CutBank 51

Spring 1999
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On the cover:

Peter Richards
Lear
Metal and Filament
1 x 2

Sketches:

Felipe Perez
charcoal
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The squirrels looked up from their foraging for a hearty laugh at the farmer's widow as she bandaged the heads of sunflowers with rags. Yesterday they tossed half-eaten acorns at the pieta of her and the scarecrow. I don't ask her why she does this or why all the sheep in the meadow wear bells or whether those are human teeth strung like pearls around her neck, because I know there may be answers. I just watch it all from my small window of leaded glass refusing the requests of bees begging to die in the warmth of my palm. Go back to the mausoleum of the rotten apple, these hands must remain free of debris in the event a small child emerges from the corn, lost and afraid of the discord of crickets sawing the leaves of trees and asks in a language I barely speak won't I cover her ears, please. No amount of agony is too big for the world said the scythe to the meadow erupting with butterflies.
FOUR SQUIRRELS

Four squirrels tangled together by a plastic grocery bag struggle as they move up a tree Tuesday afternoon in Fredericksburg, Va. They were caught and taken to a veterinarian who freed them.
—Associated Press photo caption

I. Four squirrels

All Larry wants to do is talk about what he'll do when we're free—or rather, when he's free of us. He's got big plans, big plans, and we have to listen to them, day and night: slippery birches and the topmost branches of longleaf pines, hanging bird feeders with cymbal-shaped baffles, fenced yards with house cats who think themselves smart, human boys with B.B. guns. Nothing! Larry shouts. These things are nothing, no, less than nothing, to him. He could outsmart and conquer, he says, confound them all, if only he didn't have us, his three siblings, tied to his tail. He doesn't know about us, he says, but when the big moment comes, man, he's outta here, history, sayonara, see ya, wouldn't want to be ya! My way or the highway! He gets so worked up talking like this that he starts biting the air around his head and whipping his tail, the point motion, thus jerking the rest of us out of whatever peace we might have been enjoying. "Sorry, sorry," he says, but his eyes are still glittering with hysteria. "The big day is coming," he mutters, and he tries to hold it in, but we all feel it build, wait for it to burst. "It's coming, man!" Larry screams. "I can FEEL it!"

Felicia is unimpressed. As the only female, she frequently takes that position. We don't surprise her, although of course she can still surprise us. She is just perceptibly larger than the rest of us, bigger-boned, and her fur is sleeker. And lately she has developed something of a smell about her, a coy, insinuating odor that emanates out over our heads in invisible waves. Not that it does her any good: no normal squirrel would get within twenty feet of us, she says, and she's right. Occasionally some unsus-
pecting, unfettered, individual regular squirrel happens into our yard and sees us moving miserably along in our broken-pinwheel, lopsided merry-go-round fashion, a malfunctioning machine made of fur bumping its way up the side of a pine tree—and the normal individual bolts, doesn’t just back away, but flees, flees us, as though we were the enemy or could possibly represent any kind of threat. The terror that seizes them is palpable and predictable, the same every time: the first jolt of shock, and then the quick-blooming cloud of understanding—that whatever we are, whatever it is that has happened to us, could happen to them. That revelation—we are what they—flickers into their eyes like a floundering bird. Stare too long and they might find themselves in our place, they suddenly realize. For who’s to say how we got this way? They’re gone, out of the yard before we can say a word.

“I hate it when that happens,” Felicia has taken to saying.

Paul, as usual, says nothing. What I can see of his face when Larry isn’t bobbing up between us—one black eye, a twitch of whisker, sometimes a millimeter of mouth—appears thoughtful. Or perhaps sad. No, thoughtful. I try not to dwell on Paul. Paul’s silence, and I think I speak for all of us here, has become worrisome.

I, Marv, try to take the large view. I remind Felicia that not everyone is horrified by the sight of us, that the yard in which we live is populated by insects of many varieties who have no problem getting along with each other, not to mention the bland assemblies of oblivious pigeons, the sparrows and finches trying to make an honest living, the lizards who sit around all day blowing up their throats and doing push-ups for no apparent reason and who, therefore, would have a lot of nerve calling us odd-looking, the grackles and starlings who take themselves very seriously and are much too busy attending meetings and discussing policy to give us a second thought.

“That’s great, Marv, thanks,” Felicia says. “I’ll fuck a grackle immediately.” When she says “fuck,” a long shudder, kind of an extended wince, runs through all four of our bodies—certainly her intention. I glance nervously at Paul, but his eye is dark and inscrutable, steady as ever. I try to remember the last time I heard him say something, but I can’t. And yet I know he must have
spoken in the past; why else would his silence now seem so disturbing?

Things can change, I tell Felicia. And I believe it—I’ve seen plants wilt overnight, rain boil up out of an empty sky. But what I don’t say, though I’m sure Felicia suspects or simply knows, in her way, that I harbor this weakness, is that when it comes down to it, I can’t imagine it, can’t actually picture the time when the four of us will be separate—be free. This is a failing on my part, I know, yet sometimes when I listen to Larry’s escalating lament, or look for more than a moment into the inky weirdness of Paul’s eye, I think perhaps I’m fortunate.

The thing is, I can’t remember a time preceding our current condition. It must have happened to us in the nest, that elevated womb of crinkly paper and warm fluff and flowing milk, but I don’t remember. We weren’t trying to go anywhere then, we surely didn’t think of ourselves as separate beings, and we never strived for anything, except to burrow closer, deeper into the heat of each other and the detritus that hid us from the world. And when we did finally come down out of our tree, we moved in a group, as if propelled by one motor; the plastic had apparently been a part of us for weeks. Sure, we had our individual longings, our urges to move toward this bit of foil reflecting the sun, that fallen apple turning sweetly rotten, but no matter what caught the eye, drew the heart of one of us, there was always the pull of the others.

So no matter how frustrating, how wrong, our condition has come to seem, the alternative seems so... foreign. Right for some, perhaps, but not for us. Why should we imagine ourselves to be other than what we know ourselves to be? What possible gain can come out of such imagining? Only loss, I would say, heartbreak and disillusionment. But I try to keep my opinions to myself for the sake of collective peace. That’s the very least, I think, that I owe my brethren.

In response to Felicia’s grackle remark, Larry reminds her that octopuses can unscrew jars. “And they are solitary, territorial creatures,” he says. He is quoting the yellowed shred of newspaper that’s wound in with the bag around our tails; he reads the few visible bits of print over and over, obsessively, searching for
clues to our destiny. "In the Philippines," he says hopefully, "they have knifeless surgery."

"Here we go," Felicia says, rolling her eyes.

"Lightning hit the governor's airplane," Larry tells her. "There is an orthodontist who requires no down payment. On the next Springer, 'We May Be Identical Twins But I Hate Your Guts!' The perfect lobster is coming! Fisher-Price knows!" There used to be more paper for him to read, but rain has worn most of it away, and Larry, of late, has been reciting the fragments he can remember more frequently and frantically, as if these blurred words from some distant authority, words that have nothing to do with us, are his last hope.

Also, he has begun to talk in his sleep. He garbles one news story with another and adds in elements from nowhere, describes in detail sky-high buildings and cavernous, crater-sized wells he cannot have seen firsthand, burning cities and men carrying crosses, human babies speaking archaic languages. But the refrain is always the same: The day of change is drawing near.

And then, a few nights ago, the final straw—an event we couldn't laugh at, tolerate, or ignore. During a stretch of impossible, rainless heat, in the middle of a night so hot the birds couldn't tell it wasn't day and kept singing idiotically past midnight, Larry tried to chew himself loose. Felicia felt it first, woke the rest of us up shrieking and twisting around to try to reach him. There was the deranged smell of blood coming up from where his mouth was fastened, on the lump of hair and bone and plastic that connected us. "OUCH!" someone screamed, and suddenly we were flipping through the air, out of the crook in the oak where we slept. We bounced twice against the bark and hit the ground on our backs, our legs flailing. Larry made a big show of squinting and yawning, as though he had slept through it all. And to be fair, it turned out to be only his own tail he had gnawed. Still, I don't think any of us believed he had done it unconsciously—and if he had, that was no less troubling: What might he do next?

"Where am I?" he asked. "What happened to my tail?"

Felicia spat at him.

"Look, Larry," I told him, "I think I speak for all of us when I say: this is unacceptable behavior."

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“You’ve crossed the line, Larry,” Felicia said. “You’d kill us if you could get away with it! Wouldn’t you?”

Larry didn’t answer, kept his face averted, licked his bloody fur.

Paul, not surprisingly, said nothing, but something made me turn and look at him. His eye appeared even larger than usual, and a dark light I’d never seen before seemed to tremble out of it, directly at me, a light that said, Emergency—emergency.

“Larry, I beseech you,” I said. “For the collective good, the good of us all...”

“Beseech, fuck,” Felicia said. “He tried to kill us. If he tries it again I’ll chew his face off.”

Later that night when I finally got back to sleep, I dreamed of Paul’s eye. Nothing else—no movement, no sound, just that black, unblinking orb, so large it filled my sea of vision, the fierce silence of it growing bigger, more palpable, more demanding every moment. Paul himself seemed absent; there was only the eye. What, I pleaded, what do you want? But the eye gave no answer, nor did it ever turn its gaze away.

And in the morning, like some terrible omen, a rabid raccoon had appeared over us like a dark cloud, as though out of nowhere, high up in the branches of our tree. It woke us up humming, crooning to itself at some unnaturally low, thunder-like frequency. The smell of its disease was everywhere, heavy against our eyes, and the bugs were going nuts, leaping wildly out of the grass in all directions like gazelles.

“Is it raining?” Felicia asked, coming awake. Water from the raccoon’s mouth was falling on us, making marks on our backs.

“Listen!” Larry cried. “Listen to what it’s saying!”

I’d thought the raccoon was only moaning senselessly, but now I heard that Larry was right. The end, the end, the end, the raccoon chanted. Its voice was unraveling, the tone all-engulfing in its desperation; the words seemed to float down from something larger and more diffuse than the bloated, swaying shape on the branch.

“I can’t take much more of this,” Felicia said. “I mean, how much more of this are we supposed to take? I mean, why were we even born—just to be driven crazy by lunatics?”

The end, the end, sang the raccoon.
“We hear you, buddy!” Larry called up to it, but it did not appear to notice.

“Why?” Felicia repeated. “I need to know. Can any of you answer me? Marv? Larry? Paul?” As she said each name we all turned to look at that individual, and when she fell silent we were all left staring at Paul, as if he might really provide the answer. I can’t speak for the others, but that was when I knew we were done for.

That was three days ago, and we haven’t moved. Our limbs are sore from gripping the tree, our necks stiff from looking up. The raccoon hangs over us, chanting out the end of its life, swollen with meaning it must express. All the other creatures have fled the yard, and only we five remain, locked in our fateful exchange. The raccoon chants and drools, Larry babbles, Felicia wails in frustration, and Paul’s eye grows bigger and blacker, its message more inevitable, every moment. And I wait, wait for the change I now believe is coming. Larry was right all along: The day is drawing near. I try to hold out hope that when it is upon us we will rise to meet it, that we will find it in ourselves to do whatever it is that’s required of us.

II. The Veterinarian Who Freed Them

When he was a teenager he had longed to become a real doctor, and he still thought of it that way, despite his successful ten-year practice in the treatment of small animals: real doctors treated human beings. It wasn’t that he didn’t care about animals, but he felt that it was humans he would truly have loved to save—the unsolvable enormity of them, the moist complexity and trickiness of even their simplest parts. One summer when he was still in high school he’d worked a minimum-wage custodial job at a convalescent home, cheerfully scrubbing bathrooms and changing linens and digging people’s false teeth out of the cafeteria garbage; he’d felt at the time that he was proving he could make it as a doctor. He loved helping others, and he was not undone by the grisly.

Then one day he was mopping the hallway outside the room of a retired actuary named Mrs. Rooney who had suffered a se-
ries of strokes that caused her to perceive a string hanging in her field of vision, whichever way she looked. She was constantly calling the nurses and orderlies into her room to get the string out of her face, driving them crazy. On this day, she had soiled herself in her bed, and as he slopped his mop along the linoleum, he overheard her ask the nurse who was giving her a sponge bath to please be more gentle. "I'm not having a picnic down here," the nurse snapped.

He waited for Mrs. Rooney's response, heard nothing, waited a few seconds more, listening to the thick, ruined silence coming from that room, and then he left his mop standing upright in the bucket there in the hall. Looking back, if he had to pinpoint the exact moment he'd abandoned his plan, that would have been it. He could still see that mop standing there like a surprised person he had suddenly walked away from in the middle of a conversation.

He returned to the job, of course, worked the hours he'd signed up for and finished out his summer, but something in him, perhaps his will, had shifted, backed off, turned itself ever-so-slightly away from the experience. He wasn't so sure of himself anymore. He had reported the nurse to the supervisor, but that didn't solve it for him. It wasn't the blood or shit or vomit, he eventually came to understand, that he couldn't handle—not the soft, vulnerable parts of people that undid him, but the hardness, for which there was no answer, no methodology, no cure. So it was that now, instead of saving human lives, he specialized in rodents and birds, taught community education courses called "Understand Your Gerbil" and "What Your Finch Wants You To Know" and "Raising Orphaned Squirrel Babies So They Can Rejoin Their Brethren In The Wild." The only cases he found difficult were those brought about by ignorance: the old man who had shown up, for instance, with a starved, comatose baby squirrel he'd found and kept for a couple of weeks; the thing refused to eat, the man said, sounding a little angry. The animal, just a few inches long, lay at the bottom of an empty cardboard carton, a single, enormous unshelled walnut by its head.

But most of the cases the veterinarian saw struck him as a little silly, though of course he never let on that he felt that way in front of his anxious clients. Out of some perverse habit or
compulsion, even after ten years, he often thought about the human equivalent of an operation he was performing or a treatment he was administering, forced himself to consider the differences between human and animal in terms of money, beauty, glory. When he heard about the squirrels that were being delivered for him to untangle, he recalled a story he had seen in the news about the surgical team who had, in a ten-hour operation, separated a set of human infants, conjoined twins—they weren’t called “Siamese” anymore—who shared one six-chambered heart. The doctors had known in advance that only one of the babies could survive the surgery, they had selected which one based on all available information, and that baby’s fingernails were painted pink to avoid a tragic mistake. Because of the sacrifice of the one life, the doctors were careful not to sound too celebratory in interviews. The head surgeon had said that the feeling he’d had during the procedure was “one of respect for the event, for the sanctity of the individual soul.”

The veterinarian understood and accepted that he himself would never give such an interview, never know such a feeling—it was not a feeling likely to be engendered by inoculating a hamster, or, for that matter, untangling a bunch of squirrels from a grocery bag. Nevertheless, in some odd way his obsession with medical miscellany kept him from growing bitter. He didn’t mind doing his best by small animals; he figured someone had to do it. Cases came to him, un glamorously, and he took them.

The tangled squirrels had turned up in a humane cage trap someone had set for a rabid raccoon, a guy from the newspaper had gone out to take a photo, and then Mike Wentworth from Animal Control had picked them up and brought them in for the surgery. “I’d say these little ‘brethren’ are unblessed,” Wentworth said, holding the wire cage up over the receptionist’s desk and peering in at the jumbled gray lump of bodies. The Animal Control guys were a hard-core crew, and Wentworth in particular liked to rib the veterinarian about the hokeyness of his community ed courses. The squirrels didn’t flinch at Wentworth’s loud laughter; they looked wary and exhausted.

But the operation turned out to be a simple one, no complications—it wasn’t even a surgery, really, so much as a clean-up job, the cutting away of a lot of hair and debris, the sterilization
of a superficial bite wound on one of the tails, rabies vaccines for all. The squirrels would be fine when the general anesthetic wore off, though their tails were somewhat diminished, bent at odd angles and half-bald. But here, the veterinarian felt, was one of the nice aspects of treating animals: unlike humans, they would not feel shame about their deformities.

This thought made him recall something he’d come across when he was putting together his “Orphaned Squirrel Babies” course, an old wives’ tale that said the squirrel was the only animal in the Garden of Eden to witness Adam eating the apple. So horror-struck was this squirrel, the story went, that it pulled its naked, rat-like tail across its eyes to block out the sight, and as a reward, all squirrels were henceforth given bushy tails by God. The veterinarian idly wondered how the four he had just separated would manage to block out horrifying sights, but he couldn’t imagine what those sights might be, and he wasn’t really worried. Such myths were clearly meant to be about people; the animals were only symbolic.

When the squirrels woke up, he carried them, now in four separate rodent cages, out into the small, dogwood-shaded courtyard behind his office. He set the cages on the grass facing the line of trees along the back fence, opened and braced the cage doors, and then stood back to watch. After a long pause, all four squirrels scampered out at once, then moved immediately in four different directions. Oddly, though, they seemed to move in perfect unison, They took miniature roller-coaster-shaped hops, then stopped to stand on their hind legs, then bounded forward again, all at the same moments, as if mechanized. They didn’t seem to be aware of each other, didn’t even glance at each other, which for some reason made the veterinarian smile.

The biggest of the four was the first to break formation, disappearing in a sudden burst over the fence and into the forest preserve. The others followed more cautiously, going off at divergent angles into the brush. The last, who the veterinarian noticed had unusually large eyes, lingered a few seconds longer, standing up motionless with his paws against his breast and gazing off into the distance as though he were listening to something the others had not heard. Then he, too, made his
careful way into the sheltering foliage, looking back once at the veterinarian, or perhaps at the building or the row of empty cages.

*Respect for the event*, the veterinarian thought. *Sanctity of the individual soul.* What a joke.

Still, he felt decent. To have done his part, however small anyone might judge it. On his drive home he hummed moronically to radio songs he didn’t know, then detoured on impulse to the apartment of a woman he had dated briefly, months ago. She was a sharp-eyed girl who had worked as his assistant for a summer and then taken a much better job at the children’s zoo across town. They’d quarreled a lot while they were dating, yet there had been something genuine between them from the start, some sort of recognition, though of what the veterinarian could not have said. But the relationship had trailed off—he had never understood why. He still suffered occasional bouts of missing her, fits of melancholic happiness or happy melancholy that seemed to come out of nowhere, like this one, and as he stood on her front step in the late-day sun, waiting to see if she was home, he wondered again, as he often had in the past, whether in some nameless but essential way they were meant to be together.
RESTRAINT

When my mother dies, endlessly, on some near evening,

I must do everything mourners do: scream,

cut up my hair and her shoes, let our neighbors unlearn us.

I must pass time.
I must pass lots of time

in the commodious white
of the bed which conceived of me.

I have to memorize Ruth and recite her,

backwards, to haphazard Hebrews.
I must learn Hebrew

and worship some gods.
I must buy slaughterhouse futures.

I must watch flies fly into beards.
I must believe

in my future and stay fetal for days, self-importantly.

I must believe in Thermopylae, the Defenestration of Prague.
I must read more about the life of Rutherford B. Hayes.

I must carol, *meiosis, mitosis* and not let my eyes glaze.

I must divide complex fractions until I grow weary.

I must devise games to make myself wary.

I must run bare through the crowded gymnasium with a geranium jammed into the crook of each ear.

I must stum wine. I must stum lots of wine.

I must pass lots of time. I must pass time.

I must not drag my ill skin to the hearse, worn from the need to make love to her truant, calm body. I will not carve gods. I lack knives and authority.
Stan drove a fly ball to deep centerfield
and on his way to first, thought,
What if I don’t make it?
(The coach says, “doubt is the motherlode of failure”
and all his boys nod, their heads bobbing
like weatherbirds tipped
with the mercury of knowledge.)

Stan’s feet hit the ground in tandem,
raising dust. He fixed on the once-white bag
of first base that seemed no closer
than it had a step before, and thought, I could stop.
The coach wagged
a finger and boys on the bench threw their voices
onto the field like litter:

HUSTLE HUSTLE DIG DIG DIG
a striped Greek chorus giving good counsel
sponsored by the local kosher butcher.
Full count: the crowd undulated
in rare unison, and as he pounded into first,
blinded by a consortium of dust, Stan’s mind
wandered to why each weekend he risked

ignominy, what was for dinner, who mattered,
whether he existed. He thought of Descartes.
Was unconvinced. Its source, he glanced up
to see the ball committing its inexorable arc.
Gray autumn,  
the chartreuse eye of the grackle  
the only punctuation  
in a story of clouds.

The grackle strains to sing;  
a shriek splits the day.  
It hawks and spits its thing  
on the morning's canvas.

Wings hunched for effect,  
feathers spread, it quivers—  
in a dance of perfect  
hubris in the dew.

Remnant of the night,  
the grackle screams at the dawn  
it its concupiscent delight,  
again clears its throat.

The morning goes still.  
The sound goes looking  
for dreams to fill,  
the eye a moon in grackle sky.
When their wagon came in sight of the courthouse, the boy immediately looked to the barred windows of the jail. Since the journey had begun, he had been waiting to see her at those windows—he had even expected her to call his father’s name—but now, confronted by a building that looked more like a log cabin than a center of government, he saw no one.

They tethered the mules, then walked to the sheriff’s office, where they found an overweight grey-headed man sitting at a roll-top desk, fanning himself with a folded newspaper. The boy’s father introduced himself, and the sheriff, who looked much too old to be startled by anything, raised his eyebrows.

“We come to see Mrs. Crawford,” the father said in the level tone he normally reserved for reprimanding the boy.

“That a fact?” the sheriff replied.

“Yessir.”

“You all her kin?”

“Son and grandson.”

“That a fact?”

The boy wanted to announce that she was the finest grandmother in the world, but he had long ago learned to be silent when his father was talking. He bit his lip and stared at the floor. The father was as short as the sheriff was overweight, as bald as the sheriff was grey-headed, as calm as the sheriff was apparently hot. Slouched, the father again asked to see the prisoner.

The sheriff fanned himself with the folded newspaper. “Why?” he said.

“She is my mother.”

“Maybe I believe that,” the sheriff said. “Maybe I don’t.”

“Believe it,” the father said.

The sheriff’s face was narrow and flat, like the chinking between the logs of the jail. He seemed to hear not just with his ears but with the entire face, as though he could determine everything he needed to know about a situation merely by carefully analyzing the shape of a particular sound.
From the single office window, the sheriff watched the wagon's slow progress around the square, until at last the vehicle disappeared down a side street. Then the sheriff returned to his desk and did a bit of paper work, drumming his fingers on the blotter. He finally rose, wiped the sweat from his eyes with a soiled handkerchief and went to the woman's cell. She was sitting on the neatly made bed and looked up, from needlepoint, with eyes so dark, so accusatory, that the sheriff almost turned and walked back to his office. Before he could, however, her expression modulated, like a small piece of blue sky slowly becoming visible through storm clouds.

"Listen," the sheriff said, "was that your son? I mean really."
"Yes," she replied.
"Where is the boy's mother?"
"Don't know."
"Why not?"
"It's not my bidness," the old woman said sharply.
"Why even bring the boy?"
"Don't know."
"Not your bidness, right?"
The woman did not respond.
"Is it my imagination," the sheriff said, "or does that boy look more like you than your own son?"

Busy again with her needlepoint, she did not bother to look up.
"My boy favors his father," she said. "His boy favors me."
"What did he ask you?" the sheriff said.
Now she looked at him, needle poised, eyes narrow. "He asked me," she said, "where Williston lives."
"I thought so," the sheriff said.

When the boy awoke, the wagon was in a clearing, at the end of which stood a house larger than anything he had ever seen—a great mass of pillars, cupolas, chimneys, red tile and windows. The wagon was on a long gravel drive, flanked on either side by small oak trees. Beyond the small oaks was a grass lawn as smooth and without blemish as fallen ash. This place, the boy understood, was special—what heaven must look like. It seemed impossible that men could have built it, because the house was taller
than the hill behind the cabin where the boy lived with seven others. He felt like laughing or shouting but did not, because his father did not allow it.

"Your name is Crawford," the father told him at least once each day. "You don't act like other people."

Being a Crawford, the boy understood, was something special, but, like balancing on a thin wire, it was also something very difficult. Not everyone could do it.

He watched the father, noticing how the lightest tap with the whip controlled the mules, realizing that, at some time or another, he had whipped them, too.

The wagon came up the drive slowly, wheels creaking, the father tapping the mules lightly, whistling softly to himself. The boy looked at the huge house, the enormous white columns which overwhelmed him as a thunderstorm would. Then he realized, without understanding where the thought came from or what it might mean, that when the small trees along the drive were fully grown, he would be dead.

The wagon stopped directly in front of the huge house. The father, leaving the mules untethered, told the boy to wait, then climbed down from the wagon, mounted the gallery steps and knocked on the door. A dark man in a coat answered, the two whispered at each other, then the father was led inside and the door was closed behind him.

The urge to climb down from the decrepit wagon and explore this magnificent world was overpowering, but should the boy's conduct be discovered, he would be beaten, so he remained silently on the splintered wooden seat. His eyelids drooped. In his mind he saw children crowded around, laughing. He wondered what they were laughing at. Then he felt himself falling off the seat, and his eyes snapped open wide, and he realized that he had almost fallen asleep again.

He heard something in the grass and, turning, saw a stranger come around the side of the house, stop suddenly, eye the boy and the wagon, then walk on. He was tall and, to the boy, looked almost old enough to be a man, but not quite, with bright eyes and a wide-brimmed hat too large for his head.

The stranger, with an unfamiliar accent, said, "Who are you?"

"Calhoun," the boy said.
The stranger considered this a moment, as though he were trying to make a decision, then said, "How old are you?"
"Seven."
"Where's your father?"
"We come across the mountains," the boy said.
"In that?"
"Yes. Daddy says this is the best wagon in the county."
"Then your father must be blind. We have at least twenty in better condition than that. You want to see them?"
"Yes."
"Come on, then, and I'll show you."
The boy shook his head slowly.
"Come on."
"No."
"Why not?"
"Daddy said to wait."
The stranger smiled, then spoke again in the same odd accent. "You're fine," he said. "You're waiting."
"I got to stay in the wagon."
"Why?"
"Daddy said."
"What's your father's name?"
"Calhoun."
"Same as yours?"
The boy nodded.
"What's your first name?"
"That's it."
"Your first name is Calhoun?"
The boy nodded.
"Good Lord," the stranger said. "What kind of first name is that?"
"It's my first name," the boy replied.
"Okay, then. What's your last name?"
"Crawford."
"Calhoun Crawford?"
The boy nodded.
"I know you want to see the barn. Come on down. I won't hurt. Promise."
The boy shook his head stubbornly. "Daddy wants me to stay in the wagon."

The stranger thought for a moment. The skin on his face was very light and smooth, like a girl's. Suddenly, smiling, he climbed into the wagon and sat on the seat beside the boy.

"What a mess," he said.

The boy looked at him.

The stranger took the reins and pulled lightly, saying, "Hup now. Hup up, boys."

The mismatched mules lurched forward, and the stranger guided them around the gigantic house where stood a white barn almost as large, almost as magnificent, as the house itself. The stranger stopped the mules directly in front of the open barn door. The boy peered inside and saw row upon row of freshly oiled and painted wagons.

"Father owns them all," the stranger said.

"How old are you?" the boy replied.

"Twelve. My brother is, too. We're twins. My name is Warren Williston, and my brother's name is Warner Williston. Nobody can tell us apart. Sometimes, even Mother can't. Father owns most of this valley. We're rich."

The boy was certain that this place was magical—like a castle. He thought of the one room where his family lived, of the mosquito netting across the windows. He looked at his own bare feet and at the polished boots of the stranger, and his face burned.

The stranger named the place where he and his family had come from. The boy had not heard it before. You could ride all day on a horse, the stranger said, and not cross their ranch. They were, they had been told, the biggest landowners in the state. The boy listened to the strange accent, trying to figure where it had come from, then said, "Do you own all this?"

"Father does," the stranger said, laughing. "But I will—someday. And Warner. We will each take half."

The stranger pulled the reins lightly again, said "Hup," and the mules brought the decrepit wagon across the grounds, past the smokehouse and corrals, the stables and bunkhouse. A white-tail doe came out suddenly from the trees, peered at them, as surprised as they were, eyes black and very wide, then turned and disappeared again into the woods. All the fences were freshly
whitewashed, the buildings freshly painted. It was, the boy thought, it had to be, the finest place anywhere. Someday, he promised himself, he would live in such a place.

Eventually, the stranger directed the mismatched mules and the creaking wagon back to the front of the house and stopped in front of the huge white columns.

“Has your father come to talk business?”
“I think so,” the boy replied.
“What kind of business?”
“Don’t know.”
“I like you,” the stranger said. “I’ll go find Warner.”

He climbed down from the ancient wagon, bounded up the gallery stairs, opened the front door, turned and waved at the boy, then disappeared inside.

The boy sat alone in the wagon, rubbing his bloodshot eyes, watching a parade of squirrels climb down an oak tree and race across the freshly mowed lawn. Then the front door opened and his father appeared. Someone shut the door behind him.

The father stomped down the gallery steps, looking neither left nor right, climbed aboard the wagon and touched the mules once, lightly, with the whip. His eyes had narrowed and the line of his mouth was sharp, like the edge of a sheet of paper.

“You got to learn,” he said, though he did not appear to be talking to the boy. “You got to learn. . . .”

“Daddy,” the boy said.

“Hush,” the father said, and the boy did.

They camped that evening deep in the woods by a stream and ate the jerky which the father had packed before they left, sitting along the bank of a stream, watching the evening sky close above them like a door. In the last few minutes of light, the first dark, the father placed a row of stones along the bank, and the boy, as he did each evening, practiced shooting with the Winchester almost as long as he. He sighted with the perfect eyes of youth and squeezed off each round slowly and patiently, as his father had taught him. The father watched silently, giving occasional advice, tone abrupt but not harsh.

“You may git angry,” the father said, “but you Cain’t shoot that way. Drain it out yourself. Drain every bit of it.”

The boy took one deep breath, then squeezed slowly.
“Good,” the father said.
Another deep breath.
“Good.”

When he was with the rifle, the boy felt as though he were holding onto his father, as though the blood of the older were circulating and merging with that of the younger. “Good,” the father said, a compliment of the boy, not his aim.

“When you are ten,” the father said, “and if you practice, you will be as good as any man.”

In mid-afternoon, the sheriff mounted his bay and rode across the long valley. The mountains were like storm clouds in the haze. Dust above the pines, searching for a breeze, hung motionless. On the road he passed the father and son in the decrepit wagon, coming the opposite direction. The boy was slouched in the seat, asleep, and the father's eyes were upon the mules.

“Afternoon,” the sheriff said.

The old man stopped the wagon but did not take his eyes off the mules.

“You coming or going?” the sheriff said.
“Going.”
“Across the mountains?”
“Yessir.”
“Well, that is one long trip.”
The old man in the wagon said, “Yessir.” But his eyes were still upon the mules.

“I don't suppose you want to talk,” the sheriff said.
“Nope.”
“I like that boy.”
“So does his mama.”

The sheriff rode on, stopping at a bend in the road to look back at the image of the wagon, a speck now on the landscape, moving so slowly that, had it not been raising dust, the sheriff would have believed that it was not moving at all.

The sheriff reached another bend in the road, and then he turned onto the long drive which led to the enormous, white-columnned house. When it was under construction, the sheriff had attempted to appear unimpressed, but, in truth, he had been and still was astounded.
One of Williston’s servants, an old dark-skinned man named Tidewater whom the sheriff had known forever, answered the door and led the sheriff to a two-story tall foyer surrounded by a balcony. Williston appeared on that balcony, then came quickly down the wide staircase.

“Well, good to see you, too,” the sheriff said.

“He was here,” Williston said in a voice more agitated than normal.

“I know that.”

“He wants me to drop the charges.”

“Know that, too.”

“I want to know what you plan to do. I’m law-abiding. I pay taxes. I have my rights.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him I would not drop the charges.”

“I figured,” the sheriff said.

“I will not allow people to destroy my property.”

“So you lose one horse. Better than someone’s life.”

The sheriff watched Williston emotionally step backward, though he physically did not move an inch. It was as though he had walked through an open glass door, then closed it in the sheriff’s face.

“Whose side,” Williston said, “are you on?”

“I’m not on anyone’s side.”

“Look,” Williston said, voice rising, echoing off the tall arched ceiling of the foyer, “if I don’t stand up for myself, those people will keep pushing me farther and farther until one day I will just fall off the face of the earth.”

“She shot a horse,” the sheriff said. “That’s not quite the same thing as looking Jesus in the face.”

“It’s the principle, man. The principle. Don’t you understand?”

“I understand that you are a stranger to these parts, a Yankee, no less. I understand that is not a crime. I understand that she and her people been here since before the Choctaw came, and I understand the Choctaw came a long time before my daddy was even born. I understand that her son is dangerous. I understand he would as likely fill your belly full of shot as tell you the time of day.”

“I refuse to be intimidated.”
"I know that. That's why I rode out here. Any man can make
the kind of money you have is not a stupid sonofabitch. Prin-
ciple is fine, Mr. Williston, but so is a little common sense."

Williston clasped his hands and squeezed so tightly that veins
began to show. "I assume you want me to drop the charges."

"Yes."

"Well, I won't. I simply won't. I didn't get to where I am now
by running away from thieves. I will protect myself if I have to,
but I thought that was your job."

"My job is to keep the peace. That's why I'm here."

"Then talk to Crawford."

"I did."

"And what did he say?"

"He said the jail needs a better cook."

The boy mentioned the stranger, with the odd accent, who had
shown him the barn, the son of the man who owned the big
house. The father raised his brows.

"He has a son?"

"Yes."

The father considered this information a long while, whitt-
ing idly on a pine branch.

Sometime in the early afternoon, they loaded the wagon, and
the father whipped the mules to life. Clouds had moved in that
morning; the boy now smelled rain. Above them, beneath a purple
sky growing steadily black, a chill wind rustled the tops of the
pines.

They waited in an oak thicket beside a road. The father did
not say a word, had not said a word in hours, and the boy began
to daydream. He saw a freight train climbing the mountain grade,
dark plume of smoke rising like a fist, and imagined himself an
engineer.

"There," his father said. The boy looked up in surprise.

Down the road at the base of the hill, three horses and three
riders came on. As they neared, the boy recognized one rider as
the stranger who had shown him the barn. He rode a sorrel.
Beside him, on another sorrel, was his duplicate—same hair, same
eyes, same dull expression. Now the boy could not decide which
one had shown him the barn. Beside them rode a man older than

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the boy's father, a man who did not look anything at all like the two sons. A black patch covered one eye, and he wore a wide-brimmed hat.

The boy's father flicked the mules, and the wagon creaked into the road.

The boy was looking squarely at the twins, at their twin expressions of surprise and bewilderment, remembering the huge barn filled with the shiny wagons, and the enormous white pillars of the fantastic house.

"Yessir," the father said.

"We have nothing to talk about," Williston said.

"Yessir," the father replied.

"Then move that wagon, and we will pass."

The father sat quietly, looking at Williston, smiling slightly through the lines of his gaunt face, narrow and sharp, like a shattered piece of slate. The boy continued watching the twins.

"Move that wagon."

"Why?" the father said.

Williston slowly climbed down from his mount, stood a moment in the dust of the road, then approached the wagon. "See here," he said. "I am a law-abiding citizen. I pay taxes. I'm a God-fearing man, and I trust you are as well. Your mother killed one of my horses."

"On her property."

"That is not her property."

"She has lived there seventy-seven year."

"That is entirely beside the point. I own that land. I told her I wanted her off it, and in return, she shot one of my horses."

"You are lucky it was a horse."

"Don't threaten me."

"When I decide to," the father said, "you will know it."

As the boy watched, the expressions on the faces of the twins deepened from surprise to something approaching concern or even alarm, though not yet as deep as simple fright. The boy could see no difference at all between the two, and thus could not be certain which one had actually shown him the enormous barn.

"Would you care to step into the woods?" Williston said.

The father looked at him.
“Away from the children.”

“He is old enough,” the boy’s father said.

“I am not raising mine to be savages. Either step into the woods with me, now, or move the wagon.”

The father’s expression grew steadily more intense, like the north wind fanning the trees, and his whip tapped rhythmically on the side of the wagon. Something in the relationship of man to man changed, though the boy could not give it a name. The next thing he knew, his father had reached into the bed of the wagon and produced the Smith and Wesson.

The twins’ expressions passed then to outright shock. The father held the rifle loosely in his palms, and it began to rain.

Williston said something which the boy could not make out, but the father did not respond. Above him the wind swirled; the rain came harder, splattering the boy’s arms and bare feet. The boy’s father handed him the rifle.

“Stay here,” he commanded. “Watch them two.”

He climbed down from the wagon.

The boy saw the two men leave the road and enter the woods. Then he was alone with his rifle, staring at the twins. He felt the sudden and completely unexpected weight of responsibility, of knowing that his father had entrusted to him this important job. It was, as nearly as he could determine, the first time his father had trusted him with anything of importance, and he was pleased. From the woods the boy heard the voices of the two men. The rain slackened, and one of the twins started to climb down from his horse. This, the boy understood, was not allowed.

“Don’t,” he said.

The twin, halfway off the horse, stopped and looked at him.

“He won’t do anything,” the other twin said. “Go on. I’ll watch him.”

“Don’t,” the boy repeated.

“Go on.”

“Which one is Warren?” the boy said.

The twin who was halfway off the horse hesitated a moment, then smiled, then put one foot on the ground. Above the rush of the rain, the boy thought he heard his father’s voice. “Your name is Crawford. You don’t act like other folk.”

He felt the sudden touch of anger, then, remembering, took one deep breath and slowly squeezed.
ARM AND THE NEEDLE

DINNER OUT was my last, best idea. “Because you’re thin,” I told her.

“Of course I am,” she said.

“Order anything you want,” I said. The waiter was doing his job, waiting patiently, smiling at us. Sharon lit up a cigarette.

“What’s the point?” she said.

I ordered dinner for both of us. Sharon caught me staring at her crooked yellow bangs. She adjusted her wig.

“There is always a point,” I said. “Look.” I showed her my little silver pocket watch. With a grand flourish, I pulled up the small winding knob, exposing its throat. The watch hands froze.

“See,” I told her, “how easily it stops?”

“Cute,” she told me, carefully sipping her water. I held up my wine glass, the chardonnay a deep gold in the poorly lit room.

“Sure you don’t want something real to drink?”

She shook her head. “Chemo,” she said. “All tastes the same.” I held the glass out to her. “Try,” I said.

“No, thank you.”

I threw back half the wine and held out the glass by the candle, so she could reach.

“Try,” I said.

“No,” she said, and pushed the glass away. The glass was sweaty, and she pushed the base first, and I lost my grip and I guess it slipped. They empty wine glass lay between us.

I tried smiling at her. She tried smiling back. The wine I had spilled was creeping to the edge of the table, and I don’t know how long we sat there, quiet, watching the stain spread.

The waiter brought us garden salads, loaded baked potatoes, big steaks that flopped over the sides of the plates.

Instead of walking home, Sharon asked to take the bus.

“It’s only seven blocks,” I told her.

“It’s cold out here,” she whispered.

To get out of the wind, Sharon sat on the covered bench
next to an old toothless man. I draped my black coat around her shoulders and she shrugged it into place, pulling it across her chest. She started rummaging through my coat pockets. She found my Wayfarers and grunted. I removed my silver flask of whiskey from my back pocket and took a long, thoughtful, throat-burning swallow. When I stopped, the flask felt lighter.

"Is this what you're looking for?" I asked her. She nodded. Sharon took it from me, barely sipped from it like a baby bird, and put it in her purse.

"No more tonight, OK?" she told me.

"Sure, no more for you," I said, smiling. "You've reached your limit. We're cutting you off."

She wasn't smiling. She wasn't going to give the flask back.

"Hey, come on. The night is young," I held open my hands to the old man. "Can you believe this?" I asked him. He didn't move.

"Come on, baby," I said, "why you do me like this?"

"You're stumbling, sweetheart," Sharon said.

"I am not." Sharon looked away. The old man watched for the bus down the street. I said it kind of loud.

Sharon put on my sunglasses. She swiveled towards the old man, tapping him on the knee until he looked at her.

"Look," she said, the black of the glasses accenting her red lips, yellow wig. "I'm a queen of the soap operas."

Under the bright humming lights, Sharon looked fluorescent, and the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth shone like the white scratches keyed into the plexiglass behind her. Sharon was very animated, smiling at that old man the way starlets do when signing head shots for adoring fans. Sharon couldn't deal with silence, and strove always to fill any dead part of a conversation with something "familiar and gay," as she would say. That poor old guy. He handled it well, I guess. He didn't say a word, just let her pat his leg and make up stories about how gloriously the cast was treating her, how the maid was letting her wall of acting trophies collect dust. No, that old guy just looked at her. Maybe he saw how transparent her teeth looked, how thin her fingers seemed against the fat, lead-colored veins on the back of her hand, how her eyebrows were no more than tracings in a light pencil.

"Darling," I said, my hands stretched out dramatically towards
her. Sharon loved it when I played along. "Darling you look heav-

ey tonight."

I sat down between Sharon and the old guy. She seemed genu-

inely surprised. She took the sunglasses off, and her eyes were

wet. Those eyes were what I had loved about her, once. They

used to be a rich blue, but now were much paler, like a poster

that's been in the sun too long.

I rubbed my nose under Sharon's ear. That always made her
crazy, the whole four years we were together. She murmured a
little protest, wiggled, but it was nothing a little persistence
couldn't cure. I felt her head fold over mine, our cheeks touch-
ing. Sharon was rubbing the cold Wayfarer lenses under my chin.

And as I kissed her awhile in the windy night, under the hum-
mimg fluorescent lights of a bus stop, I dropped my free hand
between her legs and slipped it into her purse. I stood up fast,
the silver flask in my left hand, bright and triumphant against the
dark violet clouds.

Sharon's face was twisted and her neck was slick where I was
kissing it. My nose was wet and cold. I closed my eyes and took
a drink. When I peeked, her face was the same. I took another
drink, longer this time, tilting my head way back, looking straight
up into the night, and the whiskey warmed me. The flask was
very light, the faint tapping when I shook it said a thimbleful was
left. When I looked again, Sharon was frisking my coat for some-
thing. I held out the flask to her.

"Wanna kill it?"

Sharon did not look up. She wiped her eyes with the back of
her hand. She slipped the sunglasses back on, and fumbled in
her purse for a cigarette.

Somewhere between the dinner salad and the check I was sup-
posed to have ended it. I had it planned so well, too. She's very
calm, rational. I understand, she says, I wouldn't want to watch it hap-
pen to you, either. I pay the check, tip very well, call her a cab, and,
with a peck on the cheek, it's done.

I in no way intended, at any time, to be standing on the stairs
to her loft.

Sharon was hunched by her door with a bundle of keys, the
echo of the opened lock bounding down the stairs, when I said,  
"I should probably get going."

"You can't stay tonight?" she asked.

"I shouldn't."

Sharon was not a stupid woman, just one who didn't want to face facts.

"It's the holidays," she said, as if that explained everything.

"True," I said, and stepped backwards two steps, holding onto the rail.

She looked really surprised. "Well at least come have a drink."
The door downstairs opened, the breeze from outside fanned hair into her eyes. She pushed it aside, grinning.

"Come on," she said, "just a drink?"


Sharon fumbled around in the fridge. She kept popping her head over the refrigerator door and seemed shocked when I was still there. I had, after all, agreed on one drink. She pulled out a festive red and green carton of eggnog. She was using her interview smile, all teeth.

I sat on the couch while Sharon cut the eggnog with rum.

"Nutmeg?" she asked.

"Uh... yeah. Sure."

"Sit back," she said. "Relax. You look all tense."

I was sitting on the edge of a sofa cushion. I smiled meekly at her but did not move. She stood very still, the short bottle of nutmeg poised over the cold yellow drinks, and I knew she would stay just like that, eyeing me, until I did what she said. So I slid back and settled into a corner of the sofa, gingerly, like I was on a small boat too easily overturned.

She put the glass down on the coffee table out of reach. The top of my drink was well dusted with nutmeg. Hers was clean and thick, missing rum.

"You're not having any spice?" I asked her.

Sharon looked at me coldly, a quick moment, then snatched up the bottle. She dumped spice into her glass. It came out in old clumps, dirty islands floating on her drink. She looked like she was going to cry.

I slid over towards her but she held up her hand. I stopped. Sharon slowly, methodically spooned out the brown clumps into
the ashtray. She lit up a cigarette, then took a sip of her drink. She slurped when she drank. I killed mine quickly, watch in hand. She studied me. Outside the loft windows, the city was smothered in dark clouds. We sat there a long while on the verge of speaking.

Big chunks of ice in her drink had frozen together, the whole mass sliding up and down in her glass. I watched her. She was working her tongue below the ice, licking at the reservoir of eggnog beneath when the whole chunk popped her in the nose. It caught her off guard, and suddenly, beautifully, she was grinning. I was too. A bead of yellow shivered on the tip of her nose.

“You know what’ll melt this ice?” she said. Sharon reached across the table and poured rum in her glass. The ice popped.

“Guess I’m off then,” I said.

“You’re going to make me drink alone?” Sharon took a big swallow of white rum, and choked it down. She was making faces.

“Damn,” she said, “that’s smooth!”

“It’s just . . . I’m not sure I have the time.”

She looked at me seriously, honestly. Sharon said, “We have all the time you want.” She was squeezing the neck of the rum bottle.

I am, at my core, hopelessly weak.

“OK,” I told her, “I’ve got about five minutes.”

Sharon got up and went straight for her albums. The couch was lumpy and I spent a minute trying to smooth a spot out, but it was no use. Her hands worked quickly in the colorful stack of albums. They were on the floor, arranged like books, and Sharon was flicking their spines from right to left with her pinkie. Like a card trick, one appeared in her hand.

“This one,” she said. “My great-grandmother’s favorite. I was 11 when she first played it for me, to drown out my family’s New Year’s drinking.”

“I remember the story, OK?” I told her. She was quiet. I started fiddling with my pocket watch, unlinking the chain, winding the knob, tapping my initials on the silvered back. Sharon had bought me that watch, a long time ago. I held it up and showed her the looping script of my initials. I smiled. Sharon
stopped looking at me, tipped the bottle back and swallowed, wincing hard.

“Careful,” I told her. Something in me wanted to go to her, to rub her shoulders, but I stayed on the couch. She was busy putting the record on.

Sharon said, “Can we hear the whole thing?” I checked the time, but the hands of my watch had stopped moving. I pushed the knob back in. Then, thinking better of it, I pulled the knob back out.

“Put it on,” I said, “and we’ll see.”

The needle skipped, clip-clop clip-clop, and dusty burlesque horns mingled in harmony with the hollow tin plinking of piano. I had heard it before. When we first started sleeping together, Sharon liked the radio on this AM oldies station, a ’40s format. The whole first year some DJ must have been in love with that tune because we heard it damn near every night. So it seemed every night I heard this story from Sharon, curled up in white sheets, about how her friends from high school couldn’t ring in the New Year without this song. Like it was some tradition.

Sharon was standing by the loveseat, eyes on the spinning turntable, looking sad. The phonograph spun. The record stopped, the arm lifted the needle automatically to bed, and even long after the spinning had stopped she did not move. It was awkward. I got an idea.

I tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to me with those pale blue eyes, so big, so sad. The damn song had done that to her. I reached out my hand and she closed her eyes, breathed in deeply. And I took the bottle from her. By the coffee table, I poured us both a finger of rum. I placed her glass in her hand.

“Let’s say we start a new tradition,” I said. “Mind if I play a tune?”

Sharon exhaled, a wheezy sigh. “Sure,” she said. She sipped her drink, wincing.

I played Chopin. It was a record I’d bought for her long ago, when her hair smelled light as new snow. Sharon did not collect compact disks, ever, swearing up and down that music sounded better on vinyl. When I gave her this album, she smiled big and hugged it to her chest. I told her it took me back to carriages in the rain, to cobblestone streets with wet people under soaked
awnings, and how silly they were to worry about staying dry. I told her lots of things.

“Yeah,” she would say, no matter what I told her, “I can almost hear that.”

Sharon tilted her head closer to the music and kept drinking. She killed that finger of rum quickly and retreated to the bottle. She was very pretty, once. But then she looked so dejected, slumping her shoulders as she stood by the record player, that it seemed only the tightness of her white sweater or the firmness of her blue jeans kept her in place, kept her from melting to the floor. She was swaying chaotically with the music, back and forth, like a bridge in the wind.

“The room is spinning,” she said. I helped her to the sofa, propped her head up on the armrest. My fingers were in her wig. It crackled from so much hair spray. A few strands were loose and I tuck one behind her ear with my thumb. Sharon’s cheek was warm from all the rum. She tried to cradle my hand softly against her shoulder, like a pillow, but I wiggled my fingers free.

“It’s getting late,” I told her.

She shook her head no. Sharon was drunk, sweating, she looked waxy, her lips were pale. I couldn’t stand to see her like that. A red stain had collected on the lips of the bottle. I took it from her and poured myself a shorty.

“Get me a cigarette,” she said. She was out of it. “Get me another drink.”

“I’m going,” I said again, “it’s late.”

“It’s early,” she started, but there was no more actress in her. Sharon looked half dead.

There were nights, years ago, when I was the one on the couch. But it was temporary, and my own fault. She used to chastise me, softly, the sweetness of her perfume making me ill. But she would kiss me on the forehead, and I would sink into the cushions, sink deeply to sleep.

I bent down and kissed her. I kissed her on the lips because I refused to put my lips close to that wig. I tasted rum, eggnog, a hint of steak. She did not return my kiss—all she could do was lie there.

And I knew she’d be the same six months from now, her white bones pocked with cancer, her veins sucking on tubes.
governed by a grey box with a grey, digital readout, tubes that give the magic water that stings like ice crystals in her arm, and over the click and whirr of the morphine drip she’d open her sweaty eyes and thank me, can you believe it, thank me, for the extra time. Even if her room, with its antiseptic walls and plastic sheets, were empty.

I tugged the comforter onto the floor, peeled back her sheets. They were a shiny material, smooth, sheets that when rubbed between two fingers sound like elk walking in snow. I got her ready for bed; all she had on was a big T-shirt that fell to her thighs. When I touched her, though, I felt it, the cancer, hard at work.

I made love to her that night, softly, like she was a paper lantern.
INNIDE AN ANGEL

Angels are clever, and do not exist,
sitting on branches
when the birches are bare,

contending an entrance
that burns in clouds
has nothing to do with God.

Drawn by a blue thread
attached to a sleeve
into cities whose nights are lit,

through false doors of churches and fields
and out of the paths of runaway taxis,
they keep walking down into the world.

Did one just pass in a dress?
Soon others will come to tie its wings,
and paint its mouth shut with a crooked white X.

I say angel over and over.
Each time I say it, one more disappears.
They tell us we live on one side of the veil.

They tell us to dance and throw sparks.
When we pause, so do the clouds:
out of the sky each follows another.

A blue and white shawl covers their shoulders.
They believe we remember,
and ride down on breezes to keep us
moving from room to room.
In one, the girl I saw slapped on the bus
sleeps on a wooden chair.

Inside an angel the walls are grey.
It seems only those who feel nothing
say angel.
The decision had just turned to night
when my free hand flew up to double grip the umbrella
and I found myself suddenly engaged in a sword fight with the wind;
a battle I would never choose
and lacked the strategy for.
I stepped on a blinking red puddle,
the neon sign repeating
*pop in a for a drink*, or something close to that.
I eased past.
An overcoat asked for the time
and it was Fall forward, or was it Fall back?
A brick wall fell away on my left
leaving me high-wired with my dancing parasol.

*Pop in for a drink—*
the quick promise of *pop!*
(A safe and speedy egress not included.)
In short, I could have liked it here.
Instead of referring to the couple of high rises
as the two thumbs-up mountains,
I could have entered them,

*gliding in on the arm of a swashbuckler*
for an elevated dinner of prawns and Perrier
(or just popped in for a drink)
and from that dispassionate height gazed down
at the dark swath of water carrying boat lights.
Up in the uppity tower, say, the 31st floor,
oh, the black sky would press
against the obsidian glass. Inside,
we would twirl, despite the fact people are starving,
the music, the temperature, on smooth, stainless steel controls,
twirl, impervious as greenhouse flowers
in the floor to ceiling windows; we would whirl,
somewhere hovered in our scented cup of air
with sheets of rain spilling down
the long, clear walls.
SKINNED YELLOW FALL

Come at me fall
thief of leaves
apples hanging yellow
as honey or lanterns.

We are isolated
in these Allegheny mountains.
Even the sunflowers are gone.
Time to close the pool,
forget the pond.

I love the light in autumn
clarified and redeemed.
The cobalt sky naked
not a blue humans know
but the blue of tapestries
epics, pharaohs, certain seas
and there’s too much air.

This must be like a last breath
of a heart seizure, a fall
into purified blue.
In one instant you understand
skinned yellow at the bottom of ponds
and the edges of marrow.
You know the languages inside
rain and stone.

In July, in Rome, they said
the coliseum was once covered
by acres of red and yellow silk.
Did they have more imagination then when augury and tarot cards were legitimate professions, tea leaves and juggling, predictions about love and drowning babies and unexpected fire?

Did they have a more subtle anatomy? Did they see networks between rivers and bridges connecting genius and catastrophe? Did they sense the interior monologues of bells, searching the night for others like themselves, dark things with a taste for absinthe and amber?
THE RED HEADED WOMEN OF AUTUMN

Now the henna, the burgundies and clarets.
It's a season for alcoholics and drug addicts.
Women who wear too much red, tight skirts.
Women who smoke and collect divorces,
run red lights drunk, feeling themselves
coming apart like the landscape
in a brutal confusion of russet and amber.
Here come the red headed women of autumn,
ladies of the lamps, flame, stage.
Gardenias, velvet curtains, and quiet, please.

Autumn never lets me down
with its chorus of inflamed women
drinking tequila and red wine,
finding a way to poison an afternoon.

The women of autumn are in tatters
in debt, unreliable, liars. They sing
out of tune, buy eight-hundred dollar hats,
call Bangkok and Bombay from your phone.
These women have bandages
where they once had mouths.
Circumstance has knocked
their teeth out.

Such women have alphabets of magenta
and orange. They read tarot cards
and know tragedy like a friend.
The women of autumn refuse marriage.
They love ports and salt water,
save pebbles from inland seas.
Such women have improvised childhoods
and fluid destinies, have their palms read
and do not believe in cancer.
There is only flame and thunder, 
bouts of rain at 3 a.m. when you 
are alone, raw, with your props 
black boa, red stilettos. 
It's time for another pill or two, 
vodka in a crystal goblet.

Last month she sunbathed topless 
in Mykanos, rode a motorcycle 
from Sorrento to Amalfi, 
bought Syrian heroin on the Spanish Steps. 
She lost her straw hat between Florence 
and Venice, it disappeared like her address 
book from Santa Fe, the baby 
she had at sixteen and never talks about, 
the boy she named Josh 
in the language of the deaf 
and never touched, not once.

Last week in Cancun, the chartered plane 
cast a miniature black replica 
like an amulet in a cargo cult 
or a milagro from a lover, 
meant to be worn at the throat. 
It was like a bullet above the mangroves 
in their relentless inner sea and I thought 
drown now, fire now, one thousand feet 
and you will be grace, still, the essence 
of limestone and eagles and cocaine.

Of course you can choreograph these women, 
how they bend, shudder, twist. 
They eat thunder, thin to bone, 
wear perfume scraped from the dead. 
Their chiffon scarves are burning. 
Their mouths are red wells. 
They feel fever coming.
Outside, a ruin of maples, a surprise filigree
across branches soft like European gold.
This is the color of remorse.
If this is all I learned in fifty years
it was enough.
LOVE STORY: AN UNTELLING

What I want to know is how to write a love story. I thought maybe you could tell me why I can’t write one, how it got to be this way. But when I called you, you had your own set of answers, your own set of questions. So I stopped asking, hung up, stretched out on the couch, and set to the unpleasant task of holding a funeral and burying you. This required a blanket over my head, sad music playing, a candle burning, abstinence, repetition.

I’ve done this before: buried my lovers in unmarked graves. The time it takes to dig them varies. There’s the dirt to consider. If it’s a nice day for it. If I feel like digging. If I want to pretend a little longer that they’re alive and kicking, just forgetting to call. But when I picture them, there they are, their graves, some gloriously grown over. Yours, still fresh, mocked all attempts to subdue you. Night after night, blanket over my face until it was moist and breathing was hard. The dirt churned and you rose and strutted away. I ran after, just to catch a glimpse between the trees, to see you turn with that laugh, that smile, that said you’d be back again the next night, and the next, with those dancing eyes that know me better than I do.

One night, blanket heavy and thick, a second candle burned to a nub, your grave sits undisturbed and quiet. I look at it, think maybe you’re going to stay dead this time. That’s when I start unearthing your grave, an unholy task, digging you back up. My fingernails broken and full of dirt. There you are, in various stages of decomposition. Your hair remains, a look, a smile, the way you wore your socks half on, half off. I pack the dirt down, spit on your grave, dare you to come back again. And when this doesn’t work, I pray, make an offering to any god who will listen. Even then I know the danger of asking for you, dead, to come back to me, that what I’m asking for isn’t resurrection, but I tell myself what I’m telling is a love story, knowing I don’t know how to tell one, that that isn’t what I’m telling. I don’t want you to stop coming back to me. I want to stop wanting you to come back to me.

The magic hours between eleven and two in the morning are
bewitching. During this time, I trouble myself. I go someplace where the memory of you can’t find me. There, I spend my time talking with someone I do not desire to talk to. I can talk myself into it. I can’t sometimes. But I can talk myself into people. See them and see possibilities. Imagine them in full court regalia, talking of phoenixes. Or they are closed books with titles I don’t recognize. I examine the covers, the binding, the cloth worn on the edge.

I find a man who’ll listen and tell him the things I used to save for you, but he doesn’t respond the way you would. This is a disappointment, but it’s OK, I can imagine you responding, anyway. Maybe that’s all I ever did. I forget to listen to him. He buys me a beer, so I tell him I’m trying to write a love story but I’m having a little trouble. I put them in a scene together, but nothing happens like it’s supposed to. I send them down the rapids without helmets on because it would mess up their hair and they wouldn’t look good to each other. They hold onto the boat, lose the paddles, water rushes in. They bail it, see there’s too much weight. There’s a struggle. They try to kick each other out. Never stand up in the boat, that’s what the guides warned them, but there they are, grabbing at each other like cats. The whole thing flips. She drowns. He’s crushed on the rocks. The man I’m telling my story to has long eyelashes, which he crunches together. He tells me he can’t help me write a love story, and I believe him. He says, Maybe you should try your hand at horror. We talk about all the horror movies ever made, but it always comes back to the dead movies for me, Night of the Living, Dawn of the, the Day of. All those dead people coming back and taking a bite out of you. Next thing I know I lose interest in talking to this person I am talking to, I lose interest in talking, and then I can’t talk at all. A shot helps here, but for the most part, the words that come out of me make no sense. They simply refuse.

I have a lot of stamina and find that this someone I am talking to who is not you is listening anyway and drinking rapidly. I think about this person, I like the way he’s listening to me and that fast I look and his eyes say I confuse him. You know, when the person’s head tilts slightly and they frown. They look at me and squint. I think he is reevaluating his chances of achieving
coitus with me. I try to remember what I just said, forget to listen to what he says, and then there’s that silence and I don’t know what he’s thinking, can’t hear him to save my life, and look at that chin. Whose chin is that? I look at him and think Who the hell are you? He vaporizes, goes to the bathroom and never comes back.

This is tiring, as you can imagine. I can’t do it too often. I stand at the bar and watch faces transform, become pale and abstract shapes, noses, cheeks, foreheads, wet blank eyes. They see me looking past them, looking down into the pit of the dancers. I can be the dancers, I can dance like a woman whose spine is elastic, not vertebrae. You wouldn’t recognize me the way I can dance like there is no limit to my legs, arms, pelvis.

I look at the men and want all of them. Ones that look like you, ones that look nothing like you. I relish their leather jackets, T-shirts, workboots, jeans, belt buckles, thick arms, wide hands, hipless torsos, their long quads and big knees, backs with shoulder blades and slight indents for a waist that tell me where the butt starts. The thought of the smell of them. Caught looking, I feel your eyes on me.

You make a fine love story when you are here for real but as a ghost your presence is more than a little unsettling. I yell for someone to close the door, but the door’s closed, and I think it was your fingers that I felt on my back. Makes me remember the promise I made to you, the one I couldn’t keep. It occurs to me that any of these men could be my next victim and I try to stop enjoying the sight of them, feel the need to apologize to each and every one, Sorry, sorry, right down the bar and into the men’s room. Sorry. I wax poetic. I am the weed in the Potomac, hydrilla, that’s spreading like dandelions, strangling boats, sucking up oxygen, killing fish and plant life. I’m drunk enough to start mumbling. I’m sitting on my bar stool saying, Your fish would die.

I wallow in my arrogance and in my strength. I lose myself in distance, contemplate my beer label. The best part of me, lost between the hours of eleven and two, lost in a carbon monoxide fog. Like the smoke in a bar. I head for the door, hacking.

I don’t always go to bars, despite what you think. Sometimes I do nice things with my friends. Nice things: coffee and tea, pizza and a movie, shopping for clothes. Sometimes, we do real
things together like interact, talk about feelings, stuff you wouldn't be interested in. I meet a friend. Over coffee, we tell each other stories about our lives, but the story I can't tell her about me, the one I don't have the words for, is that damn love story, you know the one, the one we were supposed to be. Each time I start to make one up, it always ends so badly, ends in dismemberment, a car wreck, prison, nuclear war, death, something. No happy endings. The problem with happy endings is they don't end. They keep going. I try again. I keep talking. Her teeth fall out, his hair. They keep the same couch for twenty years until it's ratty and full of holes and they can't stand the sight of it, but neither says a word because they think the other has some sentimental attachment to it. I get animated here. My eyes bug out. Shaking my fist, I scream, But each time they walk in and see that damn brown couch and know they will sit on it tonight again, and tomorrow, they are filled with boundless grief! They sit quietly filled with terror and rage! My girlfriend reminds me here I need to work on my beginnings before I get to the endings. She tries to help me, says, She shouldn't have told him to stick a sock in it in that one, she shouldn't have corrected his English in the other, she shouldn't wear those shoes with those pants, she shouldn't run around the corner when she sees him cross the street toward her. No wonder she got hit by a bus. Running like that, not looking where she was going. I go home and type one up, try to fix what I've written. I spill coffee and the paper turns brown. The cat throws up on the page where she decides she likes him.

Sometimes I have to be home. This is because my stability falters. I feel it coming. My gown turns to rags. I don black pajamas. I don't want to be comforted. I drive home at a hundred miles per hour, eat a batch of brownies, turn the radio up to ten, even though it blows the speakers and the neighbors knock on the door. Other people seem so relaxed. Why don't you turn your radio down and be quiet? I don't understand this. They go home and go to bed. They stay home and watch all the prime time shows, the eleven o'clock news, and fall asleep. You don't know what I'm talking about here. Never mind. That part's not true.

There's a soap opera I watch. You would never watch it, so let me tell you, she came back after five years, he thought she was
dead, but she wasn’t, only amnesiac. She’s even more beautiful now and he, he’s long haired and half shaven with soft eyes and Clorox-white teeth. He has that look when he smiles at her, and there she is, back, but he’s moved on, had to you see, that’s the way life is, even after the first love you have to keep moving so he did, he moved, and she was the same, only amnesiac, but then she remembered, was unwilling to forget. She learned to remember.

I take a shower and the present finds me, the moment when I step out of the shower and rub my stomach dry and look at the soft curve of skin. I stare at myself like I have seen this body before but forgot it was there.

I think the soap story’s a variation of that terrible love story they spoon feed us in girl’s training camp, *Sleeping Beauty*: I was taking a nap. I don’t know how long—years—and I woke up and there he was, kissing me, how nice, and that’s it. The end.

I try to write that story, post-ending: Sleeping Beauty fell asleep and when she woke up he kissed her and said, Let’s go home, but after a little while he said, I’m going out. She followed, caught him kissing someone else and he said, I can’t help it if you sleep too much. Maybe you should get out more. Sleeping Beauty goes to retro night at the local club but gets too drunk and doesn’t feel like being nice to anybody. No one buys her a drink because she’s leaning over the several she’s already emptied looking morose and slightly dangerous, violent dangerous. Kind of mean and annoyed, but really who can blame her? It wasn’t supposed to be that way, he was supposed to stay home after she woke up. She hates writers, they’re always changing things.

Happy endings don’t end, and that’s why they’re happy. But there are always endings, beginnings and endings. They teach you that, first thing. You never could tell me how to write a love story, and now you can’t help me end it, either. There must be other stories. Why always love? What does that mean, anyway—love—such a badly worn word, like the seat of a bus. And why does it sound to me like so many slamming doors?

On my soap there’s no one else on the set this woman can fall in love with. They brought in a rival for a week or two but he’s since disappeared and how can she have a love again like the first one? No one’d believe it. They pulled out all the stops for the
first one, having her lose her virginity on a deserted island and going on location for the wedding. That dress, outdated, but I still remember it. Must make you feel like royalty, to wear something like that. How impressive, how it all looked, monumental. How was she to know that he would forget, stop loving her? I yell at the TV, He’s not right for you! He doesn’t understand. Get over it! I’m standing, sit back, aware that I was standing and that I should have been sitting. That I’m yelling at the television set and that this is a stupid soap opera. And then I start laughing at her, at me. She is saying she will wait, if it takes the rest of her life, and my stomach hurts she is so funny. I am already leaving to go make lunch. The rest of the day I laugh and even get some reading done.

I tell myself, sex is such a silly thing, and go to bed, but in bed I remember the smell of someone else on the sheets, the warmth under the covers, dandruff on the pillow, two-hour sloppy wet kisses in a car. I get up and drink some milk, go to bed, and can’t remember what it’s like to smell someone, kiss two soft lips. I get up and try to tell the story again but I don’t know how to write a love story and what I want to ask you is how it got to be this way. Did I know once and forget? Don’t tell me this is one. Sleeping Beauty with runny mascara looking tired and crunching ice cubes at retro night, and Prince Charming off with someone else and, yeah, he’s getting it but one look at his pasty skin and you can tell he’s not happy.

OK, I tell myself, you can do this love story thing. You just need better examples. I think of the classics. Love Story: two people meet, intimacy and passion occur, but she looks a little sickly, can’t act. She dies and he stands in the snow saying, Now what? Perpetual suffering? The end. Or the other one: two made one through the magic of infatuation kill themselves before they get to the disillusioning part where they figure out two are still two. The part where she is brushing her teeth and he is clipping his toenails, he doesn’t feel like it and she does. I write Romeo and Juliet Revisited. She doesn’t die, at the last minute can’t swallow the poison. Days later, without remorse, she’s riding bareback when she meets two brothers who have a farm and offer to water her panting horse. Gleefully, she accepts. The one is a world famous accordionist, the other plays sad songs on the harmonica. I don’t
tell whether she sleeps with them or others, or whether, riding the horse, she achieves orgasm. After writing this I relax, find out I'm tired.

I sleep and there you are, come back to me. In the dream you're watching me have sex with a man neither of us know. I wake with a start. Dead people do that sometimes. Just sit up like they're about to get off the table. It's creepy when it happens. No one kisses them, despite the Sleeping Beauty propaganda.

It's four a.m. now and I'm not sleeping. How has this happened that I'm not sleeping? I thought I'd always be sleeping this time of night. Always assumed you, or someone, would be next to me, planned on it even, took precautions to guard against sleeping alone, and then ran off one day to go sleep by myself. Why did I do that? Because you can buy a dildo for seven dollars? But it's not waterproof. These are the questions I ponder until five a.m. when I decide there is something wrong with me. There are people who have lived on the streets for ten years and never have a lover, they don't wake up at four a.m. wanting. What if they do? My God, they might. Still, there are starving children all over the world. Don't I have something better to do? What do you do in your house day after day? Why don't you have to call someone, me or your mother? How can this be that you have no need to call and I call and I call. I call the weather report to hear the sound of a voice and I go out when I want sleep. What is this compulsion? This is not love. What is this compulsion that drags me out of the house when I could be home getting fat, eating cookies, watching Nightline, or getting my Sleeping Beauty rest. And I look at my cat who remains immobile fifteen hours a day and I want to know how he can sleep all the time and then I remember how, every once in a while, he peels from room to room with his ears back and his claws grabbing the carpet. I wonder if I am an insomniac, but I'm no insomniac, what am I?

Coming home, waiting for the bus, I talk to a man. His wedding ring causes me to fawn, like he is a fragile thing, a present, a flower, a passing storm. I wonder if he's happy. I wonder what that means. Doesn't matter, he should stay with her, no he shouldn't, I don't know if he should or not. That's the terrible part, those awful decisions we have to make. I wish the bus would come.
That night, I have a nightmare. It wakes me up. It’s about a man trying to break in and kill me. He has red eyes and wears a shadow. I guess my usual nightmare, the vampire that looks like the guy on the Coke commercial, the one with slicked back hair and a too-short suit, I guess he was taking the night off. And now I’m awake again, and scared. My own mind scares me. A killer man. Crazy. I wonder what he’s so pissed off about? A story he wants me to tell that I’m not telling, I think. Just a thought, I dismiss it, like all the others. Like the others, it continues to lurk.

There is some connection between my dream and my decision to attend an Anything But Love Workshop over at the Y. They perform a ritual exorcism on me that involves screaming, dancing, chanting, kneeling on the hard floor. I’m sure you wouldn’t want the details, it’s bad enough I went. We pick a partner to tell off. I tell mine he is driving me nuts, screwing up all my stories. He yells at me to stop writing then, knowing this will provoke me. I write a poem:

*Pygmalion Revisited*

He carves my face like he would a stump
Wood shavings
 tickle
I have to sneeze
 Try to hold it
Can’t
My head jerks forward
Spit on his collar
The look on his face
Is horror
I tell him Release me
I’m flesh

My workshop partner tells me this is the worst poem he has ever heard in his life. I tell him that’s because he has the sensibility of a flea beetle. We admit we don’t like each other over tea and cookies. We graduate and I go home.

You know what happens then. I undress. I lay down, pretend
to sleep until it's late enough to give up. I ignore the feeling of things lurking in the dark and go into the kitchen. The breeze rushes up my spine, pushes the hair off my neck and kisses it the way you used to when we could touch. It wraps itself around me from behind, plants soft hands around my forearms, lifts the hairs up off my arms, gives me gooseflesh. Gooseflesh: plucked raw skin, raised pink bumps. My nipples tighten and rub against my nightgown. Damn your ghost always coming back for more when I'm not sleeping. I dare you to come in the morning when the sun's out and the sky is as clean as a postcard. Wish you were here. Having a lovely time.

The breeze that blows in through the open window pulls the blue flame on the stove to one side, threatens to blow it out. The flame ripples and snaps like a flag in the wind. Outside the window is blue black except for the white cylinder of moon that makes everything shadow in contrast, except for the blue flame, which I watch, waiting for the pop and sizzle of water beginning to boil in the sauce pan.

Love story: Picture yourself in a small flat box and try to stay there. Now crush that box with your fist. That's a love story. That's how it ends.

Blanket over my head, I go at your grave with the shovel one more time, pack the dirt down. Inspect the other graves for signs of disturbance. Next time I'll know to dig more deeply. Digging graves in my nightgown and I don't care, this has to be done. The middle of the night is a fit time for such a morbid task. One final assault with the head of the shovel. Now stay there, I command. I listen for scratching, hear none.

Nothing left now but to drink my tea and listen to the quiet. Listen to all that quiet. That's quiet all right, not the empty kind. More like the ocean at night when the waves look dark and full of something, like tar. Not the waiting kind of quiet, but the kind where it is only you breathing in and out, in and out.

I turn on the radio and decide that I've given up trying to write a love story. They were always about something else, anyway: expectation, desire, longing, loneliness, fear, the absence of love, death. I decide to give up people altogether.

If I could write a love story, I would bring you back to life. I would paint you on the corner in that beat-up flight jacket with
that fake fur lining, your hair too long so it wraps around your collar. You’d be standing on a street corner, your face white with cold and your nose puffy and red, and when you saw me you’d smile, wrap one fist around the other and blow in your cold hands, dry because you never would use lotion. And I’d say let’s go get warm. We’d fade out slow with our backs to the camera, walking away.

If I could write a love story, it wouldn’t begin or end or make sense in the middle, it wouldn’t be like it was supposed to be, it wouldn’t use the word love, and it wouldn’t be a story at all.

I listen to music, hold a mug of warm tea to my lips, sniff steam. I stretch out on the floor. Let the vultures have at me. I lay in my kitchen, waiting for predators.

Out back, I hear that old magic man, that snake charmer, not you. I hear him slipping through tree leaves, already can see that slippery smile. How did he get out? He’s laughing because I still have the scar where I walked into the Frisbee my first lover was throwing. Walked into it with my left eyelid. He’s laughing at the seven stitches, and the after beach suntan salt smelling puffy eyelid fucking in my girlfriend’s basement. I don’t know how I got there, how I got here from there. Why I went anywhere. He’s knocking over trash cans. I search the top of the table, find scattered feelings under a pile of coupons I’ve been meaning to cut. I put on my slippers and head out the back door, already yelling Get back here, shaking my fist in the air. The screen door slaps behind me and the singer’s voice on the radio goes low and rises in slow taunts. Like he knows how many times I’ve been buried, how many times I’ve risen again.
CITY RAIN

Singe blue of the storm
sparks a brief web
between electric lines
running fast copper gold
like a thread pulled off a nylon stocking.
I rushed to your apartment
leaving my bicycle in the hallway
my eyes bleary with rain water
we sat in the living room
low lit by the purple somber sky
your arty garlanded iron tree of welded exhaust pipes
we sat there hardly talking
just seeping lean whiskey
our ears filled up by the heavy splattering of the gutters
and silver darting against the tin roof
the mirroring terrace marbling adumbrations over our silent faces
then suddenly it all stopped
as if the sky had just drawn off
back to summer bright 4 p.m.
Out on the streets we ambled lake edges of sidewalks
saw the last stranded cars like islets in mud stream
and downtown flotsam running down blind alleys.
We jumped across gullets banked with urban silts
a big day wash scrubbing the roads basalt black
spreading our uncanny shadows scrawny in oil rainbows
the whole city shiny soaked to a mixed smell
of tossed blooms and bloated rats.
Sprite, we walked block after block
as in the aftermath of a catastrophe
we were the only survivors
renaming everything in our silent eyes
haggard, surprised to see turning shapes of after-storm prowlers
wriggled away in the meandering haze coils of hot tarmac.
In The Supermart

there was the bag boy
who saw clean through
the produce man
who caught her in his arms
the morning she lost her way
and the pharmacist she went to
to ask for directions
he, too, saw clean through
saw how horrible it was to want
and whispered his cure
of any man, any man will do
then stood aside
minding his prescriptions
and averting his eyes like a good father

as she walked the aisles
with her new purpose,
then lined earrings and shoes
on the plastic aisle
as if she were having them for lunch
and pushed off her skirt like a snake her skins
her shirt unbuckling like a rotten rail
for the slouchy bag boy and the slippery manager
and the vegetable man peeking the corner

until they made their plays
in fluorescent light
fumbling and gesturing
so she took to the aisles
like a runaway train
while they ran marathons
in light tan and blue
her slip around her ankles
her socks in her fist
the look in her eye bowing down
though she stared straight
the look in her eye kneeling down
and all her tiny bones breaking their scaffolds
till they all stood panting
by the cake decorations
leaning into the yellow roses
and chocolate sprinkles
and candles thick as boots

and the fishmonger arrived
bored of salmon and the frozen counter
to brandish his fishy weapons at them
to pull her down for company
for a party by the muffin trays
parting oysters like walnuts
and slipping them into her mouth
and pulling up her slip
and keeping with the questions
until she felt dreamy and unalarmed
until pearls streamed like waterfalls
from his mouth to hers
and she slipped him on
the definite finger of her love hand
and fell asleep in that place:

*a lemon an oyster*
*his nametag spells his name*
*at the threshold of the electric doors*
*I fluttered my skirts like the sea*
The minor devil wears a leather bomber
and overshoes to push through night-slush and sleet
to the house of two retiring angels assigned
to distract him in Cleveland. He's handed a plate
of delicacies, like local angels; bookcase speakers
hymn them in with piano jazz; the white-haired hosts grind
coffee beans; angels talk poetry beneath a watercolor
of a green cantaloupe sunning apples on a brass tray.
When the host painted it, his wife and New York City
were young, he tells the minor devil, were more
devilish. The host's green fruit will never decay.
The devil envies this hospitality
that beams, through the snow, a homing signal to all
the locals practicing short-winged flights across
Cleveland. His own flight pattern is a free-fall
sideways across America, homeless
as a cloud. But the same clear signal homed in
on him. Here he stands, almost human for one
night in this house where the difference between
what he is and what he could be closes in,
angel after homely angel. This fresh drink
placed in his hand, this seeking of his opinion—
hell blows away outside, and whom can he thank?
The hosts insist on thanking him for flying
into Cleveland; for permitting them to take him,
dressed like a nice heretic, to the Brahms Requiem.
_Blessed be the dead_, the chorus was singing
in Severance Hall. I thought I'd have to die
to be done with this devil pose, he tells his protector:
I didn't guess I could lose it simply by
flying to Cleveland. Have another deviled egg,
the hostess says. He does. He wants to kiss her
for feeding him like an angel among
snow clouds; her bright cloud hair makes his gray young.
He could thank them all for ignoring his big ingrown horns, his slightly sulfurous breath. Narcissism is hell, however minor its mirror, however invisible. In this air of tiny crystal wings cleaving to Cleveland his heart is squeezed as though by a gold band that marries him to a strange idea that death and hell can simply be canceled anywhere he pronounces the unlikely mantra Cleveland. The painted cantaloupe shines like a green sun while angels bid him goodnight and step, one by one, into the knife wind. Just one minute more, he says. Cleveland, he says, and opens the door.
Andrea Comachio

INDISPENSABLES

Ingrid sat on the floor while behind her, on the couch, David backcombed her dark wiry hair with his fingers. He plucked out a white strand and handed it to Ingrid who had begun a collection on the black lacquered coffee table.

Apes grooming each other, thought Ingrid. “My god,” she said, pushing at the little pile of hairs. “It looks like an old woman died here.” She caught herself too late then realized it didn’t matter. She’d been censoring this sort of off-hand comment, along with the gloomy talk shows and movies on cable, for months; tonight, though, she wasn’t at her father’s.

“Don’t we have a flair for the melodramatic,” said David, yanking out another hair.

“That hurt.”

David leaned over, positioning his face beside hers. “You only hurt the one you love,” he sang close to her ear. David was always funnier and more affectionate when his lover, Lewis, was out of town. She pushed his head away and stomped her foot against the plush white carpeting. No one but Lewis could get away with white carpeting in Montana. She liked him but was glad he wasn’t around tonight. He reminded her of the decorators she had worked with in Los Angeles: startling, handsome and poised, immaculately groomed with expensive, exacting taste in everything. She hated to even think how she registered on that kind of radar. What could such a man possibly want from her?

“I’m twenty-nine and my skin still breaks out; it’s not fair that I have grey hair too.”

“Have Lewis give you a rinse.”

Although Lewis was Ingrid’s Missoula hairstylist, she’d never allow him to pluck her grey hairs or even let David do it with him in the room. But Lewis had accompanied his mother to yet another of her body building competitions, this one in Las Vegas. Earlier David had half-jokingly suggested fixing up Lewis’ mom with Ingrid’s father as the solution to everyone’s problems.

“Then Lewis would stay home with me, where he belongs,
and you could stop worrying about your dad.” The idea of her father with a forty-nine-year-old competitive body builder, or any woman besides her mother, seemed preposterous to Ingrid. “Hey, I was only kidding,” David said, punching Ingrid’s shoulder after an awkward silence.

“I know. I was just trying to imagine my dad and Vera.” Lewis had a photo of his mother taped to his mirror at the salon: Vera tanned and oiled, her muscley breasts straining against a bikini top as she hoisted a trophy over her mane of highlighted hair. She had begun working out six years ago following her husband’s fatal heart attack at the rodeo. Ingrid’s father hadn’t attempted anything quite so dramatic in his grief. So far he seemed content to immerse himself in an endless series of trivia books.

David raked his hands over Ingrid’s scalp and began massaging her neck.

“Were you grey before your mother got sick?”

“A little, but it definitely got worse once I moved up here.” David worked his hands down the length of her neck and began kneading her shoulders.

“Lewis once knew a man who went to sleep with a head of dark hair and woke up with white hair—we’re talking Andy Warhol—the night after he accidentally ran over and killed his baby daughter.”

“Gee, David, you really know how to soothe a girl.”

“Sorry.”

“I’ll consider forgiving you if you keep working on my shoulders.” It had been months since a man, or anyone, had touched her like this. Brad, her old boyfriend in Los Angeles, used to give her back rubs and after she moved to Montana they’d tried to keep things going, but even over the phone Ingrid found herself full of anger she was ashamed to express. During their conversations she imagined him puttering around his white-tiled kitchen with the cordless to his ear, consulting the calendar, mapping out days and weeks, considering no one but himself.

David broke the spell by gently karate-chopping her shoulders and back. “Would you like a drink?” he asked.

“I can’t—I’ve got to get home,” Ingrid said, watching as David
stood and poured himself a shot of Lagavulin. "Oh sure, I leave and you break out the good stuff."

"Final countdown and I intend to get pleasantly hammered." David tapped his watch. "The B.S.D.'s from corporate arrive at Big Bernie's Discount Warehouse in thirty-seven hours, sixteen minutes."

"B.S.D.'s?"

"That's plebeian for Big Swinging Dicks." "I get it."

David downed his drink. "But you aren't getting any, that's your problem."

Ingrid glared at him. Lately he'd been making a lot of snide comments about her lack of a personal life.

"Sorry. Couldn't resist. Don't give me that look—I'll fire you. That is, if you don't quit first. Just remember: no glowing references unless you give two weeks' notice."

"You actually think I'd put Big Bernie's on my resume?" said Ingrid.

"You'll ditch us all and go back home where you belong. I can hear the City of Angels calling."

"Oh, stop. I don't miss that smoggy corner of hell one bit." After nine months in Missoula, Ingrid had adopted the habit of insulting California. It was practically a sport in Montana. Ingrid frowned as David poured himself another shot of scotch.

"I'm worried about you," she said. "You take this management stuff too seriously."

"Once again. Ms. Murphy, you are absolutely right. But wait, wait. I need my manager's costume." He ducked into the kitchen, returned with a spangled matador's hat on his head and bowed deeply.

"As Manager of Household Goods at Big Bernie's Discount Warehouse Store Number 36 I christen you, Ingrid Murphy, Supervisor of Indispensables."

"I got that promotion two months ago," she said.

"And now, my Queen of the Charmin Twenty-Four Pack, Guardian of coffee filters, I bid you goodnight." David removed his hat. "Seriously," he said, "we have to get some work done tomorrow. I want all the aisles in Households straightened and restocked."
Ingrid curtsied. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“That’s what I like to hear. See you in the morning?”

“Wouldn’t miss the cheer,” said Ingrid in a mocking tone. Each day before unlocking the front door, all the employees formed a circle on the sales floor and recited the store cheer. It was corporate policy, mandated by Bernie himself, and although Ingrid felt ridiculous doing it, she liked it. It reminded her of summer camp where they had all gathered and sung for the most ordinary things: putting up the flag, every terrible meal, the raccoons raiding the garbage. From the beginning, Ingrid had been an eager participant, realizing even as a child that there was only so long one could get away with such ritualized fellowship and enthusiasm. And now, knowing that Bernie had implemented the policy because a consultant had recommended it as an effective, no-cost method to reduce employee tension and turn-over (David had told her this), didn’t lessen its effect: Ingrid dreaded leaving Big Bernie’s and returning to the real world.

The vague panic that started whenever she knew she should already be home began to press down on Ingrid as she drove through town. She hadn’t told her father she’d be going anywhere after work and hadn’t called from David’s either. He might have figured it out, but Neil was an alarmist, a catastrophic thinker. She should have gone straight home regardless; he’d been alone all afternoon and now half the evening too. Had he gotten himself dinner? She’d made up a plate of last night’s leftovers and put it in the refrigerator but he still wasn’t sure how the microwave worked. She gunned the engine through an intersection where the light had just clicked from yellow to red and a truck full of boys raising their fists barely missed broadsiding her. Her heart racing, she drove to the end of the block and pulled over, hoping the boys hadn’t seen her stop. Her upper lip broke out in a fine dewy sweat. She switched on her hazard lights and the flashing yellow signal in the intersection ahead blinked in perfect synchronicity. The street glowed eerily, the wet pavement slick and bright. She turned off the defroster, then the hazard lights and there was no sound but her own breathing and heartbeat. It occurred to her then that she could stop. Just stop.

She parked the car and made herself walk at a leisurely pace
to Latte Talk About, the only cafe in downtown Missoula open at that hour. She took a corner booth meant for four people, telling herself she deserved to sit wherever she wanted. Her cappuccino arrived in an enormous cup and saucer. Alice in Fucking Wonderland, she thought, hunched over it. Most of the other patrons seemed to be university people—young, with torn jeans and long hair, goatees. The women at the next table laughed too loudly and easily, aware of their voices’ timbre. A man in the opposite corner sketched, tapping his foot to Thelonious Monk floating down from the speaker mounted above his head. Ingrid felt envious of them: a slow evening with friends spent flirting and gossiping about classmates or professors, but she also felt resentful. Indulgent was the word that came to mind. She snickered to herself—who were they, all these people with time to sit around for hours talking and drinking coffee? Didn’t they have responsibilities?

On the way home Ingrid rolled both front windows down in an attempt to blow the smoke out of her hair. Cigarettes and cancer in the family: you couldn’t tempt fate like that and get away clean. She stuck her head out the window and drove on. The rush of damp air made her eyes water. Last winter, while driving home from radiation therapy, her mother had complained that her scalp was hot, practically burning. She rolled her window all the way down and stuck her head into the sharp February chill. When she pulled her head back in, half her hair was gone. “That’s better,” she said and in the rearview mirror Ingrid saw clumps of her mother’s hair spiralling across the asphalt.

As she pulled into the driveway, Ingrid anticipated her father waiting anxiously inside, but he was settled deep into his recliner with another of his trivia books.

“Hi honey,” he said, glancing over his reading glasses.

“Sorry I’m late. Had to help David restock. Managers from corporate are visiting the store tomorrow.” She walked past him into the kitchen and scraped at a dirty plate in the sink while her face heated with shame. Why was she acting like a teenager, arming herself with excuses and lies? “What did you have for dinner?” she asked.

“Hmm? Oh, some frozen stuff.”

“Did you feed Pearl?” she asked. If Pearl hadn’t eaten she’d
be in the kitchen whining at Ingrid’s heels, but the dog was asleep, dreaming, paddling her feet on the floor beside Angie’s empty chair.

“Once, I forgot to feed the dog. Once.”

She finished putting away the plates, set the dishwasher’s timer so the machine would spring to life at two a.m. and sat down on the sofa.

“There are only eleven sword swallowers left in the world,” her father said. Ingrid looked up; he’d been reading The Oddest Jobs.

“They train themselves by first learning to swallow their own fist. Fight the gag reflex.” Neil was happiest when dispensing information like this.

“There’s a whole other world out there,” he said, waving toward the field. He closed his book, took off his glasses and swung them by the earstem for a moment. “I’m going up. You’ll put Pearl out to pee?”

“Don’t I always?” Ingrid asked, annoyed because he had to let her know he was keeping track, checking up the way he had during Angie’s illness, when he made charts and schedules for all the medications. Now he rose and walked toward her, a big man with a ruddy complexion and thick swirls of white hair. Age spots and thin, veiny skin covered his hands. Neil’s long legs had grown thinner while his chest had rounded out, but at sixty-three with a stiff back, he still managed to convey the clumsy physical arrogance of a former football guard. Years ago he used to fill the house with his rage. He was a door stammer back then, fierce in his movements. His face had reddened, his hands became sweaty, his whole body a big furnace cranking heat. But what was it he’d been so angry about? She couldn’t remember.

“Just didn’t want you to forget,” he said, bending to kiss her forehead, his shirt billowing the sweet smells of aftershave and hay. “Goodnight.”

She watched him climb the stairs, listened as he settled himself on the bed where he’d watch the little television they’d brought upstairs for Angie until he fell asleep with the remote in his hand. She put the dog out and made herself some tea, standing beside the stove to catch the kettle before it whistled. Pearl scratched at the door and Ingrid let her in. The dog jumped on the couch and
before Ingrid could think about scolding her, Pearl let out a dramatic groan and curled up. It was pointless, anyway, trying to keep the dog off the couch. Neil let her up there all day while he was home. “You,” she said, but her remonstrative tone only set the dog’s tail in motion. She picked up her father’s book and read a section about a veterinary acupuncturist. In the photo, a cockatoo with a halo of bristling silver needles perched on his hand.

She carried her mug into the kitchen and looked around. She and her father hadn’t changed much there since Angie died, just rearranged the insides of a few cupboards. The bird nests were still on the windowsill; the collection of teapot lids hung above the stove. On closer inspection, she saw they were coated with a thin film of grease and dust and she filled the sink with hot water and dish soap and began washing. The teapot lids were old, but not heirlooms. There were no heirlooms from Angie’s family; there nearly wasn’t a family. After Angie announced she intended to marry Neil, who was divorced, her parents disowned her. They were that Catholic. Only Ingrid’s Aunt Theresa, Angie’s younger sister, kept in touch. Ingrid had tried to imagine it many times, giving up your family for someone like Neil. She had once asked her mother how she could stand it, never speaking to or seeing her parents again. “They’re the ones missing out,” Angie said. “They’ll never know this wonderful granddaughter.”

She dried each lid before realizing she’d forgotten how her mother had arranged them. The pattern should have been burned into her brain; during the last nine months she’d spent hours staring at that wall, waiting for something to boil or thicken. She hung and re-hung the lids, but could not remember the way it had been. Finally giving up, she arranged them in a random pattern, hoping her father wouldn’t notice. Every day another bit of Angie slipped away, irretrievable.

She turned off the overhead light in the living room and gave Pearl a perfunctory pat on the head and the dog rolled to expose her belly. Ingrid complied and rubbed the warm pink-brown skin there. This was the time of day she liked best—everything quiet and shut down for the night. There was a cricket somewhere in the house. She picked up *The Oddest Jobs* and slumped into her father’s recliner, letting her feet dangle over the chair arm. Next to the veterinary acupuncturist was a photo of the massage thera-
pist rubbing down the flank of a Bengal tiger. The animal had a
dazed, drooly look on its face. In the end, everything but Angie’s
feet were too tender to massage.

“Where did you learn this?” she’d asked. Ingrid had her
mother’s foot firmly in her hand. Running her thumb across the
stubble on the knuckle of Angie’s big toe, Ingrid wondered why
her mother continued to shave the tiny patch of hair that grew
there. It seemed absurd in this context but then so did other
things she continued doing, like flossing and recycling. Angie
sank back into the pile of pillows.

“Camp Wasewagen.”

“What else did they teach there?”

“There’s no blow in blow job.” At that, Angie let loose a loud,
hard burst of laughter. It was the laugh she was known for—the
laugh that used to make men at parties and restaurants look up
from the other side of a room. Angie clutched her side.

“Well,” she said, recovering, “then it was money well spent.”
Her mother had always been the wildest of the three. One Christ­
mas she sent her friends copies of the Pop-Up Kama Sutra. She
was bold in the kitchen and garden, willing to try unusual combi­
nations.

Ingrid lifted the covers to rub her mother’s other foot.

“When your father sells the house, make sure you take the
rocks, okay?” Angie had decorated her garden with the drift­
wood and rocks she collected every year at the river. There was a
bleached dog skull out there too, in the fens. Pearl carried it off
once and Angie had referred to her as The Cannibal ever since.
Angie’s last weeks were full of dog stories. Pearl’s puppy stories,
when she was just a Seed Pearl, the old tricks she used to do, the
way she propped herself up on her elbow. “I hope you two can
talk after I’m gone,” Angie once said before falling asleep and it
took Ingrid a minute to realize that her mother was referring to
her father and not the dog.

But conversations weren’t easy with Ingrid’s father. She sus­
pected he’d moved to Montana to avoid having them. He’d grown
tired of Southern California years ago. He had his own plumb­
ing business there, but the Murphys were never the kind of
wealthy that people in Arcadia appreciated. Neil feuded with the
neighborhood association after having been asked, repeatedly, to
please not park his truck out front. Instead of complying, he invited his employees to the house for lunch by the pool which meant there were often four or five trucks with the big purple toilet and “A Flush Beats a Full House” logo parked on the street. Once he decided to sell the business, he began looking for a place where he could get away from it all and settled on Montana, the least populated state in the country. While Ingrid was still at UCLA, her parents bought this house on twenty acres north of Missoula.

“This is the life,” Ned said shortly after moving up here. “No more freeways, no smog, no air conditioning or Jehovah’s Witnesses.” He learned to shoot skeet, bought a tractor, got a hunting license and nearly took off his arm learning to use the new chain saw.

Now the full moon cast a glow on the room, the sofa, the dog. Ingrid thought she saw something move in the yard and it sent an electric charge down her spine. It would be just like her mother to come back in the garden. But it was only a breeze moving through the rhubarb patch, the broad curled leaves playing tricks in the moonlight.

“Goodnight, Cannibal,” she whispered to the dog, stroking its head. Pearl’s tail flickered but she didn’t open her eyes. Ingrid turned off the hall light and washed her hands in the bathroom. The wallpaper had come loose in the corner. She refolded the towel and sighed. Re-papering the downstairs bathroom—another project. The house would show better once her father decided to sell. But for now he wanted to stay. At least until he figured things out. Figure out what? Ingrid wondered. The place was too big for one person, required too much care. What will you do when I’m gone, she’d asked him. I’ll manage, he’d said. She thought of him there alone, flailing about the kitchen, forgetting to feed the dog, watching too much television and burying himself in trivia books.

“I’m not exactly sure,” was the answer she gave to people who asked her when she’d return to Los Angeles. “I can’t leave my father yet.” *You’re a good girl to help him out like this.* And then they patted her hand. She was waiting for the right time to go home and she’d know when that was.

Upstairs her father slept, snoring softly, his face furrowed,
she was sure, with worry. Searching for the remote, she tried not to wake him while picking through the folds of the Hudson Bay blanket he’d flung over himself. She hit the power button; in an instant Lauren Bacall’s face shrank to a hovering blue disk then disappeared from the room.

Across the hall, Ingrid sat on her bed and pulled off her clothes. For nine months she’d been living in the guest room and it still seemed odd. On the dresser were all the familiar things Angie had displayed for visitors to admire: the Chinese snuff bottle with a dragon of carved jade, the arrowhead she had found buried in an old flower box, a large African basket, a beveled mirror framed with inlaid birch bark, a swan made of spidery hand-crocheted lace starched and twisted together. There was a photo of the three of them in a Venetian gondola: Ingrid at twelve, scowling and sweaty, her father shading his eyes and bright sunburnt nose, Angie’s sleek, dark hair and radiant smile. She had been the better traveler, too.

Ingrid turned off the light and slid beneath the covers. As the flowering crabapple scraped against the window, stretched its shadow branches across the closet door, Ingrid dreamt about her rented storage space in L.A. She pulled the boxes and sheets off her tired gray sofa and it seemed huge, gleaming under the single yellow light bulb. She sat on the cold concrete floor, unwrapped her dishes and found herself surprised by each one. She hadn’t remembered any of her things and the dream felt like Christmas—pure greedy joy, sitting there among stacks of boxes all for her.

The next morning she was up at seven, working out to her step aerobics video, when her father came down. He rarely got up so early and Ingrid was embarrassed to have him see her exercising like this—punching and huffing her big t-shirt. Neil’s hair stood on his head in stiff meringue-like peaks; his nose and ear hair needed trimming. He bent to pet the dog.

“Did you eat?” he asked Pearl.

“Yes, I fed her already,” said Ingrid. “Your vitamins are on the counter.”

He poured himself a cup of coffee, scooped up his vitamins,
rummaged around for a magazine and headed for the bathroom upstairs. The phone rang. Ingrid turned off her video and answered. A woman wanted to know if Neil was there.

“He’s not available just now.”

“Oh, Ingrid. Hi. It’s Georgia. I was just wondering if your father still needed a lift to his doctor’s appointment.”

Ingrid glanced at the calendar on the pantry door. The day’s square was blank. “Thanks for the offer but you’ve done too much for us already. I’m taking Dad to his appointment.”

“All right then. Let him know I called, will you?”

“Will do.”

Georgia Wilkins could be unnerving. She lived on the corner and boarded over a hundred horses in stables equipped with filtered water and forced air heat. She had an indoor riding arena and property that stretched across both sides of the county road. Yoko Ono was an old friend of hers. Several of the Sable Drive residents claimed that the electric fence Georgia had put up was a hazard to dogs and children, and after spring meltdown any potholes within half a mile were attributed to the tunnel she’d gotten a permit to dig beneath the county road. She was gaining on sixty but dressed much younger and despite living on a dirt road, her shoes never showed any signs of wear. Georgia and Zane, her much older husband, had moved from Aspen and after he died she bought herself a pale yellow diesel Mercedes, the only engine on the road that knocked.

She was neighborly though, and had been waiting at the hospital when the surgeon came with news of Angie’s cancer. Just the fact that she had witnessed such a private, painful moment was reason enough for Ingrid to resent her, but now she was moving in on Neil. “Who was on the phone?” Neil called down the stairs.

“Georgia. I told her I’d take you to the doctor.”

“I thought you had to work. My appointment’s not until nine.”

“I can be a little late.” Ingrid called Big Bernie’s, left a message for David with the receptionist and fried two eggs for her father. She told him his breakfast was ready then stood at the sink watching the birds swarm the feeder. She couldn’t sit with Neil at the table while he ate. He chewed noisily with his mouth open, working the food around.

Spring 1999
"How come you need someone to drive you?" she asked. Neil set his fork down and swallowed the last of his orange juice. "I'm getting my eyes checked and he's going to put those drops in."

"Oh. Well, I'm going to shower and then I'll be ready."

"I really don't see why you're taking time off work to do this. Georgia can drive me downtown."

"Oh, Daddy," Ingrid said, sidling up to her father. She planted a dry little kiss on his cheek. "Don't be silly."

At the doctor's office, Ingrid chewed a thumbnail to the quick and flipped through a whole pile of magazines, not even bothering to look at the pictures. She'd spent so much time in waiting rooms over the last year. Knowing that Neil was only having a routine eye exam didn't seem to make a difference; she still wanted to bolt. It seemed like an eternity before her father appeared in the paper-framed sunglasses.

On the way through town, Neil tapped the dashboard clock. "Nine-forty-three. You're late."

"I told you that wasn't a problem."

"I hate to see you take time off work to chauffeur me around. Georgia could have driven."

Ingrid turned toward her father. "Georgia has done too much already," she said. "You can't always depend on other people. I'm here now, but you've got to learn to do more for yourself." Sometimes Ingrid was ashamed to hear herself scolding her father but now that Angie was gone, someone had to tell him and if she didn't do it, who would? Her father sat through this silently, his eyes hidden behind the black squares of plastic. He seemed to sink into his seat and when he turned toward Ingrid she saw the sun reflected on the surface of those ridiculous glasses—a brilliant white star.

"I need more stamps," he said after a long silence. Ingrid pulled into the post office parking lot, left the engine running and told her father to sit tight. The man ahead of her in line had an artificial ear and she couldn't stop staring at it. It was pinker than the rest of his skin, like rubber doll flesh, and she wanted to touch it. She was wondering how he'd lost his ear when the sound of cheeping birds filled the lobby. The outer door was closed and she couldn't see any nests in the rafters.

Spring 1999
She handed the clerk her father’s ten dollar bill. “What is that noise?” she asked.

“We just got five hundred chicks in for the farm supply store. They’re three days old and hungry.”

“You can send chicks through the mail?”

“You’d be surprised what people put in the mail. Just last week one of the boys at the university got a package from his mother and what do you think she had in there? Ice cream sandwiches dripping everywhere. But then, she was from California.”

In the car, Ingrid told Neil about the artificial ear, the chicks and the package of ice cream, but all he asked about was his change.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“My eyes feel all rubbery.” His lip twitched; he was still annoyed with her and she decided a stop at Latte Talk About might help smooth things over.

“What are we doing here?” he asked when she parked in front of the cafe.

“We’re going to have some coffee.”

“I already had my coffee.”

“Then get something else.”

He trudged in and lifted the oversized glasses to study the menu.

“Are these real egg creams? Made the old-fashioned way?” he asked the guy behind the espresso bar.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Because I don’t want one if it isn’t authentic.” Neil stared suspiciously at the guy’s multiple earrings.

“He’ll have an egg cream,” said Ingrid.

Neil frowned as Ingrid chose the only empty booth, below a stereo speaker. The music was too loud and when Ingrid picked up their drinks she asked the girl behind the counter to please turn down the volume.

Neil took a cautious first sip and turned the glass slowly in his hand, surveying it. “I haven’t had one of these in years,” he said.

“Is it good?”

“Just like I remember.” He took another swallow, licked the
foam from his lips. When Ingrid looked up, tears spilled down his cheeks.

"Dad?"

He wiped his face with a napkin but couldn't stop crying.

"Good thing I have these on, huh?" he said, touching the sunglasses. She hadn't seen her father cry since Angie's memorial service.

"What is it?"

"This egg cream. Brings it all back to me."

"Brings what back?" She waited for her father to compose himself. He was clearly embarrassed, but made no move to leave. Ingrid patted his forearm and anticipated a story about Angie—maybe they used to hold hands in soda fountains—but her father began talking about his brother.

"Summers during high school your Uncle Tom and I used to dress up and take the train into downtown Chicago. We went around to the nice hotels. All summer long there were weddings in the banquet rooms. Fancy ones with big bands and ice sculptures. Tom and I had this game. Whenever we managed to sneak into one of those receptions we had a contest to see who could dance with the bride first. Loser bought the winner an egg cream. We were just kids but thought we were the bee's knees with our summer suits and slicked-backed hair."

"Who won?" asked Ingrid.

"Oh, I don't know. Both of us. We didn't keep a running score, but I'll tell you, I danced with a lot of beautiful women on their wedding days. It was different then. You never touched a girl unless you danced with her. The wedding dresses were made of that slippery satin and at the reception the girl hooked the train up to her wrist somehow and when you spun her there was this rustling sound." Neil finished his egg cream and wiped his face again. She could almost see him there beneath the crystal chandeliers, spinning a pretty stranger around the dance floor. She wanted to say something to her father about his story but she felt as lost as he looked. He was years away from her and everything she knew.

Ingrid cracked her window on the drive home and the rich, loamy smells of the country roads drifted into the car. Neil watched the landscape, occasionally nodding as if granting his
approval. All along the roads the lilac bushes were covered in droopy lavender blooms. Leggy stalks of lupine filled the ditches. Neil took off his glasses, lifted his face to the sun and laughed to himself as they drove by the Pagano’s. Ingrid laughed too, remembering how Bill Pagano had bragged about finally shooting that porcupine with a twelve-gauge. The blast had sent quills flying through the yard and Bill’s wife, who had lobbied for a live trap, drove into town and bought him a new pair of pliers. For weeks they’d seen him out there, extracting quills from tree trunks and wood fencing.

They passed a farm where horses grazed between a row of trailered sailboats on the field.

“Why haven’t you gone fishing yet?” Ingrid asked her father. “It’s warm enough.”

“Oh, I don’t know about fishing this year.”

“Why not?”

“I think it’s time to try something new.” He paused. “Georgia’s offered to give me riding lessons.”


“Why not?”

“What if you fell?”

“What if I fell in the boat? What if I fell down the stairs? I could spend the rest of my life worrying about falling,” Ingrid turned onto Sable Road and sped past Georgia’s property. “Would you slow down,” Neil said, “I want to get the paper.” Ingrid stopped next to the mailbox but even after unbuckling his seat belt, Neil couldn’t reach the Herald. “Back up and get a little closer,” he said. Ingrid threw the car into reverse but then pulled up too close, grazing the passenger-side mirror against the mailbox. Neil let this pass without comment, got his paper, slid off the rubber band and glanced at the front page while Ingrid parked in the driveway.

She got out of the car, rushed past her father and shut the front door on Pearl, who’d rushed over to greet them. Upstairs, in the guestroom, she changed into her work clothes and brushed her hair with furious strokes.

When she came downstairs, Pearl was on the couch, next to
Neil. He looked up from the newspaper spread across his lap and the dog’s head.

“What’s with you?” he said.

“You just don’t see.”

“According to Dr. Stang, my vision is fine, quite good, actually for a man my age.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it.”

“Then why don’t you tell me what you do mean.”

“Don’t you see how Georgia is horning in on you?”

Neil held up his hand. “Stop right there. Georgia is a good neighbor and she’s becoming a good friend. If anyone’s horning in around here, it’s you.”

“Me?” Blood rushed to Ingrid’s face. Pearl slid out from under the newspaper and jumped into Angie’s chair.

“The last thing I want is my daughter fussing over me like I’m some frail old man who doesn’t know his ass from a hole in the ground.”

“That’s not what I think.”

“Listen to yourself some time.” He folded up his paper. “I’m happy to help you out for as long as you need, but I’ve got my own life to live. Both of us do.”

“Help me out? Sure is nice to know I’m appreciated around here.” She reeled into the hallway and yanked her purse from the coat tree.

“Ingrid,” her father called.

“I’m late,” she said and slammed the door behind her.

When Ingrid arrived at work, Holly was on a step stool, reorganizing the Ecco kitchen utensils. They had both been hired as inventory temps, but now Ingrid was Holly’s supervisor.

“Why are you doing this?” Ingrid asked. Holly blushed deeply, flipped the tail of her thick braid into her mouth and sucked on it. Ingrid fought the urge to reach over and pull the hair out of the girl’s mouth.

“David asked me to. He said you were going to be late and that I should go ahead and get started,” she trailed off.

“I’ll finish up here. Go see if he needs you for something else.” Holly turned, rushed off and the wet end of her braid left damp marks as it slapped the back of her thin t-shirt.

Ingrid pulled down all the vegetable peelers and re-hung them
next to the graters. Much more logical than the way Holly had them. She was starting on the wine openers when a customer marched over.

"I've been all over this damn store," the woman said. "Why aren't these with the coffee makers?" she asked, holding up a replacement carafe. Ingrid had no good answer for her. Convenience was the concept behind Indispensables. It had begun with just one aisle of paper products, light bulbs, film and batteries. Despite the fact most customers were hostile about the whole idea, Indispensables had been expanded and now included all the Ecco kitchen gadgets as well as masking, packing and scotch tape, Rubbermaid trash cans, coffee-maker filters and replacement carafes, tea kettles shaped like pigs, cows, cardinals and smiling tomatoes. The woman waited for Ingrid to respond.

"It's considered an Indispensable," she answered meekly.

"You need a goddamn map to shop at this place."

"Actually, there is a map," Ingrid said. "The greeter up front can give you one." The woman left in a huff. Ingrid returned to her bottle openers, but when David came over to see how things were going, she couldn't hold back her tears.

"Let's go talk," he said. Ingrid followed him through Households, ducking her head as she passed Holly.

"Now what's the matter with you?" David asked. They were sitting on a pallet of canned green beans in the warehouse. He shook a Camel from his pack.

"Me too," Ingrid sniffed. David lit two cigarettes and handed her one.

"Well," he said, exhaling a ribbon of smoke.

"It's this woman, Georgia. She's after my father."

"The neighbor with the horses?"

"Yeah, her."

"So, what's wrong with that?"

"I can't stand her. She's pushy and I don't trust her. I can't figure out what she wants from my father."

"I thought she was rich."

"She is."

"So she's not after his money," Ingrid shook her head and blew her nose. "I'm sure Neil can hold his own with the horsey set."
"Oh, please. He's a mess, David. This morning he cried over an egg cream."

"His wife died four months ago. He's supposed to cry." David dropped his cigarette and stepped on it. "So are you," he added. Ingrid let the tip of her cigarette melt a hole through the shrink-wrap on a case of beans. An acrid wisp of black smoke rose before her. "You know," said David, "you and Lewis are a lot alike."

"How's that?" She couldn't imagine Lewis being any less like her.

"You both have that only-child syndrome. You think your parents need you. But it sounds to me like Neil's getting on with his life. Maybe you're the one with the problem."

Ingrid's indignation flared. Why was she letting him talk to her like this? She burned another hole in the plastic.

"Stop that," David said, grabbing her cigarette. "What are you going to do with yourself?" he asked. "Spend the rest of your life working at Big Bernie's and fretting over your father?"

"That's not exactly what I had planned." But there was no plan. She could go back to L.A., but for what? She and Brad were finished. It was unlikely Wall Flowers would hire her back. She'd screwed up the last job they'd sent her on—a Brentwood nightmare of a bathroom. Columns and a domed ceiling over the shower. The client had special-ordered William Morris wallpaper from Liberty of London and Ingrid ruined three rolls of it on the ceiling alone. If she returned to L.A. she'd have to start her life all over. Just the thought of it was daunting.

The storewide intercom crackled. "Customer service to Indispensables. Customer Service to Indispensables." Ingrid began to hoist herself up, but David pulled her back.

"Let someone else take care of it," he said.

"Indispensables," Ingrid snorted. "Such a stupid department."

"I know. There's already been talk about eliminating it entirely. The customers don't seem to like it."

"I could have told you that," Ingrid said. "Thanks for the cigarette. And the pep talk." She stood to go.

"Wait a sec. You've got smudges." David licked his thumb, wiped it beneath Ingrid's eyes and gave her an appraising glance.

"So, Mr. Manager, am I excused now?"
David gave her a little shove. “Go forth and multiply,” he said. “Do as I say, not as I do—is that it?” “Funny, Ingrid. Sure will miss you around here.”

When Ingrid got home, Pearl wasn’t in the house. Neither was Neil, but his car was in the garage and he’d left a note on the kitchen counter: Soup in the crock pot. Ingrid lifted the lid and held her face over the steam. Angie’s lentil soup recipe. Had he made it himself or defrosted a batch from the freezer? She checked the kitchen trash can for evidence, but found it empty. She got a spoon from the drawer and tasted the soup. A little heavy on the black pepper, definitely not a batch of Angie’s. Ingrid stood there, eating out of the crock and thought about starting her own wallpapering business. She’d never enjoyed working for those catty decorators at the store anyway. She already had her own equipment. All she really needed were some business cards. It was something to consider, anyway.

An hour later, Neil still hadn’t come in. Ingrid walked out to the garden. They had waited until the snow melted before scattering Angie’s ashes there and now Ingrid knelt to look for traces of them. She couldn’t find one tiny bone chip, but the dahlias were coming up. An ant dragged a beetle carcass, easily ten times its own size, into a hole. Pearl appeared at Ingrid’s side, panting. “Where’s Dad?” she asked the dog that took off running. Ingrid followed Pearl through the wild grasses and flowers that hadn’t yet opened. The grasshoppers had recently hatched. Hundreds of them popped across her shoes. One landed on her hand. No bigger than a sesame seed but already perfectly formed. Ahead, in the center of the bowl-shaped field, Pearl looked almost luminous. The dog ran on, occasionally stopping to wait for Ingrid. Above, the crows circled hysterically, chasing a hawk.

Crossing the road, Ingrid saw that it was her father riding the Appaloosa through Georgia’s pasture. Neil was a bit wobbly in the saddle but kept his head up. He must have seen her because he waved then. Ingrid waved too. But what do we mean, she wondered. Hello or goodbye?
CONCEPTION

I will collapse beneath this tender task, keeping the record, the sun-stroked mantel clock, the chipped soup bowl, the hum of the dome hair dryer pouring heat from its dim sky of little holes.

My parents are making love in early spring, late in the day in her grandmother's house.

The old woman raises the empty bowl to her lips again and again, my sister deaf under the blue helmet—her hair drying to an electric rise. I am swelling and waiting, a ticking egg, a twisting tail, a fly smashing against bright glass.

I imagine her quiet breath in his ear, his hands, blood-swollen from metal grooves and sharp-toothed gears, and Jesus hung above the bed, head lolled as if to get a better angle on their lovemaking, a witness to all he missed. His wooden cross trembles against the flowered wall. Outside the window, a bird bobs on a branch, a dog barks, a kid on skates clatters down the sidewalk like a tin train, and the daffodils give the first yellow twists within their thick green tongues.
Summer nights in the street under the arc light,
I throw rocks high in the air,
watch the bats follow them down,
just missing the ground before swooping up
and barrel rolling back into dark.
My missiles shoot through a Milky Way
of fluttering millers in the lamp’s cone.
I wonder why night creatures struggle
to reach the light, become willing food
for dive-bombing ghosts, who hang
dawn to dusk in the rafters of our garage.
If moths love the light, why aren’t they
out when the sun burns bright?

Each morning I do a miller body count.
Gypsy moths litter the ground
around the pole—petals of dying
poppies. I finger their fern-like antennas,
rub the dust of their color into my skin,
then climb on the garage work bench,
pull myself up into the rough-plank loft above.
Moths scaled like an Indian warrior,
I peer at the coffins (black-caped
cocoons) and hum the miller’s song.
The bats panic, unfurl, tumble-wing
into the open confusion of daylight—
darting behind the shed into dense
cover of chokecherry shade.
I shot one (with my brother's air rifle)
catched it trespassing in our garage. I nudged
the small bundle with the gun barrel,
peeled open its arms (like two
cabbage leaves) revealed tiny
arms, ears, a hairy torso,
it's bald little monkey face—
nothing pernicious—a puppy with wings.
Still, nights I watch the bats
hunt the millers. No stones.
It seems right to let them fly, do their dance,
looping in circles through golden light—
where the priest said my grandpa had gone last
Christmas because he was old, sick, and all
tuckered out, couldn't eat
milk-toast or drink whiskey anymore.
David W. Lavender

THE MECHANISMS OF INJURY

The class meets on Monday nights in the new annex of the old Public Library in a quiet, cozy room where the very idea of calamity seems as faint and undetectable as a shock victim’s slippery pulse. There’s recessed lighting, the heady smell of fresh paint, and the kind of carpet that makes you want to take your shoes off and curl your toes—but no windows, so Marilyn, the instructor, does her best to dress things up by tacking surplus Red Cross posters on each of the four bare walls. She’s only got a few minutes between the time the last of the origami folks file out and her own students show up, which is probably why the posters always seem crooked. Or maybe it’s by design. Walter wouldn’t know because he’s never shown up early enough to see Marilyn at work with the push pins. Usually, he hunkers down by the New Arrivals shelf and pretends to scan book spines until the last of his classmates arrives. Then he stands, dizzy from squatting so long, and heads for the annex. On the way, he passes elderly women clutching delicate, bright-colored cranes.

Tonight, a warning about blood-borne pathogens tilts from the west wall. On the east wall, at the opposite angle, leans a poster showing a group of ethnically mixed firefighters ranged before their shiny engine, all of them smiling from beneath their formidable helmets. On the north wall, an action shot: two men in hard hats—one, employing the pack-strap carry Marilyn taught the class two weeks ago, is dragging the other from the scene of a nasty industrial accident. Purple smoke billows at his heels, and the slant of the poster makes it look like hard work. Carrying all that weight uphill. Walter has studiously taken a seat with his back to the south wall where Marilyn’s hung a poster of a pretty woman in a red bathing suit kneeling by a child prostrate in the sand. He’s convinced he’s seen this woman before, sans Speedo, splayed across the pixels of his seventeen inch, SuperScan computer screen: Smut Pic of the Day. He knows he’s probably wrong, but doesn’t want to spend the next couple of hours in lustful speculation, doesn’t need to be reminded of his own cravings.
and the pathetically hollow manner in which he's been satisfying them of late. He's been free-falling in hyperspace for the past several months now and his sister, for one, has told him it's high time he \textit{get a life!} She has the habit of ticking off his faults on fingers that are almost identical to his own: thirty-three, no wife, no kids, a job that requires he go brain dead for forty hours a week, and an internet bill that could finance a small mortgage. She tells him every chance she gets that he's hardly doing the gene pool proud.

Walter always counters that he had a life, once.

The last time he said this they were sitting in the sunken pit that passed for the living room of his sister's duplex. "Wally," his sister sighed, "you know that doesn't count. That was over way before you 'lost' it." She was working on a hook rug while Walter gave his nephew a half-hearted bronco ride on his knee. The whole house was done up in crowded country cute. Folksy knick-knacks jammed together on the end-tables, the walls were hung with hand-made quilts, and the furniture had been artfully 'pre-distressed' to look as if it had been pirated from some farm-house in Vermont. When he'd arrived, Walter's sister had been out in the garage taking a claw hammer to a hope chest.

"A loss is a loss," Walter insisted, following it with a miserable, horsy whimper. His nephew laughed and pawed at the air.

"Anyway," his sister went on, yanking yarn, "that was back in January. It's now practically November. I think the period for mourning, assuming there even was one, is officially over."

"Can you believe it?" Walter asked his nephew. "My wife does an endo in her Plymouth, and your mom, here, thinks I should just suck it up and deal."

"Your ex-wife," his sister corrected. "And I'd be the last to speak ill of the dead, but your Amy was no saint. The drunk that hit her probably did you a favor."

These were harsh words and they carried a dull, almost delicious sting. Walter leaned closer to the boy, letting his voice drop halfway to a whisper. "Plus, she was pregnant." He lingered over the last word, letting his tongue work the syllables like he was probing a bad tooth.

"By whatever schmuck it was she left you for!" His sister stabbed the hook through the first hole in the next row. "Hon-
estly, Wally, did you have to take classes to qualify as such a certified loser? Sometimes I can hardly believe you’re my own brother. Maybe you should save your pity for the rest of us.”

“Hey,” Walter started in, “I think if anyone here deserves a little pity—”

“Oh, please. I hope you didn’t come by hoping to be coddled, because this house is a designated No Sniveling Zone. If Mom were still with us, she’d tell you the same thing: it’s time you get off your duff and get over it.”

Walter had felt a familiar slosh in his nephew’s diaper and lifted the boy to reveal a dark blot on his jeans. “I think someone needs a change,” he’d told his sister.

“That’s just what I’m saying.”

A Yearn to Learn, the quarterly catalogue his sister received from the community college extension program, listed over a hundred Adult Ed courses ranging from tole painting to do-it-yourself genealogy to a class that in a single Saturday empowered you to act as a Notary Public anywhere in the state.

“Think of it,” his sister had suggested, “as a way to get out and meet some people. Real people, not like those ghosts in your goddamned machine. Who knows? This could be your ticket to kick. Maybe shake the silicon monkey once and for all. Goodbye plug-in drug!”

“Right,” Walter snorted, “become a real rug master like you.”

“There’s worse ways to spend your time,” she countered. “Besides, you shouldn’t be pissy with people you’re borrowing money from.”

In the end, he’d had to hit her up for sixty-five dollars over and above the balance due on his phone bill so he could make tuition on an eight-week course in Advanced First Aid. His sister wanted proof that he’d actually enrolled, so he’d swung by the duplex after that first Monday night and shown her the thick book that Marilyn had passed out. The cover read Emergency First Response! Inside, there were sections covering everything from Soft Tissue Injuries, to Poisoning, to Multiple Casualty Incidents. An entire chapter was devoted to nothing but Bleeding. His sister had flipped through the pages, taking note of the illustrations which, even if they were re-enactments, were pretty gruesome
which is supposed to approximate the rib-resistance of a middle-aged man in cardiac arrest. Marilyn passes them out like party favors, one for each student. Walter considers his. Up close, the bald plastic head looks like the fellow in that Munch painting, pre-scream.

Before they get intimate with the ACTARS, Marilyn wants them to practice the head tilt on a real person—meaning, each other. This is the part Walter likes least about the class. It's been a long time since he's had call to touch another human, and he's grown accustomed to the clean feel of his computer keys. It would be okay, would be wonderful in fact, if he were ever paired with Diane, who's a rookie cop, one of the new female recruits that the city has hired under pressure of lawsuit. She's surprisingly petite, has clear, cream-colored skin and wears her dark hair borderline butch in a stylish cut that makes her seem even smaller than she is. Walter figures that she wouldn't have to lean much to look through a driver's side window and demand license and registration. She has a no-nonsense manner that he finds oddly attractive, though he suspects it's just a front to go with the job. He'd like to find out, but hasn't had the nerve to approach her during the mid-class break when everyone heads for the library's cramped vending room to purchase stale nuts and candy bars that they wash down with a hot brown liquid that's sold as coffee at a quarter a cup. He certainly hasn't been paired with her. Marilyn, ever gender sensitive, always sticks Diane with Ramona, the only other female student. Tonight, as usual, Walter gets partnered with Mr. Heebert, a high school math teacher cum football coach who, like Diane, needs regular re-certification as part of his job. Everyone, it seems, is taking the course for a reason. Even Ramona, who manages the office at the local Redi-Mix, has signed up as that company's designated Industrial Safety Planner. Walter, apparently, is the only one who's taking the class for fun.

Coach Heebert approaches life like it's a serial wind sprint. "Hup, hup, Wally!" he barks. "Let's check those airways. Who's gonna be first?" Before Walter can even put off volunteering, the coach has punched him in the arm, hard enough to hurt, and begun stretching himself out on the carpet. "Me? Okay, pal," he winks, giving Walter the go-ahead, "Let's save a life!"

Up at the front of the class, Marilyn is saying, louder than
necessary, “Primary Survey first. Remember your ABCs, people. Airway, Breathing and Circulation!”

In unison, Walter and the other non-victims ask, “Are you okay?” Coach Heebert, of course, says nothing. His eyes are closed and he appears to be holding his breath. Walter feigns putting an ear to his chest, then gingerly checks the carotid artery for a pulse, which turns out to be strong. No way you can fake that. The beat of the other man’s blood in his own fingertips gives Walter the willies. As quickly as he can, he grabs the coach’s head and tilts it back until the other man’s chin is pointing at the regular pattern of round holes in the acoustic ceiling. There’s a gray stubble along Coach Heebert’s solid jaw, the feel of which Walter does his best to ignore. He wipes his hands on his thighs, sits back and waits for the others to finish. Beneath him, the coach starts making a gurgling noise like a goose being slowly strangled: nyek ny nog honks. Walter ignores him, but Coach Heebert keeps it up, getting louder until, just as Marilyn is coming up to check on them, the coach opens his eyes, grabs his partner by the arm and says, “No good, Wally. You forgot to check inside my mouth. Hell, I could’ve swallowed my tongue by now. Why, I’d be a corpse thanks to you!”

“That’s right,” Marilyn says, squatting by the coach. “It’s never enough just to tilt the head. You’ve got to physically check the airway.” She hooks one finger and mimics scooping out the inside of Coach Heebert’s mouth. “Your victim could be choking on anything. Even his own vomit.”

“Had a kid gag on his own tooth guard once,” the coach volunteers. “Got hit that hard.”

“Right,” Walter nods to them both. “I’ll try and remember next time.”

Marilyn reminds him coolly, “In real life, trying isn’t enough. Doing is what counts.”

When it’s Walter’s turn to play victim, Coach Heebert scrapes a forefinger along his tongue a couple of times for good measure. It tastes bitter, and Walter doesn’t even want to imagine where it’s been. Afterward, he sits up and looks around and wishes there were some place to spit.

They spend the next half hour practicing chest compressions on the ACTARS. One and-two-and-three-and-four. . . . It’s harder
than it looks. After giving his ACTAR the requisite fifteen pumps, he barely has enough breath left to inflate the plastic bag that doubles for lungs. Marilyn keeps them at it until Walter figures his dummy would’ve died a dozen times over. When he checks the others, he sees that the coach hasn’t even broken a sweat. Diane’s pretty mouth is the picture of resolve; she’s straddling her own ACTAR, pumping away like she could keep it up forever. Walter ignores the scowl he’s getting from Marilyn, takes a break, wondering how he’s let himself go so soft. All this exercise has him hankering for a smoke. When Marilyn wanders up and wants to know why he’s stopped, Walter tells her the victim was successfully revived. He holds up the ACTAR like it’s a ventriloquist’s dummy and mumbles through mostly closed lips, “I owe my life to Walter!”

“Ha, ha,” Marilyn says, clearly un-amused, but behind her Walter glimpses Diane grinning up at him as she finishes giving two hearty breaths and gets ready to start in again with the chest compressions.

“Okay, everybody,” Marilyn decides. “That’s enough for now.”

Later, in the parking lot, he has his chance, and blows it. Marilyn’s still inside packing up her lightweight dummies, but her students are all gathered in a group out front, car keys jingling, breath steaming in the not-quite-yet-winter air. Everyone’s hanging out, enjoying a little post-class camaraderie. Coach Heebert, ever effusive, suggests that they should all make like real students and go get a cup of coffee or maybe a beer. But this just reminds everyone that there’s somewhere else they’re supposed to be. The group wavers and then begins to break up, everyone agreeing to shoot for next week.

Walter’s car, it turns out, is parked next to Diane’s, and so they head off together. She drives a black Toyota 4-Runner with fog lights and custom wheel rims and an extra gas can strapped on back by the spare. It looks sleek and solid, but slightly downsized given that it’s a Japanese make. A compact bundle of get-up-and-go, Walter thinks, next to which his own K-car, with its primer paint and duct-taped taillight looks downright frumpy.

“I could cite you for that,” Diane says, nodding toward the rear of his car.
Walter starts in on making lame excuses before he realizes, too late, that she's only kidding. In the soft light of the street lamp, her smile is like a stray moonbeam. It makes him dizzy. He leans against his car and begins fishing in his pocket for a cigarette, then decides against it. Diane hits a button on her key chain and the 4-Runner chirps and comes to life. Door locks pop up and the dome light flickers on. “Well,” she says, “I guess I’ll see you next week?”

“Right,” Walter says, but for a moment neither of them moves. There’s a frost forming on the surface of both cars and on the asphalt beneath them. When another car backs out of its space, its headlights sweep a field of diamonds at their feet. Diane is briefly backlit by the passing lights. She’s just waiting, Walter’s convinced, for him to give her a reason to linger. He grinds the grey matter, searching for something to say. But in the time it takes a fleeting halo to form and vanish around Diane’s close-cropped head, about a million synapses misfire and fizzle in his own.

“Right,” she echoes at last, and then the moment’s clearly gone. She climbs up into her truck and backs away, leaving Walter all alone, his ass growing cold and his pants beginning to stick to the frosted fender.

The night the hospital called, his divorce had been final for exactly three days. There’d been an unseasonable thaw, a week of highs in the forties and a steady rain that made the snow slump back to reveal patches of brown lawn beneath holiday decorations that had yet to be taken in. All around the neighborhood, plastic Santas and reindeer stood marooned on barren grass. Then overnight—clearing skies and bitter cold again, everything iced over under a full moon. Crust snow banks sparkled like heaped crystals. Tree limbs turned eerily luminescent in the dead of night, and the parking lot gleamed like the surface of a pond, throwing his headlights back at him as he crept into a space at Mercy General, tapping at the brakes like there was an egg under the pedal he was afraid of cracking. Later, the police would speculate that it was the ice as much as the booze that had caused it all, like maybe it was an act of God or Nature—fate, and not just some drunk with no business being on the road. The doctor, though,
had been too weary to be anything but blunt. He told Walter that Amy had arrived minus most of her brain pan. Massive trauma. The kind of thing that’s usually restricted to war zones. He told him they’d tried to keep her vitals going for as long as possible, because of the baby. But the fetus was only about six weeks along, seven max. “The chances were slim to none,” the doctor said. While he spoke, his fingers picked at the rim of his white cup and flicked bits of styrofoam into the quarter inch of cold coffee at the base.

When he jiggled the cup, the tiny pieces chased each other around and around.

“It was pretty much over before we even got to her,” the doctor told him. “I’m sorry.” He dropped the cup into a waste basket, and Walter worked out the math.

Amy had left him barely a month before, but for a long time prior to that, the most she’d been willing to do was jerk him off now and then while they sat and watched TV. For Walter, it wasn’t so much sex as self-loathing. He’d whine about needs, but what he increasingly came to need was first the almost ugly look on her face—her jaw locked like a dead bolt, one eyebrow winched toward the other, and the same sum of passion she might bring to the task of scrubbing a burnt pot—and then the way her features dissolved and went blank as he spasmed back into the cushions of the couch, desperate to kiss her, even as she wiped her sticky hand across his leg and reached for the remote and thumbed the volume up. He couldn’t remember the last time they’d actually made love. Clearly, her own needs were being taken care of by someone else. She told him as much in the end, but Walter never found out who. He never got a name. Or even an address, later, when she’d insisted that everything be sent care of her lawyer. The only reason the police had called Walter was that she hadn’t gotten around yet to changing the last name on her driver’s license. There in the hospital, as the doctor cleared his throat and turned and strode off down the hall, it dawned on Walter that this tragedy really belonged to some other man. For the first time all evening, he wanted to weep.

But now, driving home from the library, Walter finds that for once his mind isn’t clotted with the thought of Amy. He’s thinking about Diane and the way she hesitated before climbing into
her car. He smacks the steering wheel a couple of times and mentally kicks himself over the missed opening. It amazes him he can manage to be so inept. A car passes in the opposite direction, its high beams right in his face. He looks away and catches sight of his own reflection flashing in the rearview mirror, stunned eyes and a pale forehead flickering to life.

"What, you like being alone?" he asks. The sound of his own voice startles him, but when he looks directly at the mirror, all he sees are taillights receding. Half a block ahead is an empty intersection, the light changing to yellow. He takes a deep breath and squeezes his eyes shut and stomps on the gas. He feels the car lurch forward. As slowly as he dares, he counts: One. Two. Three. When he opens his eyes again, the stoplight’s behind him, and his vision jerks with the beat of his heart. He blows out his breath and steers the rumbling K-car into the lot of an all-night market.

It’s late, and the place is practically deserted. Mostly it’s night-shift stockers swabbing areas ringed by “Wet Floor” signs or spraying replenished produce bins or straightening boxes along well-dusted shelves. There’s the sharp smell of ammonia, and not a trace of disorder—no gaps in the cereal aisle, no fingerprints on the freezer door, no fog on the inside of the glass. Bread loaves are lined up like a regiment. At the end of one aisle, dozens of identical soup cans are stacked in a perfect pyramid, all the labels turned in the same direction. Walter finds the sight of it, the solid and assertive shape, suddenly overwhelming and he has to chide himself, They’re soup cans for Christ’s sake! He grabs a six-pack of beer from the cooler in the back of the store and heads for the checkout.

Out of habit, he finds himself studying the other men in the place. Most of the stockers seem too young, barely out of adolescence. There’s an old guy wheeling his cart distractedly, tapping its nose into displays, backing up, then moving on. By the milk section, a man is sorting through the cartons, scrutinizing expiration dates. His parka’s unzipped and he’s got a gut like he’s stuffed a watermelon up his shirt. Not Amy’s type at all. The guy at the register has silver hair, but looks pretty young all the same. Mid-forties, maybe. His sleeves are rolled up, and from the meat in his forearms it’s pretty obvious he works out. He’s got an elaborate mustache that sweeps up toward his ears, just the sort
of extravagance that Amy might have favored. Walter can make out creases around the guy's eyes that could have been etched there by grief, or by guilt. The man runs the beer across the scanner, the machine chatters and Walter waits for the total to pop up.

After his ex-wife's death, Walter had managed to finesse a one-week bereavement leave and spent the entire time sitting by the phone, waiting for the call he figured eventually had to come. The funeral, though well-advertised, had been perfunctory and sparsely attended. Amy's only living relative, a sister in Seattle, sent flowers and a card that had a name, but nothing else, scribbled beneath the imprinted sentiment. A small gang of women from Amy's office showed up and stood together in one corner whispering among themselves. Now and then they threw Walter the sort of closed-lip looks that suggested he wouldn't get much information from them even if he tried. The only other males in attendance were his nephew and his brother-in-law.

For that first week, as he sat and waited by the phone, Walter had tried to put himself in the shoes of the other man, his own shadowy double, whom he'd come to think of as a silhouette of pure black surrounded by white, like a pop-up target at a shooting range. He wasn't quite sure what to feel. On the one hand, the guy had been boning Walter's wife, a simple truth that, each time he entertained it, immediately prompted a deep and primal rage that lunged like an attack dog against its leash, but which tended just as quickly to bubble over into a whimpering self-pity, something which Walter, the cuckold, both relished and despised. He tried to fan his anger by focusing on the fact that Mr. Mystery, after screwing Amy for who knew how long, had gone all soft when push came to shove, had shriveled up and slunk away. What a coward! What a callous bastard! But on the other hand, it was entirely possible that Mr. Mystery didn't even know—not just about the baby, but about Amy, too—in which case Walter felt a stage sort of kinship for this other fellow who he imagined, at certain moments, to be much like himself, sitting abandoned by a phone somewhere, wondering what the hell he'd done wrong, and waiting for a call that would never come. Walter had considered taking out a classified ad, some sort of notification, but
couldn’t decide how best to word it. When he consulted his sister, she looked at him sideways. “What, are you nuts? You think you owe this creep anything? If he doesn’t read the obituaries, that’s his problem.”

Back in his apartment, Walter pops open one of the beers, turns his computer on and waits for it to boot up. He logs onto the net and types in the URL for Hardcore Harry’s House of Sin. After a few seconds, a familiar screen comes up, a naked woman smiling beneath a pair of devil’s horns. She’s got a pitchfork in one hand and a pointy tail curling out from behind her ass, the tip of which jerks up and down in a bit of crude animation. Walter clicks on the Members Entry button and begins to type in his password only to find that he’s forgotten it. It’s been a couple of weeks, maybe longer, since he’s logged on, and he wonders if he should take this as a good sign, even as he digs through his desk drawer in search of the scrap of paper on which he’s scribbled down his passwords. When the main menu comes up, he lets the cursor slide by “Stories” and “Chat” and clicks on “Photo Gallery.” The next screen offers links to more than a thousand high-res jpegs, all grouped by category. Walter clicks on “Couples” and sits back and sips his beer and waits for the first page of thumbnails to download.

It was Amy who’d first begun dabbling in on-line porn. Walter had gotten them on the internet thinking: News, Weather and Sports, but Amy had quickly discerned in the technology an astonishing marriage of access and privacy—like she could stroll every red light district in the world and never leave her own home! It wasn’t long before she was jumping on the search engines and riding them to all the raunchier sites. She’d sit there half-naked in the desk chair, her tongue tracing her top lip in the green glow of the screen, Walter behind her, kneading her shoulders as she click-click-clicked through one image after another before settling on a shot whose particular composition sent a jolt of pleasure that Walter could feel ripple up through his fingertips. She’d reach up and take his hand and, with her fingers on his, pinch her own nipple and suck in a sharp breath. Getting wet on the net, she called it. She started spending hours in chatrooms—first with Walter, then on her own. She’d don different identities and send
out streams of titillating type that always converged on the same dark territory. When Walter tried to prick the bubble, when he pointed out that the others on-line with her—Young & Hung, or Stud Muffin, or even Daddy’s Little Angel—that any one, or all of them might be a fat guy with bad teeth and flat feet spanking the monkey somewhere in Cleveland, Amy would look up at him, flushed and distracted, and ask, “So?” It was like the computer was a window onto a world where sex was the swampy thing she’d always secretly believed it to be, a dank and musky place with endless byways where you might push your prow through a curtain of Spanish moss and come upon a creature you’d never imagined existed, let alone recognized as yourself. She’d tell Walter to love her so nasty it made him weak in the knees. But the more often she logged on, the more Walter came to feel like a bit player in these head games of hers. He started having a hard time distinguishing himself from any one of the various aids and accouterments which Amy began to order on-line and bring with her into bed.

Early on, she’d told him that what she liked about the smutty pictures wasn’t so much that their carnality was so raw and exposed, though that was part of it. Rather, it was the way they froze time, flashed on a single, sordid instant and left the rest to the imagination. They were better than videos that way. You could extrapolate forward or back, work out all the moves—the shedding of street clothes, the foreplay, the fumbling for a right fit—that had led up to the moment, or let your mind wander on to what might be coming next. When she said this, Walter had a bad feeling, his mind running forward, thinking not “what,” but “who.” And he’d been right, hadn’t he?

Walter picks out a thumbnail and clicks on it to enlarge the photo. The screen fills with the image of a woman straddling her partner. Her back glistens with sweat and her face, even with the mussed bangs and the bad light, is surprisingly pretty. She’s looking back over her shoulder at the camera, just starting to smile, her eyes half-crescents under lowered lids as she lowers herself down. It’s easy to imagine Amy in the same pose. The man beneath her is just a gangly pair of legs and a stiff prick, which is good. Walter favors photos where the man’s face is obscured. He
likes to do a little extrapolating of his own. Once she’d left him for real, Walter had taken to trolling through images, searching for ones in which the man was just a tensed ass or a headless trunk. He’d use the computer’s zoom function to blow up patches of body hair, or the thick veins in a forearm, or any quirky features of the skin—a big mole, a scar, or a blue tattoo. The larger he made the images, the more these small details would distort and become lost in a pixilated blur, but the easier it was, strangely enough, for Walter to begin fleshing in the outline of the man he knew must be responsible for Amy’s arriving home later and later each evening, and then not at all. He’d shrink the picture back down to normal size and feel himself split—his body responding to the subjects captured mid-rut, his mind floating somewhere above, thinking of a dead baby that had none of his blood.

Walter clicks on another thumbnail, then another. Tonight, it isn’t working. He can’t summon the right blend of wormy lust and insipid self-pity. Worse, the people in the pictures keep melting into so many body parts—ankles and elbows, torsos and limbs—more frail than robust, vulnerable. Walter studies them in terms of potential occlusions and fractures, worries over the sudden misalignment of skin and bone. He hears Marilyn’s voice drilling the class on survey and response, and as he lingers on one shot after another, he tries to work out the mechanism of injury. Torn ligaments seem likely, and muscle strain. He imagines applying ice to the latisimus dorsus, or guiding a dislocated shoulder back into place, or binding a wrist that’s been snapped from being thrust against a bedpost. When he zooms in on a man’s arched back, he can identify the vertebrae by number, descending from the cervical on through the thoracic and the lumbar. He begins to see positions in terms of distal and radial—who’s closer to the woman’s heart, who’s further away. In one shot, a man lifts a slim brunette from his lap and his hands are right where the brachial pulse would be.

After fifteen minutes, Walter shuts off the machine.

In bed, he flips through a few pages of his text book. He’s read it all the way through once already, and so he sets the book aside, switches off the light and tries to mentally review what he’s learned so far while he lies there and waits for sleep. They’ve
covered a lot of ground—from puncture wounds to asphyxiation to all sorts of different burns. Walter remembers most of it in bits and pieces, all of it jumbled like the mess behind his bathroom mirror. He wonders whether or not, if called on in an emergency, he'd wind up doing more harm than good. The Monday before had included an overview of shock, which Marilyn had informed her students was the most insidious killer of all. You could think you'd done everything right, attended to all the surface injuries, and still you might find your victim going south on you, just slipping away. The serious injuries might lie below the surface of the skin, which is why the Secondary Survey is so crucial. Stretched out in bed, Walter is aware of himself slipping into a dream. The heater kicks in, causing the curtains to sway and toss shadows around the darkened room. He closes his eyes and listens to the hum of the digital clock. A shape which he dimly recognizes as Diane congeals and hovers in the area above him. She's wearing her uniform and badge, but instead of blue pants, she's got on garters and silk stockings. He can't tell if she's wearing underwear. Walter's own shirt is open and her soft hands are on his skin, moving gently as she palpates the region immediately below the ribs. Slowly, she probes the area above his liver, her fingers cautious, like a pastry chef pressing designs into a delicate dough. Her hands drift down toward his spleen, but no lower. At first Walter's confused, until it dawns on him that what she's doing is feeling for any unusual distention. For any epidermal rigidity. For the sort of bruising you can feel, but not see. Sure signs of internal bleeding. But just her touch alone is enough to make everything inside him break apart and rupture in the most delightful way, even as his breathing slides into the steady rhythms. And then the phone rings.

Walter blinks his eyes open and stumbles out of bed. His first, impossible hope is that Diane has managed to get a hold of his number and chosen of all moments this precise one to call him—ESP, he thinks, or mental telepathy, or some other unworldly synchronicity. But he shakes off this unlikelihood along with his sleep. He scrambles for the phone and answers, "Hello?"

There's nothing but a stuttered breathing on the other end, a half gasp followed by a volley of truncated sobs. "Hello?" he asks again.
A voice, pinched with emotion but decidedly male, says, "I’m . . . I’m looking for someone."

Suddenly Walter’s wide awake. He can’t believe it. After waiting for months, here the call’s finally come and caught him unawares. He doesn’t know what to say. He’s done probably a hundred dry runs. He’s picked up the receiver and practiced spitting every curse he could think of into the dial tone. Has unleashed his heart into the hum. He’s slammed the phone back into its cradle a dozen different ways. Other nights, he’s forced himself to be calm, has rehearsed the role of bearer of bad news, has pitched his voice at a level that might accommodate compassion, or even concern. Sometimes, he’s simply lifted the phone and said, “Dead”—over and over, till the word’s become a mantra, empty of all meaning. And yet now, shivering in his boxers, his feet chill on the kitchen floor, all he can come up with is the obvious. “Who is this?”

There’s a pause. “Who is this?” the voice asks, more aggressive now.

Walter detects a slightly upper crust clip to the words. Not quite British, but proper all the same. He pictures bloodless lips, a nose hooked like beak. “I asked first,” he says.

The voice on the other end sniffs once. “Listen here, I’m in no mood for games.”

There’s noise in background. Music? Yes, something classical, the sonorous lament of a string section overlaid by the other man’s deep sigh. “Have I rung the wrong number?” he asks after a moment. “Just what number have I dialed?”

Walter ignores him. “Who are you trying to reach?”

There’s another pause. Then the sound of a swallow followed by the muffled thunk of a glass being set upon a table.

“Who are you?” Walter demands, but the line clicks and goes dead.

Walter spends the next week scanning crowds, picking out strange faces, searching for one that might match the voice on the phone. Despite the odds of being a wrong number, he’s suspicious of coincidence. Real life, he’s convinced, doesn’t work that way. Life! What a terrible tease it is. Tantalizing you with a snapshot of a
single happy moment, letting you believe you can control what comes next. Accidents, he's decided, are anything but.

The following Monday, he's back at the New Arrivals shelf. There are a couple of biographies he doesn't recognize, a new mystery or two. He pulls down a fat volume and cracks open the spine. The pages have sharp edges and give off a pleasant, inky smell. He's holding the book up to his nose when he's startled by the sight of Diane strolling not toward the annex, but toward him. Her hair looks slightly damp, as if she's just showered. Her face looks fresh scrubbed. The tips of her ears are bright pink in the fluorescent light.

"Hey, there." she says. "Anything good?"

Walter closes the book in his hands. "Don't know. Just browsing. Smelling, actually." He re-shelves the book and realizes too late he's put it upside down.

"Mmm," She smiles. "That new book thing. I know what you mean." She traces a finger along the shelf, letting her nail click against each dust jacket like the pickets of a fence.

Walter's about to ask her if she reads much, when over her shoulder he spots a man entering the library. Not just any man, the man. Mr. Mystery himself. He's wearing tweed beneath a camel hair overcoat, and his hands are sheathed in expensive looking leather gloves. Everything about him—the longish hair swept back from an angular forehead, the smug set of his shoulders, the almost proprietary air with which he strides toward the periodicals section and plucks up a journal—all of it matches the composite Walter's been carrying around with him all week. The man shrugs off his coat and drapes it over the arm of a chair, establishing his claim. Walter goes rigid. Watching the man remove first one glove, then the other, he feels an almost irresistible urge to break all his fingers, snap every knuckle one by one. He wants to gouge out those eyes that have looked upon Amy, wants to bite off that patrician nose that has sampled her most private scents. He wants to discharge such a flurry of blows, rain them down around the man's head, that he'll be left bruised and reeling for months afterward, unable to banish the ache. He's so distracted by the sudden boil in his blood that when Diane taps him in the chest with the corner of her first aid manual, he mistakes it for the pounding of his own heart.

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“So,” she asks, “you ready for another round?”

Walter looks down and finds himself held in her pretty gaze, suspended in such a way that all she has to do is blink once and his rage begins to reform itself. Up close, she smells of apricots. Walter thinks it must be her shampoo. “Come again?”

“Chapter Ten,” she says, inventing her own title as she goes. “Splints and Slings and Other Fun Things. You ready?”

“Oh. Sure,” he says. “I’ve been boning up all week.”

It’s a bad pun, but Diane is kind enough not to care. She laughs, and there’s such an effortless generosity in the sound of it, the way it ripples back and forth between insouciance and something much closer to grace, that Walter is momentarily stunned. He feels something tear, not within him, but without, like a small rent in whatever noxious cloud has been gathered about him since Amy’s death, choking him on the fumes of his own obsessions. How long, he wonders, has his heart been bounded by a belief in life’s parsimony? When had he decided that happiness was a commodity doled out but once in a lifetime, and then only in meager allotments paid for over time in daily installments of bitterness and regret?

Diane looks at her watch. “Well,” she says. “It’s almost time. Shall we?” She nods her head toward the annex, her gesture an invitation—limited for now, but perhaps only for now. He glances once more at the man in Periodicals, whom it suddenly seems possible to see as just another stranger. A man with a magazine, nothing more. Then he steps after Diane who is saying, “So, I’ve been wondering . . .”

“You. Why you’re taking this course.” She throws him a curious look. “I mean, does this go with your work? Or is it just a hobby?”

“More like self-improvement,” Walter tells her. “A yearn to learn.”

“Ha!” Diane snorts. “You don’t seem to be learning all that much.” She looks over at him quickly. “I mean, no offense. But some the material seems to have you pretty stumped.”

“It’s that obvious?”

“Maybe you could use a study partner.”

Walter considers this. Considers her. “Could be.”
The hallway is suddenly clogged with old ladies. This week it’s flowers: colorful bouquets of folded camellias and tulips and lilies all bending cheerfully from green paper stems. Walter and Diane step aside to let the procession pass. His hand brushes her arm, which is firm beneath her blouse. She says, “But jeeze. Listen to me! I don’t mean to pry or anything.”

“No,” Walter tells her. “It’s okay. I’m not even sure why I’m here myself. I guess I needed a little excitement in my life.”

Diane hesitates, then asks, “Ever date a cop?”

She starts to blush, then turns and steps through the classroom door.

They spend the first half hour working with Sam splints and triangular bandages and rolls of white adhesive tape. Walter keeps making a mess of it. At one point he’s got the coach trussed up like something out of *Tales from the Crypt.* The bandages are tight where they shouldn’t be, and loose where they should, stray ends trailing all over the place. “I don’t think so, Wally,” Coach says. “I can’t feel my fingers. And look!” He jerks himself around and the arm Walter’s been trying to brace flops free.

Later, Marilyn takes down the two back boards she’s had propped against the wall since the start of class. After walking everyone through the straps and buckles, she lays out the scenario. She tells them to imagine some guy who’s taken a nose dive from a tall ladder. “You’ve got breathing and a strong pulse, but your house painter’s unconscious and can’t respond to verbal stimuli. Given the mechanism of injury, of course you suspect the worst.” Then she divides her students into two groups. Diane joins Walter and the Coach, along with two younger guys—one who lifeguards during the summers, and the other who’s getting ready to start his EMT training. Everyone agrees Walter should play the victim.

“You’re out cold,” Coach Heebert reminds him. “This shouldn’t be hard.”

Walter gets prone on the carpet, closes his eyes and does his best to go limp. The coach is right; it’s easy. While the three men fiddle with the back board, getting it ready, Diane takes up position above Walter’s head. Using the technique Marilyn’s demonstrated, she stabilizes his head and neck. Her thumbs are at his
temples, her fingers spread out along his jaw. "Mmmm." Walter tells her, eyes still shut. "That feels about right."

"Shush," she laughs. "You're supposed to be unconscious."

The three men crouch alongside him at his shoulders, waist and knees. On the count of three, they gently roll Walter on his side and slide the board underneath him. Diane keeps on cradling his head. Then they lower him back down and start strapping him in. Someone fits a foam collar around his neck, and Diane lets go.

"Feels tight," Walter grunts, his chin hampered by the collar. "Has to be," Diane reminds him. "You don't want to be paralyzed for life, do you?"

Walter's not so sure. With the straps snug and the collar in place, he can't move at all and he likes the way it feels. Relaxed and secure at the same time. When he opens his eyes, he sees Diane above him. It's his dream all over again, slightly different, but better. She has a dimple in her chin, and another, larger depression where her throat meets her clavicle. She grins down at him and takes a deep breath that make her breasts swell beneath her shirt. "Ready?" she asks.

Coach Heebert says, "Okay, everybody. On three. . ."

And then Walter feels himself lifted.
On every floor are children’s beds, wheelchairs, gurneys, and plastic quarts of milky chemicals. Some children are bald and some don’t sense the needle; some can’t remember how to breathe, their faces pinched and white above tracheotomy tubes. The cribs and beds are made of steel. Nurses prepare blood samples and long coils of hollow plastic for the administration of enemas, their patients strapped to orthopedic chairs in rooms where light is low and gray, windows casting a northern gloom. Who would think I might be here, counting my son’s breath. We don’t belong.

Walking laps around the hospital, I realize I’ve forgotten the weather’s cold, that there is weather. I plan our escape—slipping down factory shores, startling thousands of blackbirds who spread like cinders on cold orange light, who whistle and call and whirl in spirals over trees and junkyards. We’ll sleep by the river, awaken stiff and thoughtless, and run farther as currents gather volume and force, and finally slow in the soupy mass of summer life—mats of algae, sauces of frog and salamander eggs, pale slices of soft-shelled turtles cutting through murky silt, mucous-slick.
hide of the largemouth bass. On the Amazon
now we drift with arowana fish—
diamond scales, ribbed fins—as the long
coil of catfish barbers wraps my thighs,
the anaconda’s gravitation pulls deeper.
Is it this point when I discard my burden
to save myself?

Sliding doors open, and the lobby fountain
bubbles over colored rocks.
Outpatient areas are deserted,
wash buckets slump on vinyl tile.
Gigantic stuffed animals, false smiles,
look down from the mezzanine.
The storm bored in from the Northeast; across the Great Plains, off the Divide, down from the Three Medicine Wilderness as I crept along the Big Flat road in second gear climbing steadily along the river bluffs. It was New Year’s, mid-afternoon but it was already hard to see and the crunch of gravel underneath my tires was reassuring.

Lonnie Manxman met me by the mouth of his drive with a flashlight and we walked a couple hundred feet behind a hexagonal log home, decks on every side, light blazing from the windows so that it shone through the murk like some rustic space ship. We walked back to an older cottonwood, thick-trunked, brushy, and bowed away from the hillside from the years of wind. Lonnie was a Brit, small, crisp and urgent in his fur-trimmed parka and arctic Mickey Mouse boots. There are a lot of newcomers around town these days. Brits. Russians. Hmong and Tibetans. There’s a whole wave of people moving in, some from as far away as California. A lot of the locals are bothered by it, though personally, I don’t mind very much. Like the maples lining the city streets, I’m a transplant myself—an introduced species, if you like—and I figure so is most everyone when you get right down to it.

We stopped at the base of the tree and Lonnie pointed to a dark patch not quite halfway up it. “There he is!” he said, in a great booming voice that was more than a match for the storm. “That bit of fur? He was only twenty feet up at noon but I tried to fetch him off the ladder and the little bastard ran right out of my hands!”

I nodded, kicked at the snow drifted beneath the cottonwood. “They try to come down headfirst,” I said. “They get an eyeful and they go mental.”

“Well, what do you think?” said Lonnie.

“If we don’t get him down while it’s light he won’t last another night up there,” I told him. I tried to make the requisite customer eye-contact but it was hard in that gloom. When I peered
into the hood of his parka, all I could see was the flash of his teeth, an animal-like nose. “Now I can get him down,” I continued. “But you might not like the way I do it.”

Lonnie chuckled again. “Well, I don’t seem to have much choice now, do I, mate?”

“No,” I told him. “You really don’t.”

I zipped into a beat-up expedition parka I bought at a yard sale, buckled on my climbing irons and safety saddle, slipped a pair of one-fingered shooter’s mittens over my thermal gloves. “What’s his name?” I said.

Lonnie grinned. “His name’s ‘Cornell.’”

I swam up through the thicket of suckers, into the murk of the storm. As I drew closer, I could hear the cat yowl above the wind.

“Here, Cornell,” I said in the rescue falsetto I’d adapted some years ago. “Hang in there, boy. I’m coming, Cornell. I’m coming.”

“Yowww!” said the cat.

In ten minutes I’d cut my way up through the brush to the cat’s roost. I had just got my hand around the trunk and clipped myself in when the cat lunged, ran right up my arm, leaped off my shoulder to the main trunk and scrambled another ten feet towards the top.

We climbed on into the storm. Each time I reached his perch, the animal panicked, climbed higher into the tree.

The bark had grown slick, the shooter’s mittens made me mistrust my grip. The wind teared my eyes, my nose ran like a faucet. My hands were losing sensation and I had to keep stopping to shake them out, and by the time I reached the top, the conditions were very near a white-out. I tried to look down but the wind had changed direction, now seemed to gust upwards, into my face. I spat, watched it rise for a second before it carried away horizontally.

By four o’clock, Cornell hunkered a few feet above me in the top wood. He was one of the most pitiful sights I’ve seen. He bunched himself up, clung to his little branch.

“Yow-ww! “ said the cat. “Wowww!”

“Wowww,” I said, sadly. “Isn’t that the truth?” I squirmed
out within arm’s reach, fumbled with my safety line, released some slack, drew closer.

The little tiger peed in terror and the wind gusted, pinned me flat against the bark. The snow was blinding.

“Oh God, Cornell,” I said, dropped my little rescue voice. “I can’t believe what you’ve got us into. It’s just a good thing we can’t see down.” I steadied myself, caught my breath, unzipped the knapsack that was clipped into my harness, then jammed my hands up under my armpits until the sensation came back.

“Yowww!” said the cat.

“Cornell,” I barked. “Get a grip on yourself!”

“Wowww!”

I was scaring him even worse, if that was possible and I lay on my stomach and called to him gently, “Come on, Cornell. Come on, boy!”

But he wouldn’t come to me, and that was that. And talking in that crazy voice made me feel I’d entered a kind of cartoon world.

I pulled out more slack. I was lying full length along the branch, my belly to my safety knot. “Come on, boy!” I called. “Come on boy! Come on! Argh! Jesus! Fuck!”

It was hard to move in all those layers and my parka kept snagging on the suckers, and I had one of those quick, telling visions of myself: I was a man approaching his middle years, sixty feet up a Montana cottonwood in a blizzard. It was New Year’s Day. I was talking to a cat. I thought: How do these things happen?

But I knew the answer to that. This is the way they happened: First, the pet owner calls the fire department. The fire department tells them that they haven’t done cat rescues since the days of Norman Rockwell and that the pet owner should call a tree service. The pet owner calls a big outfit with an aerial bucket. The big outfit tells them they can’t get their equipment back to a tree like this one. The pet owner finally calls me. I’m a tree climber. A throwback. I don’t have a bucket. And this time of year, generally speaking, I don’t have anything much better to do.

I wormed my way out another foot. Again the cat howled, backed away, but by now he was off the main branch and he was
clinging to twigs. It had finally happened, and we both knew it. He’d run out of tree.

I was breathless and the cold was starting to seep through my clothes. “OK,” I gasped. “There’s two ways we can do this. I can zip you up in this nice warm knapsack and you can ride down with me. Or you can take the short cut. Which one’s it going to be?”

The cat flattened himself, tried to back up further but of course, he couldn’t. He was shaking wildly. He looked across the little patch of storm that lay between us, his eyes round, bright and crazed, so desperate that for a moment, they stopped me cold, as if they reminded me of something. I thought, finally, that we were thinking exactly the same thing—that it was time to get on with it.

“Cornell, listen. Are you coming down with me?”
“Wowww!”
“You’re sure?”
“Yowww!”

“OK,” I said. “So be it.” And I reached as far as I could, jigged the branch he was clinging to and the little cat finally let go, frogged out like a skydiver, disappeared into the storm.

By the time I got home, the snow had let up but the wind still gusted hard enough to blow a flight of ravens out of my weeping birch. I killed the motor, sat in the truck for the very last of the light, watched the top whip back and forth, heard the deadwood rattle and I thought to myself that I really needed to get up there and clean it out, that a birch full of deadwood in my own back yard was plain bad advertising, though it was common knowledge the big weepers just didn’t fare very well in Montana.

I let myself in the back door, found Chris reading on the couch in her new Christmas robe, her copy of *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* propped on her stomach while the dogs napped beside her. Every Christmas her mother gave her a brain-busting tome along those lines. The robe was beautiful, cardinal red, genuine silk. It was the kind of gift I couldn’t afford and her mother had sent it along with the book, for all I know, to make that very point. I’ve got nothing against her, Chris’s mom. And if she thinks I’m a back-country oaf who
spirited her daughter off to the hinterlands to keep her from a career in the law or whatever, well, that’s certainly her right.

“Tell me this again,” said Chris. “You got eighty dollars for throwing someone’s cat out of a tree?”

I paused. “I like to think that I helped him reach a decision.”

“He fell out of a tree and he was OK?”

“He fell into a snowdrift.”

“But you *pushed* him out?”

“Chris. I didn’t push him out.”

“So what *did* you do, exactly?”

“I twanged his branch.”

Chris tipped her head back and guffawed. “You what?”

“I twanged his branch. He wouldn’t let me grab him and another night up there would have killed him. Besides, they were feeding him smoked oysters off a spoon by the time I got down. There’s nothing in the world luckier than a lucky cat.”

“So how’d you know he’d be a lucky cat before you pushed him, I mean, ‘twanged his branch?”

“I did a background check, OK?” I was getting exasperated. It was really hard to explain these things sometimes, if you hadn’t actually been there.

“All right,” she said. “You don’t have to get sarcastic.” Chris stretched, pointed her toes in her new rag wool hunting socks. The dogs yawned and stretched with her. The hunting socks were my present. It was quite a combination, those socks, that robe. As if Chris’s mom and I were having a kind of contest for her soul.

Chris gathered her taffy-colored hair in a twist, rolled her head languorously.

“God, Munday,” she murmured. “Isn’t it glorious not to have to go to work?”

“It sure is,” I told her, but I knew in a matter of weeks I would give quite a lot to have to go to work, that we had arrived at that point in the year when my business went into dormancy.

I read in *Newsweek* that I’m what is known as a “new entrepreneur.” The article was talking about a growing trend toward small, family-run businesses, and I guess that’s what I am. Although Chris has a full-time job of her own, she does do my
books. I run A.M. Tree Service from my house. I've got a little shop in the back, attached to the garage. I have a brush chipper, a one-ton Chevy dump, beefed up with helper springs. I have a 200 gallon sprayer unit and a pickup that I use for estimates, spraying or both. I buy good quality used equipment, pay cash for it and keep my overhead to a minimum. I've got a good reputation and get most of my jobs word-of-mouth.

I call my business "A.M. Tree Service," because those are my initials, because I thought it lent the impression of early bird industriousness and because, for a while at least, it had set me up first in the Yellow Pages. That was before the arrival of AAA Tree Service. For a while, there was an Aardvark Tree and Landscape, too. But they didn't last.

Anyway, my winters are long and dead and there are a couple of months when I will take whatever comes along, just to keep the bills paid. One winter it was hardwood floor installations. The past winter I'd been high man on the scaffolding at St. Olaf's church, working for WaiPo McMahon, a Kung Fu Master and remodel carpenter who specializes in historic restorations. WaiPo was from Hawaii, came to Montana on a football scholarship and, like so many people, decided to stay. It was WaiPo's contention that in a town like Nez Perce, you needed two or three lines of work to get by. I couldn't agree with him more and along those lines, I was trying to get him to teach me how to marbleize.

I squatted by my fireplace, built a larchwood tepee, lit it, fed it quarter rounds until it blazed. Chris had dozed off, the two dogs woofed, paddled their feet in their dreams. I switched Chris's reading lamp off and watched the fire-cast shadows swim along the living room walls.

We'd celebrated New Year's at Rae Ann's place, on the north side of the river. Rae Ann was the graphic artist at Bitterroot Ad, where Chris worked. I was ready to go home at 12:30 but Chris wanted to stay on to the ragged end. There was never a time when she hadn't.

I watched the fire, watched Chris sleep. I was still restless, "squirrely" as Chris liked to put it. The holidays are difficult for me but more than anything, I dislike the dregs of them, the clutter and noise and left-over hype, and I find myself longing for that point, still a week away, when the evergreen carcasses are
dragged out to the alley, the ornaments and lights are stowed away and the new year stretches out before me, clean and fresh and unmarked.

I heard the relentless thump of bass drums as some major university marching band performed "Age of Aquarius" and I thought, Why is the TV on? and Why do bowl game bands always play that song? I snapped the set off, stepped out the back door in a down vest and high-tops just to feel the storm rush over me. The east wind carried upon it the phantom honk of my next door neighbor's tenor as he grappled with a song I recognized as "Never Can Say Goodbye." I laughed to myself and thought, My God. It's Oldies Day all over the planet.

Back in the house, I wandered to the kitchen, poked around the refrigerator. I could have used a can of smoked oysters myself. I was starved. Nobody'd shopped since Christmas and there wasn't a lot to choose from: there was fruitcake, but I was sick of fruitcake. There were nuts, but I was sick of nuts. There was Chris's cream cheese Confetti dip. Two foil-wrapped venison enchiladas from a couple weeks before. They smelled OK so I got out a spoon, opened the foil.

"This is truly disgusting," said Chris.

She startled me. "Mmph," I said. "I thought you were asleep."

"So here you are, face in the fridge, your butt sticking out. Wow." She shook her head and grinned. "I mean, where's the magic?"

She stood in her rag socks with her arms folded, that red robe tight across her chest. She managed to look both glamorous and down-home.

I took a drink from the milk carton to wash down the enchilada.

"Munday!" she said, and the grin disappeared.

"Chris! OK. Your timing is unfortunate. But look at it this way. This situation here, well, I see it as a privilege of my station."

"What station?"

"I thought you understood. I'm a world-famous rescuer of kitty cats."

"I'm still not sure I understand," she said, "how you can call that a rescue. But listen, before I forget, while you were out with
your cats, a man came by to see you.”

I closed the refrigerator, wiped my mouth and said, “What man?”

She shrugged. “He was looking for a job.”

“What kind of man would this be, coming by the house on New Year’s, looking for a job?”

“A tree man.” she said. “Who else?”

The dogs straggled in, milled around her feet, Niki the shepherd, Sky the blind spaniel.

“I guess it’s a consensus,” said Chris. “We’re going to the park. Want to come along?”

I nodded, suited up again, and my wife, the dogs and I, walked out into the night.

The storm had settled back in. The snow whirled around the streetlights like a great cloud of insects. Our boots squeaked along the ice trails and the dogs flashed in and out of the murk, racing around the big bare trees. The temperature had dropped and it must have been sub-zero. I could tell by the way my mustache was icing. I’d forgotten my mittens and my hands had gone numb, dead white, the way they do from capillary damage—years of chainsaw use. I flexed them, stuck them under my armpits, and I thought: I’m thirty-seven years old. I don’t smoke or drink but I’ve got the hands of an old man.

“He was an odd one, this guy,” said Chris.

The snow whizzed by us. She was shouting above the wind but her voice still came out a murmur. I couldn’t see much more than the shape of her, but every time we walked close to a streetlamp her violet parka lit up like a beacon. It was eerie, like talking to a will-o-wisp.

“So what’s so odd about him?”

“You’re going to laugh.”

“Try me.”

“OK. He kind of looked like the devil.”

“Really?” I said. “With his bright red suit? His long pointy tail?”

“No,” she said. “Come on. OK, maybe that’s not quite right. Maybe not the devil. But there was something about him. His eyes?
His voice? I don't know. See? I told you it was odd. I can't even tell you why.”

“The devil wants to come to work for me?”
“Now you're making fun.”
“Does he climb?”
“Yes.”
“Does he run a chainsaw?”
“Yes.”
“Does he have a driver’s license?”
She frowned. “He said he did.”
“Wow, he's three out of three. I'd call him tonight, if I only had some work.”

“He doesn't have a phone,” she said.
“Oh, no. It's starting to go sour.”
“He's got a room over in the Montaigne.”
“Of course,” I said. “Where else would he live?”

The Montaigne was a hotel on the river, built in the twenties. In the thirties, it became a rooming house for railroad workers, loggers, people on the move. It still housed a mix of bohemians, students, old men and renegades. Six out of seven of the last people who worked for me lived at the Montaigne, whatever that says about my business.

“What's his name?” I said.
“His name’s Tom Sweeney.”

Valentine's Day, the first thaw. The ice cracked and puddled, the western wind blew the sky open, rendering the snow back to dirty gray crystals.

I'd spent two weeks up a scaffold in the St. Olaf's nave working for WaiPo, scrubbing away at the candle smoke and incense soot that clung to a hundred-year-old mural of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and Saturday morning I was on my back with a bucket of calcium carbonate while far below me, WaiPo and his step-daughter marbleized the columns—she was small,
wiry like Waipo, and she wore her hair in a braid past her waist—watched as the great doors swung open, wheezed shut as worshippers came and went as if the old church were breathing. I couldn’t tell whether it was the old church or whether there was something about the painting that was starting to get to me. Maybe it was the way the two of them stood there by the Tree of Knowledge, just waiting for something to happen.

Maybe it was their expression. They were supposed to look innocent. Instead they looked dumb: buck-naked, sweet and dumb as anything with their wistful little What, Me Worry? smiles.

All the paintings in St. Olaf’s were done by an old Jesuit named DeSousa. According to the story, when he wasn’t painting a mural, he was out chopping the wood, cooking the meals, saying the mass, conducting a thousand souls in and out of this world. I had to admit, the idea of staying that busy had a certain appeal. Maybe if you stayed that busy, that’s the way everyone began to look to you after a while—What, Me Worry? I don’t know. But I was relieved that Saturday afternoon when I got home to find my first tree call of the season.

It was Lonnie Manxman’s Aunt Edie, calling about a frost-split rowan, a short drive from my home near Bridger Park. From two blocks away I spotted it—bright, rawlooking, the two leaders peeled back like a banana, so their branch tips brushed the snow.

Edie Hendricks came to the door, a snowy-haired woman in a huge timber cruiser’s coat with a terrier at her heels. Even with the February thaw, I could hear the furnace throbbing in the basement, could feel the heat pumping out, the breath of the house with its odor of mothballs, sachets, something else I couldn’t identify. Geographies in the basement? A thousand dinners alone? It was the smell of an old person.

I’d hardly begun my sales pitch when she interrupted and said, “I don’t want to lose my old tree. My husband planted it when we moved here from Anaconda. Whatever it costs, well, you just go ahead and fix it.”

I tried to ignore the little bubble of glee that tickled up through my belly. “Whatever it costs?” I thought. Nobody ever said that! and I fairly skipped back to the truck to collect my cabling gear.

I like cable-and-bracing jobs. You can work them alone, there’s
no brush to drag and it's one of the few times in the tree business when what you're doing is so obvious that some self-appointed eco-cop doesn't come over and say, "Hey—why are you cutting that tree down?" About eighty percent of my business is pruning, and the sheer dimwittedness of the notion that cutting a tree down was the only thing I could possibly be doing brings me close to despair.

But then I caught myself. I was about to ruin a perfectly good morning, thinking about some of the things people said to me and about all the nifty responses I never had the presence of mind to come up with anyway. I yanked out the come-along, a couple sections of screw rod and the brace and bit and got to work.

After all, I thought, that kind of encounter was exactly the way I'd met my wife.

It was back in California, twelve years ago. I was standing on the top rung of an orchard ladder in San Carlos, super-gluing a plastic owl to a liquid amber crotch and I heard a woman say, "Hey, what's the big idea?"

I didn't turn around. I don't like to encourage these dialogues, but she asked me again and it became clear she meant to nag me about it. For a lark, I bounced the owl up and down, held him backwards over my shoulder like a handpuppet, made him talk in what seemed a reasonable facsimile of an owl voice: "Hello, Miss Lady. I'm the scary owl-boy."

The woman snickered. "That doesn't sound like an owl. That sounds more like Bullwinkle the moose."

"So sue me," I said in my owl voice. "But this nice man's put me here to scare away the flicker birds."

"The flickers?" she said. "Why? I thought they ate the bugs."

"They do. But they're pecking the bark right off this tree while they're at it."

"But isn't that part of a larger plan?"

It made me laugh, I don't know why. "If you say so," I said at last, and I gave up my little puppet show, turned around on my ladder and there was Chris, lanky and fairhaired, shading her eyes
to look up at me. She appeared to be nearly as tall as I was, with a lovely, smooth, strong-looking jaw, a wide, friendly mouth.

This will probably sound odd, but all that day I had a feeling something extraordinary was about to happen, from the time I got up to the time I came into work. I can’t say exactly how it felt, except that I knew everything was about to change, and that any decisions I thought I might make had somehow already been made, and that they had been made a long time ago.

“You’re trying to tell me that silly-looking owl is going to scare away a woodpecker?”

“Not a woodpecker. A flicker.”

“OK, a flicker.” She smiled then, and for the first time I appreciated the seriousness of the moment. I knew exactly what would happen next, which would be that I would fall in love with this woman. I remember looking at the owl I was holding, at the eyes, which were yellow, shiny, big as silver dollars.

“Besides,” I said, “I don’t think he’s silly-looking. For a three-dollar owl, I think he’s quite terrifying.”

It was an extraordinary moment for me, because I had always been a bit shy around women. But there was something about Chris that made me bold, and almost before I knew what I was doing, I’d asked her to the motorcycle races at Laguna Seca that weekend.

It was an extraordinary moment for Chris, who’d grown up in Los Altos with her two sisters, her mother working full time and giving piano lessons out of the house, because she accepted. She was going to the cycle races with a man she’d barely met, a man who worked outdoors, who worked with his hands. Not just a man who worked with his hands, as her mother pointed out to her that evening, but a man who worked in the trees.

“What’s the problem with that?” Chris had asked her.

“Well. Nothing, really,” said her mother. “It’s just that it sounds so atavistic, dear.”

Atavistic. That’s a good one. I’m well aware of the names by which my fellow tradesmen and I are known: “skinners,” “trimmers,” “hackers.” Defacers of the flora, men whose vision of a well-pruned tree lies somewhere between a hat rack and a fire hydrant, whose notion of shade tree maintenance was to cut the sonofabitch right down. In short, the trade had an image
problem. It was hard to be in the same business with some of those gorillas and still profess to care how the trees look when you were done with them, to care about how they fared, to persevere and call yourself *an arborist*. *An arborist*. That’s what I was. But the term wasn’t even in the dictionary.

The door banged open, startling me. I heard the wheezing bark of the little terrier, heard Edie Hendricks pipe out, “You be careful up there, now, Mr. Munday. You make sure you don’t fall.”

I released the come-along ratchet and pulled some slack off the spool. Don’t fall, I thought. Don’t fall indeed. It’s plain bad form to fall to your death in front of the customer and you’d think anyone would know that. Yet people tell me that nearly every day of my life.

I hitched the two sides of the tree to the come-along, scrambled up the orchard ladder and began to ratchet in the slack. “Don’t fall.” People tell that to me, but nobody ever tells that to Chris.

I’d never seen Grand Mal seizures before I met Chris and they frightened me badly. It was hard for me to accept the fact there really wasn’t much for me to do except to help her ride it out. I went through a phase where I saw them coming all the time. Whenever she twitched, whenever she seemed forgetful, I tried to get her to lie down, tried to get her to re-medicate. I imagined dozens of scenarios during the day—what would I do if this happened, what would I do if that happened? Finally one night we were staying at a friend’s cabin by Lake Tahoe. Chris wanted to go skinny dipping. I chose not to. Instead, I watched from the dock as she swam further and further into the lake and I thought God, if anything happened, I’d just never get out there in time. Then it struck me that it was one of those simple, lethal truths. That, finally, no matter what I thought, I couldn’t be there every moment for Chris, and that it was unreasonable, maybe even perverse of me to think that I could. I understood that the risks she took were her own, and in a way, sacred to her. Exactly the way my own risks were. I knew all this intellectually. But on another level, I knew I had no choice but to try.

The Falling Sickness. I wondered if anybody still called it that, or if it was another one of those terms that had fallen into disre-
pute. Now, more than anything, I was curious about Chris’s disease. What was it like? Where did she go? Was it like a dream? Was it terrible, or was it incredible, beyond belief—a journey up some lost river? For a while, after Chris came to, I’d ask her where she’d been. But she never could remember.

I winched the back tree together, drilled out the base and bolted the split trunk together with screwrod, like you would a piece of furniture. I cut off the excess with a hack saw, peened down the screwrod ends, mitered out the nuts with a chisel so the bark would callus over, sprayed the metal parts with black tree paint. Then I stood in the top, spliced a length of 3/16ths cable into a pair of lag hooks. I cut out a piece of deadwood, released the come-along and went to the door to settle up.

“How does it look?” said Edie Hendricks.

She looked at me, not the rowan, and I hesitated. It seemed an odd question, and then I realized that beneath the heavy lenses, her eyes were milky, nearly sightless. There was a sudden rustling noise behind me and when I turned, the crown of the little tree was dark with waxwings, feasting on the winter-soured berries, perching on the eye-bolts, perching on my ladder rungs as they gobbled them down. Except for a flash of cable, the tree looked as it probably had for the past thirty years.

I shrugged. “It’s back. It’s open for business.”

“What’s that?”

“It looks like a million bucks,” I grinned.

“Oh, good!” she said. “Now. What do I owe you?”

I took off my gloves to tally her bill. What came next, well, I don’t know how these things happen. I was feeling good. This was my favorite part of the job—when I was satisfied, the customer was happy, everything was terrific. I don’t know quite how it happens except that I just want things to keep on going in that vein and not ugly them up with the introduction of money. In my mind I’d already spent the hundred fifty the job was certainly worth, so I was genuinely shocked when I heard himself tell her that it came to sixty-five dollars. The old woman beamed. “I’m tickled to death,” she said. “I thought you’d charge me twice that much!”

Before I could change my mind, she’d already written the
check. She balked at the deluxe estate prune I tried to sell her on the rest of her trees and she turned down the dormant oil spray bid, but she finally bit on the deep-root fertilizing for later in the spring. I glanced quickly at the check to make sure it was signed, then slipped it in my back pocket. I walked past the tree, to the front gate. On my way out, I stooped to pat her dog. The animal wheezed, backed away, showed its teeth.

I drove straight to the bank and cashed the check, then drove slowly through the University district, one of my more productive neighborhoods. I cast a critical eye at my old work, a hopeful eye for the new: leaners, hangers, widowmakers, bastard traps, or what was referred to in a sales pitch as "life-threatening dead wood."

I bought a quart of chocolate milk and drove along, drinking deeply from it while the familiar smell of crushed leaves, old sweat and chainsaw mix filled the cab. The weak winter sunlight smeared through the windshield. I was a man in my own truck, about my own business, on my own time. A whole new season lay before me and for just a moment, I was about as happy as I get.

I parked in front of Marvin's Bakery, dashed across the slush to the Montaigne. It was three-story, red brick, forty-six rooms in all, on the left bank of the Nez Perce River. It was reasonably clean, reasonably cheap and remarkably scenic.

I stopped by Archie Dean's office on the first floor and caught him at a bad moment.

"Fucking kids!" he said, "Can you believe it? They're cooking fondue on a Coleman stove and they crank it up, set off the sprinkler system! Hosed down the whole building! I'm sitting here, eating my goddamned lunch and out of nowhere, it's pissing all over me!"

I tried not to laugh, but it was hard. His hair was all wet, plastered over his forehead like a bad toupee. I knew Archie Dean when he still worked at the Husqvarna chainsaw shop over by the tracks. I must have been in there dozens of times over the years but I still wasn't sure he knew who I was. I glanced down at the two or three stubs where his fingers used to be. It was a good
thing he got out of the saw business when he did. He was just about to run out of fingers.

"Know what you need Archie? Surveillance cameras in all the rooms. It's the only way you're going to keep on top of it."

Archie looked wistful. "Now there's a thought," he said.

"I'm looking for a guy named Sweeney."

"Tall guy?"

"I guess so," I said. "All I know is, he's supposed to look like the devil."

Archie packed his lip and guffawed. "You're not takin' any prizes yourself, Mister."

"I mean, he resembles the devil."

"Oh, I know who you mean: big tall red-head. Eats bird food. I went in there to check his radiator, there's sunflower seeds everywhere. He's 312. Upstairs, to the right. I haven't seen him for weeks though."

I rapped on 312 and there was no answer. I rapped again and, just for the hell of it, I tried the door and it opened immediately. Archie must not have relocked it.

A strange thing happened then. There was a kind of popping noise in my ears and a pressure, like you get when you descend suddenly in an airplane. I checked the hall, saw it was clear and the next thing I knew, I was standing alone in this stranger's room.

The radiator was shut down and my breath came out in plumes. To the north, there was a terrific view of the Nez Perce River and to the west you could see Trapper Peak, just this side of the Idaho border. But inside, the walls were close and stained and the room smelled of citrus and cheap roll-your-own tobacco. There was a steel cot, a mattress covered with a flannel-lined sleeping bag, the kind you used to take to camp with you when you were a kid. There was a collection of traveling souvenirs from the tree business: a larchwood crotch, smooth, gray, weathered as driftwood. There was a wren's nest, sitting in a larger nest. There was a cherrywood burl that had been split on a table saw, oiled and polished so the grain stood out like flowing water and Archie was right—there were sunflower hulls everywhere. There were tins of boot grease, a chainsaw piston that served as an ashtray, a couple copies of Arbor Age magazine, a roll of climber's sling. There were a few paperbacks—St. Exupery and

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Peter Matthiessen. There was a well-worn snapshot tacked to the wall that got my attention—a young woman with big shoulders, a great mane of hair and a dazzling smile, holding twin toddlers in her round, strong arms. There was something familiar about her. I thought, for just a moment, she looked remarkably like Chris.

I listened to the knock and clang of the steam pipes. Somewhere down the hall an old man coughed. An osprey flew by the window at eye level, winging its way eastward, upriver toward the mountains. I watched the rafts of clouds move in and out of town, the light dimming, going bright, then dimming, as if there were someone outside playing with a switch. High on the side of Lookout Mountain a herd of animals cropped at the brush, but I couldn't tell what they were.

It made me shudder. It was too lonely, and in a crazy way, too familiar. It reminded me of just how skinned-back your life could get, the room of this man I didn't even know yet. To travel around like that, to live in something like a boy's room with your little souvenirs and not much else. Maybe it reminded me of the places I'd lived when I was out drifting around myself.

I had just closed the door and locked it when a kid appeared in the hallway in robe and shower shoes, on his way down to the bathroom. He was carrying a loofa and a Playboy magazine and we exchanged greetings. I told him I was looking for Sweeney, that I wanted to talk to him, and the kid grinned and told me I might have to wait a while.

"Why's that?" I said.

"Well," he said. "For Christsake. The guy's in Antarctica."

I felt like driving so I headed out of town, to the east, along the Nez Perce River. I followed its bends upriver past the studmill, glanced at the fir deck glistening under the sprinklers. Every year it seemed a bit smaller and every year the log loads coming in looked a whole notch stringier, more pitiful. It had gotten to the point where they were cutting anything you could make a two-by-four out of. The mountainsides down the valley were a checkerboard of clearcuts. They'd taken all the big trees. Now they were going back for the smaller ones. I wondered what in the world they were thinking of. And then, out of nowhere, I thought Antarctica? What's a treeman doing in Antarctica?
I was in my basement office, working on my first spring mailing when Chris walked in with a tray. The dogs snuffled in behind her and she said “Tea time, Munday.”

I liked it down in my office. Chris says I have a Bunker Mentality and I think she’s probably right. Four years ago I insulated the concrete walls with styrofoam sheets, paneled over that with tongue and groove cedar. I painted the walls white, put up the Bailey’s Woodsman’s Supply poster of my heroes, those two no-name California tree climbers, tied in a hundred and sixty feet up a giant coast redwood, chainbinders on the butt, spring boards at the kerf, blowing the top out with a two-man Stihl.

I put in some discount track-lighting, laid an earth-tone carpet remnant, and through the off-season I was down there most of the time, happy as a prairie dog. Sometimes I would stay up late, sleep on the day bed. I could hear the plumbing all over the house. I could hear the tick of the dogs’ toenails overhead and the soft footfalls of Chris as she passed from room to room. Sometimes when she went on a reading binge, I’d disappear early in the evening, and while she was plowing through Chekhov, Celine, whoever she was hot on that particular month, I’d hole up in my little room, watch TV until I hated myself.

I wished I was more like Chris—more of a reader. I used to be. But as it was now I spent more and more time with my business, more and more time outside, more and more time following the trees through the season and sometimes wondered about the way things had worked out.

Moving to Nez Perce, for example. We’d done it more as a lark. I don’t think Chris had planned that we’d stay here forever, but more and more it looked like we would. I hadn’t planned to stay in the tree business, either, but more and more that was just what I did. I stayed busy, Chris stayed busy, but I could never tell if she liked it or not.

Chris handed me a cup of cocoa and coffee, half and half, and sat down beside me.

I caught the smell of her—what was it? Cigarettes? Tatiana? Chris’s own candy-like smell? She lit a cigarette, put the match
out in her saucer. I hated to see her smoke, particularly when she smoked in my office and used anything handy as an ashtray. But I knew you had to pick your shots. I hadn’t mentioned her smoking in eleven years and daily I grew more certain I probably never would.

I rubbed her shoulders, told her that I’d stopped by the Montaigne looking for Sweeney.

“Can you believe it?” I said. “I mean, what the hell is a treeman doing in Antarctica?”

“He’s on the tower crew,” she said. “For the microwave circuit.”

“How did you know that?”

“He told me,” she said.

“When?”

“New Year’s Day,” she said. “Remember?”

I sipped at my mocha. “You didn’t tell me that,” I said.

“Sorry, Munday.” She smiled at me. “I could have sworn that I did.”

“Why is it that everyone knows all about this guy except me, his potential employer?”

She shrugged. “What can I say? You must be out of the loop. Did you go by there to give him a job?”

“I have to, now.” I said. “I can’t miss out on the only microwave tower-climbing St. Exupery-reading treeman in the west, can I?”

Chris grinned. “No,” she said. “I wouldn’t expect you could.”

I ordered us a pizza, went back to work. Chris went back upstairs and I could hear the noise of the shower running and after a while, I heard the doorbell chime. The dogs swarmed upstairs, barking while I looked for my checkbook and when I passed the bathroom, the shower was still on.

I opened the front door just as the pizza man was beginning to look anxious.

“I wasn’t sure I had the right address,” he said. He wore a yukon trooper’s hat in rabbit fur and his collar was up around his sideburns. It was after five and the sky was a smoky blue-black. A bright slip of moon rode off above the Bitterroots.

I wrote him a check, looked at the pizza box, suddenly doubt-
ful. It seemed it should be hotter. “Is this thing all the way frozen yet?” I asked him.

The pizza man grinned. “I ain’ t sayin’ it ain’t.”

I shivered, took the pizza in, rapped on the bathroom door to tell Chris. There was no response.

I turned the handle. There’s no lock on the bathroom door but it wouldn’t open. I pushed again, but something on the other side was holding it. I pushed harder. In the widening slot of steam and light I could see the cloud of Chris’s blond hair against the tile floor.

She was on her back, convulsing, and in the second that I stepped over her while I entered the bathroom, I had a moment of vertigo, a feeling that somehow the room had inverted itself. I dropped to my knees, caught her up in my arms, held her loosely while her body jerked and her breath came in ragged, whistling gasps. The Falling Sickness. I cradled her head, closed my eyes so I couldn’t see her face, and I called out to her as though she were a hundred yards away. “I’ve got you, Chris!” I shouted. “Don’t worry! I got you, honey. Hang on! Hang on! Hang on!”

The dogs sat in the hallway, solemn, attentive until gradually her breath slowed and she grew quiet. And when she’d been quiet a while I stood, dampened a hand towel, wiped her face and then carried her to bed.

She was still fully dressed so I took her blouse and jeans off, put the comforter over her, and as I did, she woke and her eyes flew open. “Oh God, she said, and she grabbed my hands, pressed them hard. “I love you honey. God, I really do, I love you—”

I held her to me, stroked her head and said, “I know that, Sparky. I know you do,” and I did know that then, just as I knew that in an hour she would have no memory of any of it—the seizure, the fall or what she’d just said.
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Spring 1999
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