small
   sewing kit.

   Hus, house. Bunda, head. This house has a bee in its bonnet.
   This house has a wood floor. Those are my hips.

My head I will have for a little table. A husband lives in my hand.
   Up the long stairway to the turret. A round, windowed room.
   A tiny sink with real water. His warmth, his press, his fit
   against my body. I wake to find the bear, the stranger in the boxcar,
   the sound of someone walking through tall sunflowers,
   all changed now back into the husband.

Devil

Comes, like ballistic and diabolic, from diabolos,
   slanderer. Diabolos, a throwing across your path.
   Bolos, that hard wooden ball, thrown

on a summer picnic, that comes into sightline
   and then hits your head.
   He takes your soul. As quick as that.
Hell

A hidden place, like kel, which covers.
Also follows apocalypse, to uncover.
Cell and cellar, two small rooms.

Conceal and helmet. Also, pod, hull, occult, color & holster.
Hell is a hall. Hall has a roof.
Hell has six feet of dirt. That's all.
It will be a hot day, the hottest we have had in years. It is only nine o’clock, yet sweat soaks my shirt as I sit alone in the shade of my fruit stand. It has not rained in weeks. The air is as still as San Humberto’s bones.

The great saint is buried in a vault beneath our church, along with the remains of the hyenas that followed him on his travels around the world. Each morning since his death three hundred years ago, the church bells have rung at eight o’clock, sounding the beginning of the daily Mass in his honor. The church bells woke me today. In my throbbing head it sounded like they were calling out “No...fruit! No...fruit! No...fruit!” scolding me for another late night with the bottle, for another wasted morning. Once again I have disappointed my early customers, the people who like to eat fruit on the church steps as they wait for the Mass to begin. The town is quiet except for the buzz of fat, dizzy flies as they circle and dive and swarm.

Someone is running towards me from the town square. Though I cannot see clearly, I know it is my friend Vargas, the woodworker. He is a fat man. He runs neither often nor well. When Vargas reaches the stand he leans on it to support himself. He holds his side and doubles over—like a man stuck by a knife. I give him the glass of lemonade I have made for myself; he looks like he needs it more than I do. “Manolo,” he says through shallow breaths. “Come to the square. You will not believe what you see.”

“Who will watch the stand?” I ask.

“Your fruit is safe. Everyone is inside the church.”

We walk toward the square, shading our eyes from the sharp morning sun.

“What news is so important that it makes you run?” I ask.

“You would know if you had been awake.” Vargas often feels the need to be a teacher. I am too old to learn his lessons.

He turns to look at me. “It was another one of those nights, yes? You drink and you clean the gun?” He says this quietly, with concern.
"I did not touch the gun," I lie.

The square is at the exact center of the town, where the two roads cross. In one corner of the square is the town wishing well. As is my custom, I drop in a coin and mouth a prayer of contrition to the saint. There is no splash, just the flat sound of the coin landing in the muck below.

Vargas leads me through the square to the mayor's office. A scroll is nailed to the door. The parchment is thick and smooth, with bright purple and yellow borders, long black leather fringes attached to the corners, and elegant script that seems to be written in gold. I touch it, to see what the gold feels like. The words are cool, slippery, like the skin of a pear.

"It must be for the Festival," I say. "But such a scroll to announce Ayala?"

"That is the news," he says. "It will not be Ayala. Let me read it for you." Vargas knows I broke my eyeglasses in the bar last week defending my daughter's honor, such as it is. "Attention citizens! El Gris the bandit has been captured in our town! Next Friday he will receive his punishment at the Festival of San Humberto, where the hyenas will run fast and hungry! Rejoice in safety! Rejoice in justice!"

El Gris! My pulse races. It is a feeling of triumph, a feeling that everyone in the town must share this morning. El Gris is a ruthless murderer, robber, and thief, a man who shoots then laughs then shoots again. It is said that he had his mane of gray hair even as a teenager, that it turned gray from the thrill of his first kill. El Gris was a plague on this land long before Lars Jarlssen ever came to town with all of his money and built his house with its swimming pool and bought the village bar and turned the back rooms into a brothel and cursed us with his verminous pet spider monkey and raised the price of tequila and stole my wife and my children away from me.

"We have never had such a famous person to hang," Vargas says.

"It is San Humberto's doing," I say. "El Gris is too smart to be caught by any man."

"Perhaps he wanted to be caught," Vargas says. "Perhaps he wants to repent."
I laugh and shake my head. “The heat makes you foolish,” I say. “One can bathe a hyena, but it will never smell clean.”

As I walk back to my stand, I see two boys run away with their arms full of my guavas. They yell and laugh. It is too hot to chase them.

Twice I have nearly been a victim of El Gris. The first time was twenty years ago. I was walking home from the bar—then owned by Vargas’s grandfather—where we had celebrated the engagement of one of Vargas’s sisters. I walked through the town square and turned onto the west road, toward the one-room house Madalena and I had shared since we were married the year before. I heard someone clear his throat behind me. I turned and saw El Gris leaning against the wishing well, his long gray hair bright in the moonlight. I had walked past him and not noticed. “Good evening, friend,” he said, in a voice that told me I was not his friend at all. I saw his right hand move toward his holster and my instincts took over. I leapt into the alley next to the bank and ran, taking a snake’s path through the west side of town, staying off the road. I hid behind the seafood seller’s shop, behind a stack of crates, kneeling among the old stinking fish that had been left out for the dogs. I remained there for two hours, trying not to breathe. When I thought it was safe, I ran and I did not look back. At home I fell into Madalena’s arms and told her my story. “You did the right thing,” she said. “You have too much to live for.” Then she bathed me and made love to me. It was the night Ysela was conceived.

The second encounter was four years ago. El Gris robbed and killed three shopkeepers on the west road. I would have been one of his targets, but I was not tending my stand that day. Madalena had left with the children only a week before, and I was at home, face down on the cool floor, trembling, sick with drink and the loss of my family. In the echo of each shot, I prayed a ricochet would take me.

The heat lingers into the evening like a stubborn guest. I am exhausted after hours of making change and smiling and ignoring the angry glances that said Where are the guavas today, Manolo? My wife needs them to make jelly for the feast. And where were you this
morning? But my day is far from over. I must go into the hills and tell my son Ruben the good news about the Festival, about El Gris. By my estimation, there will be just enough daylight for me to find my way back.

Ruben left town four years ago, on the day his mother married Lars. He left a trail of orange peels so I could find him. He has never come back, not even for his mother’s funeral. But each day I tell myself maybe, just maybe, he has grown tired of living alone, tired of punishing me, and only needs a reason, an excuse, to come back. Perhaps the chance to run with the hyenas for El Gris will be reason enough.

I leave the dirt path that runs south of the town and head into the hills. I walk for an hour, follow the path I know by heart: over a field of prickly maguey and fire-red bandilleros, across a stream where dipper birds swim underwater, up a rock face flecked with quartz. When I come to the apple tree, I stop and call his name. Silence. I see the faintest movement of a shadow in the branches. Then an apple shoots down and hits me in the boot, square on the ankle. This is what usually happens: I talk, and he throws fruit.

“Ruben,” I say again. “There is exciting news from town. They have captured El Gris. He will hang at the Festival next Friday.” Another apple, this time soft, rotting, hits me on the knee and stains my pants.

I dream of bringing Ruben back into town with me; I will cook him a magnificent dinner, then we will steal a bottle of tequila from Lars and share it as we watch the sun set from the bell tower, and Ruben will work with me at the stand and smile as he makes change because he is so happy that we work together. But I have come to accept that, for now, he is a boy who lives in a tree and throws fruit at his father.

I did not always accept this. When I followed the orange peels and found him in the tree, I shouted at him, drunk and blind with anger. These are the things I said:

- Come down from that tree! Boys do not live in trees!
- You are bringing shame upon your family, such as it is!
- You are as bad as your sister! Perhaps worse!
- The lightning will hit you. San Humberto will see to it!
- Squirrels will claw at your testicles, trying to gather them for the winter!

Spring 1998
If there is a drought, the branches of the tree may weaken and break, and you may fall and hurt yourself!

Why are you leaving your father alone?

Twice I have brought the gun to Ruben’s tree, drunk. On the day after Madalena was buried, I aimed it at my son, a shadow in an apple tree. Weeks later, on the day my daughter Ysela told me she was going to work in Lars’s back rooms, I held it to my head. On both occasions, San Humberto prevented me from pulling the trigger. For this I am grateful, most of the time.

“Do you not want to see El Gris?” I say to Ruben. “We have never had such a famous person to hang.”

Apple, apple, apple.

I turn and walk back to the road with the bruises growing under my clothes. But I have not given up. I have decided that the capture of El Gris is a sign from the saint, a sign of order restored, a sign that Ruben and I will run with the hyenas together this year.

It is pitch dark when I pass through the south gate into town, and I swear it is as hot as it was at noon. Though my clothes are stained with sweat and dirt and apple, I go to the bar for a bottle of tequila. It is the only way I will find sleep tonight. I do not want to see Lars, but, as is his custom, he sits at his desk in the loft overlooking the bar, calling out bawdy jokes as one of the girls sits on his lap and combs his thick blond beard. The sound of coins slapping the bar is as constant as the ticking of a clock.

There is a bottle of tequila on the corner of the bar, unattended. Lars has placed it here either as a mocking welcome or as a trap, an invitation for me to steal from him while he watches out of the corner of his cold blue eyes and salivates at the thought of the police taking me away. Lars is right to expect me to steal from him, but he underestimates me. I will not take something as insignificant as a bottle; I will steal something he loves. I do not yet have a plan, because Lars does not seem to love anything besides himself. It is an excellent defense, I admit.

I keep my eyes to the floor and pay the bartender. I turn to leave, the bottle of tequila in hand. “Manolo,” Lars shouts from his loft. “My very best customer.” I keep walking. Behind me I
hear whispers, stifled laughs. “You come for a glimpse of your daughter,” he says. “But she will have nothing to do with you.”

I turn and look up. Without my glasses I see his face as a blur, but I know his expression—a scornful curl of lip under blond mustache, a creeping lopsided smile, blue eyes wide with savage mockery. He sits in front of a bright lamp that casts a halo around his head so people who look up at him will think he is some kind of angel. I spit on his polished floor.

“Oh, Manolo. You must be so lonely,” he says loudly. It is important to him that everybody hear. “A nice girl could comfort you more than that bottle. One of Ysela’s friends, perhaps? I’m sure they would love to see where she came from.”

More laughter. The door seems very far away.

I know that every man in this room has paid his money to be with my daughter. Most have not said anything to me, but I can see it in their eyes when they come to buy my fruit. Some of them cannot look at me or talk to me. They squeeze the fruit silently and stare at the ground while they hunt for money in their pockets. The others look me in the eye too directly, speak too loudly, listen too earnestly. I do not know which bothers me more.

Even Vargas took his turn, once. Later that night he knocked on my door and confessed: he said he was sorry, he was drunk, he was fighting with his wife, and Ysela was just so beautiful. He begged me to blacken his eyes, so I did. We never spoke of it again. If I were to hold grudges, I would soon be out of friends.

“You are an evil man,” I say, staring at the floor.

Swinging from a crossbeam, Lars’ monkey screeches and bares its teeth at me. I hate that monkey, that filthy little beast in its purple velveteen coat. Lars laughs. “Good-bye, Manolo, and thank you for your business,” he says, waving me out.

“San Humberto punishes those like you,” I say, my back to him and to everyone else.

As I walk through the door I hear him say, for the benefit of everyone having a drink or waiting for a girl, “But Manolo is wrong! San Humberto punishes people like El Gris!” It is not funny, but they laugh. He has the money. He gives the party. People laugh.
I open the bottle and drink. Tonight I will not touch the gun, will not clean it, will not cradle it like a baby. I swear it to myself.

In the morning, Vargas brings news from the jail, where Ayala and El Gris sit in adjoining cells. “Ayala does nothing but cry,” he says, mopping his brow with his sleeve. “He cries so hard it is like a seizure.”

“But Ayala will live,” I say. Ayala had been the only criminal in jail. With the Festival so close, he must have expected he would be the one to die. The capture of El Gris is a reprieve for him.

“Ayala wants to die,” he says. “He wants to be with Concepción.”

Concepción was Ayala’s wife, Vargas’s sister. She died of the fever six months ago. The night after she was buried, Ayala went to the bar and drank himself senseless. When the church bells tolled midnight, he jumped up and overturned his table, smashed bottles, kicked the monkey into the wall, and ran out. He went to the church, where he stripped off his clothes and relieved himself all over the front steps. “I piss on your apostles! I shit on your saints!” he said. He shouted this again and again, dancing naked around the church as we gathered in a crowd. He stopped, suddenly, and with a look like he had just seen the Revelation, he said, “I will burn your God.” The police came as Ayala pushed through the crowd, asking people if he could borrow a book of matches.

I open a crate of sapotes delivered this morning. “And El Gris?” I ask Vargas. “You have seen him?”

“Yes,” Vargas says. “He tries to comfort Ayala.” Vargas eyes the sapotes. “Go ahead,” I say. He chooses one and cuts into the fibrous brown skin with a pocket knife.

“It is sad to see Ayala,” Vargas says. “A naked man in a bare cell. Even though the police do not need him for the Festival any more, they still will not give him his clothing.”

“It is San Humberto’s will,” I say. “We live because it is our duty to live.”

“You have never wanted to die?” Vargas asks. He cuts a crescent of pink flesh away from the rind.

“What we want is irrelevant,” I say.
I too lost my wife to a fever—to the fever of money and power that Lars brought to our town. Her note, delivered by Lars’s coachman, explained it: *Lars can give the children everything you cannot. He is a gentleman and you are a brute. He is a respected businessman and you sell fruit of poor quality.* At Mass the next morning they all sat together in the front row, in the pew reserved for Lars. I have not been inside the church since. San Humberto understands.

Two years ago, Lars and Madalena traveled to the city for a vacation. Madalena never came back. It is said she was hit by a stray bullet when rebels stormed the palace. Whatever the story, she is gone, and there is nothing I can do.

The white marble tombstone that Lars’s money bought is as big as my house. It is a blindfolded angel pointing at the sky. When the shadows are longest, the wings of the angel darken forty-six other graves. I cannot read the epitaph because it is written in Latin. Worse, the stone gives her name as “De Los Pozos,” with capital D, capital L. What kind of man does not know how to spell his wife’s name? I asked Vargas if the stone could be corrected. “You do not have enough money,” he told me.

I know Madalena would have come back to me. Lars made her forget what is good and what is right, but one day the great saint would have opened her eyes, shown her that Lars is like the *feijoa*, a fruit which rots from the inside out, turning brown and foul-smelling underneath its shiny green skin. I may be a man who blackens eyes, who cleans his gun and dreams evil dreams, but I try to live by San Humberto’s example. I am not a bad man.

As much as El Gris deserves his punishment at the Festival, I would rather see Lars in his place, sweating and crying and helpless, knowing that the floor will fall away, that his neck will snap, that we will all run and lead the hyenas to him. That is the picture I have in my head when I drop my coin into the well. I hear it clink at the bottom, metal on metal.

I am stooped over in the pain of drink. The shade of the fruit stand is little comfort. It is so hot I can hardly breathe. I hear the sounds of hammers from the square. They have begun to build the gallows.

She tucks a strand of her long black hair behind her ear. Ysela is nearly twenty, and she is the most beautiful woman anyone in town has ever seen. These are not the words of a proud father, for I am deeply ashamed of her. Her beauty is just fact, like it is fact that hyenas can smell dead meat from seven miles away through a cross-wind. She looks around nervously. She opens her basket and hands me a bottle of tequila, the best tequila Lars sells. “I took it so you would not have to go to the bar.” I tell her I can buy my own drinks, Lars or no Lars. But I take it from her and hide it behind the stand.

She bites her lip. It is the same look she had before she told me she was going to work in Lars’ back rooms:

Have you lost your mind now that your mother is gone?

— You can’t control me like you controlled Mama.

Do not talk to me that way. I am your father.

— I will talk any way I want to talk. And I will make my money any way I wish.

I will drag you from there and beat sense into you.

— I will curse you whenever someone is inside me. Whenever I am fucking. San Humberto will make you pay.

— San Humberto would pay me to fuck him.

I brace myself for her news.

“I want to see Ruben,” she says. “Will you show me the way?” “Ruben does not want to see you,” I say. Not while she works for Lars.

She looks at me but says nothing. Then she turns. “May San Humberto guide you,” I say. “May he guide you as well,” she says curtly, walking away. She walks like Madalena walked, with confidence, even arrogance. In my blurred vision she looks exactly like her mother. I cannot stop watching her. I do not even notice the two boys making off
with all of my tamarinds until it is too late to chase them. The children are getting bolder these days.

Each day Vargas visits the jail and brings back the same news: Ayala is despondent, El Gris is strangely calm, and the two whisper together between the bars. I am filled with questions about El Gris. Does he have regrets? Does he pray? Is he conspiring with Ayala, planning a breakout with the man who wants to die in his place? Vargas shrugs and says he does not know; the bandit does not speak to him.

It is too hot to do anything but talk. The rumor today is that Zorrillo, who runs the hyena farm, has starved the animals for a week; they are so hungry that one of them escaped the pen last night and ate twenty chickens before Zorrillo captured it. People are also talking about the drinks and the meats and the jellies and pies we will share on the rooftops after the run. I want to share their excitement, but the thought of food makes me ill. I realize I have eaten nothing in days. The heat, the stillness, the flies, the tequila, they have robbed me of my appetite.

I pull my hat over my eyes and pretend to sleep. The children will try to steal again today; they are crazy, and the Festival makes them crazier. The gun is in my hand, hidden under my shirt. The bell at the schoolhouse rings. I wait. It will not be long.

Through the weave of the straw in my hat, I see the two boys emerge from behind the cobbler's shop and creep toward my stand. The shorter one pulls a small wagon behind him. They are more than bold, I think. They have gone insane with this stealing.

They are within arm's reach of my oranges before I can make out their faces. The short one is Zorrillo's son and the tall one is the son of the town doctor. They are not boys who have to steal because they are hungry. The wagon creaks and they stop, watching to see if I stir. I am patient. I am calm. I am completely still.

But I am up quick and strong as a panther the moment they reach for my fruit. The gun is pointed at the tall boy's head before they can even pull their hands back. It is the fastest I have moved in years. They look at me, mouths open. "You are surprised?" I say. "Surprised that a man will defend his fruit?"
walk out from behind the stand and kick over the wagon. "A wagon? Were you going to steal everything I have?"

The short boy starts to say something, so I box him in the ear with my free hand. My hand thinks for me. "Shut your mouth," I say. "Do you know what San Humberto does to boys like you?" I hit him again. I see tears in his eyes. I feel tears in mine. "Go home now," I say, "and tell your fathers what you have done." I lower the gun. "Now leave me alone." I do not want them to see an old man cry.

They are slow to move, so I hit the tall one. "Go!" I yell, and they run. I sit and wipe my eyes with my shirt. I am so tired.

An hour later, their fathers come to the stand to pay for all the fruit the boys stole. "In the future, I would prefer that you not point your gun at children," Zorrillo says.

"In the future, I would prefer that children not steal my fruit," I say.

"Understood," he says. He puts the money in my hand, which is still shaking.

Some nights I dream about forgiveness. I do not mean that I dream about people forgiving people. I dream about forgiveness itself, curling around buildings and nuzzling people like the cool west winds. Vargas does not believe me. He says you cannot dream about something you cannot see or touch or hear or taste or smell.

I have not told Vargas this, but when I dream, forgiveness has a smell. Forgiveness smells like limes.

On the day of the Festival, I close the stand early so I can visit Ruben once more before the run. As I pack away the grapefruit I sense someone near me, watching me, so I look up. I do not know if it is the heat or the hangover or my bad eyes, but for an instant I see Ysela standing hand in hand with her mother. Then I see it is my daughter, alone.

She takes a pair of eyeglasses from her basket, hands them to me. "I found them in one of Mama's boxes," she says.

I put them on, and I feel my eyes adjust. The gallows in the square comes into focus. I feel my eyes shift again, and now I can see all the way to the east gate. I turn to Ysela, and I see thin
shallow wrinkles in her forehead that I have never noticed before. It makes me sad, to see my daughter look like she worries so much. But she has chosen what she has chosen. I cannot blame myself.

She is biting her lip again. "You know that I have made a lot of money," she says.

I nod.

"I want you to visit Mama tomorrow. There is a surprise for both of you."

Madalena's name, I think. The way it should be, the way she would have wanted it. I feel like dropping this crate and running to the cemetery now. But then I realize how wrong it is. San Humberto would frown on such a tainted monument. He would curse it. "No," I say. She looks surprised. "Have it removed," I say. "I do not want your mother's grave defiled by whore money."

The slap hits me before I see her arm move. My eyeglasses, bent, hang from one ear. Her teeth are clenched and she shakes with anger. "You have not changed." She grabs a large, ripe papaya and heaves it into the wall behind me. Pieces of the fruit spatter on the back of my head and neck. "And I no longer work for Lars," she says. "Soon I will be a schoolteacher."

"What can you teach them?" I say in a voice louder than I intend. "How to shame their fathers?"

She walks away. She stops in the middle of the road and shouts, "You think you are San Humberto himself! You are not! You are an old drunk fruit vendor, not a saint and not even a father!"

I want to go after her, but I do not know what I would say, so I close the crate of grapefruit and sit. I put on the glasses again and see that people have come out of the shops to stare. I take the glasses off. I cannot watch them watching me.

I bite into a lime and let the sour juice flood my mouth. I do not even blink when Lars' monkey steals a tangerine and runs away tittering.

I am dry-throated and dripping with sweat when I get to Ruben's tree. My heart is beating fast and a pulse drums in my ears. I sit on a flat mossy rock and stare up into the branches, but I can see no shadow, hear no movement. The only sound is the shrill cry of a chachalaca defending its nest. I wait, trying to think of what
to say. It is difficult. I feel it has been years since I have said the right thing to anyone, even to the saint himself. Finally, this comes out: "Ruben, I do not speak to you as your father but as a man. I am sorry for all I have done and all I have failed to do." The apples fly. I close my eyes and let them find their marks. When I arrive home I count the new bruises. Seventeen in all. One for each year of his life.

It is time. The last traces of sunset have disappeared and the gallows is lit only by the flickering torches on the roofs. We are all gathered in the square, packed in tightly, breathing on each other. I look through the crowd for Ruben, hoping, but I do not see him. It is a terrible thing for a father to say, but I am not sure I would recognize him even if he were here. I cannot find Vargas, either. I do not want to be here alone.

A boy climbs the gallows, faces the crowd, waves his fist in the air. "Bring him out!" he shouts. "Bring him out!" The crowd takes up the chant. I see Lars standing on the terrace of the hotel that overlooks the square shouting along, beating the railing with his fists. Ysela stands next to him, quietly, looking out at the crowd. I wonder if she is looking for me.

The door to the police station opens. The light from inside spills into the square, but no one comes out.

Underneath the shouting I hear Vargas, panting, saying, "Pardon me. Pardon me. Pardon me." He pushes his way to me. He is covered in sweat and dirt. He wipes his forehead, leaving a streak of clean.

"Where have you been?" I ask him.

"The police said I had to bury Ayala right away, before the hyenas are set free."

"Ayala is dead?" He nods. "How?" I ask.

"El Gris strangled him through the bars."

"One last kill," I say. "He could not resist."

"Ayala begged him," Vargas says.

"Then may San Humberto have mercy on Ayala's soul," I say. "He did not deserve to be buried." I find myself getting angry. Why should Ayala get away so easily when the rest of us must stay here and hurt?
“Do you want to know what I think?” Vargas says quietly, with his head down. “I think it was an act of kindness.” When he lifts his head I see tears in his eyes. He wipes them away with his fat fingers and suddenly I feel very old and lost. It was so much easier long ago. When husbands and wives stayed together. When children respected their parents. When we had nothing to fear but the infrequent visits of a legendary bandit.

The crowd quiets as the monsignor walks out of the police station. He takes his place to the right of the gallows. He chants San Humberto’s creed in the old sacred tongue and makes the sign of the cross. The Festival has begun.

The mayor walks into the square, followed by the police chief. El Gris comes through the door. His hands are shackled behind his back. He does not look so frightening now that they have shaved his head. He looks tired, thin. Still, the crowd gasps and ooohs and aaahs, just like they did when they saw Madalena, my wife, walk through the church in the wedding dress Lars bought her.

“If I were in charge, I would not have cut off his hair,” Vargas says. “Now his name does not fit him.”

El Gris is surrounded by policemen. One of them is the young man who has woken me up in the street several times and walked me home. He is friendly, not yet corrupted by age and money and crime. The policemen lead El Gris to the gallows. The young one walks up the steps with him.

I imagine El Gris jumping down from the gallows, catching a pistol thrown by a compadre hidden in the crowd, running to a waiting horse with his gun blazing. I imagine one of his bullets finding Lars up on the terrace and dropping him dead. I imagine El Gris getting away safely. I wish for it.

Perhaps I am the one who will throw him the gun.

But El Gris makes no move to escape. He stands still as the young policeman tightens the noose around his neck. The mayor motions for quiet. “As San Humberto punished evil, so do we in his name. Before you is the infamous outlaw El Gris. Many have tried to bring him to justice and have failed. But today, in our own town, he will die, thanks to Lars Jarlssen and to the young and beautiful Ysela María Rivera de los Pozos.”
Ysela? I think. The crowd roars approval.

El Gris looks up at my daughter, as if he wants her to be the last thing he sees before he dies. The young policeman reaches for the lever. Just before I close my eyes I see that Vargas cannot watch either. I hear the trapdoor slap and the rope jerk taut, and then the creak of wood as the bandit swings, dead.

Years ago, when Ysela was a little girl, I explained the Festival to her like this: First we impose justice like San Humberto himself would. After the hanging, we divide into four groups and wait at the gates for the hyenas to be let in. Then we run with the hyenas. We lead them to the dead man, and then we watch from high above. We are their guides. It is like we are the great saint and they are us. We lead them to justice, but we do so at great risk to ourselves.

But why? Couldn't they find the dead man themselves? she asked. Couldn't they smell him?

That is not the point, I said. Someday you will understand.

We are gathered together in front of the west gate, waiting for the signal. Jugs of sangría pass through the crowd. People drink quickly, in equal parts celebration and fear. Someone says the rabid ones are behind the south gate this year. Someone else says no, he knows they are here behind the west gate because Zorrillo himself said so. There is still no sign of Ruben.

I look down the road toward the square; though it is dark, I can make out the shape of El Gris’s body, now motionless at the end of the rope. I can hear the hyenas in their cages outside the gate, snarling, throwing themselves against the bars that confine them. I hear teeth on metal, and I realize that I am very frightened, frightened of the hyenas, of Lars, of the people around me. I am frightened that I will never see my son again, frightened of what I have done to Ysela. I realize I am becoming an old man, and I am frightened of myself. The more I have learned, the more frightened I have become.

I feel the strength leak from my tired, bruised legs. I drink a large mouthful from a jug but it does no good. “I want to go,” I say to Vargas. “I am too tired to run.”

A pistol fires from behind the gate. “Too late,” Vargas says. He throws the jug aside, grabs my hand, and we run.
The gate opens behind us. I hear the clanks of cage doors and the hyenas’ snarls turning to whoops. I do not look back. Past the feed store, past the animal doctor’s, past the bakery, a quarter of the way there. But Vargas and I fall behind the pack. He pulls me along with him. I can hardly breathe; the air is filled with dust and with the stink of dirty, murderous fur. I feel my heart thumping. I hear my feet pounding against the road. I hear the hyenas behind me, front legs long, hind legs short—ka-thup, ka-thup, ka-thup. Powerful jaws snapping. I have heard them every year of my life. I do not want to hear them ever again.

Past the tailor, past the barber, almost halfway. Vargas is nearly dragging me. I am holding him back—fat, panting Vargas. I am so tired. I need to stop and I do not care what is behind me. Then I wonder: am I no better than Ayala, on his knees and begging to have his neck wrung? Oh, but this is different, so different. It is one thing to seek death; it is another simply to accept the inevitable, to embrace the fate that snaps at your heels. Everyone will be able to see how different it was. Even if they do not, I know San Humberto will. He will understand.

At the moment I let go of Vargas and try to plant my feet, I feel a prickly heat surge throughout my body, just as quickly the warmth turns to ice. I think I feel myself dying. Vargas clamps his soft hand around my arm and pulls, hard. He turns his head, and I can see by his eyes that the hyenas are close, closer than they have ever been to him before. “Run!” he yells, his high voice sharp, commanding. Without thinking I take his hand again, but I do not know how much longer I can run.

Just ahead is my fruit stand. My fruit stand. Where I have sold the fruit for every breakfast, every pie, every jar of jelly in this town for thirty years. In this town where people laugh at Lars’s jokes and forget where their pies come from. In this town where men come to do business with me after doing business with Lars, with my daughter.

I feel a sharp pain in my side, and I think, I have been shot. Lars has shot me. He is standing on the terrace, lowering a rifle, and laughing along with that damned monkey. But no, it is just a cramp, not enough air. Breathe, Manolo. Breathe. And I concentrate on breathing, breathing in everything that is in the air, the good with the bad, the forgiveness with the dust and the stench and the ghosts of
the dead, and the love with the fear. We pass the stand and now I think about Ysela coming there to tell me her good news. Ysela. My daughter who fixed her mother’s stone. My daughter the schoolteacher. My daughter who caught El Gris. And the pain still burns my side, but I pass Vargas and begin to pull him along with me.

And we pass the cobbler’s and the cooper’s and the saddle maker’s store, and I see in my mind how it happened. El Gris heard about the most beautiful woman in the land and knew he had to see her so he came to our town with his hair tucked under his hat and found Lars and told him he would pay twenty times the usual rate; he just had to be with this beautiful Ysela, this angel. And Lars took the money and sent him off with her, and maybe she was scared and maybe she was not, but she knew what she had to do for everyone else, and she knew Lars would never do it—could never do it—so she whispered to one of the other girls to run and get the police, and she took El Gris into her room and let him soil her, no, no, she took him, she had him, and she kept him there until the police knocked down the door. And Lars claimed credit, but of course that was a lie; it was only Ysela. Ysela, who now wants to surround herself with good people and do good things, who wants to teach children. And maybe that was not how it happened exactly but my legs are pumping and the bar and the church flash by me and everyone converges in the square and Vargas and I climb the ladders up the side of the hotel, safe, away from the beasts below.

The hyenas stop dead in front of the gallows. They hunch forward and eye the body swinging in the air. Their instincts will soon take over. We are silent as we watch them in the firelight. When this is over, we will have the rest of the night to celebrate. We will drink and dance and laugh on the roofs until sunrise, when Zorrillo and his riflemen clear out the hyenas and make it safe to come down. But now it is time to watch.

After the first hyena leaps onto the gallows and bites into a leg, the others fall into a frenzy, as if they had all shared the first taste of the dead. They swarm over the gallows, jaws snapping as they jump for their bounty. The body sways and jerks as the hyenas rip meat from bone. They knock each other over the side as they fight for the best pieces. They howl and laugh. We will all
hear these sounds in our nightmares, and that, I realize, is one reason we do this.

Lars watches from the edge of the roof, leaning against the railing, surrounded by three young girls, his latest recruits. I think about approaching him and demanding money for his monkey’s theft, but I tell myself that this is not the time. I see Ysela standing with her friends across the square. I tell Vargas I will return and make my way around the square, crossing between buildings on the wooden planks, trying not to look down. I tap her on the shoulder. Her friends look at me and turn away.

“I am so sorry,” I whisper to her. “I am proud of what you have done. And I think you will be an excellent teacher.”

I feel her warm breath in my ear as she whispers back, “San Humberto keep you well.” She smells like her mother, like the west wind and the winter rains. She kisses me and returns to her friends, some of whom are handsome young men. It occurs to me that she could be in love with one of them and I would not know.

I realize that I do not belong here, and while this saddens me, I understand that for now this is how it must be. I cross back to the roof of the hotel and stand with Vargas.

A hyena climbs the frame of the gallows and creeps out on the crossbeam. It gnaws at the rope. The body falls and is buried under a pile that twists and quivers and shrieks. “They figured it out more quickly this year,” Vargas says. The snapping and chewing and laughing get louder and louder until there is nothing left of the bandit.

The bells ring. It is time for the celebration.

People surround Lars, congratulating him for the capture of El Gris, fighting for position in his good graces because he owns the town. Vargas and I stand by ourselves, still watching as the hyenas sit and eat the pieces they have torn away. We do not say anything to each other. A light wind blows across the rooftops, cooling me through my wet shirt. It is a wind that promises a thunderstorm, a violent but merciful break in the weather. I think of all the times I stood on the roof with Madalena and we watched the sacrifice together. When the church bells rang, she would make the sign of the cross and begin to pray. Maybe it was just the bells ringing and the wind blowing through her hair and her
lips forming the words of a prayer, but every time I thought *my God, she has never been more beautiful*. For the first time I can remember her without anger. My feet throb, and I can feel a puddle of sweat in my boots. Is this how anger drains away?

I see Lars telling his story for a crowd of people, collecting handshakes and pats on the back. Someone whistles and the sound cuts through the wind. Lars turns toward the whistle, like a man who assumes all whistles are meant for him.

I hear the bone crunch as an apple hits him on the bridge of his nose. He recoils as if shot. Blood spills over his blond beard and down his white suit.

“Did you see?” I say to Vargas. “My son has good aim.”
Making Birds

I.

The neighbors pace the floor to a hole in the pine. The physicist cups his ear. For months he has been pulling white birds down in pieces of feather and claw.

He spends the days sewing grey quills to the still bodies, labeling throats with pen. He uses an eyedropper of ink. Beaks are molded and baked in colors.

He is asleep when the eggs, impossible ovals, harden and grow on the inside. He dreams of a plane that hovers in a cloud. He dreams of an eye in a wing.

II.

In the eye of a wing a woman stands with a broom and numbers pinned to her dress:

This one for Our Lady of the Closet. This one for Our Lady of Fatima. This one for your shoe, black and too narrow, the lace in her palm.

He would like to hold her, to take her home, smooth and unleavened,
in his pocket. To feel the poplars bloom
slow against his hands.

He does not stop when she follows
through the streets. She rides
in his car in a seat of hair. She rides
above the headlights in globes.

III.

She makes a shadow of her dullness
and sculpts her hair against the rain.
“Tell me about the birds,” she says,
hands fluttering, but he hears a hammering slide
from her hem and break on the floor

where he is scrubbing. He is crawling
under the drywall, incessantly. He feels
his feet are glass and may break at any moment.
Then she would have to carry him,
a wooden bride, and stiff. Across
every doorstep.
American Entropy Series: *Worcester Train Station #1*

Infrared image on silver gelatin print

1994
John J. Arnold
Ferns #1
Infrared image on silver gelatin print
1994
Beth Lo

*Legal Aliens*

Porcelain & wood, 9" x 8" x 8"
Edgar Smith

Winter

Oil on wood, 30" x 36"

1996
James Todd
*Russian Icon*
Woodcut
1997
James Todd
Smoker
Wood engraving
1997
He called her a genius. She turned to snow and drifted against his house. To tuck away, suckle the babe, irrational, in her arms was what she thought, what she ate, what she heard heroines must do. Genius, but her effort told her otherwise—

though she could feel the switch on a bull’s back, and the last twitch of a dying girl, she could draw no conclusions.

She wished for the slow descent of a seahorse, or the timely arrival of a mad tale to her head—Time, inordinate. Peaceful. His patio glittering with chairs.
Interview with Chris Offutt

Chris Offutt grew up in the Appalachian Mountains of eastern Kentucky. He left at age 19 and has held over 50 jobs, all part time, in every region of America. At age 30, he attended the Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa. His writing includes the short-story collection Kentucky Straight, the memoir The Same River Twice, and the novel The Good Brother. His newest collection, Out of the Woods, was published in February by Simon & Schuster. He currently lives in Missoula, Montana with his wife and two children.

Let’s start with what you’re working on now.

It’s a collection that will be a follow up to Kentucky Straight. All of them are set in a different part of the country: Butte, El Paso, Idaho, Missouri, New Mexico. The protagonist of each is from eastern Kentucky. Everything I write comes from the town of Blizzard, which is by Clay Creek in Eldridge County, which is a little community in the hills, a former mining community. Each protagonist has a job that I’ve had, and all these stories are about somebody who’s from Kentucky and leaves—one joins the army and winds up going to Korea, some leave and go back to Kentucky, and some leave and stay out. They are all extremely changed by having grown up essentially in the 18th century and then leaving and entering the 20th.

Are any of them characters from Kentucky Straight?

No. I have a limited pool of individuals that I write about, but they’re not the same. My wife Rita thinks that some of them are extrapolations or extensions of some of those characters in Kentucky Straight.

These characters in the new book all have jobs that you’ve had. They’ve also all lived in places you’ve lived. What are your ideas about the line between fiction and non-fiction?
I don't draw much of a line. I get mixed up as to what's what a bunch of times, but that doesn't really matter to me. All those stories are more emotionally autobiographical. When I write, I tend to insert what I am feeling at that moment. I'm pretty much walking around in a supercharged emotional state. I'm not doing it on purpose, but it's the case, and the writing becomes an expression of it more than anything else. So stories change from draft to draft because my state of mind changes as I work on them.

*So how do you know when they're done?*

Well, they're never done, really. I just give up on them. Usually I let it sit for a long time, and then I'll look at it again and I'll get intensely obsessed with the stories for a while. When I get to the point where I'm changing commas to conjunctions and conjunctions back to commas, I'm done, I'm sick of it, I hate it. This son of a bitch needs out of my house. My emotional state is pretty much one of disgust.

*While writing your novel you went through an interesting process; you practically became your main character, Virgil. Could you talk a little about that?*

I do that with all of them. It's just that with a short story I can become a character for a week to two weeks and then boom, it's over, nobody seeps into my life. With Virgil, I arranged airline tickets for Rita and the kids to Montana, and I drove to Kentucky and then drove from there to Montana following his route, taking notes all the way and trying to imagine leaving Kentucky for the first time as Virgil, not really knowing where he's going. I knew, of course, that he was going to wind up in Montana, but he didn't know. I rented a cabin up Rock Creek where I could go write, which Virgil goes and lives in. I grew my hair to my shoulders and grew a big beard and dressed the way he dressed and became him in many ways. In Rock Creek I kept a journal—a Virgil journal—that I used in the book. I had reconstructive knee surgery, so Virgil gets terribly wounded in the knee and has to go through the same process I had to go through—learning to walk
again. And he meets a woman who is similar to Rita, who has two children modeled after my two kids.

I guess it all was supposed to make it easier to write. I was intimidated and scared by it and had failed in three prior attempts, so I was utterly determined to complete a novel at all costs, and it was a high cost. We went broke during the writing of it. We sold our couch here in Missoula for 60 smackeroos. I told my editor, “You all have to give me some more money than this. We’re running out of money.” Their idea of solving financial problems means eating out less. When I told them that I had sold my couch, they realized the situation.

*What emotional state were you in when you became Virgil?*

Well, Virgil is a guy who is utterly withdrawn and hides himself, he concocts a new identity. But you see, that’s where the idea came from—my identity had changed drastically. In about a two-year period I went from a guy who couldn’t hold a job or a girlfriend to having a wife and children and books in print. How I saw myself, my place in the world, my responsibility, the worlds that were evidently open to me, it all changed. And I had a hard time with it, I really had a very hard time. I wanted to write about it but I thought it would be pretty boring: a guy who has a baby and is a father and gets a book in print. What the hell? It’s not very dramatic, so I made Virgil be someone who changed his identity. He became Joe Tiller, moved to Montana, got a false identification and recreated his life. And, of course, the past catches up with him. I think the past always has a tremendous impact on the present.

Another thing I wanted to do with Virgil was explore the whole cliché Kentucky feud mentality. *Kentucky Straight* was just about the cliché of the simple or the ignorant—that all these people are ignorant but happy, which is all bullshit, because I’ve never known any ignorant and happy people. These “simple” folks are incredibly complicated, like people everywhere.

*You’ve said this novel is part of a trilogy. What comes next?*

The next book will be a precursor to the first. It will be about the
brother, Boyd, who was shot prior to the opening of *The Good Brother*. It's about identity again, a common theme for me. This one will be about issues I'm having right now. I'm thirty-nine years old and Boyd will be about that age, and the world has changed drastically since I was a young man—in politics, attitudes about sex, manhood—and I wanted to address my concerns with someone who is a wildman outlaw, who hasn't been incarcerated or found religion or gotten married. His youth is pretty much over but there's not a clear path for him, unless he makes one of these big moves, which he's reluctant to do. This will reflect to a certain extent on my life. I mean, for the past two years I've been teaching college—which for me is like becoming a *citizen*. Before this my jobs were dishwasher and truck driver, so I'm no longer on the fringe of society. But the difference is I love it, I enjoy this place, but Boyd will never have that opportunity to find out; he's going to get himself in a lot of trouble.

The other reason I write about identity is because the world I grew up in is no longer there. It was a community that had flourished in the '20s and '30s and declined in the '50s and just remained there. I don't have a home place. I'm essentially an educated hillbilly, and there really is no such thing in this world.

*I've seen a lot of writers explore issues of identity, but not to the extreme of becoming their own characters.*

Yeah. Part of it was I studied theater in college. I wanted to be an actor; I thought it would be a great way to meet girls. It wasn't. I think it's an easy thing for me to do—becoming a character. I always wanted to be something else. But like I said, it takes a toll. It took a toll on my wife; she just didn't like old Virgil. When I finished the book she was glad. She said I had been grumpy for three years. In fact, she's really behind writing about Boyd, he's a lot more fun.

*Your characters are usually pretty ready to escape their surroundings—those of Kentucky. Do you ever think about returning there to work?*

I'd like to. That's the third book in the trilogy—Virgil has survived what he gets involved in and will return. It will be interest-
ing. I'm already planning for it, assuming I'm still teaching college. I'll go back home for the summer. I'll go there as Virgil going home and take a lot of notes and then leave and begin writing that novel.

Did you always know Kentucky was your source?

Oh yeah. It took me a long time to get the courage to write about it, and to figure out how to write about it. I knew that I didn't want to squander my material by learning how to write through it—I didn't want to just use that up. I wrote science fiction, mysteries, plays, stuff that had nothing to do with me. I knew that if I had the courage I would do it, and I did.

Courage to not screw up your presentation of these people?

No, courage to face that stuff on my own, emotional courage to address the place I came from, what it was, what the world was, how it made me, and how it made me different. I didn't fit in growing up in eastern Kentucky, at all. I was the odd man out, like many writers. However, I'm the odder man out anywhere else. I fit in less in the rest of America than I fit in at home. The place I fit in the most is Missoula, really.

Why is that?

Out-of-work, lower-class working people, pretty much. Railroad workers, miners, loggers. I understand that mentality, that culture. That's mine, but it's a little different. It's like 100 years later. Kentucky's still 100 years back. Plus there's bookstores here. There're no bookstores in the hills.

Did The Same River Twice start as a novel or did you launch into a memoir?

That didn't start as a novel or a memoir, that started as me sitting in a rooming house in Boston in 1984, thinking, How the hell did I end up in a rooming house? This was not what I thought would happen when I left home, hitchhiked to New York City to be an
actor. I wasn't going to be alone in a rooming house, in a strange town, with no friends, no girlfriend, certainly no acting career. And what I had was piles and piles of loose-leaf spiral-bound notebooks in which I'd written incredibly extensive diaries. I would sit down three or four times a day and write in longhand as fast as I could. I don't know why. It was the only thing I could do, really, that made sense of the world. I was always trying to do something else.

One time I took up photography because I had read that Hemingway had a hobby and that he wrote about fishing and hunting, so I thought, I don't really have any hobbies. I should have a hobby so I can write about it. I decided to write about why photography was a great art form and why it was a better art form than writing, which is, of course, stupid. Essentially I was using language to talk myself out of using language. I got rid of the camera. I said, I've got to see what I'm doing here, and suddenly light bulbs went off—it was like, Hell, I'm writing. That's what I'm doing. And I always wanted to be something else. So I took all these notebooks and said, I'll make sense of my life with this.

I wrote the first draft—essentially about the subjects that hurt me the most, or the most colossal error I had ever made, and I wound up with 600 pages of painful mistakes. Then I cut out all the old girlfriends, because it wasn't fair to them that they were stuck with me, and I cut out a lot of self-pity and whiny stuff and my grand theories on the world, and then I put it away and went to Iowa and wrote Kentucky Straight, and then after that I didn't know what to do. I was sick of writing Kentucky stuff, so I went back to that against everybody's advice. They said, Man, you can't go back, so I went back. I was working on it one day, on the computer. (My aunt had given me this computer. I didn't really know how to use it; in fact, I still don't know how to use it very well.) I found 60 pages of notes I had taken during Rita's pregnancy, sort of coming up from the bowels of the computer, and I realized, My god, this... I knew that The Same River Twice lacked a context. It was anecdotal. What's that called?

A picaresque.

Yeah, a picaresque. Essentially it was a bad On the Road. I needed
a context and I realized this pregnancy would work. Rita was pregnant with the second baby, so it was utter delirium. It was the happiest two years of my life, really. We were living in the three-room cabin heated by wood on the river and I was working anywhere from 12 to 15 hours a day on the manuscript, trying all sorts of different techniques for structure. Then I hit upon the stages of pregnancy. Rita’s a very tranquil pregnant lady, she’s just gloriously happy pregnant, and I was a blithering idiot. So that’s how The Same River Twice came about. None of that was ever supposed to be in print. It was all me trying to make sense out of pregnancy and me trying to make sense out of this past—how I wound up in this rooming house.

Did someone come along and say ‘This needs to be in print’?

Actually, this woman came and took it out of my house. She worked for a publishing agency in New York and came to town to visit some old high-school friend, and I said Hey, New York agent, cool, and I just drove her around for a couple of days and told her all these stories. She said, What are you working on, and I said, I’ve got a manuscript based on all these stories I’m telling you, and she said, Can I have it, and I said, No. And so I went and told Rita and she said, You know, Chris, if you don’t give it when you’ve got somebody asking for it you’re never gonna get rid of it. And I said, I don’t want to get rid of it, it’s not for the world. But the agent finally came and took it, and I didn’t even give her the last couple of pages because I wanted to see if she was going to read it.

These days non-fiction is becoming incredibly popular, particularly memoirs. Do you think this trend is affecting fiction? Where do you think fiction is going?

I struggle with these things all the time. Certainly right now non-fiction is the fad, but I think like all fads it’ll fade. Part of it is our culture. Look at TV, those true cop shows. I think American culture has gotten to the point where our reality is more intense than our fiction, because our country is experiencing a lot of turmoil right now, we’re really having a hard time living here, and the intensity of existence in the cities is reflecting this. Sports are
enjoying enormous popularity right now because they're the great escape. And cable, MTV, they're all having huge influences on our country—negative influences.

The thing is, most people lead pretty simple lives. For me, I get up, I work, I play with my children, I eat, I do errands, I talk to my wife, I try to spend a little time alone, I go to bed, and I think our culture is telling people that's wrong. We always want to revere people other than our neighbor, our mom or our children or our teachers or the postman. It's always the sports hero or some fogey on TV. And the publishing industry picks up on that. You go to a bookstore and there're tons of books by non-writers—TV celebrities, sports stars.

I think this new non-fiction is a response to that. I think this is like, Hey, I'm me, remember? I am an individual, I have a unique story. There's also some attempt at busting up what's happening in literature. This century saw Hemingway and Joyce and not much in between these two; most writers follow one or the other, some mix it, and a few writers are really trying to attack it. But look at me—I'm at the point where I say, where am I now, in the 20th century? I feel like my stuff is firmly entrenched in the grand tradition of American narrative realism, and of poor white people in the south, and there's a huge precedent for that. I don't just want to find myself in 30 years writing Chris Offutt stories. I see other writers in the latter parts of their careers—they became good doing something in their 20's and 30's and they began essentially copying themselves, and I'm terrified of that. Do I want to build on this tradition, or do I want to try to bust out of it? I don't know. The only way I know how to look at it is Bob Dylan. In '64 Dylan was a troubadour, a great folk hero of the people, and then he went to the Newport jazz festival.

*He plugged in.*

He plugged in and blew everybody out of the water. He changed music. Now, I don't know if I could change literature (laughs). But I'd like to make a move forward for myself and my own writing as bold as Bob Dylan's electrified guitar.

*Could you tell us about that move?*
No. I really don’t know what to do with it. I have one idea and I’m not even sure I’m doing it. Denis Johnson did it with *Jesus’ Son*; there’s a woman named Joanna Scott who writes really really terrific short stories. David Foster Wallace is pushing things around a bit, but he’s sort of coming out of that Joycean/Gravity’s Rainbow/T. S. Eliot kind of movement. I don’t see him as innovative as his predecessors were.

Kentucky Straight had a strong kind of folk magic presence. It seemed like something you were pushing. Not in the extreme of magical realism, but there’s definitely a strong sense of natural power at work, a mystic power. Do you see this move as pushing that further?

Hell, I didn’t even know it was there till guys like you came along and told me that. I’m serious! It was just... What I was expressing in some of those stories were... Many of them were written when Rita was pregnant and the world was a very powerful place for me. It was mystical time—this creation of life—a potent and genuine period. Rita calls the stuff I did “mythistical.” I don’t think I have written that way since.

You don’t see it coming back?

Not now. I don’t really foresee too much. I don’t really know what’s going to happen. I have big plans for a third book of short stories where I was going to electrify my acoustic guitar, but I’ve got a little more work to do and I can’t talk about that.

I was talking with someone once about why experimental writing got popular in the ’60s and early ’70s... It didn’t really fizzle out, but people lost interest. This person was saying it was because fiction is such a critical art form. We use stories to define our lives. And if you f**k around with it, people are going to get irritated.

When I write, I’m going to fail three out of four stories, that’s my average. I love stories, and that’s what I am, essentially, a storyteller. But once you start messing around with conventional narrative and start experimenting... instead of three out of four, you’re seven out of eight. That’s why it was short-lived. It is
possible to be innovative without messing with conventional narrative form. Denis Johnson does it so well with his stories that I want to just take an ax to my computer. What am I doing writing short stories?

The thing that gets me is if you look at the history of music or history of art, the thing about each generation of artists is they do two things at once. They're building on what preceeded them and they utterly attack it, and we can't really do that with writing. We can't because the book itself is an ancient art, it has not changed. We're trapped by narrative in a way; it's got to have a beginning, middle, and end. The act of reading is linear: you sit down and progress through time, you evolve with the text and at the end of things you have progressed, interacting with language.

What I'm doing is looking at the disenfranchised and marginalized. I read a lot of Indian writers, Chicano writers. I tried reading magical realism and I didn't go for it too much. I'm sure it's hard to write, but it's easy to have shit happen with no basis in reality. Like, when in doubt, have a giant chicken walk through the door. There's a Cuban-American that's interesting, Junot Diaz. I was really thrilled to read his stuff because it's not so much an attack, but it's coming at such a different angle that's so fresh. I'm also reading myth like crazy. If you look at Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, she took one of the great Shakespearean plays and added alcoholism and child abuse, two of the current bugaboos, and made it into a pretty good book.

*So what are you reading right now?*

I tell you, I hate that question. I've probably had 25 interviews where people ask me that and I feel like I've got to say something really profound and cutting edge. I can't tell them I'm re-reading Sherwood Anderson and *Rock Springs* concurrently because I went to see a reading by Richard Ford up at Great Falls, and I asked him if he ever came to Missoula, and he said no, that he liked Great Falls, and I asked how come, and he said, *Well, it's my Winesburg*, and he said Anderson is one of his masters. So I went home and started rereading those two together and it was amazing. You can see the influences. So that's what I'm reading.
I feel embarrassed that I'm rereading, but it's interesting to me. I'll be done in a week.

*Why do you feel embarrassed?*

Because I'm rereading and I feel like I don't have much time. There is so much to read and there're so many books I haven't read, and there're so many poets I want to read. I hate to admit that I'm rereading rather than pushing forward, that's all.

*I hear that's common practice for writers.*

Rereading? Really?

Yeah.

I didn't know that. I need to join a Writers Anonymous group so I can know it's okay.

*What about Montana writers?*

Well, Kentucky was a frontier state. It remained isolated by geography for almost 200 years until they built an interstate when I was a child and connected east Kentucky to the rest of the world. And even with that, even though there were slight inroads, the foothills maintained a frontier mentality, more so than the rest of the country, except maybe Montana. The writers from here have the closest mentality to how I grew up and the culture I'm from—the story I'm a part of. *The Big Sky* is a great, great book, it's one of my faves. The protagonist's name is Caudill—Boone Caudill—same last name as Virgil and Boyd. And he goes from Kentucky to Montana and gets himself in a lot of trouble.

*Did you have ideas about Montana when you were a kid?*

I had ideas about everything when I was kid. I mean, I had a... I don't remember. It was a big blur of the woods, really. I had an unusual childhood. There were eight of us boys on the hill and the only rule we had was be home for supper at six. Before we
could come in to eat my mother would make us take our clothes off in the backyard and hose us down. It was a phenomenal kind of childhood. In fact, that’s what Rita has suggested—that’s what my characters struggle with and what I struggle with: freedom. I was so free as a child in such a very safe, pure world, and the rest of my life has had less and less freedom. There’s no way to have as much freedom. And that’s where Boyd’s at—how does a man who’s had more freedom than anybody ever achieve that joy again?

The only place I can find it is writing. Writing is what offers me more freedom and joy and flights of fancy and pure ecstasy than any other activity.
An excerpt from the collection Out of the Woods.

I headed for the bar, hoping to meet a woman. The problem with dating in a college town is that young women are too young, and the older ones usually have kids. I’ve dated single mothers, but it’s hard to know if you like the woman or the whole package. A ready-made home can look awful good. Women with kids tell me it’s just as tricky on them. Men figure they’re either hunting a full-time daddy or some overnight action with nothing in between. Still, we all go to the bar, men and women alike, hoping to meet somebody. Occasionally one of us will pair off with a new face.

This night was the usual crowd, my friends of seven years. I drank straight shots and at last call ordered a couple of doubles. I’d started out drinking to feel good but by the end I was drinking not to feel anything. In the morning I woke on my couch. During the drive home I’d had to look away from the road to prevent the center stripe from splitting. I’d fixed that by straddling it.

Four cigarettes and a cup of coffee later I felt alive enough to visit Tarvis, a fellow Kentuckian at large in the West. We had recently met. He’d asked for help skinning an animal, I figured it was a poached deer. He lived below town on a dirt road beside the river. I veered around a dead coyote with a tire trench cut through its guts. There were a couple of trailers with add-ons and a few small houses. Some had outdoor toilets. At Tarvis’s house I realized why the area seemed both strangely foreign and familiar. It was a little version of eastern Kentucky, complete with woodpiles, cardboard windows, and a lousy road. The only thing missing was hills.

I’d woke up still drunk and now that I was getting sober, the hangover was coming on. I wished I’d brought some beer. I got nervous that Tarvis had killed his deer in a hard place and needed help dragging it out of the brush. I didn’t think I could take it. What I needed was to lie down for a while.
Tarvis came around the house from the rear.
“Hidy,” he said. “Ain’t too awful late, are ye?”
“Is it on the property?”

He led me behind the house to a line of cottonwoods overlooking the river. A large bag lay on a work table. Tarvis reached in the bag and very gently, as if handling eggs, withdrew an owl. The feathers on its chest made a pattern of brown and white—a barred owl. Its broad wings spanned four feet. The head feathers formed a widow’s peak between the giant eyes. It had a curved yellow beak and inch-long talons. Tarvis caressed its chest.

“Beaut, ain’t it?” he said. “Not a mark to her.”

“You kill it?”

“No. Found it on the interstate. It hit a truck or something. Neck’s broke.”

The sun had risen above the trees, streaming heat and light against my face. Owls were protected by the government. Owning a feather was illegal, let alone the whole bird.

“I want this pelt,” Tarvis said.

“Never done a bird.”

“You’ve skinned animals out. Can’t be that big a difference.”

“Why don’t you do it yourself then?”

Tarvis backstepped as an expression close to guilt passed across his face.

“I never skinned nothing,” he said. “Nobody taught me on account of I never pulled the trigger. I was raised to it, but I just wasn’t able.”

I looked away to protect his dignity. His words charged me with a responsibility I couldn’t deny, the responsibility of Tarvis’s shame. Leaving would betray a confidence that had taken a fair share of guts to tell.

I felt dizzy, but I rolled my sleeves up, wishing for a beer. I began with the right leg. Surrounding the claws were feathers so dense and fine that they reminded me of fur. To prevent tearing the papery skin, I massaged it off the meat. Tarvis stood beside me. I held the owl’s body and slowly turned it, working the skin free. My armpits cooled from the breeze, and I realized I’d been sweating. I could smell the liquor in my skin. The hangover was beginning to lift. I snipped the cartilage and tendon surrounding the large wing bone, and carefully exposed the pink muscle. Feath-
ers scraped the plywood like a broom. The owl was giving itself to me, giving its feathered pelt and its greatest gift, that which separated it from us—the wings. In return I'd give it a proper burial.

There is an intensity to skinning, a sense of immediacy. Once you start, you must continue. Many people work fast to get it over with, but I like to take it slow. I hadn't felt this way in a long time and hadn't known I'd missed it.

I eased the skin over the back of the skull. Its right side was caved in pretty bad. The pelt was inside out, connected to the body at the beak. The reversed head still held the shape of the skull, which pushed into the skin of the mouth. It was as if the owl was kissing the shadow of its mate. I passed it to Tarvis. He held the slippery skull in one hand and gently tugged the skin free of the carcass.

"Get a shovel," I said.

Tarvis circled the house for a spade and dug a hole beneath a willow. I examined the bird—both legs, the skull, each wing, its neck and ribs—all were broken. Its head hung from several shattered vertebrae. I'd never seen a creature so clean on the outside and so tore up on the inside. It had died pretty hard.

I built a twig platform and placed the remains in the grave. Tarvis began to spade the dirt in. He tamped it down, mumbling to himself. I reversed the pelt so the feathers were facing out. The body cavity flattened itself. It was an empty skin, a pouch with wings that would never fly.

Hand-shaking is not customary among men in eastern Kentucky. We stood apart from one another and nodded, arms dangling, boots scuffing the dirt, as if our limbs were useless without work.

"Got any whiskey?" I said.

"Way I drank gave it a bad name. Quit when I left Kentucky."

"That's when I took it up."

"I started wearing workshirts after I moved here," he said. "Boots, hat, the whole works. Never did at home. Here they think I'm a tough guy, at home I was far from that."

"What makes you want that owl so bad?"
“It’s pure built to hunt. Got three ear holes. It can open and close each pupil separate from the other one. It flies silent. They ain’t a better hunter.”

“Well,” I said. “Reckon you know your owls.”

I drove to the bar for a few shots and thought about eating, but didn’t want to ruin a ten-dollar drunk with a five-dollar meal. I didn’t meet a woman and didn’t care. When the bar closed, a bunch of us bought six-packs and went to my house. I laid drunk through most of the week, thinking about Tarvis in the blurred space between hangover and the day’s first drink. Though I’d shown him how to skin, I had the feeling he was guiding me into something I’d tried to leave behind.
THE EXCHANGE

After the burning of the lilac after travels
through rains beside jetties the sounds of alarms
a factory burning in the distance forklifts
emerging from the foliage and driving beside us for a while
after the stepping on dry stones on wet stones
in the midst of raging streams
knowing I could be washed off them
unlike the starfish welded to rocks I could be pressed by a wave
into a bank of mud and ferns
after carrying the toolbox through a warehouse enormous
spinning brushes
after the unfurling of burlap scrolls down corridors of stone
the sound of bare feet slapping the marble floor of the colonnade
with its faint odor of lemons
after watching the dogs play briskly in the fields
after the leveling of mountains we ascended in the rain
our clothes soaked
the dye bleeding into our skin
after fingerling the scraped granite its white scars
after seeing the dung burned to ash blown away like wisps of hair
over a parched horizon
after the graph of green light on the monitor
has enveloped the skull's horizons
after the turquoise chopstick has been removed from the flute
after the meetings face to face with partisans looking through us
at a star the students who carry black envelopes
in which they have sealed the image of the child overhead
climbing a palm tree towards the sun students
who trade life for bleached terminologies skin for pears
lacquered unreal the taxidermist stuffs today's news into dead hides
I want to say something
A sentry appeared at the window with a ladle of water
azure sky above passing clouds reflected in his helmet
he says look here drink the blue
is also in the water
I want to say something I want
to say at night I see fires in the hills hear shots in the distance I am almost
thankful for my captivity but that's what they want me
to think I have the faint knowledge
of forests reflected in the puddles of city streets my dreams
taste of horrors I look forward to
the van parked in the street below driving slowly beside me when I go
out for cigarettes I walk the wind on my face
in minutes will fill the black pockets
of a woman sleeping in a hammock where
will this end after
the delight of bodies closing their eyes in the sprinkler's spray
after the plants awake me with green
the tiretracks on the lawn still warm I remembered
in the night I had come through the woods to the brick
church our room in its attic you
in the clawfoot tub my head screwed into a cage of mirrors
in one the aspen's yellow leaves shimmering
in another the face of the fox in the third
hundreds of men in white disassembling a charred galleon
in the desert and what do I hold
now but this black leaf its edges burned with amber
I have made confessions like traveling through a series of tunnels
without a steering wheel we are the blades
cropping the tops of trees in the forests
of each other's minds will this end
after the blackboards are rinsed by a rainstorm
that paints the asphalt with snails
after brushfires scour the hills of broom
where the fox finds himself encircled by flames the distant
black tower
its needle in the sky's blue arm
tower from which we stole the red flag we hid
in the drainpipe we returned it was gone replaced by urine by
two blue stones we set on the floor of the canoe we pushed
into the lake remember we watched as it turned and was suddenly pulled over the falls
after nights on the roof naked backs to the sun-warmed tiles wind splicing its fingers under our arms the first summer raindrop on the back of my hand the hand you later kissed and slipped into your shirt to show me the key taped to your breast which was gone when you were found facedown between two blue stones I threw at the sky they landed in the grass without sound after we said goodbye to the farm of autumn its cistern clogged with leaves and rustwater the buzz of locusts in tall grass through which shadows move towards the children who have spent the day in the sun stuffing Grandfather's clothes with straw that blackbirds slept in after you ran naked across a wet lawn chased by spotlights which brush a stomach convulsing with laughter the crescent moon tickling your ear her pubis at your chin the sudden silence after you are gone when the strangers take your shirts off hangers and wear them
Brian D. Cohen

Tornado

Etching, 12" x 18"

Spring 1998
DANGLE

_The unharming sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths._

—Herman Melville

HIGH BEAMS, cursing, tail-gating; I speed home in the powder-blue $\frac{3}{4}$ ton that’s pretty well paid off and I crave the roughhouse with my kids. The RPM seems precisely right, perhaps a chemical thing. I’ve had a few and they’re excited by my noisy re-entry into their space; they want me, they want airplane rides, they want to dangle over the big stairwell. I made the banister myself.

I dangle my favourite tiny son by his ankles over the stairwell. You let go of the pudgy ankles and clamp on again fast.

My kids all shriek. They love it.

Don’t, she always says. She has no choice. Someone else wrote her lines. My mother said the same to father. Don’t Jack. The slight Scottish accent. The reaction is part of the ritual.

The kids go to bed; you stay up, an adult. Eventually you catch a few hours, but before you know it you’re at work again, rich white dust in your hair, your hands tearing down recalcitrant pipe scaffolding as the blue crane swings tapered buckets of cement through space overhead, and then you’re heading back home again, a muscled mystery really, but the kids always hyped to see you.


Past tense because one night I lost my youngest son’s fleeced ankles. A mistake. He went straight down, a heavy blond bomb dropped in a blue sleeper. No laws were broken. My youngest son obeyed gravity.

Superman failed to fly under his path. Superman did not save me. You actually hope for something like that. Someone with the power to bail you out. My son hit tiles I personally laid over the cement and his eyes rolled back. He didn’t see me anymore. We ran down the corkscrewing stairs, the two of us actually fighting each other to get there first, a competition to show who cared
more. Forever I’ll run those black stairs. His perfect head and the great shroud of the sea closing over him.

In the Miseracordia hospital I was crying, trying to process this shitty information. This never happened when my father dangled us by our ankles. Why did it happen to me? My parents are deceased so they could not answer my textbook question. My parents’ house was cut from blocks of pale stone; mine is made of white tin; take a can opener and you’re in like Flynn.

Sorry, I said to her in the hospital, I screwed up, I said to her. I always screw up, I blubbered.

I admit I was hoping she’d tell me this was not so.
You wanted this, my wife said calmly.
I did not think this entirely fair. I think I could say I viewed a new side of her.
You don’t exist for me, my wife declared. If my baby doesn’t come out of this, my wife said, then you don’t exist for me.

My blonde son hasn’t come out of it. He hasn’t died but he hasn’t woken up either. My Goldilocks son lives on in limbo, machines telling him state secrets, his blue eyes refusing to aim. The doctors all say he could improve but I no longer exist for my legal wedded wife. Pound of flesh, eye for an eye.

Look, I say. But she won’t look. If his eyes won’t look then her eyes won’t look. I willed it into being, she claims. I wanted this. I don’t need to go home now. Not even a “Don’t go.” Not even nothing.

Time is some kind of invisible glue; you are stuck in your time, even after it’s no longer there filling an iris. You’re still young but they knock your old school over. You remember her oval face staring out the window or a map with chocolate bars on it, or the smell of a green apple, an old crooked kind no one grows anymore, or the stuttering janitor selling radishes. Then one day at the jobsite the new kid snickers at your time-warp fashions. It’s a new era. The new kid lives to regret this.

I went to confession at the Cathedral; I needed to confess.

As a kid at junior high school I always lied at confession: telling the priest made-up sins rather than telling the real ones.
“I lied twice; I disobeyed my mother.” I said this over and over. I think most of us in that class at St. Vincent’s did the same thing. What are we going to say? Forgive me for whacking off 800 times since I last spoke to you?

Anyway, I went to confession again and I lied again!

I found I could not force my mouth to say: Hi, I’m a fucking goof and I dropped my darling son on his fucking head. The priest behind the screen called me “son” just like when I was a schoolkid. And he gave me the exact same penance as when I was a kid: five Hail Marys and five Our Fathers. Maybe it was the same old priest.

I hope he knows we have other sins and forgives us for them. He’s probably not even listening. He’s probably thinking, *Hmm, gotta get the Nova tuned up before winter.* Jesus we must bore them. They must crave REAL sin, just once to hear utter depravity. Those hardcore ones probably never climb into their confessional. I tried to give him my real sin but I did not. I failed to thrill him. I’m with my baby in limbo.

Since those trying times I’ve made certain subtle adjustments. That’s me you run into at The Bruin Inn north of town or Curly Bob’s Supper Club way down by the sweetgrass borderline. I get around now, do what I want now. The tanned blonde guy in a sweaty tank top. Fu Manchu and the blue pickup truck with the highbeams and much-squandered tread.

Used to be that every Friday after work my tiny blonde boys gave me a hand spraying the construction crap out of the truck bed. The noise of the hose-water drumming the metal bed; the fine spray drifting back at us in rainbows; Friday nights I was free!

Now the garden hose hits the truck and I think of my lost boys: a reflex. Now we’re in Dispute Mediation. I can smoke those tires at will. I’ve left a lot of them on our driveway, on my own tar. In reverse. Amazing torque. Makes the hippies across the street jump. I’m aware of my nervous neighbours. I believe there’s talk of a court order.

Inside the rayless border bar I’m outside time’s glue while Seattle’s Blood of the Lamb Band rattles out Muleskinner Blues at 800
miles per hour. Almost as fast as my baby dropped, a glum plumbline down the corkscrew stairwell.

The music zines rave on about the new band, insist SubPop’s going to sign them to the hip label right soon. But hey. I’ve seen the hype before. I’m not a betting man. I’m a muscled bricklayer and I want to go, destroyed knuckles or no. It’s a test and I’m a collector, taking it out in febrile flesh.

Smash your foreign bottle and let’s do it because I adore shard sounds, that music that breaks something green, that melody of things twisting down fast and pyretic. I’m eager and Old Testament and I’ve got the bends. No feckless jabs or Marquis of Queensberry; just the routine roundhouse, the banal bodyslam, the pristine teeth to the curb.

I seek plain purchase and I win every time but that takes its toll. The rest of my life dedicated precisely to my head and the stairs.
TO THE PIG: AN OATH

To do no harm beyond need and not to hurt.
To catch you up by the leg, to be
that body of doubt you denied always.
To graze your lifeline,
tell the future only once.
To sharpen the knife till it's thin as a leaf.
To boil water, hide the rope,
to wear the scent of an unlocked gate.
To quiet the bucket's handle with a rag.
To let you eat in silence.
To compare your broad back to fresh lumber
and muscles to spring bulbs. To wait
to say your name aloud and clot your ears with sense.
To prepare my arms, to reshape fear.
To catch your intelligent eye with mine.

To stand in the widening circle
and soak my boots to the ankle.
To scrape wiry hair, to keep water boiling.
To hang the shell of you in waves of smoke.
To unpack a pot the size of your thoughts
and jars enough for the jewels of your insides.
To linger over pale pink ones.
To force hands in. To bloody my apron,
to isolate every fracture and pour salt over.
To break bones to go deeper, to empty my mind
to make a tent of you, to balance the knife, to say
your eyes are white as milk so almost blue.
To bring the wheel of my attention
and quick hands to the smallest bones
that articulated jumping. To tie
a second apron on. To wear myself out. To find
you blooming suds, to be the one to have fed you,
whose abundance is proof of my love.
JOKES

At the sound of his name he trots onto the little stage and starts talking. Touches his hair, feels around in it gingerly. What’s left is obstinate, curly, sandy gray.

*Not exactly lush,* he says, bringing forth the first laugh, a small, localized wind.

*Those styling competitions?* he says. *They ought to start with a Problem Head.*


*Tress Chic.*

*Well, there’s something relentless about it. Gives you faith—almost. It’s like they can’t help themselves. This urge overpowers them.*

*But I like that everything has a name. Means we’re paying attention. Suggests we’re more or less on top of things, if you get my drift. Also suggests that things happen only once—and I’d have to include people here, too, wouldn’t I? No two of them alike. Which is kind of interesting.*

*Not funny exactly—I’d be the first to admit that. But worth considering, no?*

He fills his cheeks, lifts his eyebrows, pops his lips. *Had somebody in my family named Freelove. Woman. Married a guy named Trueworthy. Imagine. Well, it was in the sixties, what do you expect?*  

*No, no, no. The 1660s.*

*They were very big on the virtues in those days. Constancy, Forbearance, Serenity, like that. All thought they were going to heaven.*

*Four hundred years ago.*

*Man, picture four hundred years from now. Year 2400? I’m at a dead loss, I’ll tell you.*

*Time’s too weird for words, don’t you think? Even a year can seem gargantuan.*
He flaps back his sleeve, slapstick, squints at an imaginary wristwatch, taps the imaginary crystal. *Even ten minutes.*

He'll have to get them going, sooner or later, but isn't there a good mood rampant in the air, a *willingness*? He has to admire them for that. He spreads his arms, all-inclusively, asks, *Aren't you happy it's me up here, and not you?*

That's what my wife used to say: *They're just happy it's not them up there acting like idiots.*

He dissembles for a moment, shuffles, shakes his bowed head, then springs abruptly down to floor level. He offers to pass the mike to a young guy at the frontmost table. The guy seizes up, like he's frozen a bearing—whatever in God's name did he do to bring this on?

*No, no, it's OK,* he assures the guy, brotherly. *You'd think of something to say. Trust me. Nature abhors a vacuum. Honestly.*

Then, bang, he flips his attention to this fellow's companion, his pretty girlfriend or wife. *Now I bet he's got plenty to say sometimes,* he says. She claps a hand over her mouth. *I'd guess more than enough, on some occasions. Fascinating stuff, too, right? I mean gripping. Truly riveting.* *OK, OK. But tell the truth, you'd miss it if he were gone. Yes or no?*

What else can she do but treat this as more banter? *Yeah, I might,* she says, bantering back.

*What?* he asks. *Can't hear.*

*I might miss it.*

*Ah. Very good. That should comfort him terrifically.* He smiles, scans the deeper audience, letting the tension evaporate. Leaving, he reaches out and ruffles the poor guy's hair. *Nice,* he says. *Least you don't have a Problem Head.*

Back on stage, he fingers the little groove under his nose. *The nasal frenum,* he says.

*If your hands sweat too much? Palmar Hyperhidrosis. No, I'm serious. It's a precise world.*

*I love the names for things: Kingfishers. Butterfly nuts. Filberts. Tungsten. Gentian violet. After the first few he wings it. Astigmatism. Visigoth. Spelunker.* Some nights this is actually a joy. He pops the words out, lets them hang as if visible, as if his mouth has become a kaleidoscope, a little factory for producing the miraculous.
Dulcimer, astrolabe, catamaran.

And he likes (he doesn't say this) how he is in two places at once, how he can talk talk talk, wearing that cheesy, half-astonished smile, and at the same instant be back inside taking stock, ragging on himself. And how he can even let himself be wafted, contorted, on a curl of desire and memory. For there's a woman out in the middle distance, in a spray of light: black rayon with a deep scoop—her chest is wide and flat, with a light sheen, the breastbone making a smudge of shadow. Reminiscent of Margo. Don't his eyes always find one? They're as corrupt and unquenchable as his lips.

Margo as she was. Margo before the wig, before the head wrap, the silk scarves, when she had an acre of hair that could be cut, styled. It was like black gold, like heat lightning...or like what, like what?

But the thing to do is stay on task. Nobody wants to see a man drifting. He was discussing the names of things.

Even things we can't see have names. Such things as emotional states—which is to say your brain chemistry.

I'm taken aback, you might say. I'm incredulous. Stupefied. Snafu'd. All bollixed up.

I'm stumped, I'm in a fog, dazed and addled. I'm disconcerted. I'm rattled, you might say. Blown away, dumbfounded, thunderstruck, flabbergasted.

I'm zonked, irretrievably out of it, deeply unconvinced, heavily into denial. I'm aggrieved. I've been blindsided, taken it in the shorts, had the legs cut out from under me, have no place in this goddamned world to stand.

Man, there's no end to what you can feel.

Or maybe there is.

Maybe there is.

He hits that split second, that fragile place where everything can turn, and he turns it back, and lets fly with a run of easy, domesticated jokes. One or two of Margo's favorites. But he will not stoop to a litany of all those little things that irritate him about life. No sir.

And when he's done there's that water-over-rocks sound of applause. He steps back, light-headed—gulped in too much oxygen—and he thinks, light-headed, what a weird expression, and trots
off the way he came. Already, it’s someone else’s turn. He steps outside where it’s the middle of the night, but not yet truly cold or dark. Trucks are humming on the highway, there’s a low continuous sizzle from the signs that are everywhere.
YOU MUST DRIVE TO PHOENIX

I’m sorry. Turn off your air conditioner. I know it’s humid and the drivers are angry. Roll down a window, remove the face plate of your radio and throw it into a canal. Talk radio won’t help you now. There is a way to understand one wild secret: I’m asking you to sleep

in a vacant lot in the center of a city. To rest on the belly of wilderness, you have to lie on bull-head thorns that poke through a dead softball diamond. Find

a field where cotton and alfalfa won’t grow, no matter how much water is pressed down upon them. Only a backstop twists and rusts where sports and grass failed. In a hall of the San Carlos Hotel, refer to an areal picture of this place. It shows the faintly dug creases of the Hohokam who grew corn and tepary beans. You must sleep where their water wouldn’t cross, a small dry square between mountains. Canals still give it a wide berth, like cattle who tear their hides in cat-claw acacia at the shake of a rattle. You have

only a rusty backdrop and a raggedy pomegranate tree to go on, but don’t sleep near these characters. They are bad companions, false ambassadors, visitors like yourself. They have worn their welcome to rust and tattered fruit. Ants make better bed fellows. Watch the swifts.
perch in the holes when the metal cools at dusk. An elf owl will make a racket blinking in the branches of moon-lit, gutted pomegranates. Along an avenue, park and lose your hubcaps. Leave your car unlocked, and into a row of thick trees enter.
Brian D. Cohen
*Train Entering Tunnel*
Etching, 18" x 24"
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JOHN J. ARNOLD was a photographer for seven years at a major pharmaceutical corporation before being downsized out. He is enjoying his newfound freedom by exploring personal expression through photography. “Experimenting with infrared B&W photography has forced me to think outside of the box.”

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