CutBank 52
Fall 1999
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On the cover:

The Other Women
Ink
Chris Levi
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Portra

Coda: Fundamental Principles for Your Health

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**Autobiography of a Head Bully**

The street outside my uncle’s store was full of mackerel when the nun entered. Two men were hitting each other with dead fishes, bashing each other on the sides of the head. It sounded like the whole city was honking. The locals were walking, sliding, up and down the sidewalk.

"Milk?" I asked the nun. She was in every Thursday. Forty-three-years-old according to my uncle.

"Not today," she said.

I walked to the counter. She had a paper bag there, from the Broadway, the department store. I looked in it as she glanced out the window. It was full of ladies’ wigs, red and blond and brunette.

I needed to wash my hair.

Outside the store, the two men had each other by their scalps. The one man—bigger than the other—had the other guy against the roof of the rig. The big man was the truck driver. He had a fish in his hand, and he was shoving it into the other guy’s mouth.

"You ever watch the fights?" the nun asked.

"No," I told her, "just wrestling."

"There’s nothing I like more than the fights," the nun said. She walked to the window.

"How much you wash your hair?" Tim had asked earlier that day at lunch, at school. "How much?" People were always asking that, saying that. He knew how much. I’d told him. I couldn’t help it. His hair was “business cut” short, parted on the left, clean. I hit him, slammed him with a palm to his forehead.

"Yeah," I told the nun. "Those fights are something."

She turned to me and smiled. "You could fight," she said. She walked toward me, put her hands on my arms, around my biceps, rubbed them down to my wrists and up again, pressed her hands into my flesh. They were bruised and bony, like old trees. The fingers twisted in odd directions at each knotted joint.
“You have a fighter’s arms,” she said.
I pulled away, my hands feeling these arms.
The small man was among the fish on the pavement. The truck driver stood over him, reeling. In the distance, sirens.

My wife, Melinda, bleached her hair the summer before she entered high school. She tells me this in the locker room as she wraps my hands in the tape. I ask her why.
“It’s your hair,” she says. “It’s turning grey.”
“You want me to dye it?” I ask.
“No,” she says. “It just reminds me.” The crowd is chanting my name. It’s a small crowd. They’ve been small for a decade now. My manager’s quit. “They’ll think you’re getting old,” she says.
“They know,” I tell her.

Gloria had hair like an olive, round and black, cropped at the top of the neck. Evenings, it fell across her face, her head on the pillow. I could see the gray roots near her forehead entrenched like flakes of skin wore into the floor boards of a dark house. She was thirty, twelve years older than myself. She was a graduate student at a local university, a music major, clarinet, bassoon, and bass. We’d meet at the Burger King across from the Jack LaLane Fitness Center, she in an overcoat, a scarf over her head, sunglasses. I wore shorts, a tee-shirt. I didn’t care—but for her, a career was on the line. I was one of her students at the city college, earned an “A” for her class, music appreciation. Afternoons in bed, she’d say I was using her, but the class was easy. I assured her. She was my first. I was in love. Fridays, she’d go to the hairdresser, get a dye job—always black—and a haircut. I never knew her original color.

What I told Tim, reminded him, eventually, though I’m not sure he heard, was my mom won’t let me wash my hair more than once a week. I begged her, told her most kids washed their hair every day. I knew. They told me. Mom said washing hair too often made the scalp go bad, made it turn into wax. My hair was
grease and flakes. So I hit Tim. He stumbled back. I didn’t see him the rest of the afternoon.

The nun raised her hands, fisted them as best she could, better than I thought she’d be able to, started shuffling across the floor, jabbing. “Come on,” she said, “Come on, Jerry. Put up your dukes.”

I didn’t know her name, so I called her Nunny. “Listen, Nunny,” I said. “I can’t fight you.”

“Why not?” she asked, jabbing at me with her left. She moved slow on the floor, the same way the cops were moving slow through the crowd outside, trying not to slip in the fish. She jabbed at my chin, my chest, missing each time by less than a centimeter. She ducked her head after each move, as if she were certain I was about to strike back. She’d watched a lot of Joe Lewis and Muhammed Ali on the television, I decided. She was big, too, for a nun, almost six feet two, had wide, well-squared shoulders. She could have been a boxer.

“I can’t hit a nun,” I told her. “I can’t hit a woman of God.”

She popped me on the right side of my mouth, and I went down, cursing.

“Shame on you,” she said.

“What’d you do that for?” I asked her. She stood over me, hitting her two fists softly against each other as if she had on gloves.

“Are you going to fight or not?” she asked.

THE WAY YOU ENTER THE ring is this. You come out of the double doors on the right, jog down the alley. Some guy along the railing, some guy sitting about fourteen rows up, tells you you’re going to be pulp, you’re going to eat the floor. You give him the finger, and the folks around him laugh, say, “That’s it. That’s the way to go, Jerry.” On Saturday nights, they dream of you. You are the gas station they can’t own, the lottery they can’t win. You are beating up their boss, giving him a headache that will last through Wednesday morning, keep him home half the week. You are the President of the United States of America and you are whipping a commie for the boys overseas. You are punching the teacher that failed them in fifth grade science. You are punching that
police officer who gave them a ticket last Tuesday afternoon for a stop sign only a telescope could see.

You are almost too big to squeeze through the ropes. You are Godzilla on steroids. You are going to fell some buildings. This man is nothing. He is a Barbie doll. Look at the way he wears his hair, curls and frills along the bottom edges, little ringlets on his scalp. Paste a ribbon on him and he’d be Miss Junior America 1973.

Your arms and legs won’t stay still. You jump around the ring on the balls of your feet, knock your hands together, jab at air. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten just like that, down. You punch the corner post, wrestle the turnbuckle. Your corner man tells you to turn around. The referee gestures for your body. You knock gloves with the-sissy in the other corner. You go home, jump along the corner ropes, wait for the bell to ring. In five minutes, the referee will raise your right arm, and you’ll strut about the ring like a proud rooster.

Lucinda Bancor was the redhead from Peru. She had a Southern accent. Her father oversaw the offshore drilling for Texaco gasoline. She’d lived her first ten years in Biloxi, the next ten in South America. She’d come to Los Angeles to study acting but gave up school after one semester. She’d landed a role in one of the soaps—Loving, I think. She was Clara Moore, the spoiled, Southern girl who killed rich boys for a living. The role lasted a year, and she was rolling in the money for a while. I met her in a nightclub a couple months before my fourteenth fight. I was an “up and comer” in the newspapers, had a fight coming up with Condon, a junior weight from Hoboken, New Jersey. It was the red hair caught my attention, red hair on a white evening gown. She’d heard of me. It wasn’t much of a problem muscling her boyfriend out of the picture. The red always came out a dark gray in the gossip columns. We saved the pictures, laughed at them over the breakfast table and at parties in our home. A week after we broke up, her old boyfriend accosted me outside my gym. “I dare you to fight,” he said. I punched him in the belly, not hard either. He fell to the ground, gasping. I turned, didn’t see him pull the gun.
“Fag,” he said. “Fag.”

Dad didn’t approve. When my head was in Mom’s lap, he’d complain about this being sissy vulgar for a twelve-year-old boy. He said this was monkey and gorilla stuff, moms poking through their kids’ hair for mites, that we were human beings and had shampoos for that. Mom continued her massage, but I heard him, and I knew. There was something wrong with me. At school, the kids called me “Flakeface” and “Lepercan,” “Walking Sunburn” and “Mr. Clean.”

It was the nun taught me how to fight. Not all the way through, but the basics. Thursdays, she came into the store, showed me the moves. No one was around much. If someone did come in, she’d drop her hands and stare at the racks of pills and produce, the plastic bags of herbs and cartons of trail mix and raisins and yogurt-covered peanuts, until that person left. The way she trained me was this. She performed the moves herself, the left uppercut, the right hook. I watched. Then she took my arms, my legs, in her hands, moved them for me, showing me where to take them. Afterward, I stood beside her punching, following each move, the same punch over and over and over and over again. We began sparring, not fast, not hard, just practicing the moves in opposition to each other, the defensive ones, the ducking, the hugging. I didn’t want to hurt her.

She herself managed to give me a black eye. This wasn’t in the store, though. This was in her house. She claimed the store was too confining. I moved the shelves around, cleared a space, but she said it wasn’t large enough. She told me we’d meet at her house after I got off work. “I thought you lived with the nuns?” I asked.

She laughed. “Of course,” she said.

“But the nuns,” I said, “the nuns aren’t going to like this.”

“You let me worry about the nuns,” she said.

Turned out she had a car and all. Drove me to her home. It wasn’t a nunnery or anything like that. It wasn’t anything like I’d expected. It was a house around the corner, four and a half blocks from the health food store. Two blocks from my house. It was one of those California bungalows, one story, two hundred square feet of front yard grass, a couple chest-high shrubs shoved against
the front of the house, a porch smaller than the corner of a boxing ring.

Inside, crucifixes covered her walls. I couldn't hardly turn without running into one of those figures staring down at me the way they do, all sad and weepy-eyed, that look of "why'd you do this to me?" all over their faces. I couldn't hardly breathe in there. But it was the nun who was watching me, not him. "You like my friends?" she asked. She walked me to this back room, an empty room with nothing on the walls or the floor except red velvet.

"I'll be back," she said.

I stood in the room, waiting for what seemed like an hour. I leaned against the wall, stuck my hands in my pockets, walked around, tried to imagine pictures on the sides of the room, on the material. All I could see was those crosses. I walked to the doorway, looked around, cross upon cross strung all the way down the hall like railroad ties. I turned, started to shadow box, my feet almost sinking in the carpet. I was used to the concrete floors of the store. I felt like I was walking on hair, jumping on it, in it.

"That's good," she said.

I turned around. She had on a pair of boxer's shorts, red with white strips around the edges, and a sleeveless tee-shirt. On her feet were two boxing shoes, purple, laced up almost to the knees. On her head was one of the wigs I'd seen in the bag months earlier. It was a blond one, big, fake curls from scalp to almost shoulder. Her legs, I noted, were unshaven.

"Here," she said. She handed me a pair of gloves from under her arm. She stuck a couple on her hands as well. We boxed for a few minutes like we always did, careful, slow, and then she let me have it, threw punches faster than I'd ever seen before, hit me hard. "Come on, Jerry," she said. I ducked, dodged. "Hit me," she said. "Hit me hard." But I didn't. I didn't even try. We boxed a long time. I ran out of breath, but she continued, punch after punch. I went down, a kisser to the left eye.

"You okay?" she asked when I came to. I was in a bedroom, pictures of Ali, Marconi, Lewis, on the walls. There wasn't a feminine thing about the room.

"Yeah," I said. I felt like someone had stuck a pencil up my eye socket.

"I think you're ready for the big boys," she said.
You know you are going to lose. You pretend you are invincible. You kid yourself you’re going to retire before anything bad happens. But you don’t. You can’t. Fighting gets into your blood, and even more so, winning.

The first time you go down is like being shot in the back. You don’t even know you’re on the floor. You wake up, and you hear this man calling out numbers, waving a finger in your face. There is something on your back, something unfamiliar, something that is not supposed to be there. It is thick like denim, but you have no shirt on. You know that because there is sweat running from your belly down to your back. You try to get up, not because you want to win, but because you want to prove you are okay, that all your internal organs are still there. Perhaps, you do get up. You are not ready. You never will be. You haven’t felt this bad since your days as an amateur, your teenage years before you were in shape, before you were in fighting form. You know you will lose.

I am lying, of course. Losing should be so easy. No, it is not like being shot. It is like being terminally sick for fifteen years. You know you are going to lose from the first, from the moment you enter the ring, the moment you feel that first slug in your ribs. You want to turn and run, but you are scared of the crowd. You are scared of that man in the fourteenth row who said you were pulp, said you were going to eat canvas. And you are scared that you really are going to be pulp, that you really are going to eat canvas. You are scared of the gloves on the other man’s hands. You are scared of the newspapers Sunday morning. You are scared of your trainer and the next decade and a half of your life. You are scared of the next fight and the one after it and the one after that. You are scared you will never win again. You are scared you will be the boxer other boxers use to become twenty-one and zero. The canvas is almost a relief. At least, you are dead then. At least, it is over. But you fear waking up. You yearn for the one good punch that will end it quickly, send you sailing into the black forever, but you also yearn, try to hold on, thinking, hoping, that maybe, the other boxer is as bad off as you, that if you can just take punches for the next hour, he will crumple from exhaustion. Victory by deterioration. You know that, one day, this will not happen, and one day, it doesn’t. The black lights never last long enough.

* * *

Fall 1999
Gina had brown hair, dark brown, with medium-sized kinks, kinks like a finger had rolled them, fingertip kinks. We'd watch the sitcoms, the Happy Days, the Fonz, the Laverne and Shirley. She'd snort a laugh, and I'd pull on her hair, not hard, just enough to straighten a curl, watch it roll itself back up like a spring. "What're you doing?" she'd ask, and I'd kiss her neck, say, "Nothing." We rarely got all the way through Laverne.

"You got nice hair," she told me late one night, "really rich, thick, like a woman's should be." The lights were off, but we could see each other by the street light coming through the window, shadows with a streak of color where the glass showed itself on the bed. She had my hair in her hand. It was long then, shoulder-length, the style for a few more years. I didn't know what to say exactly. I'd been losing a lot of fights.

Tim saw my head in Mom's lap, saw it plenty of times, almost every time he came over. "Come here," Mom'd say. We'd be watching The Flash on the television, The Fabulous Five, Superman, when we were older, one of those daytime talk shows or, if it was on, a baseball game. "Mom," I'd whine. "Come here," she'd say. "Aw, Mom," I'd say, but I'd come, and she'd put her fingers in my hair. "I don't get it," she'd say. "It's like your whole head is dead." Tim would snicker when we got outside. "Monkey boy," he'd say, "Freak."

After school the day I hit him, I met him in the locker room. Tim was standing in front of a mirror beside his line of lockers. He had his shirt off, and he was rolling his shoulders back, feeling his chest with the fingertips of his right hand. I didn't say anything. I went to my locker and started the combination. The locker room was a rectangle with lockers along three of the walls. My locker was on the long wall across from the showers. Tim's was on a short side to the left of the showers.

"Those yours?" he asked. I turned around. In the middle of the room were two rows of benches. On a bench on the far row from me were a pair of white shorts. They looked damp, droopy, lying there, a layer of freshly disembodied flesh.

"They stink," he said. He stuck his arms through his shirt and pulled it over his head. He pulled the bottom of the shirt with his fingers, letting the print on it go tight then loose. He
watched this in the mirror. “They stink up the whole room,” he said.

“I wouldn’t wear any crummy shorts like that,” I told him.

I was there to pick up my P.E. uniform. It hadn’t been washed in two weeks. This was the night Mom was to go to the Laundromat. I pulled out the sports bag I’d bought with my money from the dime store and stuffed each item of the locker into it: my red uniform tee-shirt, my pair of white socks, my running shoes, my jock strap. Besides my deodorant, there wasn’t anything left in my locker.

The shorts on the bench were from a uniform. They were cotton and white with a one-inch slit up each side. They didn’t have pockets, but they had a tight elastic waistband that gouged into the skin like a string of fingernails. The bottom edges of the shorts were big and loose and made the legs of all of us but the most fit look skinny and malnourished. They were uniform shorts. They fit everyone and no one. The only way to tell which ones belonged to whom was if we sewed or magic markered our name or initials onto the inside. Mine had my initials markered under the manufacturer’s tag where the laundry handling information used to be printed. But I couldn’t see that from where I was.

Tim had his bag full and closed his locker. I laid down my bag and sat on the bench beside me. After a few seconds, I laid my back and my head against the wood. In a few moments, Tim would be gone.

“What you waiting for?” he asked, the handles of his bag slung over his left shoulder.


When he saw my bag was still open, he dropped his bag off his shoulder, carried it to the far edge of the bench near his locker, and laid it on the floor. He sat down then, grinning.

We waited like that for what seemed like hours.

Finally, I got up, retrieved my shorts. Within seconds, Tim had me by the arms, pushed me, shoved me into the hole between the lockers and the partition covering the door. He punched me in the ribs, the stomach. I squeezed tight against the wall. And then, somehow, we were on the floor, and Tim was on top of me. I closed my eyes. There were fingers in my hair. Skin was peeling away. Dandruff was coming out all over the place.
“Don’t worry about your hair,” my wife tells me. “You have pretty hair.” We are in the locker room again. She is dabbing the cuts on my face with alcohol and aloe vera. My head bumps against the table with each swab.

“Why would I be worrying about my hair?” I ask her.

“I didn’t say you were,” she says. “I just don’t want you to. That’s all.”

But I am worrying.

My wife’s hair is thin, always has been. Dish water blond, somewhere between brown and bleached. It lies on her head like a piece of tissue paper or like old cotton. She doesn’t curl it and can’t. It won’t grow longer than halfway down her back without going fuzzy, splitting ends. No perms. No fancy stuff. She washes it, combs it in the morning, goes out. It is not bad looking hair. It is, in fact, some of the sexiest hair I’ve known, especially underwater. Wet, it clings to her head and her neck tight like skin.

Hers is the hair beauticians hate. They create short styles for her, boy’s cuts. My wife caught onto that years ago. A quickie shop for men will do the same job at a fifth the price. We need the money, always have. She didn’t meet me till I was well on my way out.

We met in a swimming pool at a detox center. Yes, I drank for awhile. What else could you expect? She had her glasses off and had lost her contact lenses three months earlier. She was swimming laps, and I was floating on one of those plastic rafts. She bumped into me. It wasn’t that she couldn’t see me. Her eyesight’s not that bad. It’s that she wasn’t watching where she was going. I’m not sure if I like being married. It’s like telling yourself there are no more victories to be had. It’s like hitting that canvas. But it is also restful. It is that clear, black center you find on your back for a few seconds in the ring.

I started working out at Klazuski’s gym, sparring with the big guys. It was the nun who brought me there, introduced me to Sam and Walter and Casey and the others. Said I had staying power and a decent left hook. They took me into the ring, let me fight it out a few minutes with one of the local boys. I sent him back crying to his mother. He barely even got a hit in. “That’s enough,” Casey said, almost before I started. They took me in.
The nun came to see me a couple weeks later at the gym. Said I looked good. I asked her about the other nuns, and she laughed, said she’d see me in a few days.

But I never did see her again. Not as a nun. The next time she showed up, she’d shaved her legs, bought some heels, a black dress, sleeveless and six inches above the knee. She was wearing make-up too and that blond wig. She looked awkward and ugly, that huge build on those tiny shoes.

“Milk?” I asked her. I didn’t hardly recognize her at first, but the wig and the six feet two inches gave her away.

“Jerry,” she asked, “how old do you think I am?” She’d rested her arms on the counter, was looking me straight in the face.

“Forty-three,” I said before I realized I should have said thirty-eight, thirty-seven, something to make her feel good.

“I’m twenty-nine,” she said.

“Oh,” I said.

She put her hands on the counter, the bruised and cut ones, the bony ones with knots at each joint. “I’m not that old,” she said. She looked down at her hands. “Jerry?” she asked.

“Yes?” I said.

“Do you think?” But she didn’t continue. “It’s these hands,” she said, “and the shoulders and the height.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“We had something, Jerry,” she said. “We had something.”

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“What are you, Jerry?” she asked, “Seventeen?”

I wasn’t, but I told her yes.

“The men don’t like me,” she said.

“You’re a nun,” I said. “What does it matter?”

“I ain’t a nun,” she said. “I ain’t never been one. It’s just, their clothes, their clothes are the only thing I look good in.” She pulled off her wig then. Her head was bald. A red, coagulated scar ran from just above the center of her forehead to her left ear. “Brain surgery,” she said. “Cancer. The hair grew back in patches. I was twenty-one.”

“I’m sorry,” I told her.

“It’s a terrible thing, Jerry,” she said. “A terrible thing to age before your time.”

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16 Fall 1999
THE TABLOIDS SAID I WAS GAY. They said I’d been shot by a lover’s ex-boyfriend. They said I got Lucinda Bancor pregnant. They said I dropped her for a rival coach. They said I was washed up. They said I was the best up-and-comer in the United States, and the sexiest. I was the sports star the women wanted to see do daytime television. I was the one who beat up the girls I went out with. I was the one who spent all my money on phone sex. I was the one who punched a waiter at an unnamed downtown restaurant. I was the one getting psychic readings from Kenny Kingston, the paranoid one, the one who wouldn’t fight on a day that Kenny didn’t approve. I was a star, not a big one, but a star nonetheless, someone some folks had heard of, soap opera fans, diehard boxing fans.

Tomorrow, I’m forty-three. When I retire, the tabloids won’t even mention my name.
THE WOMAN SMOOTHING HER SON'S BANGS

Looks young against the Dakota snow.
Her dad's a bird man, she tells me,
when a pheasant jumps a post.

She misses it—
the town where her father's mayor
and taxidermist,

where there's not much use
in whispering, the church secretary
leaving casseroles in your mailbox

with bad news.
The furrow where sky and field meet
is little more than a suggestion

like the nod that says
I'm listening
or the house without door

her son outlines on the train window.
Out there—her ex
feeds kindling to a needy wood stove,

warming a room for a new girl
who wears thermals and slippers most days.
So quiet when she enters a room

he doesn't even notice her.
His white-sided house
stands invisible in these plains

that give up only game tracks,
a thin vein of barbed wire.
It was John who pushed Dominique to engage life. It was life that flung John into Dominique’s sun-burned arms. It was Dominique who looked in horror at all that life had to offer. She imagined terrible coincidences while clouds pushed through each other. She was concerned with the safety of children, with the fate of a bird no larger than a thumb. It was Normandy who had rescued Phil from a frighteningly long dryspell. Next day at the lab he imbibed an absolutely colorless liquid which induced euphoria and tinted his vision blue. Normandy was startled to find he’d lost interest in sex but preferred rubbing his thumb across the opalescent inside of a seashell. Normandy started her car in disbelief and backed into the cart of a roadside fruitstand. She shut off the car and sat thinking, *I am inside the eyedropper.* The car-phone rang. It was John to say Dominique had “broken through.” Normandy was taken with John. She’d overheard him using a metaphor that employed only one domino. That night under her duvet she imagined John’s fingers on her neck, gently behind her ear—his lips to her closed eyes. She recalled this as John spoke of Dominique “coming to” in the steam of some shower. Normandy held the phone to her ear, she stared ahead as the grocer knocked at her window with soil-streaked fingers. She rolled down the window and gave him the phone. She shifted into drive and a pumpkin fell to the pavement.
Sven is up on the roof. I can hear him stomping around up there, doing what he does best. He has come with his satellite dish, his big red box of tools, his six years of experience, his generous heart. He is installing a dish for my father, the historian. “I got a great deal on this thing,” Sven said last night, proudly unboxing the dish for me back at his house on Garland, a half-mile down the road from the university where my father teaches.

“Think he’ll like it?”

“He doesn’t have a television.”

“No sweat. I’ve got extra. He can have the twelve-inch. It’s three years old but it works fine.” For Sven, television years run alongside dog years. At nine months a set is mature, by four years it’s on the downswing, once it hits six you simply keep it around out of compassion, loyalty, familial respect. Sven could probably fashion the innards of a television out of coat hangers and string if necessary, but the man could not work a stove top to stave off starvation.

My father cannot help but be uneasy with a man who is so resolute in his bachelorhood, holding on to the old ways. Even before my mother died, my father could whip up a remarkable roulade or baste a turkey to perfection. His clothes are much better-ironed than my own, his China cabinet more attractively stocked. I am convinced the reason he survived my mother’s demise so well was that the household continued to run efficiently in her absence. I was seven years old when lightning got her in Little Rock, one of those freak accidents you hear about and hardly believe, “112 people killed by lightning in the United States each year.” According to the newspaper article, my mother was number thirty-nine. When I first told Sven how she died he thought it was a joke, and who could blame him? A church pianist from Fayetteville, Arkansas, mother of one, painter of landscapes, collector of paper weights, just doesn’t die like that. The lightning bolt struck the tree under which she and her best friend Bonnie had taken shelter from a rainstorm on the third day of
their sixteenth annual visit to the capital. They were sitting on a
bench. Bonnie lost use of her right arm and my mother died,
because my mother had miscalculated electrical conduction and
refused to sit on the side of the bench closest to the metal gar­
bage can, opting instead for the end directly beneath the tree’s
lowest-hanging limb.

After she died I waited for everything to fall apart, but it
didn’t. Although I never stopped missing her, eventually I came
to realize that it had always been my father who kept the house
and family intact, performing the maternal duties. I returned to
school three days after her funeral, my hair properly braided, the
whiteness of my socks and uniform shirt uncompromised. My
father had even bought me a new pair of shoelaces upon realiz­
ing that the ends of the old ones were frayed and I could not get
them through the eyes of my blue leather saddle shoes. One
winter when the pipes burst and flooded the basement I came
home from a weekend in the Ozarks with my high school boy­
friend Jason—one in a long string of “promising” athletes—to
find my thin, graceful father ankle deep in the frigid water, mopp­
ing, while a hired man repaired the pipes. I know he must look
at Sven and see a hopeless case, some anthropological holdover
from the days when men took out the trash and women explored
the endless possibilities of casseroles.

Sven moved to Fayetteville with his family ten years ago. I
was born here and never came up with any good reason to move
away; there is something comforting about the place, with its
low hills and seasonal weather, its constant influx of kids from
rural Arkansas towns who move here to attend the university. I
see Dad at least once a week and Sven often accompanies me,
content to participate in the routines that have become my life.
He is not trying to win my father over with the satellite dish;
bribery would never occur to him, just as it would not occur to
him that my father might not like him. Dislike, anyway, would be
much too strong a word. My father doesn’t understand Sven, but
he is in no way averse to him. My father has spent the last eigh­
ten years of his life compiling the letters of Wendell Cage, a
labor of love that has netted him a few thousand dollars in grant
money, four sabbaticals from the history department of the state
university where he is a tenured professor, and an as yet unpub-
lished five-volume set of correspondence that threatens to be-
come seven volumes before the project is over. Wendell Cage
was as prolific with his letters as he was with his children: twenty-
eight by three wives and four mistresses, a clean number until
you break it down on a per-mom basis. The mistresses produced
twenty-two of the kids, far more than their fair share. Little re-
 mains of the man save two unremarkable works of entomology,
one uncelebrated novel titled In A Cold Place, an old plantation
house in Eufala, and the letters.

My father came upon the novel at The Haunted Book Shop
in Mobile, Alabama, two years after my mother's death. He pur-
chased it because he liked the binding, immediately recognizing
it as the work of a long-defunct confederate publishing house
whose trademark was a cotton plant stamped a half-inch from
the bottom of the spine. My father bought the novel as a relic
only, an homage to the past; but once he had read it, he immedi-
ately devoted himself to Cage, convinced beyond doubt that this
man whose name he had never heard was the greatest American
writer of the nineteenth century.

Sven and I don't live together yet, we've only been going out
for three months, but at some point we fell into a routine whereby
I spend most nights at his place. Mornings Sven gets up around
six o'clock and showers, and I pretend to sleep while he dresses
silently by the window, trying not to wake me. It is a pleasure to
see him unwrapping the towel from his trim waist, and then to
watch the muscles of his buttocks shift when he bends to take
his underwear off the chair. After putting on his jeans, he always
turns toward the full-length mirror beside the bed, raising his
arms above his head to put on a clean white T-shirt, and during
those seconds when he is pulling the shirt over his head I con-
centrate on the cleft in the center of his chest just below the
sternum, a deep indentation the circumference of a quarter. I
am struck every morning by the sheer beauty of him, how the
individual parts-face and neck and hairless chest, back and thighs
and ankles-add up to this startling aesthetic whole.

This morning I went back to sleep after watching him dress,
then got up an hour later and made coffee, brewing it dark the
way he likes. I found Sven outside, loading the big cardboard box containing the satellite dish into the back of his pick-up truck. The twelve-inch television was there too, swaddled in bubble wrap. I kicked at an oversized mushroom that had broken through the soft surface of the asphalt, exposing its hairy underside. “Let’s call first and see if Dad wants it.”

“Wants it?” Sven shouted joyfully. “Of course he wants it! Besides, I’ve already got it in the truck. Now, are you coming with me, or not?” Sven’s success as a satellite dish salesman must have something to do with his ability to convince anyone of anything, despite the condition of all facts and favorable odds being against him; I am certain that people go along with him in part, like I do, because he gets so excited about something you can’t imagine disappointing him.

Dad was at the mailbox when we pulled into the driveway, his hand thrust deep inside. When he withdrew his hand there was nothing in it and I knew he would be disappointed today, distracted. He was waiting for a particular letter, the existence of which he had only recently discovered, a one-page item sent by Wendell Cage more than a century ago to a young woman in Germany named Helga von Trask. My father has already translated the precursor to that document, a letter from the sixteen-year-old Helga to the sixty-three-year old Cage in which she informed him of her pregnancy. In her letter, Helga begged Cage to send her the money to join him in America.

Sven parked at the top of the driveway, got out, and shoved the box down toward the tailgate. “Nice to see you, Sven,” my dad said, reaching out to shake his hand, but Sven was busy slicing through the masking tape with his Swiss Army knife. He ripped the box open and stood over his gift, beaming like a proud father. “With this sweet piece of machinery you’ll be able to receive upwards of 200 channels.”

Dad just stood there, looking surprised and amused, staring at the dish in its bed of packing worms. He turned to me and asked quietly, “I don’t have a television, do I?” as if there might be one stuck away in some corner of the house he’d forgotten.

“Sven brought you one of those, too.”

“Sorry, it’s only a twelve-inch, but the picture quality is good. It’s an RCA. Top of the line in its class three years ago. The dish,
though, this baby’s the sweet n’ saucy end o f the deal. Take a
look at this. What you’ve got here is a 5451, built-in antenna.
Bigger is definitely better. The bigger the dish, the more amplifi-
cation.”

“Amplification?” I asked, prodding Sven, wanting him to show
off a little, wanting my dad to understand that despite his pick-
up truck and blue collar job Sven has a head on his shoulders.
“Sure,” he said, launching into a long monologue about the LNBF,
how it catches the signal that bounces off the dish, amplifies it
and converts the frequency, etceteras, stuff I’d heard a few times
before but that I never really get bored with, because I love to
see a man in his element, employing the terms and turns of phrase
he knows best. When I was in junior high I used to sit in a corner
of my dad’s office while he consulted with his students, watch-
ing him transform into a person entirely different than the one
he was with me. I loved the way his female students stared at
him, a little awed, while he went on about writing or some work
of literature he felt passionately about, seemingly unaware that
his preacher-man voice and dark blue eyes had them under a
spell. With his male students he struck a more casual tone, and
he was slightly more intimate with the seniors than with the fresh-
men. He was another man altogether with his colleagues, and
different with the professors in his own department than with
those in the other humanities. Eventually I came to understand
that his changing personality was not due to any duplicity or
pretense on his part; he naturally slipped into the personality
that he believed would put a person most at ease.

When Sven is around, Dad tries to talk about sports or home
repair, careful not to engage me in a conversation about history
or literature that Sven is unable to join. Sven, on the other hand,
remains the same across the board, unchanging, one Sven for
every occasion, solid as history. I could tell from the way Dad
rocked back and forth on his heels that he was zoning out, un-
able to process Sven’s explanation of azimuth and elevation angles,
transponders and signal strength. He smiled politely and nodded
his head, and Sven, believing that he and my father belonged to a
worldwide fraternity of men fascinated by the intricate workings
of television, took this as a sign of encouragement.

“The signal comes from 22,300 miles away at over 12 GHz.
22,300 miles! That's some space-age shit.” He had set the dish down on the driveway and was caressing the antenna tenderly, the way Jason in eleventh grade used to caress his kayak, the way Devon my sophomore year of college handled the greasy matrix of machinery beneath the hood of a British sports car, the way Jimmy my senior year touched the game ball that bought him a ticket to the minors. Before Sven it had been Dave, and before Dave it was Greg. My romantic history is replete with men whose hands have moved as smoothly over my thighs and belly, my breasts and buttocks, as they did over some cherished item that loudly proclaimed their manhood. It's embarrassing, really, the guys I go for. While my friends hook up with artists and intellectuals, men who know how to serve a flambé or choose a bottle of wine to go with the swordfish, men who kind of like the thought of being transformed at some point in their late thirties into stay-at-home dads, I am a sucker always for the well-cut abs, the strong jaw, the height and heft and sturdiness of any nice guy six feet and over with traditional male sensibilities. In high school, my father assumed it was a distasteful phase I would simply grow out of. Upon catching me in the garage with the first-string quarterback of a rival school, he was less disturbed by my sexual experimentation than my uninventive choice in partners.

Not until I was halfway through college did my dad begin trying to hook me up with his graduate students, studious boys he'd introduce me to at department parties, boys who overflowed with knowledge about some specific point in history that more often than not had to do with war or uprising: Hunt and the Civil War, Jack and the French Revolution, Sid and Nazi Germany, George and the Bolsheviks. These guys had monosyllabic names and scholarly, if not somber, demeanors. They nibbled sesame sticks laced with vegetable dip and drank wine out of plastic cups, utterly at home in the rather understated elegance of Arkansas academia. They asked me all about my interests rather than introducing me passionately to their own.

Sven, on the other hand, has got me watching TV. On our fourth date, he installed a satellite dish in my back yard. On our fifth, he gave me a descrambler so I could pick up HBO and Cinemax. “I can't accept this,” I said each time. He kissed me hard, then soft, then hard again, mumbling, “Sure you can,” and
thus it was settled. Our evenings together are spent with peanuts and ESPN, or popcorn and Starsky and Hutch, seated side by side on the couch that he has arranged at an angle mathematically designed to insure the greatest possible viewing pleasure.

Dad and I are sitting in the living room in opposite chairs, facing one another across the television, listening to the sound of Sven’s footsteps on the roof above us. Sven has placed the twelve-inch RCA on the floor in the center of the room in the exact spot where Dad’s big world globe used to stand. He had to run an extension cord from the TV to the wall in order to reach the outlet, and the thick orange cable snakes menacingly across the plush blue carpet. “It don’t matter if I move this, does it?” he said earlier, grabbing the beautiful globe by the brass stem on which it was suspended.

“Well,” my father said, but Sven had already set the globe down in the corner. I felt a tightening in my stomach—not because of the globe but because of the grammatical error—and glanced over to gauge Dad’s reaction. If he noticed, he did not acknowledge it. Poor grammar is not something I would notice if Sven and I were alone, but I am always alert to my own mistakes and those of my boyfriends when I am with my father, despite the fact that he strives to put everyone at ease.

The sofa, two matching chairs, and ottoman that once looked as though they revolved around the globe now more closely resemble a group of stationary satellites, all aimed at the television. The effect of this arrangement on my perspective is startling. For as long as I can remember I have had to lean over in my chair and peer around the globe to see my father, but I am now able to look directly over the top of the television without obstruction. Dad is drinking water and I’m having milk and Pepsi, a concoction I discovered recently on the syndicated episodes of Laverne & Shirley.

“Look,” Dad says excitedly, pushing a shoe box across the top of the television. Inside the box are six daguerreotypes. Four of the pictures show a man, woman, and children. In two, the woman is absent. Upon close examination, I notice that it is the same man in every picture, although he is wearing a different suit in each one, holding a different pose, and the expression on his
face is varied. In one he looks vaguely amused, in another simply bored, in another he is frowning ferociously. The man is in his fifties, strongly built and handsome. Once, when Mom was alive, we took a trip to Gatlinburg and had our photo taken at an old-fashioned photography studio at the top of Lookout Mountain. We chose antique costumes off a rack—Mom in a severe black dress with a high lace collar and bustle, Dad in a dark suit and bowler hat, me in layers of scratchy crinolines beneath a flouncy yellow number, complete with matching parasol. “Look serious,” the photographer commanded. “In the old days you had to sit for five minutes or more waiting for the photo to take, so no one smiled.” In the sepia-toned photo, which stands on the dresser in my bedroom, my mother and I manage to appear mean-spirited and grim, but Dad looks as though he’s about to break into laughter.

“Is it Cage?” I ask.

“The very man. With the wives and two of the mistresses. All of the daguerreotypes eventually ended up with the second wife, Georgette, who survived all the others. This is Georgette, here’s Luda, and Fannie-Mae, and this is Charlotte.”

“Each with her own children?”


“What about the other two mistresses?”

“Elsie and Hanna died in childbirth.”

“And Helga?”

Something crashes on the roof, and Sven lets go a long string of curses. My father’s gaze travels to the ceiling and lingers there, as if he could look straight through the paint and plywood, insulation and roof frame and shingles, into the mind of this strange creature with whom I share a bed, with whom it is even possible I may choose to share a life. After the cursing subsides, Dad says, “Helga remains a mystery. To my knowledge, there are no supporting accounts of her relationship with Cage. All I have to go on are the letter she wrote to him announcing her pregnancy, and the one I’m awaiting, which should arrive from Munich any day.

“Babe, could you hit the power button?” Sven shouts. I reach
for the remote, wishing there were some way I could keep these two loves separate—the strong, young man on the roof and the older, intellectual man in his chair—the way Cage desired to keep each woman, each set of children, apart from the others. In letters he wrote to his younger brother in Paris, Cage often spoke of the impossibility of keeping secrets in a place like Eufala, Alabama, where everyone had ears: “Everyone knows my business. Several of the children go to school together. It has become unbearable.” Yet, despite his desire for discretion, Cage sat through six photography sessions with six sets of children, forcing himself to hold the pose while the images took, as if his pride demanded this proof, this irrefutable evidence, of his virility.

The television flickers on. There is only a moment of static before the picture appears silently, an exotic place I don’t recognize. Dad identifies it immediately. “St. Petersburg. Your mother and I visited once.”

“I don’t remember your going there.”

“You were just a year old. We left you with Bonnie. Your mother wanted to see Gatchinsky Palace.”

I was only seven when my mother died, nine when Dad came across In A Cold Place The Haunted Book Shop in Mobile. It is difficult for me to remember a time before Cage, before so much of my father’s energy was focused on that man. I think in some way Cage replaced my mother, a presence to fill the absence she had left, because, unlike Cage, my father is not the kind of man to love many women. “She was it,” he told me once, when I was a senior in high school, my heart having just been broken by a guy named Royce, the star goalie of the rugby team. “You’ll find yours, the one, and, by then, Royce won’t mean a thing to you, mark my word.” He was right, of course. Royce’s last name escapes me now, and I can’t even remember if his hair was blonde or brown, or what girl he ditched me for, or how many points he blocked that season.

Sven shouts down, wanting to know if the picture is clear, and I tell him it looks great, and my father, to my surprise, asks me to give it some volume. The program is entirely in Russian. A bald man in a cheap-looking suit sits behind a desk in a small, dimly lit office. A blonde woman is seated in a metal fold-out
chair on the other side of the desk. You cannot see the interviewer but you can hear his voice, posing questions alternately to the man and the woman.  

"The man being interviewed is a plastic surgeon," Dad explains. "The woman is his patient."

"I didn't know there was a market for cosmetic surgery in Russia."

"A few years ago there wouldn't have been, but today the growing class of wealthy elite is eagerly feeding various luxury enterprises, cosmetic surgery included." In the flickering light of the television my father looks older somehow. The firmness has gone out of his neck. His nose looks longer than I remember it, his eyes more sunken. I glimpse the man my father's students must see every day, a man whose life is more than halfway lived, a steady voice of reason imposed over an incomprehensible story.

"Honey, I'm gonna count to three and I want you to turn the set off, then turn it right back on again, you hear me?"

"Got it," I shout, hitting the power button on cue. I wonder if over the years my father has been tempted to judge me by the company I keep, perhaps believing that the intelligent daughter he meant to raise would not love the men I have loved. I wonder if he sometimes wishes that he and my mother had chosen to have a second child, even a third, to balance out the odds. Of Cage's twenty-eight children, twenty-one lived past infancy. Two survived smallpox but were crippled by it, confined to beds and wheelchairs. One was admitted to a sanitarium because of retardation, another for mental illness, a daughter of one of the mistresses was lost to prostitution. Two died of syphilis as young adults, one was murdered in a land dispute, another jailed for murder. During the war Cage lost his slaves and his inherited fortune, but two of his sons soon reclaimed the plantation and restored the family's wealth. One son became a doctor, one inherited his father's passion for entomology, two daughters took up teaching; there was also a state senator in the bunch. Some simply disappeared into the common malaise of anonymity. Still, Cage bet on the laws of probability and came out on top in the end. My father bet on my mother and me and came out with just me.

The doctor says something that makes the interviewer laugh.
The blonde woman nods excitedly and goes into a loud, lengthy monologue.  
“What’s that about?”  
“The doctor is boasting that he has even performed breast augmentation. The woman says she plans to have that done next, after the eyes.”  
“Thank the Lord some women don’t need that sort of thing.” Sven has entered the room stealthily, like a man on reconnaissance, and now he stands between me and the television, simultaneously patting my shoulder and the TV. I can feel the heat rising in my neck, a mixture of agitation and embarrassment.  
“Nice piece of work, isn’t she?” My father raises an eyebrow in confusion, caught off guard, unsure if Sven is referring to my breasts or the television.  
Sven begins channel-surfing and Dad regains his composure, saying, “That was a pretty good program we were watching there.” I doubt Dad even notices the slight change in his own vocabulary, the way he automatically shifts into another gear when talking to Sven.  
“I bet you speak a little Russian, am I right?”  
“I know a few words.” The truth is Dad is fluent in Spanish, French, German, Italian, and Russian, and also manages to speak passable Chinese. Never once have I heard him confess to knowing all those languages, not even in front of his colleagues and graduate students.  
“Now, if your picture seems less than perfect, you got to tweak it. To do that you bring up the dish pointing info on the screen, like so, then try several transponders.” He goes on like this for a while, showing Dad how to move the dish around by remote in order to search for clearer signals or different channels. I can hear the thing clicking and humming above us, occasionally letting out an angry groan, like an alien ship perched there on the roof. “At any rate, you got any questions about the dish you call me. I’ll do a tune-up on your set in six months.”  
I am constantly astounded by Sven’s faith in the stability of things. He is as certain that he and I will still be a couple six months from now as he is that no man can turn down a satellite dish. That lightning bolt in Little Rock in 1978 taught me one important lesson, which is that nothing is certain or constant,
anything can change in an instant. Who knows what happened to Cage’s families in the moments after those daguerreotypes were taken? Perhaps Cage believed during each session, while he waited with the photographer’s head buried under the black hood of his camera, that he loved the family he was with. Perhaps he discovered that he loved none of them or all of them, or that he had given away too much of himself, or that these six families were not enough and he must create more, and thus his late-in-life affair with Helga von Trask. Perhaps he felt keenly the absence of his seven dead children. The minutes and hours following the photography sessions in the parlors of his mansion in Eufala, and in the less grandiose rooms of his five lesser homes, could have been filled with lovemaking or with fighting. The letters don’t tell and we don’t know, but it is likely that he, or the women and children, emerged from those sessions somehow changed, knowing something more than they knew when they had begun. However Cage perceived his separate lives, history has brought all of his wives and children together, the letters bound between the pages of five sturdy volumes, the pictures stored one on top of the other in a shoe box in my father’s study. Maybe that is why my father has devoted himself to history, for the sheer solidity of it: our interpretation of any given event may change in time but the facts are cement, the truth doesn’t waver, and if some new discovery—for example, a letter from a young girl in Germany revealing a twenty-ninth child—exposes a glitch in what we have accepted as truth, it is not history that has changed, only our knowledge of it.

Sven brings the Russian channel up before announcing that we’re leaving. Dad stands and shakes his hand, thanking him, and I tell Sven I’ll be out soon, then sit for a minute watching Dad watch television. I am feeling a little off-balance, confused by this strange new entity spouting foreign words and pictures into Dad’s once pristine space. “You’re sweet. You don’t have to keep this, you know. He just wanted to give you something.”

“No, it’s great,” Dad says, and I realize he isn’t listening to me. All of his attention is focused on the screen, which is showing a before and after picture of the blonde woman. “This woman and her husband used to farm in the country, but as a result of Perestroika they were able to realize their dream of opening a
small ceramics shop in St. Petersburg and moving into a modern apartment.” While translating, my father is at ease, removed from both the story and me, like a conductor that transports electricity from one point to another. At this moment he exists in the safe in-between where nothing is required of him but to understand and to pass on this understanding. There are moments when you realize a thing about your parents, and the moments are few and far between but they are everything, because they reveal to you a person beyond the mother or father you have come to know. My first realization of my father’s character came on the school bus in second grade, three days after my mother’s funeral, when I looked down at my feet and realized that he had purchased a new pair of shoelaces to replace the ones that were frayed. Now I understand for the first time that my father has always been and will always be a compiler of letters rather than a writer of them, a translator of stories rather than a storyteller.

In the before picture, the blonde woman is puffy-eyed and pale, her hair frizzy and unkempt. For the after picture, her hair has been styled with sweeping wings and falling waves; you get the feeling that the hair stylist saw old episodes of *Charlie’s Angels* decades after the fact, misunderstood the passage of time, and deemed Cheryl Ladd’s mass of unruly hair to be fashionable. The woman is also wearing lipstick and blush. To the doctor’s credit she does look younger, the flesh beneath her eyes smoothed out, the lids no longer drooping. From a purely aesthetic standpoint she looks rejuvenated, undeniably improved, but there is something almost sinister about the youthfulness of her eyes above the loose skin of her neck and the deep lines around her mouth. It is as if history has been erased from her face, but only partially, so that past and present are unhappily juxtaposed.

My father leans forward to get a closer look. “It’s uncanny what modern medicine can do with a laser and a little anesthetic, isn’t it?”

“We can at least move it into another room, Mom’s old sewing room, maybe. Surely you don’t want to keep it here. We can put the globe back. You love that globe.”

My father doesn’t seem to hear the panic in my voice, lost as he is in the translation. “She says she doesn’t want it to end here. She’d like to have her entire face done. She says if she can afford
to be transformed entirely into a younger, more beautiful woman, she can see no reason not to. She believes she has lived with nothing for too long.” The picture goes yellow and he kneels down before the television, looking for knobs to adjust.

“I’m heading out. Call if you want me to come by and take that thing away.”

“Bye, Sweetie.” He stands to give me the obligatory hug, the kiss on the cheek, the quick tug of the ponytail like he used to do when I was a kid.

“You coming?” Sven calls from the truck. I go through the kitchen so I can grab a soda on my way out, then pop my head back in the living room to remind my dad I’m having Bonnie over for dinner this week and he’s invited. He has moved away from the television and is standing in front of the fireplace, staring into the mirror above the mantle. He hated that mirror when my mother put it in. It was one of the few fights they ever had, or at least the few I remember. “It makes the room look twice as big,” my mother reasoned.

“Not everyone has a face like yours,” Dad replied, always able to work a compliment even into an argument, he loved her that much. “Home is supposed to be a haven. The last thing I want to see when I walk into this room is my own ugly face staring back at me.” The truth is he had and still has a beautiful face, although I suppose it has never occurred to him to think of himself that way. If my mother were alive I would ask what it was that drew her to him in those first weeks when she was falling in love, months before marriage, long before me, years before she sat on the wrong end of a bench in Little Rock, Arkansas, her dark, broad face and long black hair inviting electricity—back when my grandparents still believed she might end up with a man of medicine, someone wealthy and ambitious who would make for her an exceptional life. I would ask her if, like Sven, like Cage, my father’s was once the kind of face that would make a woman think she could change her ways for him, forgiving bad grammar and infidelity, disappointing her family and even disappointing something in herself, just for the beauty of him.

My father squints his eyes and relaxes them, pokes at the loose flesh with his fingers, forms a V with middle and index finger and drags at the bags beneath his eyes so that the inner
pink below his eyeballs shows. He frowns, then mumbles something to himself so quietly I cannot make out the words. He flattens the skin beneath his chin with the back of his hand, then places his palms on either side of his face and tugs the skin toward his hairline. His mouth widens, the corners of his eyes stretch ghoulishly, the skin looks thin enough to break. When I was a kid he used to make faces like this to amuse me. Back then I thought it was funny, but now I know he isn’t doing it for my benefit—he doesn’t even know I am here. I imagine one day I will walk into this house and find him in his chair in front of the television, his face bruised by a surgeon’s hands, the skin stretched to unnatural proportions.

In the truck Sven is fidgeting, growing impatient, for in the quiet streets of Fayetteville this fine Saturday customers are waiting for him, standing on their porches and watching. Somewhere a father walks inside and dusts the screen of the television set. He calls his family into the living room where they will fight over the most comfortable chairs, then wait with snacks and fizzy soft drinks for the man with the satellite dish. They know that he is coming, they have all gathered around to greet him, Sven believes this in his heart.

From a quarter mile away I can see the big white dish on Dad’s roof, moving slowly back and forth, its antenna poised like a lightning rod, searching, searching, for signals beamed down from space.
LE PÈRE BOUJU

Who's more real than Le Père Bouju?
A presence, you (or who?) might say
And I might not, guessing he was
Absent for Maurice de Vlaminck.
He did not smoke his clay pipe, wear
His orange hat. I think he could
Not be insulted if he'd been
There in 1900 when slashed
And greened and red-scarfed and conky
And buttered on canvas roughly
Life size. But if he had no life
But on this oblong drum there's not
Another as original
But Ubu, who, speaking through his
Merde-brown bite he might resemble.
He does not puff out smoke but sucks
Tossing green surrounding salads.
No, no one painted like that then.
It was drunkenness smeared it on.
But Maurice de Vlaminck left it:
Much too much paint to overpaint.
And anyhow Bouju objects
And always will. That nose is one
Of a size to be respected.
He could turn ugly as he looked.
"All right when you get to know him"
Only raises our suspicion.
THE CRACKED JAR CALLED CAN IT BE TAUGHT?

After ten years of seeking, light was thrown
over a side of the boat and the whole wasn’t what we expected:
was not white, had no eyes but behemoth teeth—

Quelles dentes, Granny. Be advised: A boulder is gravel
to glacier and snow is where you left it in the shade of seeing
a summer’s residence.

The building was like a cake, wedding of wished and fulfillment.
Two dreams: in one, a mouse hands back a wolf-totem from Warsaw,
saying: This is your Grandmother’s husband,

a painter of small crucifixions, influenced by Gris
and perhaps by Braque; the other was a hand wiping a smudge
from a face. Can it be felt? This caring.

From a semblance of sun, a clown drops his face painted yellow
to match fire when it flares, the sound of heat in a flue.
Sit in the chair covered with please and let me touch you.

O boat house of ester ore, what can you teach us of keeping?
It cannot be taught.
THE NOVEL IN THREE CHAPTERS

1.

The subway mouse crackled the wrapper. A man with a bonsai walked by. Comfort is brazen. Caution a train. I had said to the priest, it's the light-bearing lucifer that's causing the trouble. You lack knowledge not faith he replied. Dusk and half-huddled, I kissed him. To the eastern mind, my lover said. Street smart with a birthmark, how far would you get? To him, I looked just like his daughter. To me, he looked just like himself. You must break from yourself, I once told him. He first wanted to know who was I? To empty myself and from where. To the eastern mind, he said, to be filled is to finish before you've begun. I wanted to laugh but I wouldn't. In the west I said a king is an ache. The queen is the one who beguiles. It was dusk and half-huddled and raining. That's when we went inside.
It happened like this: a Cezanne gripped my arm and took me to X. He said: on an escalator, this would be up.

He bought me those flowers I’m fond of (no, not roses) but romance only takes us so far—down the lane to the lake with the needle neck swans. Of course we were happy, who isn’t, for all of five minutes or so. A tangerine touch set high in the sky, splendor of green at our feet.

And *lover, come lover* tripping our lips, turning the leaves into teas.

If only we hadn’t ignored the late lunar eclipse but simple were we, and bewildered. A kiss on the quick, hand in my hand. Nothing done wrong to unreckon.

The one on wood stilts turned to the one with the alabaster turban. He bowed once from his waist and again with his noggin—then sat himself down and said: How different we are in our head.
On the lake at the back of my mind, he rowed to and forth in a small fishing boat; I kept him in sight as the crab does the cuttlefish. Currents were strong and traffic was heavy. Incident? Or adjective? Both fail to convey the cathexis. We quibbled each morning with gravity’s assertion—what wasn’t susceptible to showdown? When it rained, I sang a capriccio, respecting the pause between lightning and skybreak. He’d been injured he said. As a youth, he’d been placid. The letters he wrote were all written in a late alphabet, a Y that refused to divide but was more like a door with its solid assertion. He was good at markdown diversions: leaning against a wall’s suave modesty, we counted the buttons on the hangman’s black jacket. It was clearly a bargain, clearly a good buy.
Last fall I was asked what adjective best described my father. I was sitting in a poetry technique course. At first I did not know what the professor meant, but then he explained: "If your father were reduced to one word, one essence, what would it be?" He was very expressive as he talked, using his hands and making sure he looked at each of us. His eyes moved from one student to the next, so I didn't dare let my mind wander. I pictured my father, a small man, born in Sagua, which is in the middle of Cuba, but who later moved to the coast. I let his image turn to smoke, and in a way I have trouble describing, I examined it and tried to gauge its nature. The other students responded with more traditional adjectives—Exacting, Proud, Thoughtful—but I only developed a nationality, Cuban.

"Cuban?" my teacher asked. "Why Cuban?"

"I don't know," I said. "I mean hopeful, yet pessimistic. At least something like that."

"Cuban," he said again. "OK, we can go with that, why not."

Then he moved to the next student, a girl named Margie, and waited for her response.

I began to think of that word in a way I had not before, as though the hazy smoke I pictured had always lived inside of him, like blood or air, filling up his skin and giving him life. Cuban. Cubano. Poquito Cubano. A thin frame. Delicate features. Eyes like a dark house. I have a photo of my father when he was my age. He stands next to his own father, the two of them in the family bakery, a silver bread oven behind them, the year 1959, a time when a person could still own something in Cuba, back before the socialismo. They are wearing white bakers aprons, the strings tied around their waists. They have their arms around each other and are looking at the camera, though as I look at it now, I believe my father is looking beyond the camera, his eyes somewhat unfocused, as they are in most photographs. I have been told I
was there on that day, hitched on my mother's hip, almost two years old, but I don't remember any of it. I have only a few memories of the time before America, which is one reason I took Poetry Technique. I thought words held memories, that they would open up the past, although I knew this was a romantic idea. I knew this as well: romantic ideas gave you a rope to hold on to, when the water starts to rise.

II.

When my father was young, he wanted to be a teacher. He wanted to work with students in the eighth and ninth grades; however, for a long time I did not know why he had this desire. He was a hopeful man who, I thought, wanted to carve out a place of respect for himself, but I could not see him working as a teacher. At least not then. My earliest memories of him are at our house, the large two-storey my grandparents owned but had since surrendered to the government. He would arrive home in the early afternoon, his hands gloved in flower, an apron folded over his shoulder. He would sit next to me as my mother made him Cuban coffee, stirring in extra sugar, as he said it helped his stomach. He read to me from books I could not possibly understand, authors such as Jose Martí, but did so in a soft, sweet voice I liked. In the afternoons, he would go to the University, his notes in a binder, his books hefted into a canvas bag. He would leave quietly, kissing my mother once, then continue to the bus stop where he would wait for the 2:15 which was almost always late.

He did not talk about school much, or at least I don't remember it. Instead, he spent a good deal of time by himself. He read, he walked, he woke each morning at three to go to the bakery where his own father, by then, was baking loaves of sweetbread. On Tuesdays my father would go to a beach, called La Luz, and sit by himself. There, he would read other books, not the official reading for his course, but foreign authors secretly promoted by his professor, Dr. Trujillo. For the most part, my father was frustrated with the novels, distanced by the nuance of language, the subtlety of each sentence. He read as much as he could, copying phrases into a bound journal, but in the end was not interested in most of it. The only reason he stayed at it so long was because
his teacher told him, "My friend, you will someday be a good teacher. To believe in Cuba is to believe beyond the revolucion."

My father liked this image of himself, a person transformed by language, by thought, the pages of books curved around his soul, and when he tired of picturing himself this way, he turned to drawing. In-between journal entries, my father sketched beautiful images, the sea, the sun, a starfish overturned. At times, he drew figures from the books he was reading, people dressed in elaborate clothes, their jackets newly pressed, their ties perfectly knotted, people like those on the American TV they were not allowed to watch. In one section, my father drew the same character over and over, a thin man, double breasted coat, a fedora tilted over his brow. Beneath this image, he wrote only one word, Gatsby, and from this picture's frequency, I understood he'd spent a good deal of time with this book, working through it slowly, halted by the density of prose. This figure appears nothing like the Robert Redford I have come to envision as Gatsby. Instead, he has shaded skin, dark eyes, frail hands. In short, he resembles my father.

Sometimes I like to picture my father there, a man a few years younger than I am now, sitting on that beach. Behind him are the sugar mills and chemical plants. Before him, seawater like a barrier, blue across the thin straits, small fishing boats dotting the horizon. He does not live in luxury: school is free; the bakery provides a little money; his wife works at home as a seamstress. When the sun begins to slip into the water, the ocean absorbing its redness, my father walks home. He hears the government radio broadcasts: "The International," "Go Forward, Latin American," songs somber in their melody, Russian in their feel. When he arrives, his wife greets him at the door, our dog, Lourdes, tucked under her arm.

III.

WHAT DO I REMEMBER ABOUT THOSE early years? Not much. I remember sitting in our yard, our dog nosing itself into my hands; I remember the warmth of the fall sun cutting across our garden; I remember people talking about how, before I was born, you could find anything in Cuba, anything at all; I remember the
music of our language, the sentences rolled out of people’s mouths like love songs, their accents nothing less than inflections of sweetness. My father later told me that they were living under a false belief. They thought the socialismo would fall, that they would own their home again, their bakery, their lives. They would get TV and magazines and fine French flour used for pastries. The trouble came shortly after my father’s professor was arrested for promoting anti-socialistic ideas, though no one we knew was asked to testify against him. He was simply sentenced to 15 years. His cell window, we later learned, looked out toward his old neighborhood. From there, he could see the top of his apartment building, its roof polished like white shells.

During the weeks that followed, my father would sit at home each night, a copy of Jose Martí not far from him, his two student essays on socialist ideals in Cuban literature conveniently left on the kitchen table. He would stay up late, looking out windows and, on weeknights, he would sit on the porch, the orange butt of his cigar emberring in the darkness. Still, he would rise each morning, no later than three, and put on his white shirt and pants, remove a clean apron from the closet and join his father at the bakery where, by now, there were shortages of flour and milk. At home, my father grew restless and would not look directly at my mother, his eyes slightly adverted from her gaze, though each night, they sat on our sofa, their hands joined.

I have always been told that it was my father’s decision to leave Cuba, to go to Habana and declare themselves Anti-Socialists, though looking back, I believe my mother had a good deal to do with it. My mother was a strong woman: she was not afraid of the government or its officials; rather, she was afraid of the fear they felt, how it made them small, scared people. The following week officials came to inventory our house. We could not take our possessions with us to America, not our books or blankets, not our camera or even our dog, and according to the law, we were not supposed to give these items away, though my father managed to hide one pair of diamond earrings and to give other small items to his parents. Officially these items were the government’s, not ours; that is, they were nationalized. We could only take a few clothes: three pairs of pants, three shirts, some socks stuffed into our luggage. A few days before we left, my
father took us to the beach for a picnic. He hugged and kissed his mother over and over, and when we returned to our house, she pressed a small gold cross into his hand. “With the others,” she said, “hide them in the sole of your shoe.”

“I will,” he whispered, “I will, Mama.”

I have never seen my father as sad as he was that night, his eyes damp, his hands folded in front of him. As he watched my grandparents walk away, I knew his heart was breaking and that America needed to be big and great to support such a loss. My mother stood beside him, her head held higher than his. The last I saw of my grandparents they were turning the corner, their bodies about to disappear behind another building, when my grandmother turned towards us, her cheeks damp with tears. Her voice was soft, like a breeze: “Be good, my God, to my only son.”

IV.

In America we lived with my mother’s second cousin, a woman who shared a name with our old dog, Lourdes, and who spoke down to my father. She spoke about Castro in a way we never heard people speak about him. “He used to say he was not a communist, but he was. He was a liar and a thief. He will destroy Cuba, mark my words, yes, he will destroy it then wipe the dust from his feet.” During these conversations, I saw how my father wanted her to like him. He leaned toward her, his hands folded in his lap, and when she would take a breath, he would agree with her. “Yes,” he would say, “we did not have enough flour at the bakery.”

“Flour,” she would reply. “I hear some people do not even have water. Their wells went dry. But will Castro help? No. Castro only cares about himself. Himself and the revolution.” Then she would sip her coffee, after blowing a thin stream of air over it. “When I first came to this country, I thought I would be here six months. Six months, you see. I thought things would change back home. Now look at me. Three years. Yes, three years we are in exile here, all of us, without much choice on the matter.”

She would continue in this fashion, talking about how good things had been in Cuba, how you could find anything there,
sodas, cars, French wine, that is, before Castro. She talked about how she missed her other cousins and most of all how she missed Christmas Eve celebrations, the relatives, the presents, the coffee—"Oh, the coffee, yes, and with a good, thick froth"—and the way her father, dressed as Santa, would arrive around ten o’clock and pass out presents to the children.

My father said he missed these things too. He hoped Lourdes would turn his way and say, "yes, how right you are," but that never happened. He simply sat there and after a while became resigned to the idea that he was just a man in a chair, a cousin’s husband who had come to this country in need, a place to live, some food to eat. At the end of each night, we went to our room. We would lie there, all on the same mattress, and look out at stars sprinkled over the heavens, the same stars we once saw from Cuba, but now they seemed farther away, washed out by the city lights.

"We are going to leave here as soon as we can," he whispered.

"It'll be soon," my mother said, "I know." Then she would curl against my father, her lips pressed against his neck, and they would fall asleep like that, their breathing slow, soft whispers, the room hushed around us.

In the morning, my father and I would go to St. Mark’s Catholic School where I was a student and he was a groundsman. St. Mark’s had made arrangements with many Cubans to exchange tuition for services. Fathers would show up on weekends to help with new portables, would coach the baseball team, would paint the main office, and for those who worked there, such as my father, their children’s tuition was a benefit, free and clear. I liked going to St. Mark’s because many of the other students there also had trouble with English, and while we were in our special class, no one laughed at us: no one looked at our shirts or shoes, no one said, "I just can’t understand what you are saying." We would sit in room C-1, while our, teacher, Ms. Lawren, helped us with our English. On Fridays, she would let us bring in stories or show-and-tell items, and afterward, she would talk to us about being Cuban-Americans. She was a Democrat, she said, and believed Castro was wrong to treat his citizens the way he did. She told us that here, in this classroom, no one would ever say anything bad about Cubans, that from ten in the morning until eleven,
we were safe and could talk about whatever we wanted, but from eleven until lunch, we needed to work on our English, as that was her job.

I liked Ms. Lawren's class and looked forward to it each day, but knew my father had no place like room C-1. There was nowhere he truly felt safe, nowhere quiet, not even at home. At school, he drove the lawnmower over the baseball field, then he would chalk the baseline. At lunch, he ate with two other gardeners, neither of whom had ever owned a business, as my father had, nor had they gone to college. At times my father would try to talk to the teachers, striking up conversations about authors he had read, Chekhov and Flaubert, but these teachers were confused by his intentions. They treated him as though he were one of us, a student, and not a man who had studied for many years hoping to become a teacher himself. His accent confused them, as did his interest in Jose Marti, an author who my father believed was world-renowned because in Cuba he had been told this. In the end, though, he stopped trying to talk to the teachers. He simply said hello to them in the hallways, his eyes rarely meeting theirs. For a while, he went to our school library and checked out books taught in the 11th and 12th grades, but eventually he stopped this as well. He came home each night and sat with my mother, a bottle of beer in his hands, while they waited for Lourdes to begin once again about the Cuba she missed.

For a while, our lives fell into this routine. My father and I would go to St. Mark's, while my mother worked in a packing room, loading technical books into boxes and shipping them. I would sit through my first two classes, where by then I understood just about everything which was said, and at lunch I would eat with my Cuban friends or, if my father was not busy, I might eat with him, the two of us leaning against a backstop. Those were my favorite times, those lunches with my father. We would eat thick ham sandwiches my mother made, mustard lightly spread on both the top and bottom piece of bread. Sometimes we would play ball after lunch, our hands inside school-owned gloves, but mostly, he would just run his hand through my hair and tell me to study hard.

"I will," I said.
“And when you figure out this country, I want you to tell me about it,” he said, a private joke between us, then he winked. I simply nodded.

“Because when we go back to Cuba, I would like to say I understood America when I lived there.”

“When are we going back?”

He looked toward the sky then, thin clouds striped across the Miami blue. “Soon, I think things will change soon.” But by then I could tell he was beginning to doubt this.

After lunch, he would go back to work, his two workmates, Steve and Hank, lounging by the tool shed, their hats usually folded in their hands. “Looks like a hot afternoon,” Steve would say.

“Come on,” my father would say, “let’s just get to work.”

They would walk off to the football field or perhaps to the front of the school, where the ice plant was beginning to unfold into beautiful white blooms, but I could not go with them. I had two more class periods to finish. I found my friends, and together we trudged off to Math, where Mr. Sorvino was beginning to explain imaginary numbers. At first I believed he was making them up, but they were also in our textbook, so I figured it was true. In American, there must be a use for imaginary things.

V.

In May we finally moved out of my aunt’s house. It was a grand day. It made all of us happy, even my father, who was joking with Aunt Lourdes, which was something he never did. We packed all of our things into four large boxes, including the special Spanish-English books my mother bought for me, and then we carried them out to the curb where my father had parked our station wagon. Our car was seven or eight years old, and before we bought it, it had been in a minor accident. Still, I liked being inside it. It was roomy, and it was ours. When we were done loading our things, we went to say goodbye to my Aunt. She was leaning against the doorjamb, her arms crossed.

“Well,” my father said to her, “I’d feel better if you’d let me give you something to help with the rent.”
"We don’t need anything," she said. “You’re new to America, and we’ve been here almost four years now.”

“Still,” my father said, then held out three one hundred dollar bills. I had never seen so much American money and knew it would’ve taken him a long time to earn it.

Cautiously Lourdes took the money. She unfolded the bills, but did not count them. Amazed, she looked back at my father in a way she had never looked at him before, a new respect pressed into her face. “Where did you get this money?”

“I sold something,” he said.

“You have nothing to sell.”

“He sold a diamond,” my mother said.

“A diamond?”

“One of his grandmother’s diamonds,” my mother whispered. “He brought them over in the sole of his shoe.”

Lourdes looked at my father again, her eyes narrowed, considering what he had done. “That is very clever,” she said, “hiding them in your shoe, very clever and brave. I left many things in Cuba I wish I’d brought with me. In Cuba, we were very comfortable. In America, we are lower-middle class.”

“We are too,” my father said.

“Yes,” Lourdes said, “we all are. No one but Cubans seem to understand what we left behind.”

In the car, I thought my father would be glad for once because Lourdes had looked at him with respect, but he didn’t say anything about it, nor did he act in any particular way that would have betrayed his pride. Instead, he drove slowly out to the main road, which would then take us to our new home. After a while, my mother said, “You know, you didn’t need to give her so much money?”

“We stayed for many months,” he said. “We should’ve given more.”

“No,” my mother said, “Lourdes is family.”

“Still,” he said, “we should pay what we can.”

Nothing more was said about the money, or about my aunt’s reaction; my father simply let it pass, though I knew it was important to him. We drove quietly to our new apartment, a building called The Palms. We lived in Apartment H5, and for the first time since coming to America, I had my own room, though my
mother sometimes used it for her sewing. For the rest of the day, we felt good about ourselves, being legitimate renters, our own walls, our own roof. It was good to have these things again.

At night, when my father went to bed, he asked me to come sit by him. “Come here, Antonio,” he said. I sat on the corner of his bed, my math book open in my lap. He took my hand, his large calloused fingers curved around mine. For a while, he did not say anything, but just sat there, his breathing heavy as it often was at night, long, deep breaths. “We have been here many months now,” he said, “and I think you should know we may not go back to Cuba for a while.”

“I know,” I said, “I hear people talk about it at school.”

“When I came I thought we would be here only for a short time, perhaps a year at most, but Castro is strong and our people are very afraid.”

“Why don’t the Americans do something?” I asked.

My father looked at me, his heavy brown eyes searching for mine.

“That is what I didn’t understand before I came,” he said.

“They’re afraid too.”

Shortly after that I went to my room, and for the first time since leaving Cuba, I fell asleep by myself.

In the days that followed, I understood that my father was finding a way to accommodate this knowledge, that we might be in America much longer than he planned. At school, he became more quiet than he had been, picking work he could do by himself. Often I would see him putting in new plants around the Administration Office or patching up the rain gutters in preparation for the rainy season. He worked with a firm determination, a certain resignation in his body, and for the first time since he acquired this job, the teachers took notice, often complementing him. Occasionally they would ask him to work at their homes, putting up a new fence or weatherproofing an outdoor deck. My father never refused because “a little extra money would not hurt us at all.”

I did not know what my father did with this extra money, but among Cubans he slowly developed a reputation as a man who was doing well. On Friday nights, we began to have dinner parties at our apartment, my mother cooking beef or pork. Once
she cooked plantains my father said were so good they almost made him cry. They invited people they knew from Cuba, old acquaintances and relatives, including Lourdes and her cousins, all of whom were loud and talkative, like Lourdes herself. “See,” she said to them, “this is the man I was telling you about. He is very smart with money. He was able to keep things from the policia. When the policia came to my house, everything was taken for the sake of the revolution. He has a good job and has been able to get one of his friends a job as well.”

At this, I saw my father raise his hand, beginning to object not only because this last claim was not true but because he was embarrassed. “Let me take your coat, Lourdes,” he said, “and your cousin’s coat as well.”

“This is Helena,” she said.

“Why hello, Helena,” my father said. “I can get you something to drink if you like.”

“Oh yes,” Helena said, “that would be nice.”

Slowly, over the course of a few months, I saw my father change into a new person at these parties. He stood taller, never looked down at his feet, and always had something to say, a joke or a story everyone liked. One Friday, during dinner, a man asked him, “So tell us, what did you do in Cuba?”

My father put down his fork. “In Cuba,” he began, “my father and I owned a small bakery. I mean, we owned it until Castro decided he owned it instead.” At this, our guests laughed. “My father was very good at making pastry. As for me, I simply helped make the bread each day.”

“But bread,” the man said, “that is important.”

“Important, but easy,” my father said. “Anyone could make bread.”

“No one makes good Cuban bread in Miami,” he said. “You should become a baker. We need a good baker in South Miami.”

“I agree,” my father said. “The bread here is not as good as the bread in Cuba. But the Cuban bakeries in Miami are family owned. If they need extra help, they will hire a family member, not me.”

“That is very true,” Lourdes said.

“It is better to be a groundskeeper,” my father said. “People always need someone to tend their gardens, and as long as I work
at St. Mark’s, Antonio can attend for free. It is better he goes to
a Catholic school than to a public school where the classes are
much larger.”

“Indeed,” Lourdes admitted.

“But,” my mother added, “you also attended the university
for many years. You once wanted to be a teacher. You were very
close to finishing your degree.”

“I wanted to be many things when I was younger,” my father
said.

“Didn’t we all,” our guest added.

“No,” my mother said, “you would’ve been a fine teacher, if
you ask me.”

“I don’t think so,” my father said, and after this, he began to
talk about other things: small businesses which might do well in
our South Miami neighborhood; ways that, if he had known, he
might have converted his family’s money into US dollars; how
lucky they were to have chosen the United States, as opposed to
Mexico, as their place of refuge. After dinner, my father went
outside and drank beer with his guests, all of them looking at
distant city lights, one of them smoking a cigar which, he claimed,
“did not have the fine, even ash of cigars back home.” My father
let me sip a little beer—as always I found it bitter—and when I
tired of listening, I went inside, where my mother and Lourdes
were finishing the dishes.

“You know,” Lourdes said to my mother, “when you first
came to America, I thought you had married much beneath you,
but I can see I was wrong. You did very well. He is pleasant to be
around now that he is accustomed to being here. More impor-
tantly, he is smart about work and good with money. He is much
more clever than I originally gave him credit for being. Yes, you
did well.”

My mother simply agreed, but I knew she was thinking of
other things, though I did not know what they were.

At ten o’clock, I went to my room and put on my pajamas.
When I got under the blankets, I read one of my school books
for a while, but could not concentrate. Instead, I listened to my
father’s voice. Even though he was on the porch, his voice filled
my room, soft like a summer breeze. “No, no,” he was saying,
“Cubans will be fine in this country. There are many opportuni-
ties for us here.” I noticed then the other people must be paying attention to him. Never before could I see my father as a teacher, someone like Mr. Sorvino who taught both math and social studies, but now I could. I saw how he liked ideas, was good at talking, and more importantly knew how to speak in such a way people would listen. I went to sleep holding this image, wondering at its strangeness, how my father had once been one person and now was someone completely different.

VI.

At school, I saw how he changed as well. He was more comfortable in the presence of teachers. He would say hello to them in the hallways and, every week or so, might have lunch with one or two of them. They treated him differently; that is, they did not treat him like Steve or Hank; they gave him respect. They asked him questions, not about gardening or handiwork, but about himself and the things he had done. One day, Mr. Sorvino asked about his years at the university: “Didn’t you say you once wanted to be a teacher?”

“A long time ago I did,” my father said. “I went to school for many years but never finished.”

“What area did you want to teach?”

“I was most interested in Cuban Literature.”

“Cuban Literature,” Mr. Sorvino repeated. “Who was your favorite author?”

“For a long time, I liked Jose Martí, but later I read American and European authors as well. If I would’ve been caught, I would’ve been suspended, perhaps even arrested.”

“I see,” he said. “I can’t say I’ve read Jose Martí, but I’ve heard of him.”

“He’s very well known in Cuba,” my father said, “but not in America.”

“Maybe I should read one of his books. That might help me better understand Cuba.” After this, he touched my father’s shoulder, a very friendly touch, as though they had known each other a good while or had a great deal in common, and after the bell rang, Mr. Sorvino returned to his classroom and my father walked to the tool shed.
In our neighborhood, he became well known among other Cuban immigrants. He would invite them for dinner, and for the first time I could remember, he would go drinking with them. He would always buy his friends a drink or two, and the few times they needed money, he would loan it to them. It was only forty or fifty dollars, but still it worried my mother. One night she talked to him about it. They were sitting in our living room, on the new couch my father purchased from one of the teachers at school. "I know," she began, "you like to be generous, but we can't afford to be generous so often."

"It was only a little money," he said. "Enough to see Martin to his next payday. He will not forget to pay it back."

"Yes," she said, "but suppose we have an emergency, suppose we need the money."

"We are Cubans," he said, "and as Cubans we must stick together. Most Americans do not care about us at all."

"Yes," she said again, but I could see she was giving in, the argument trickling away and leaving only softness. She moved closer to him, folded her arm onto his shoulder. Tenderly she smoothed the hair from his face, and I could tell she loved him a great deal, perhaps more now than when they lived in Cuba. She kissed him softly, the type of short kiss she used when I was nearby, but before she could kiss him again, she heard a tapping on our door. Through the window, they saw Lourdes who, in fact, was looking back at them.

"Oh, you love birds," she said when she came in. "You are very foolish not to close your curtains when you have a scene like that. Why, anyone could see."

"Hello, Lourdes," my father said.

"And hello to you too," she said, walking over to his side.

"Yes, and before I forget, I hear that you are doing nice things for people."

"Nice but foolish," my mother said.

"It's best to be foolish if you can afford to," she said.

My mother was about to say something about this "foolishness," but I saw my father look at her in such a way it made her want to stop. For perhaps the first time in his life my father was well respected in his community, well loved, and my mother did not want to take that from him. Instead, she said, "Why don't
you come with me, Lourdes. You can help me with some sewing. I need help selecting a pattern.”

After the two women were gone, my father talked with me for a while, and later that evening, put on his gray coat and hat and went down to meet some of his friends at a local bar, one named after a popular Habana night club, The Tropicana, though this Tropicana was much smaller, having only three tables and a long bar, above which the owner had fixed a TV. For a while, I wondered why my father chose to wear this gray coat and hat each time he went out, but that night I remembered something I had not remembered for many years. In his reading journal, when he was much younger, he had sketched a well-known American businessman, a character from a book I had not yet read. I thought he looked somewhat like this character, but then again, he did not look exactly like him. He had put on weight, and his face was beginning to wrinkle. From our balcony, I watched him walk to the corner, where he met one of his friends, and together they ducked into an alley which would lead them to the bar.

For awhile, then, our lives were lived on familiar avenues: work and school, social dinners on Fridays. Occasionally my father would meet friends at the local bar. When he went out, he always dressed in his hat and coat, the buttons never done. On one Wednesday, when I finished my homework, I followed him, leaving our apartment shortly after he did. I watched how he walked, long, confident strides, which was slightly different than the way he walked when he was with us. He would look at strangers as they passed, and once or twice, I believe he said hello to people he did not know. Out here, his presence seemed to expand and occupy a larger space. Often when he talked with people he knew, he would touch their arm, an intimate gesture he was just beginning to experiment with at home, his hand firmly planted near his friend's shoulder or elbow. When he arrived at The Tropicana, I lingered at a magazine stand, pretending to look at newspapers printed in Spanish. I waited for ten or fifteen minutes, until the stand owner began to shoo me away, believing I might steal something, but instead I bought a Spanish comic book about Poquito Pedro then went across the street to look at it.

I wasn’t reading it really, but mainly looking at the ads. The
ads were for products popular in Mexico, not Cuba. I knew most white Americans confused Hispanics. They thought we were all alike, interchangeable, no more than reflections of each other. No one understood that we Cubans had come here not for better jobs but because of politics. At times I was beginning to resent this attitude, but right then it did not bother me. I looked at ads featuring famous Mexican movie actresses, many of them wearing only the smallest bikinis. In one ad, the main character, Poquito Pedro, appeared to have fainted after looking at a beautiful red-haired actress who, according to the ad, would star in a new TéléNorela. By the time I finished with the comic book, I was upset, though I could not say why. It was at this point my father emerged from the bar, two friends with him. With bottles in their hands, they sat on a bench and watched cars pass. He gestured with his hands and was very sociable, even more so than he had been at our Friday night dinners. I had never seen him like this and understood if he happened to see me here, one block away, he would stop being this person and shrink back into the father I more easily recognized.

For a while, I stayed there, the sun falling low and casting long shadows across the street. A few times, I was able to hear his voice above the other city sounds, a word of Spanish distinguishing itself or perhaps a piece of his loud, expansive laugh. Most of the time, though, he was simply a man I was unsure I truly knew sitting a block away from me, his empty beer bottle at his feet. When he tired of sitting outside, he returned to the bar, the glass door closing behind him. I walked home slowly that night, my comic book rolled in my hand, and when I arrived at our apartment, I discovered I had absentmindedly crinkled many of its pages. I set it on my dresser and lay on my bed.

When my father returned an hour later, he still had the sheen of this other personality on him, a film of his expressiveness covering him like an afternoon shadow, but it quickly went away. His gestures were not as sure, his smile not as broad, a small element of satisfaction missing from his eyes. He took off his hat and coat and hung them in our hall closet, and when he was returned to his regular self, he sat with my mother and Lourdes. When I came out to see them, my mother held up fabric Lourdes
had helped her select: it was patterned maroon and white. "What do you think of this?" she asked my father.

"It's nice," he said, "don't you think?" but this was not the same, exact voice I'd heard float down the twilight street not more than two hours ago. It was different somehow.

Over the coming days, I began to look for the aspects of my father I had glimpsed outside The Tropicana. I looked for it at home and at school. I looked for it when friends would visit our house on Friday nights, suspecting that this personality may appear late in the evening, sometime after I went to bed, but one Friday, long after midnight, when I sneaked out of my room and stood in our dark hallway, it was only my regular father I saw, not the one from the bar. He was tall and good looking, he was good with conversation, but he was not the same somehow as this other person.

Only once, later that month, did I see it at school. From my friends, I found out my father would talk for a few minutes to Mr. Sorvino's morning class. I didn't know why he didn't tell me about this, but suspected he did not want me there because it might make him nervous. During third period, Mr. Sorvino taught 11th grade Social Studies, and during the month of May, they had read excerpts of Jose Marti's work. Shortly after my own class began, I asked Ms. Lawren for the hall pass, but after I left, I did not go to the boy's room. Instead I walked to Mr. Sorvino's class, where I peered in through the back window, my hands cupped around my eyes. I saw my father in front of the class, talking to the students. I did not know any of them because they were much older than me. They were not talking or passing notes as we did when we had a guest speaker. Instead, they appeared to be listening. One girl even took notes. I tried to see what my father was writing on the board; I tried to hear him, but heard only one line: "Martí's work can be used in support of many political platforms, even the socialist platform in Cuba." He said it with such force, such pride, it was as though I had never heard my father's voice before. After hearing this, I began to walk back to my own classroom, my hands in my pockets, my feet shuffling over the cement. When I saw Tom Luiz, the hall monitor, I simply showed my pass and he let me go on my way.

When my father arrived home that afternoon, I thought I
might see traces of this person on him again, but they were not there. Only when he put on his gray hat and coat, did I sense they might emerge. He left, as he often did, after dinner, and walked to the bar. I followed him for a half block, but when he turned and happened to see me, I simply walked off like I was headed to Joey’s house. I did not go to Joey’s but walked a good ways up that street. When I had gone far enough, I cut up a side alley very cautiously because I did not want him to see me again. I walked past the corner grocery, the laundromat, and Mama Concha’s Family Style Restaurant. When I could see The Tropicana, I ducked into a Cuban cafe and looked out the window. Once more, I saw my father on the same bench, a half empty beer at his feet. I could not hear what he was saying, but saw that his gestures, in fact his whole demeanor, were very different than the ones he used around my mother and me. I understood this as well, though I should have understood it earlier that day: he might have made a good teacher. There must have been a time when he had been this person, when his personality had been more frequently touched by this spirit. When the cafe owner said I needed to order a drink or leave, I simply left without answering him.

I began to think about this a good deal, who my father had been before I was born. I had not imagined that he could’ve been someone significantly different from the person I knew. I had thought he was the same person throughout time, a constant line darting back to his own boyhood, but this understanding must have been wrong. Now I pictured his body like that of a wooden Cuban doll, the kind where the doll opens, hinged at the side, so that you find another, smaller doll inside, and then, inside of that a third doll, a trail of personalities, and right now one of these earlier personalities was working its way to the surface, one I very much admired. I was fascinated by it, how this other person was unlike him but at the same time was him. In time, I thought, this other person would overtake him, that he might become a teacher or a business owner, something that would make him feel more important and, therefore, more satisfied. When he came home that night, however, he simply took off his hat and coat, setting them both in the hall closet before going to bed.
VII.

On the afternoon of Lourdes’ birthday dinner, my father left a little early for The Tropicana, wearing his coat and hat, but I did not follow him. Instead, I stayed with my mother who was preparing a cake. It was not officially Loudres’ birthday—her birthday was the following Wednesday—but they thought it would be a good idea to invite her over, an early celebration which would lead up to a proper party three days later. I watched him walk down our stairs, a Spanish newspaper folded in his hand, and when he reached the bottom, he waved to me. “Help your mother, Antonio,” he said, then walked off. I knew that two blocks later he would turn into a slightly different person, but I thought tonight, because Lourdes was visiting, this person might stay with him, lingering like a fine dust, and, for once, he would not wish it away.

Inside, I helped with the cake and later diced vegetables for a type of spicy chicken soup my mother knew how to make. While she was cooking the meat, I asked, “Why does father go to The Tropicana?”

“Oh that,” she said as she turned the meat over. “Men need some place to go. You’ll understand some day. It is a very old saying that men like to wander in the world.”

“But why The Tropicana? Why not someplace else?”

“What do you know about The Tropicana?” she asked.

“I’ve walked by it a few times.”

“It’s just a little, neighborhood bar. I imagine no man likes to be around the house all day.”

I considered asking something else, but did not know how to phrase what I truly wanted to know, if she understood my father was somehow different when he was away from us. Moreover, I sensed she did not know the answer and would not be able to help me. I began to content myself with her company, as I often liked to be around her, and when Lourdes joined us, I began to notice the different ways men and women moved in the world. I do not mean to say I had not noticed this before—I had—but I had not noticed it in fully conscious terms. For the first time, I understood that I would someday join my father’s mysterious
world, that its hazy brilliance might encompass me. As I thought about this, I began to look forward to my father's return. I thought this piece of information would help me see my father for who he was. He was my father, he was Cuban, but he was connected to me in some other way I did not understand.

We waited a long time for my father, and when my mother began to worry, Lourdes said, "Oh let him be. A man like him needs time to relax. Besides, it's nice for us to visit by ourselves." They talked for a while more, about my mother's work and how bad conditions had become in Cuba, and around six o'clock, my mother went to answer the phone. When she returned, I saw she was concerned, though at the same time she was trying to hide how she felt. I saw, too, that Lourdes did not see this in my mother so, instead of asking about it, continued as she had before.

"I bet that was him, wasn't it?"

"Yes," my mother said.

"You see, in Miami, you shouldn't worry. Miami is much safer than most cities I knew in Cuba. A man like him can take care of himself. He is fine, isn't he?"

"Fine," my mother said; however, her voice was not quite as it should be. I knew right then something had happened to him, but also knew not to ask. At least not until we were alone. "He's just sorry he can't be here for dinner."

"That's quite all right," she said. "It would be nice for the two of us to spend the evening together. Rarely am I allowed just the company of women. It will be nice, yes, a nice quiet evening. He can join us on Wednesday for my proper birthday."

For the rest of the evening, I saw my mother put on a performance no one would see through. No one, that is, except for someone very close to her: my father, perhaps her own parents, and me. She served the soup and then the sweet bread, all the while asking Lourdes about herself so that she would carry the burden of conversation. She spoke in a light friendly voice almost identical to her regular voice, but in some crucial way, it remained different. Before dessert, however, Lourdes noticed that something was bothering my mother. "Yes," she said, "you must tell me if something is upsetting you."
“It is nothing,” my mother said, waving her hand before her face, “a small headache. I believe it will go away shortly.”

“Yes, I know how those are,” she said, and for some reason, she began to make small ruminations that meant she would leave soon, much earlier than I had expected. “My headaches now that I am thirty-seven are much worse than those I had only a few years ago,” Lourdres said. “I know of a good Cuban doctor if you’d like to see him. Of course he is not licensed, but does good work.”

From the top of the stairs, we watched Lourdes walk to her car, her purse tucked under her arm. We waved goodbye and only then, after we were inside, did I ask my mother what had happened to my father. She absorbed this question as though it had tangible weight. When she was near the sofa, she collapsed onto it. She looked out the window, where the moon was centered in the top pane, before turning back to me. “Oh Tonio,” she cried, “you must not tell anyone. This must be a family secret.”

“What?” I asked.

She turned again to face the moon. “Your father was arrested—arrested for drinking beer on the street. This country has many crazy laws. Crazy laws that make no sense. No one could possibly know them all. On the street or in the bar, what’s the difference?”

“Are we going to get him?”

“We can’t,” she said. “We don’t have enough money. He doesn’t want anyone to know. He’s a proud man, your father. He’s foolish and prideful, but I love those things about him. He believes he can come home in the morning. He will talk to a judge.”

All that night I pictured my father sleeping in the type of jail I saw on TV, a small cell with one loud roommate who kept him awake. I understood it would be cold and dark, a bare yellow lightbulb dangling from the ceiling, but also understood that my father was there in his gray coat and hat, that he might have his friends with him and that they might talk like they did outside the bar, their beers at their feet, the bottles half finished.

When I saw him the next day, however, I understood it had not been like this at all; it had been difficult for him and had shamed him in a way I knew he would not talk about with me.
On Tuesday, we went to school together, and instead of going to the teachers’ lounge as he usually did, he walked to the tool shed, where Steve and Hank were surprised to see him. He took out his tools and began to work on his Monday chores, even though it was Tuesday. He cut the baseball field then chalked it, before finally weeding the plants which lined the teachers’ parking lot. From what I saw, no teacher treated him any differently—they said hello, they invited him to lunch, they asked him to work at their houses—but there was now a stiffness between them, an invisible barrier which had not been there before and which clearly frustrated my father. He had set it there and yet could not take it away.

At home, he did not go to The Tropicana. Instead, his friends came to our apartment, each of them carrying a six pack, which was something they had never done before. They did not ask why he didn’t join them and, more importantly, never asked him for a small loan again. From this, I understood they knew—they knew my father was not quite the man he had hoped to be—and despite my mother’s encouragement, he did not put on his gray hat and coat and go out with his friends any more. To my knowledge, he only wore that coat one other time. It was early summer, a cool breeze moving through town. When he thought he was alone, he removed the items from the closet and slowly put them on. He admired himself in the mirror, and then stepping closer, he examined his face, the small wrinkles, his eyes a deep, inquisitive brown. When finished, he stepped back to better view himself, and then as though he were conversing with his reflection, he made small gestures, moving his arms much the way he had outside The Tropicana, pleasant, expansive motions, but he must have seen how these gestures were forced now. Slowly he took off his coat and hung it in the back of the closet, then wearing just a white shirt and slacks, he walked down to The Tropicana. Inside the bar, I knew his friends did not sit around him as they once had; instead he joined them and together they sat around some new man and listened to the stories he had to tell.

For most of the summer, he stayed around our apartment on weekends. He planted an herb garden; he grew pumpkins and summer squash. When Lourdes came to visit, she did not look at my father the same way. Still she respected him, but her respect
was distant and tentative, different than what she offered him earlier that year. When school started that fall, he did not talk to the teachers very much, only occasional words to Mr. Sorvino who later told me he was grateful for my father’s presentation. “It was very well informed,” he said, “and interesting to hear.” Because of these things, I understood that our lives had fallen onto a new path, one where hope was placed at a distance and more tangible securities piled close. I understood my parents were at an age where they needed to rethink their lives and where my father’s earlier personality would not do them as much good as it would have even a few months before. I was confused why this personality disappeared for good, hidden like the gray coat in the back of the closet, and can only offer this one, small explanation, though I know it is not enough. At a winter party later that year, I overheard my Aunt Lourdes explain my father’s situation to two of her friends: “Yes, I believe it was my own misunderstanding. I blame myself for that. I thought his shoes were filled with many diamonds, but I do not think it was that many after all.”

VIII.

A year later, we moved to another part of Florida, and a year after that we moved to Huntington Beach, California, where my mother knew relatives twice removed. After each move, I expected my father’s old sheen to return, but it never did. He was a hard working man, a man who in later years returned to reading, though this time he preferred non-fiction because of its factualness. He held a number of jobs: he was a groundskeeper for Dade County and later for a large church; he was translator and a TV salesman at JC Penny’s; for a while, he was even a bread baker again, a small Cuban bakery in Costa Mesa his employer. Eventually, he returned to being a groundskeeper for a private school because that was his favorite job and one he found manageable after he turned fifty.

When we moved to Huntington Beach, I enrolled in ninth grade, and later, after graduating with a fairly good GPA, I was accepted to UCLA, which was the college I most wanted to attend. I am a business major, as are most of the Cuban-American
students I know. I do not know all of them well, only two, and we have been taking most of the same classes since the winter quarter of our freshman year. This last fall, I took a poetry workshop which was where I began to reconsider my father, much encouraged by my teacher. I had not thought of him like this in many years, as Cuban in some larger sense. His country took away not only his land and his house, but also part of his hope which should’ve been his birthright. I was looking for words which would hold my father, or perhaps more accurately I was looking for words which might hold the hidden aspects of him, the ones I glimpsed as a boy.

I have never told my father I saw him outside that bar, never told him I saw him give his presentation on Jose Martí. My words are becoming smoke much like the smoke inside him. They are thin and changing, difficult to get my hands around. My father was a proud, careful man, a man who might have been many different things, but in the end chose not to be some of them. From college, I know sons tell stories to redeem their fathers’ lives, but this one is different. I am his son, and he is my father. Someday I plan to give him the things I have written, my poems, a few pages perhaps. I would like to write a story about those times I saw him as a boy, but have not figured out how to do that yet—that, or perhaps I am just too chicken to try. When I do write this, I will give him a copy. I will let him read it when we are alone, my mother out with her friends, and I will watch his face, believing it might reveal some spark or sheen of that other man I was not able to meet, back when we were new immigrants to the country that, fifteen years later, has become our permanent home.
Why couldn’t I have willed the sudden concentricity of waves in Biscayne Bay
so that now, pond-like and registering the drop of a stone against the calm,
the tear and shove of the natural world could seem the locked effect of need?
Instead, I linger four stories above and beneath another three, tiered like cube-edged crystals scored with Babylon rims of succulents and ixoras mingling in the hang against the harbored wind. We face the city across a proper arm of sea, cleanly bridged, the windows lit like trays of costume jewelry. O Araby who broke the pubescent heart by shutting down and haunts every proof of odyssey, you’ve cast your net most certainly among the faded exiles of this child-heavy, memory-broken place. But they do not know or dare to turn and know the elision that subverts them. Let thirst be the hero of this hour and glass indoctrinated shore that counts itself with calipers of Either, for there is no greed
like that of panhandled rivers or the cracked tomb,
and who but the vibrant amid the groomed options
can flourish here? But I digress long enough
to let the freakly centered waves dissolve
the Bay into familiar nervousness, a quilt
of calm dark stains hard-edging the crackling
banners of halogen-peppered crests. This is the law
of temperature upon liquid masses but likewise
the fruit of chance for the data-frivolous eye
that takes its seeing seriously. Hence poetry and Both.

II

We came, by sheer desire, from a sunken nation
to frequent the surviving shore, to joke and revel
and gather from the fast hunters how to master
naturalness. Amid the shifting dunes, the strewn
algae, we made the mirror of this city rise.
A lawyer’s office balcony upon the Bay facing
the tinker-toy skyline where more belief than profit
is made. I have a cubalibre in hand, the other sleeve
correctly angled into the blazer-draped pocket.
I am surrounded by fellow children of an epic—
though they are a decade younger, still its echo.
They are the peasants of the seeming urban scape,
content to feast on nibblings the abacus culture
throws to them. Its interests are theirs, though
they would reject the thought outright and claim
an impossible Cubanity. Still, they could not be mistaken
for men and women of desperate straits, haggard
from a flight from mask. On the lawyer's balcony

I am more of them than not. Despite the weighing
with which I flatter my distances, of them I am and stay.

III

I too have borrowed Cuba by the tome,
glass-eyed my national emptiness, configured
the cosmetic data, studied the licensed pose.
It is a Cuban matter, so the cherished story goes,
to be so from another’s balcony, behold the schooners
and cigarette boats, the flagrant fill of canvas

and the cleaver’s foam, and think a sailing beheld
is a sailing undertaken. Explorer, but to the bench

of your mind get working and never stop, anvil
and hammer, or is it the tanner's indigence

of stretch and hue, the curing enterprise
by which a little longer in the grave a memory

prolongs itself? But these are not or ever will be
mine. Memory like little Perseus on Danae’s raft

sleeps deeper into infancy while his mother,
damned by beauty and prophesy, harries out

the course of winters and gales. Before lie
the chance monsters and other proofs, but none

will return me or these other simply younger lost
to the cradle of native purpose. No welcomes.
Ricardo Pau-Llosa

**DICE**

One throw and wheat or goldleaf appears, or horseback riding. Mudbrick or chiaroscuro.

Throw again and the genes of Velazquez or Attila fly in the face of the simplicities, our muses.

Everything must be learned, even wonder—
First hand in snow, in thighs.

Even love. A person, world enough, cannot center a world,
yet the leafy tears argue
the case on necessity.

And the tongue, tired of wagging
before the deaf of stone
clouds, says yes, the weapons
are there, under the floorbeams,
under the house memory
said it was building from experience.

When the roof crashes, the tongue
names the corpses by where they lie.

Memory rigs the dice to tell the truth.
Loyal dog can always smell its way to light.

Fall 1999
Before Winter

First you remember your father’s hands, thick hairy fingers with joints round as marbles. Powerful hands meant to haul rope, slice logs, gaff fish—like the November day he and one of your uncles, a lanky red-faced man with a curse for each change in the weather, set out in a jonboat at the height of the flood to fish the overflowed salmon hatchery nearby. You were five, hands softer than a bird. You watched as they left seven times that day, each time returning with the boat weighed down to the water by piles of salmon. Each fish bigger than your leg.

The kitchen was no different: stacks of fish, their brains malleted to a pulp by your grandmother—your mother scouring the brilliant flesh, spinning away scales like shrapnel. The women’s knives worked as deftly as extra limbs, splitting the bright red meat, dropping the entrails into buckets by their sides. Raised on milk and liver pellets, the salmon stank like old beef. But for an entire winter’s supply of food, no one dared complain.

Not even you, not even when the smell made you nauseous, not even after you fled to the furnace room where your grandmother had penned the three brown-and-black hounds. Nestled into the dogs’ fur, you thought about the eyes of those fish, glazed over with a stare less like death than knowledge, the end of a story written into their first gasp of water. A look of regret.

And even now, thirty years later—grandmother gone, mother gone, all gone except your father—you cannot chase that look from your mind. In the small bed beside you, your father’s large hands can barely muster the strength to clutch the wool blanket closer to his trembling chest. A wooden cross above his headboard faces the window on the far wall, through whose thin panes you listen for the first crack of cold descending from the mountains to the west, feeling it the hulk of your chest dark and house-like. Somewhere the
salmon continue their run, a great loop which may be an eternal cycle or may just be a futile joke that only the salmon understand. You see them within your father’s eyes, moving beneath the thickening film, beneath the water’s surface, a movement which is itself the only truth, ending with the smell of liver and frightened boys clutching the fur of dogs in rooms not distant enough to let them forget.
MOON SHOT

FOLLOWING A WEEK OF TREATMENTS, the doctors give my brother Marvin a NASA cap to cover the hairless patches. Marvin, at age seven, decides to go to the moon.

He gets wind of the space shuttle they're building and asks to ride along. To humor him, Mamma writes a letter to Cape Canaveral. Marvin takes it on his bike down to our mailbox at the end of the hill. Weeks later, he gets an autographed photo of John Glenn.

It's not enough, of course. Marvin gets weaker but keeps smiling. Mamma wipes his forehead with a cool cloth before bed. Daddy, standing outside the room, says, "If they can put a goddamn man on the moon...."

Marvin goes to the hospital again. When he comes home, Daddy and Mamma close their door to talk. Everyone seems upset except Marvin. At dinner he announces that he's going to the moon, after all. His space suit is ready. No one thinks much about it until bedtime, when he's nowhere to be found.

We hit the front door just soon enough to see him flying down the hill on his bike. He's wearing his NASA cap backwards, Daddy's old catcher's mask, and a red towel that he's tied around his neck like a cape. Mamma screams. Marvin accelerates. At the bottom of the hill he's angled several pine-boards over the curb like a ramp almost towards the dark house on the corner. The full moon hangs low in the sky, just above the trees, and Marvin is heading straight for it.

I hold my breath. Daddy and Mamma have already started running toward the road. Marvin meets the ramp and goes up, reaching with his right hand. When he hits the pinnacle of his flight, I somehow know that this is the way I'll remember him. A small sound escapes my lips, like words I don't yet know how to form, something between applause and prayer.

Then Marvin crashes ass-over-eyeballs. I take off down the stairs. When I get to where he is, Mamma's already cuddling him in her lap. Daddy's shaking his head. "I almost made it," Marvin says bluntly.

The night is orange, and all around the earth is soft. "You sure did, baby," whispers Mamma. "You sure did."
QUESTIONS ABOUT AND NEAR DUCKS

Do they mate for life.
   In pairs, brown against green:
   complement.

Will they be going away for winter.
   I have a sister in California,
   futon next to the temperate porch.

Is he trying to impress her,
   holding his chest above the water.
   When we see something we like,
   we lean toward it.

They wish they had bread crumbs, or something
to offer.
   You bring a loaf of homemade bread
   and make tea in my kitchen.

Those two at the edge of the pond
developing a complicit look,
a coded telephone ring.
Difficult to find privacy when their voices
can be overheard, when their feet
are bright orange.

How do they communicate
   sudden changes in the air.
   Though neither announces it, both travel
   in the same direction.

What will they do when it snows.
   They'll be tucked beneath feathers
   in a warm pocket of woods,
   just the two of them, eating bread and seeds.
ALL OF ITS WEIGHT

He sees the thin scabs,
    fresh over his right knuckles,
    the blood beneath pressed
back by grease
    and thin, dry hope.

The tips of his fingers
    callused smooth,
he runs them
    across her thigh
        and wishes them
more gentle than they are
or he is
    or thinks he is,
wishes to press
    the full weight of his heart.

(Almost bluses in the dark by thinking of his heart at this time, but he does think of his heart, then does again.)

And he wishes to press the full weight of his heart
    into his hands,
as if they were things
    apart from himself,
things that can hold
    love as certain
        as a crescent wrench.

But can he wish anymore
    into his hands
    already full
of decades
  of work, of fights, of machines?
Which is to say they're already full
  of love,
because his decades
  of work, of fights, of machines
  are love too,
love that is without words,
  love that denies over and over
    in grunts and bruises until it forgets
where it belongs or why.

But those things are pushing him
  now
into more than they are,

making more for him to wish
  into his hands,
    gently, gently
coaxing under
  the hard pressure
    of the mind to move
the heart
  into the hands.

And she with the moon's light
  cutting through
the bent slats of the window
glides her hands across
  his check—
his hope fresh,
  crisp, sharp.

His hands swallowing
  more than ever.
THE THIN DISEASE

Nearly seven feet tall, a skeleton
made of giant bird bones,
a bird-cage rib-cage,
his heart a little pulsing
robin, Winston from Ghana
on the old Gold Coast
was my best friend.
He’d reach down
to tap me on my red head. “Dutch,
we’re going to cadge some drinks.
Tell them I’m King Quazi
of oilrich offshore Quaziland.
Tell them my kingdom is ten miles long
and a quarter mile wide, including beaches.”

Ghanian Winston had purple-grey skin
and was so thin he looked like the shadow of a pole,
but his head was large and noble,
with cheekbones carved in slate,
and royally crested with a pompadour
befitting the son of a son of a king
from the ancient West African Empire,
though he was always church-mouse poor.
We worked on the New York docks,
off-loading ships, on-loading trucks.
He wasn’t very strong. He drank a lot
and bled from the rectum when he worked.
They had to cut the grapes away.
Like a daddy longlegs and a flat red beetle,
we wobbled to a bar near the hospital,
a knot of stitches still in his new tight ass.
He could ignore the pain for the booze.
He put his arm over my shoulder.
"Dutch, I'm going to die.
I've got the thin disease.
I'll never go back to Ghana
to see the revolution through."
I didn't want him to die.
"Sure you will. You'll go back."
There were good times yet.
But he died. He died.
He died. The white bed
was empty but for a wave-crested,
welting head, and limp hoses,
some of which were black
and leaked their fluids.
Ghana was far away, a dream,
but I was there, near, here,
his friend, holding his hand,
our funny different fingers
entwined, though pulling apart.
ADULTERY IN THE ALBATROSS DINER

The man sitting beside me is shrinking into his clothes.
His jacket is bright blue and swallows him like a balloon.
His head is the size of an apple, now a plum, now the pit of a grape.

He is screaming but his voice is just a whistle, inchoate and fading beneath the sounds of The Albatross Diner: pots and pans, waitresses with their giant steps.

What is it you say, little man?
Your body is a naked pea and soon you'll ride the backs of protists.

He is just a speck now, a point on a line, imaginary to everyone except mathematicians and schizophrenics.

Before I go, I do something very cruel; I brush crumbs from the counter and finish his soup. The crumbs took like asteroids, I'm sure, and the soup is something he can no longer fathom.

When his wife returns I take his clothes and pay his bill.
I take her too,
with my large hands,
and knowing she will weep,
tell her everything.
It is the same story I tell her for years
after he is gone.
THE LEGEND OF PLUTONIA YOUNG

By the time she reached her senior year in high school, most folks around here had Plutonia figured for the type to suffer an early marriage, a violent divorce, and a hard life of single motherhood in an aluminum trailer on the edge of town.

In other words, a typical local girl, with a bit of a wild streak. There was some justification for these low predictions of Plutonia’s prospects, among which was her dalliance with the Vice Principal. It was a sordid business, but maybe not all bad—in some odd sense, it started the chain reaction that split her future wide open.

The first rift appeared under the bleachers during baseball practice one early spring day. Plutonia wasn’t sure if the sharp crack she heard at the crucial moment came from bat hitting ball or from her shoulder, the arm attached to which lay twisted uncomfortably behind her back while her partner grunted and farted and ultimately spilled several years worth of pent-up libidinal secretions into her indifferent insides.

When the balding administrator rolled belly-up like a fish played to exhaustion, Plutonia was struck by a stunning wave of revulsion, and realized it was imperative that she graduate and gather enough scratch to get the hell out of Spring Rocks, if not clear out of Wyoming.

Due to the extenuating circumstances, Plutonia’s D-average and 25% absentee rate were tactfully overlooked. So she made it to graduation night—a rite of passage sadly cut short by the consumption of a quart of gin on top of two Circle-K microwave burritos.

That was the beginning of one ass-kicking summer, which featured Plutonia shredding the hearts of two Baptist deacons, breaking the jaw of a roughneck who had the bad judgment to try hustling her at pool, and getting tangled up with some thieving cowboys.

The rustling thing was what cost her. The whole deal was ill-conceived and poorly executed. It ended with Plutonia accidentally riding up on a ranch house while making her getaway. She
stirred up the dogs, and got thrown from her horse, and in the course of either trying to catch her mount or beat it to death, she inadvertently whacked a Blue Healer pup along side the head with a stick. She heard just one quick yelp before the rancher froze her in the deer poacher's lights mounted on his pickup. Plutonia was promptly tried, convicted, and sentenced to three years for grand theft bovine, and the murder of a pup many had expected to mature into one of the finest damn cattle dogs in the county.

When the Judge sprung her on bail pending appeal, Plutonia figured the time was past ripe to show her departing ass to that stinking town, broke or not. She boarded a westbound bus on Labor Day, and mooned the crowd waiting for the big parade along the entire four-block length of James Watt Boulevard on her way out. Folks really thought it was a damn shame about the dog.

Plutonia's Grandfather had raised her. She was his life. Her going away like that pretty near killed him. A week or so after her unforgettable exit, he stumbled out of the Colt .44 Lounge around 1 a.m., not having drawn a sober breath since he read her goodbye note. His howls shattered the yellow plastic circle flashing in the stoplight over the intersection of Watt and Wayne, where he lay in the middle of the road screaming, "Por favor, somebody, run across me."

His name was Rojo Amenaza, and most folks counted him one sandwich short of a picnic. He ran the local Port-a-John business that supplied bright blue plastic shitters to drill rigs and construction sites. He had gotten his start in New Mexico back in the 40's, trucking outhouses nailed together from old shipping pallets up onto the Jornada del Muerto during the war, when all those German and Russian physicists were out there working on that secret project.

Rojo always hated that place. The name (Day's Journey of the Dead Man) gave him the creeps, and the way the pale yellow light of dawn out there flowed like water across the bleached sand—well, it made him feel like he had stepped off the edge of the world and into his mother's dark house. He would get to the top of the hill, bless himself, then chug his old truck down the
rutted dirt road to the metal huts where the men worked. He tried to go when no one was around. He would drag the sawed-off barrels of shit out from under the outhouses, pour in a gallon of gas and one of diesel fuel, light it, and watch it burn; watch the black, greasy smoke rise up into the gleaming sky. The men with the uniforms made him do it that way. They didn’t bury their shit like other men.

One morning he came over the ridge and a blinding flash of light stopped him. Then an incredible roar and a fierce blast of scorching wind filled the truck. Rojo threw himself to the floor, and prayed to the virgin to deliver him from the devil. The MPs discovered him a short time later, kneeling beside his truck, gibbering about the giant mushroom-shaped cloud he had seen when he finally raised his head, how it drifted up from hell. The MPs hauled him up by his shirt and slapped the cuffs on him.

“Senores, I see the nube Diablo go on the sky!” Rojo sputtered.

“Sure, Buddy. Anything you say. Just get in the car.”

Poor Rojo was taken for a clever spy, one who had found a brilliant way to witness the detonation of the first atomic bomb. He was actually a deeply religious and profoundly profane young man whose greatest misery in life was that a bruja had cursed him for stealing a chicken at the age of 14, punishing him by taking his fertility.

Two months after Rojo’s release from the stockade, the village girl who had taken to bringing his dinner (and her favors) to the abandoned hay loft where he slept, turned up pregnant. Rojo concluded that the magic cloud that climbed to heaven had lifted the bruja’s curse.

“Dios Mio,” he said to the girl’s shining brown eyes. “Hay un milagro, Mija.”

Twenty years later, Rojo’s son had a daughter. Rojo was honored by being allowed to choose her name, and he named her after the magic metal men said made the bomb that made the cloud of the devil that had rejuvenated his withered seed.

When a stray lightning bolt orphaned the infant girl, Rojo took her in, saddened that she would never have a brother, that
the tree of his family would grow no taller, but charmed beyond wonder by her mischievous smile.

Rojo most likely didn’t know that the magic metal was named after the coldest and most remote planet in the solar system, which was named after the Roman God of the Dead and ruler of the underworld.

Plutonia learned that early on, and took a certain pride in it.

Just before Thanksgiving, after three months on the run, Rojo’s granddaughter turned up working in the Light of Hope Bookstore on Tabernacle Avenue in Lake Salts, Utah. By then, she had started using the name Plutonia Young, thinking that the implied family association with the founding father of what she called the Church of the Own-Everything Saints, couldn’t hurt.

Her keen sense of her own best interests served Plutonia well in her first days in Lake Salts, and took a rather dramatic change of direction. Back in Spring Rocks, after draining five or six Buds, she had been known to say, “The only thing I really want out of life is a man with a dick as big around as a beer can, who cooks good Mexican food. The rest is bullshit.”

But her brush with the law—and perhaps the batting practice with the Vice-Principal—had convinced Plutonia that all of her previous statements and most of her previous life had been leading her down the wrong road. The prospect of incarceration was so horrible, it cast a totally new light on things. In it, Plutonia saw that what she really wanted was a baby that would nurse without biting and draw good pictures she could stick to the refrigerator with the little magnets her husband would bring home from the office.

And she felt pretty damn sure Lake Salts was the right place to find them.

As for Plutonia’s legal problems, well, the bus ride to avoid prosecution didn’t help matters any. But even though word of her whereabouts filtered back to his office before too long, the County Attorney had neither the heart nor the energy to chase her down and drag her home. Truth was, he kind of admired her spirit.

So she was on her own. Until, on the very last day of 1984, Harvey Dingman shuffled into the Light of Hope Bookstore in
a shabby trench coat and a Clark Kent-style hat that made him look like a comic book exhibitionist. Without exposing either his naughty bits or his eyes, he asked Plutonia Young for a copy of “Your Daily Bread,” a popular devotional guide offering a daily bible reading interspersed with bits of wit and wisdom from Big Daddy Brigham on items like the proper roles of Man and Wife in the households of the Lord.

“They’re just over here,” Plutonia said, steering Harvey’s lumpy grey form down the aisle with a gentle touch on the back of his arm.

Harvey had never been so touched by a woman. Not on his arm, not in his heart, and not, well, there. He had in fact never met a woman who directed her bright green eyes right at him, and when his dull brown peepers accidentally wandered into the line of fire, an electric current ran right down his spine, split in half at ground zero, shot down his legs, and welded his scuffed-up size 12 wingers right to that sanctified floor.

Ol’ Harv was a poached cottontail, then and there.

Plutonia took stock of his stuttering, shuddering, immobile carcass, and knew as certain as the Wyoming wind that she’d stumbled smack onto the best refrigerator magnet-provider west of the Wasatch Front.

She put the little book into his hand, and slid hers up his arm and across the back of his stooped shoulders. “Is this what you’re looking for?” she murmured.

“I, I, I, believe so,” Harvey managed to croak.

Plutonia had her doubts about whether Harvey had sufficient juice to reproduce, but she figured she’d make up in readiness whatever he lacked in amps.

News of Plutonia’s wedding reached Spring Rocks right about the time the ice on the river started to break up. The word took a while to filter down to the murky depths where Rojo was still bottom-feeding on bitterness, regret, and whiskey. At least once every day he read Plutonia’s faded and greasy goodbye note. “Mi Abuelo,” it said. “Sorry, but I’ve got to go. Jail and me would never mix. Don’t be sad. I’ll let you know when I get squared away.” She had signed it, “Love, P.”

Rojo had been wondering about the meaning of the phrase, “squared away.” Nearly all the English he knew he had learned
from his granddaughter. He could not bring himself to ask anyone else, as he would of her, “What means it to say this, ‘squared away’?”

But he thought surely her getting married would bring word from his little girl. So he checked his mail often and waited anxiously, but no word came. He heard people say she was in Lake Salts, but it was a big place, they said, with lots of people, and they laughed when he asked if he couldn’t just go there and wait at the lavanderia until she came to wash her clothes. That had seemed like a good idea, but they told him to forget that girl and the trouble she made.

It was not the trouble he remembered. It was the way the air around her always smelled like trees in the springtime, and the glittering stars that swam in her eyes.

Within a year, Plutonia had a son. Harvey named him Joseph, but when she was alone with her baby, Plutonia called the chubby little bugger Jake. He nursed like a calf, didn’t bite, but would latch on and refuse to let go. She suffered a few painful nipple hickeys until she learned to break the suction by slipping her finger into the comer of his mouth. But she didn’t mind.

What bothered Plutonia in those days was that Harvey took to calling her Toni. So on those rare occasions when Harvey took her to dinner with his business friends, she wore the clothes he laid out on the bed for her, and she didn’t drink or swear, but she did make a special point of stepping in quickly, before he had a chance, and introducing herself.

“What an odd name,” the other Wife would say.

“My grandfather named me,” Plutonia would explain. “After a bomb that made him potent.” They never pointed the middle of their eyes at her after that, but she didn’t really care. She enjoyed standing in their big, clean kitchens full of white plastic appliances and dried flower arrangements, chatting about children and how to get gravy stains out of a table cloth.

The Wives were always nice people. Dull as dirt, but nice.

And every now and then when Harvey was snoring through his nose and farting through his sacred skivvies, she longed for the feel of a cue stick, the sound of a jukebox, and the taste of a beer. But she always forgot about it when Jake woke up and clamped onto her nipple.
So she went for #2 while the getting was still reasonably good. This time it was a girl. Harvey named her Martha, after his mother, and Plutonia called her Mattie, after a famous proprietress of a house of ill-repute back in the territorial days in Spring Rocks. Little Mattie was a treasure, and it was her smile—captured in a snapshot on her first birthday—that finally prompted Plutonia to write her grandfather a letter.

She wrote it one morning between 2 and 4 a.m., while a snowstorm hurled itself against the walls of the house and Plutonia sat at the kitchen table trying to fight off a feeling that had started nagging at her lately: the feeling that this nuclear family thing just couldn’t hold together, that the center of it was slowly going soft and squishy—not cute and warm and soft like the baby’s cheeks—but sour and watery and squishy, like the inside of an overripe tomato.

“Mi querido Abuelo,” it began.

She told Rojo about her husband, about how he had become very involved in The Church because it was good for his insurance business and was doing very well, and how her children looked and talked and ate their strained apricots with their fingers, and about their new VCR, and the fear she felt. She told him how in her dreams the red-hot liquid middle of the earth oozed out, and the rivers all ran down inside the cracks and the land dried up and blew away.

Plutonia wasn’t sure what any of this meant, but she thought her Abuelo might know, if anyone did. So she rented a P.O. box and used it for a return address because she couldn’t face him after the way she left, but she wanted to find out why she felt so unsteady.

“Nieta, mi corazon,” Rojo wailed as he read her words through a stream of salty tears.

He knew. He had already dreamt that dream.

About that time, Harvey started bringing home all kinds of things: new furniture, expensive desserts with French names, lots of strange tools that he hung up on pegboards in the new garage. Plutonia felt like there had to be something fishy about whatever Harvey was up to. Experience had taught her that only dirty money came easy.

Plutonia told Harvey so one night.
“Honey,” Harvey said. “You’re being silly. I’m in on the ground floor of a computer distributorship that’s going to be a gold mine. And when I get the permits I need in Toolee County, I’ll be making $300 a barrel for people to bury nuclear stuff out there. Toni, Honey, we can’t lose.”

“My name is Plutonia,” she said. “And everybody loses sooner or later, except the government.”

The worst of it was that under the influence of Harvey and their pampered playmates, her sweet little babies were threatening to grow into energy-sucking, television-addicted, toy-consuming demons from hell.

Then one day about noon Plutonia stopped at the Whataburger to grab up some flesh patties and a couple of shakes for the kids. She had just picked up a letter from Rojo and was hoping to read it while the kids slurped. But when she got to the drive-up, her electric window wouldn’t go down. She pulled up and opened the door and tried to scream back at the squawk box, but all she could hear was raspy static. She was going to try and back out when a Mercedes sedan with a guy talking on the telephone in it pulled in behind her. The handle of her purse snagged on the truck door and she spilled the entire contents into the slimy gutter, including the letter. Then the new Suburban died.

At that point, the Mercedes’ horn blew, and so did Plutonia. She lost it, went critical. Uncontrolled chain reaction. Meltdown. Kablooeey.

Plutonia assaulted the Mercedes, then the driver, then his telephone. The phone got the worst of it. Plutonia crushed it into little plastic bits with the stout heel of the new red shoes Harvey had bought her to match the truck.

Her next impulse was to remove the shoe and go to work on the driver’s head with it. If not for the courage of a fearless cowboy who grabbed her and pinned her elbows behind her back, things could have been much worse.

The cowboy had to drive her and the kids home while a tow-truck came to drag the Suburban out of the clogged Whataburger drive-up. The man on the phone decided not to press charges, but only because he recognized her name. He was Harvey’s law-
yer. Plutonia didn’t ask what Harvey needed with a lawyer who drove a Mercedes.

The just-in-the-nick-of-time cowboy turned out to be none other than Billy Greg Teller, former national junior all-around rodeo champion out of Hole Fire, Montana, who just happened to cook a bowl of red so powerful if you didn’t damp it out with enough tortillas, it would squirm down out of your belly and yank the soles off your boots from the inside.

But what first attracted Plutonia to him was the strong yet gentle pressure he kept on her elbows while she decided not to murder that lawyer. The easy way he got Jake and Mattie giggling at his silly cow stories and biting their lips in concentration as they tried to tie something he called an atomic trigger-hitch into the cords of her teak mini-blinds only helped.

Plutonia stood in the kitchen doorway and watched, thinking that circumference didn’t really matter much after all, but it was funny the way things came around.

And so it came to pass that there dwelt in the land of State Liquor stores and all-day church, a woman with two demonic offspring, a felony-suspect husband, and no car. What she did have was a tough call to make.

Rojo’s letter, sticky and crumpled as it was, held the key to Plutonia’s decision—that and the fact that she happened to know there was an alligator briefcase full of gold coins stashed under Jake’s bed. She suspected Harvey was going to pass it to the right people to make sure he got those waste dump permits he was after. She had a few other ideas.

Rojo wanted her to come home. She was all for cutting her losses and getting out of town. But there was no going back to Spring Rocks. Then again, Wyoming was a big state, and one where a girl with a briefcase full of gold could always find herself a suitable situation.

Plutonia lugged the briefcase down to the kitchen, and said, “Billy Greg, I need to go to Wyoming. Tonight.”

Billy Greg looked up from the toothpick corral he was building for Jake’s plastic dinosaurs and said, “I’ll have to stop for gas.”

So they piled whatever they couldn’t live without—stuffed animals, cowboy boots, Barbie dolls, a rocking chair, clean socks,
a couple of hair brushes, a saddle, a stack of comic books, a jar of peanut butter, a plastic bottle of chocolate syrup, two feather pillows, one antique quilt, and about a half a million dollars in gold—into Billy Greg's pickup and headed out.

Plutonia picked up a newspaper along the way, and buried deep in the classified section she found a little three-liner about a general store, restaurant, bar, dance hall, house, and eight cabins for sale in a place called Landing Woods up along the Larayou River. She unfolded the map, found a little flyspeck along that twisting blue line, and pointed to it.

"Go here," she told Billy Greg.

"What's there?"

"With luck, my new life.

"Anything you say, Little Lady. Landing Woods, next stop."

They pulled in around dawn. By noon, Plutonia was—for all practical purposes—the new owner of the town of Landing Woods. There wasn't a hell of a lot else there except the tight little cluster of weathered and neglected buildings she bought with her alligator briefcase.

After dinner one evening a few weeks later, Plutonia called one of Harvey's business partners. His wife answered, and was pleased to tell Plutonia that Harvey had skipped the country, and was believed to be running a German car dealership in Costa Rica. Plutonia hung up and called the Colt .44 Lounge back in Spring Rocks.

Rojo screamed, cried, threw himself to the floor, tore his shirt with joy at hearing his nieta's voice. Her invitation to come help put the dance hall and the cabins on a paying basis sent him soaring near ecstasy, or apoplexy—it was hard to tell by the way he clutched at his chest and moaned. What was clear was that he left a fresh whiskey and water sitting on the bar and raced home to load up a couple of his best shitters (you never know when you might need one) and to pack the figures of Christ and the Virgin he had carved as birth presents for his bisnietos. He bathed, shaved, dressed in his best clothes, and left at first light.

Once again, his timing was fortuitous, sort of. Around noon, Rojo pulled into Landing Woods and parked within spitting distance of a utility box where a workman was reconnecting the electricity for the dance hall. Rojo was too excited to notice. He
dusted off his boots and walked into the general store. The wind slammed the door behind him.

The startled workman looked up, and caught an eyeful of a city girl strolling past with an extra tight pair of those silky little shorts giving her a celestial wedgie. Her strut raised his Wyoming salute. Being shy by nature, he was understandably disconcerted by his erect condition. So it wasn’t really his fault, but he hooked a 440 volt transformer into a 220 line, over juicing the whole local grid.

As the wiring started to sizzle, Plutonia stepped into Rojo’s widespread arms. Jake—Plutonia’s growing baby boy—peeked out from behind the fishing tackle rack, wondered who the old guy was, and tossed a frozen green chili burrito in the microwave. Mattie hit the high button and zapped a field of hypermicro accelerated particle-waves into that unholy chemical conglomeration. That did it. A ball of blue-white light consumed the general store, touching off the propane, the gasoline, and certain little-known geologic micro-phenomena. One part of the world subducted the other. An undetermined amount of mass converted into energy. Atoms split, wandered, collided, and recombined.

Nobody could see for a good five minutes. When the spots faded, there was nothing but a shallow depression where the general store used to be. Beyond that, the river went under the highway bridge and never came out the other side. The water reappeared about a mile downstream.

Plutonia and Rojo never did reappear. Neither did Jake or Mattie.

Most folks think the river just found an old underground channel, reopened by the force of the explosion. Of course some insist alien abductors were involved. The cynics claim Plutonia staged the whole thing and her and Rojo are actually running a dive shop in Isla Mujeres. The night clerk at the Circle-K swears she saw them down there, yukking it up like Butch and Sundance—before the Federales wasted them.

Don’t really matter much if they’re hiding out up at Hole in the Wall or zipping around the universe on Miracle Whip waves. Plutonia took her clan and dropped through a crack in the earth, or went off to see the stars. Either way, what matters is that the
former Vice-Principal took over Rojo's Port-a-John business and expanded into garbage collection. There isn't much drilling or construction going on now, what with the price of oil in the toilet, so he mostly works the county fairs and rodeos and football games around here.

And it's a good thing too. After all, when the big game is over, *somebody* has to pick up the trash and burn the shit, even if there isn't any proper place to bury all the shattered atoms.

Smart money in Spring Rocks says Plutonia knew that all along.
And there I am on a rubber raft, saltwater washing through my mouth, giggling at seven in the knowledge of parents: a father with coarse, black hair and a mother like a crow, strong with flight feathers. Jewish boy on the beach, pail and shovel, drenching sun, roar of the surf, Portuguese men-o-war washed on shore, like marbled dirigibles, and strong fishermen guiding my life through the variables—Irving with dark speckles, Shep with boulder thighs, Harold no less influential for his florid skin and feminine side which wedged through him, like a fin. It was jubilance and resonance and sand grit and gutted trout and sexy wives with lacquered nails who bitched and loved and donated and slathered their dumb children with Solarcain. Women with that kind of leg skin which exudes sexuality: smooth, freckled, white, pliable, like the underside of fish. And their children, little vessels of innocence filled with immortality and egoism bucking in the sun-pound. It was Rome before the fall, solid curves of toughness in the parents like walls, gold flowing through scotch and blended whiskey necks, and Texas Longhorn football bursting like concussion bombs. Nothing crumbled no matter how brittle it became because there was money, guts, kids, wives, glory, and the whole great God damned Gulf of Mexico glittering with gamefish. And there I am floating on my rubber raft where the ocean floods the shore, laughing, breast full of glee, stuffed like a turkey
with sweetness and deflected rage, no more the carrier of the clear blue flame of poetry than the carrier of bubonic plague. It was that textured storm in the brain, blurry happiness which thrives and throws off sparks of luxury in the veins. It was fish-scaling knives and bellowing men and Port Aransas, Texas, and God's diamond jewelry broken and spilled over the horizon, like a sea. It was semen and fertility and seed flung in the flesh of wives, like meteor showers in the infinite sky. And children folded into the prayer of two hands before bedtime in the hearing of seawaves, sailed into their dreams, like schooners, flawless and streaming with praise.
Well, I heard of this convict who has allowed science to slice his lethally injected corpse into single millimeter-wide strips, every organ scanned, muscle upon muscle, his body parceled into innumerable fillets thin as Kleenex for the examiners, a CAT scan of his entire disinherited body. Rape won't show. Homicide won't run along the molecules. Childhood trauma won't be seen crouching behind boulders, crying. But meat will glisten, like freshly sliced veal, a Hubble scan of grain and ganglia, calcium and tissue, the ultimate visible man. You could make a board game of this, a card game of concentration, what strip follows strip, what strip pulls for strip, you could award points for being close on a geographical-anatomical map: the Country of Pulmonaria, the Cardiac Republic, the Reproductive Beach, your strip draped over your arm, like pasta. The man died for his sins—rape, dismemberment—but lives inside the instruments. Well, it just caught my eye, something I heard from a friend in passing, embedded in a wider conversation about competitiveness, superiority, publicity, etc, the criminal lurking in my mind after escaping her lips. Grotesquerie curls in the routines. If time were a wave rolling forward ground-to-sky, while you in your circumscribed space were down-shifting into first, elsewhere some technological saw was subdividing a man, who they froze first. Now, I am a literary agent in the basement of my home with a bone-white phone, a flickering computer, pens in a cup, like bottle rockets, crammed book cases, and, dare I admit it, a stuffed Beagle pup. I rub my eyes. I feel the thickness of my hands. I see my thighs aswirl with hair sweeping to my knees, and knee caps like helmets. I sit in a chair or wander up the hundred boards and beams hammered into steps by carpenters to feel the sun, my fingers through my hair. And you, my love are... somewhere... browsing, eating, day-dreaming, most likely working, drawn around yourself, like a bedsheet full of treasure, and tied at the top, one beautiful piece. It's not enough to say, “And round and round she whirls in space,” referring to Earth, as if I were a giant unfolding,
head in the sky, a stock response. We must return to this: a criminal who willed his heft to science, the science itself, electronic saws, weird obsessions, the immortality-drive, rape and dismemberment, the mackerel thrashing of too-tight lives, the infinite capacity of the human mind to escape prison walls and mundanity, the beauty of minutiae and the machinery to enter it, God, galoshes and slickers in which to slip as we examine the blood-sherbet which was man.
TWO WOMEN

I. Youth

Don’t assume incorrectly that this young miss brims with vitality. A sad incident occurred shortly after puberty when the blessed almighty rolled her in a bread pan.

How wonderful the white loaf of our divinity—like a wedding cake or a stony Greek temple.

But she wandered forever in the interior, tripping over the yeasty ramps.

Each led to a blank wall, a crust never broken, never shared.

And as the loaf finally collapsed, she could only crack her fists, cry for more air with a kiss of flour on her face.
II. Old Age

Someone has burst
the white walls of
the sepulchre.

She was supposed to
be buried long ago,
but the rock rolled,
the tide switched
to the opposite end
of earth.

The beach is cluttered
with abandoned homes,
slow-creatures dragging
themselves to some last
fertile ledge or fruitful
pool.

But the wind blows right
through her and the gulls
cry as their nasty eyes
look down the neck of her
thin shirt.

She wonders where to go,
what to do. The sun
dawdles like a child
with years to move.
THE DOG

ETHAN IS AN ADVERTISING EXECUTIVE, and Barbara is a model. Every year they have a very tasteful Christmas brunch in their loft downtown. The party is always bright, but a little chilly. Bright because Ethan and Barbara are such generous, beautiful people, and chilly because I always feel a little chilly when a certain kind of hipster is around and in great numbers. Don’t get me wrong, though: Ethan and Barbara are not chilly hipsters. They are, however, the kind of people who look great in a loft and even better in a loft with a sharp-faced red Doberman and almost no furniture. I feel good about having them as my friends because they both have healthy irony about who they are. Not the kind of irony which is really just stupidity, but the deepest kind of human insight.

I do my best to be a good friend to them. That job entails not judging too harshly their friends. Last year’s party, though, was a trial, breaking down into two groups: on one end of the loft, there were the shy-but-supercilious fashion types, and, on the other end, there were the goofy-but-arrogant-because-they-make-too-much-money advertising people. I tended toward the advertising people, but that's not to say that I preferred them. They provided better camouflage. A thirty-five year old queer professor, I need rich food and warm company to pull me away from my book lined, precisely small, and tchotchke-ridden uptown apartment. Like an old woman in dark house they say. The ad guys and gals were more likely to think I was one of them than the models and photographers.

It happened as the party reached its zenith. The two distinct groups were almost mingling near the designer table groaning with sun-dried tomato quiche and semiprecious mozzarella and new potatoes so perfectly crisped that I was afraid to ruin them with my fork. I myself was on the side of things, swilling fresh-squeezed orange juice, wondering if my belt size would withstand another slab of mozzarella. It was at that moment that I caught this big guy across the room laughing at me. Now ... this
is important. Have you ever had anyone laugh at you? I don’t mean when you were at John F. Kennedy Junior High School and they all hated you because you insisted on wearing red sneakers. And I don’t mean someone who loves you and their laughter isn’t their only response to your being. What I mean is a total stranger, standing about ten feet away, laughing as though you were a movie, as though you couldn’t see that he was laughing at you.

Confronted with this, I first checked myself to see if I was doing anything ridiculous. I then looked around to see if there was anyone between me and the wall. I even smiled my precious little smile to let said Big Guy know that I could laugh at him just as well as he could laugh at me. But nothing changed. His deep, unhurried, pleasant-under-any-other-circumstances laughter just continued. No one seemed to notice him standing there beside the Christmas tree by himself. The more annoyed I became, the less likely it seemed that he would ever stop.

Without any calculation, I approached him. I can’t remember another confrontation I have entered with less ammunition. I didn’t have a plan. I wasn’t prepared to say anything. It was as though my body itself demanded that I be standing right in front of him as he dared to laugh at me.

I just stood there, about a foot and half in front of him. It must have taken him a moment to realize that I had moved in time and space, because at first he just kept laughing. And then, after a moment to take a deep breath, he spoke.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He offered his hand. “My name’s Greg.”

“Martin.” I didn’t accept his hand.

“You probably want to know why I was laughing at you.”

“No.”

“You don’t want to know why I was laughing at you?”

I just looked at him.

“Listen,” he said. “Why don’t you come over here with me and sit down on the couch?”

Why I followed him, I don’t know, but when we sat down on Ethan’s bright red linen couch, this encounter started to feel familiar. He fit into none of the categories by which I had divided the party. He wasn’t attractive, but he wasn’t ugly either. His hair was receding just a little bit, and he hadn’t been as careful about
his mozzarella intake as I had. For a straight guy, he was attractive; if he’d been gay, I would have ordered him to the gym. He had that quality that big straight guys sometimes have of making their own beauty completely beside the point. Like Robert Mitchum, whom I have always loved. His familiarity was pleasantly disorienting, and I was starting to wonder exactly how straight he was when I suddenly, terribly realized that I had already slept with him.

“You really don’t remember me?” he asked.
“I do now.”
“But you didn’t a minute ago?”
“No.”

“I was laughing at you because the last time I saw you was in Ann Arbor,” Greg said, “and we were sitting around your kitchen in our underwear, and I was feeling bad about what we’d done, and you said to me, ‘Pal, I’m not even going to remember this five years from now, and you should give it exactly as much importance as that.’ Does that ring any bells?”

“It does. I’m afraid it was the kind of thing I would have said five years ago.” Who was I kidding? It was the kind of thing I might have said last week.

“No, you don’t understand.” The big guy leaned forward to whisper. My hands rose on their own between us. Whether to push him away or pull him in, I can’t say. “You said just the right thing, really, the perfect thing. I was sick to my stomach because I’d never been with a man before, and I was worried that it meant something bigger than I wanted it to. I was laughing just now because it was so true—you didn’t remember me. I’m glad you said that.” He took my hand into his big hand and squeezed it.

And then he got up to leave the party. I had a question: I wanted to know if I was the only man he’d ever slept with. I didn’t get a chance to ask it. He smiled one more time, though, gave me one of those fake frat boy salutes, and the last I saw him was as Ethan was escorting him out the door.

I don’t think I left the couch for the rest of the party. People came and talked with me—God bless them—and I struggled to be companionable, but I didn’t feel like myself. I am always the last one to leave Ethan and Barbara’s parties, but that was the
first time I stayed because I couldn’t bear to leave. I needed to talk to them about what had happened.

Just as the three of us were settling down together for our post-party postmortem, though, Ethan was called away by some crisis at the office, and though he railed at the idea that he had to go uptown on a Sunday evening, he finally left Barbara and me on their couch to talk. He brought his Doberman with him, I thought, to prove that even though Ethan was on a short leash at work, he was still his own man.

“Does he always bring the dog?” I asked.
“Jacer?”
“Does he always bring Jacer?”
“Almost every day, except if I’m scared and I need some company.”

I hardly ever talk with Barbara alone, although we seem to have each other’s numbers in a profound way. I know her as the extremely smart girl in dumb girl costume that she is; and she knows me as the solid nearly-Republican citizen that I hide behind this wacky, well-dressed art fag thing that I do. When it comes down to it, I’m probably more like her Missouri dad than Ethan will ever be. When we’re alone together, I feel like we’re circus performers on a cigarette break, finally free to stop entertaining everyone.

“Tell me more about the dog, Barbara. I want to hear something about Jacer.”

I couldn’t find a way to ask her about the big guy. Asking her about Jacer, though, felt like a similar question. He fascinated me, I guess, for being the most well-mannered dog I’d ever met. Impeccably well-groomed too. I’d never even thought about having my own dog until I met Jacer. Maybe I imagined Barbara would tell the truth about that, some kind of truth, something that I didn’t know, something that Ethan wouldn’t tell me. And in that truth we’d find our way to some other truth. And in some other truth I’d discover why I felt such grief over a man whose face I could barely remember.

“What do you want to know?”

“Did he have trouble accepting you? Does he recognize you as part of the pack? He seems to incredibly devoted to Ethan. I
asked Ethan about it once, but he just gave me a list of dog training books.

"Now, that's interesting. It's interesting that you should ask that."

"Why?"

"Well, one night we were sitting on this couch...." Barbara runs her hand along the top of the couch. "And we were watching TV or something. And Jacer was sitting between us. And I don't know exactly how I did it, but I reached around Jacer to touch Ethan. It wasn't a big deal, just an absent-minded kind of thing you do when, well, Jacer growled at me. It was very intense. I'd never seen him like that before, and I have to tell you it's terrifying to have a Doberman making that face at you, baring his teeth."

Barbara paused and swallowed. She had a dramatic way about her, but not affected so much as just felt. She was breathing deeply and preparing herself for what she would reveal next.

"Ethan looked at me for just a second before he stood up and grabbed this huge dog by the top of his coat...." She made a gesture like she was tossing something large and unwieldy. "...and threw him against the wall. It wasn't this apartment so it wasn't this wall, but it was a wall. And Ethan just threw him against it."

She waited while the image sank in. Jacer was a big dog, but Ethan was also a big man. I could see it, and there was something terribly satisfying about seeing it. Jacer is in many ways a canine version of Ethan—they are both beautiful and dark with well-bred, sharpened features. They both seem to contain a lot of happily unexplored ferocity.

"I thought I was going to throw up. It was just awful. And when it was over, and Jacer was stumbling away, whimpering, Ethan looked at me with the most horrible face. I mean, he was twisted, he was in real agony. But all he said was, there's nothing you can do with a Doberman that goes bad but kill it. He can't ever do that again. I got it. That was all he said, and I didn't ask him to say anything else."

I could see that too: it would have been, all of it, everything he needed to say, right there in his eyes. Barbara would have
known, by that look, not to mistake his swiftness for anger. Maybe fear, but never anger.

I have told this story so many times, and I can’t get anyone to understand it the way I did. I’ve come to believe that no one ever will. I have never, until now, told the story of the big guy, Greg. That night, I wished I were Ethan. Or, at least, Barbara watching Ethan in all his magnificent pain. I even wanted to be Jacer, the object of such a beautiful fear.

It wasn’t long after when Ethan returned. He was smiling, happy to have put out his brush fire and happy to be home with us. Jacer padded merrily toward us on the couch and then swiftly changed direction toward the buffet. We followed him and munched on what was left of the party. We then talked much longer than we needed to about going to a movie. I had someone to meet later on—a date, if you have to know—and we just couldn’t get the times right no matter how hard we tried. And yet, I think now, it was a good thing for us to sit there and spend all that energy trying to figure out a compromise because it reaffirmed our friendship in a way that’s hard to accomplish in the middle of our busy lives. Jacer set his nose on the end of the table, at different places on the table, so that we all had our turn rubbing his neck while we scanned The New York Times. Finally, I took Ethan’s cell phone and canceled my date at the last minute. People go to hell for that sort of thing, but I didn’t care. I wanted to go to the movie, and I wanted my friends to choose the time.
OF DOUBT AND LINEAMENT

A sudden rain pursues its wreckage.

All along, water stored up in the wind's labor
finds duration there
(rain fast along the metalloid night)
(rain slow along the architectural day)
each giving way to the other
within the impervious air.

And then an invention between them gleams—
a repose between them summoning its own expression—
all rough transcription of the spirit.

§

And where light had settled.
And where dark is settling.

§

Leaves collect in the yard's north comer, gathering up
at the sagging fence (a few blowing back across: twos, threes).

Then rain distributes its way again along the houses—
along the barn—
glinting at the point of absorption.

§
Hours later, 
frost attests to the rain’s concealment 
(to one abstraction and its subsequent designs).

§

For now, all designs.

§

Circling crows, cut the arc and descend. 
Quick 
\textit{drifts} and again the cut—
a resting on the pattern—
on the occasional resolute updraft

of blue-black birds lighting a jagged current 
they’re making between two newly outlined 
elms.
ZERO

I.

In a remnant language,
in a false specificity,

speaking of certain helices
as clean codes of history;

(rust in the wind and the half-cities
burning through the night);

of the immeasurable displacement
between position and momentum;

of each new existent beginning
in an improbable anatomy;

(commercial, empirical)
of ruins of the will.

II.

Separately inhabiting remorse.
Exacting, and wandering
as if rhythmically in connotative
pattern. (And elision.)
This recollection of forms
adhering to duration
(and splendor.)
An evening of mimicry—
an imagined end extending
a residual hesitation
of the source—periplum.
We were seen then.
**WATER, STEAM, OR ICE**

We are going to Franklin because that is where a Civil War battle was fought in November 1864. We are going to Franklin because that is where, in a past life, my son Bryce died.

He was a black soldier. He was shot three times, once in the wrist and twice in the stomach. These are the things he dreams about when he closes his eyes beside me and the thread between us stretches longer and longer until he is not even my son, but someone who knows how to clean a gun, how to crawl on his belly so he can't be seen, how to aim his shots straight and steady so they will kill a man.

Bryce first remembered this other life when he was three, or at least that's when he started to tell us, me and Greg, about it.

It was the Fourth of July. We had driven over to Warren for the fireworks display there. (Greg knew the mayor, a former client of his at the law office.) We left Red Earth early that morning, around nine, and the day had been hot and sticky, a typical summer forecast for central Minnesota. By the early evening, everyone felt tired and heavy with sweat.

We — Greg and Bryce and me — sat on a scratchy blanket by the river. We drank pink lemonade. With the first pop of the fireworks, Bryce started to wail. At first, we thought it was only a typical toddler reaction to loud noise, but after a few minutes, he was hysterical, his pulsing face the color of ripe tomatoes. I held him in my arms and he crawled deeper into the spaces there, digging his head hard into my chest, just like he had done when I was breast-feeding him.

Then he said the words that only I could hear. My beautiful boy spoke to his mother and told her in a perfect and clear sentence:

"This is just like when I died."

Now Bryce is seven, but he still remembers. He has something that most people do not, a link with himself that I can only imagine. He is not only Bryce, he is others, deep and mystical.
and not forgotten. That's what makes my boy special above all others.

Last year, you might have seen it, we were both featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

BRYCE AND I DRIVE INTO FRANKLIN, about twenty miles south of Nashville. We know this is a place of historical significance because all the signs tell us so as we pass into the city limits.

“What does that sign say?” I ask Bryce.

“Home of the Rebels,” he says slowly.

Bryce is being home-schooled.

“Those were the men I was fighting,” he tells me. Then he presses one smooth little boy finger on the window, as if he were touching the dead. “Those were the men I killed.”

To hear Bryce say these things makes my heart sad. That’s why we haven’t come to Franklin before this. Ever since the insurance settlement, Bryce and I have spent our time traveling in great loops around the country, sleeping on crisp white hotel sheets, eating food from greasy roadside restaurants. But we’ve always managed to stay away from Franklin because that’s the one place for Bryce that doesn’t include me. I don’t want us to be strangers there, Bryce transformed through space and time into someone with a different mother, someone who is not me. But Bryce wants to go. He’s always wanted to go, and now that he’s getting older, it’s harder to refuse. So when he asked last month on his birthday to come here, his big eyes shining and his little hand touching mine like it would never let go, I opened my mouth and found it saying *okay*.

Bryce feels hungry, so we decide to get some lunch before exploring the town. We drive along Hillsboro Road, a street so congested with banks and Burger Kings and neon signs that it doesn’t look very historical at all. We end up at Five Points Drug Store, a retro soda fountain kind of joint, on the corner of the newly refurbished and faithfully rendered olde-time Main Street.

Our waitress, a pretty brunette with pink glossy lipstick and one of those ridiculous paper caps like waitresses used to wear in her hair, rushes over as soon as we sit down. Her name tag reads *Howdy! I’m RUBY*.
“Hey, mister, why aren’t you in school?” she says happily to Bryce. “You feeling under the weather?”
Bryce squirms on his side of the booth.
“He’s being home-schooled,” I explain. “He’s a very smart boy.”
“Is that so?” Ruby asks, balancing a pen on her order pad.
“Bryce, honey, what’s the capital of Montana?” I ask him.
“Helena,” he says quietly, staring at his fingers.
“And what’s the freezing temperature of water?” I ask again.
“32 degrees Fahrenheit, 0 degrees Celsius,” he tells me, a little louder.
Ruby takes a step back and smiles broadly at Bryce.
“Well, you’re a regular Einstein, aren’t you, sweetheart?” she says.
Bryce giggles shyly. He likes applause.
I order us two vegetable plates with mashed potatoes, green beans, and squash. A Coke for Bryce, iced tea for me.
Bryce and I don’t eat meat: bad karma.
Ruby heads back towards the kitchen, and Bryce stares out the window at the shiny cars passing by, at the electric lights in the shape of gas lamps, at the smooth cobblestones lining Main Street.
“Can we go to the battlefield after lunch?” Bryce asks, not looking at me.
“Oh, honey, I’m really tired,” I tell him. “How about we just find a hotel and relax this afternoon. Some place with a pool, how about that? Then we can go to the battlefield tomorrow when we’re all rested.”
Bryce doesn’t say anything, just keeps looking out the window.
“How does your wrist feel, sweetie?” I ask him, reaching out to touch his arm lightly with the tips of my fingers.
“Okie dokie,” Bryce murmurs.
His heavy brown eyes dart back and forth at the window.
Sometimes, it’s there in his profile, I see something so much like Greg that my heart seems to beat faster, so I hear it in my ears like the ocean. But that’s only an illusion. He is not Greg. He’s Bryce, my beautiful boy.
Greg, my husband, is three and a half years gone.

We went out there once, me and Bryce, to the place where the crash happened. Outside a town called Moxley, about forty miles or so from the airport.

Forty miles.

The grass in the field was still brown in some places, still flattened to the ground as though a huge boot had stepped there. The sun was shining, a light breeze waved through the tender sprigs of grass that had started to return.

Bryce — he was four then — ran in the field, his arms spread out like airplane wings, his voice imitating the roar of an engine. I leaned against my Volvo, parked on the side of the road, and watched the other cars zooming along with no idea that forty-eight good lives had stopped here.

Forty-eight lives.

That was the only time I ever cried about the plane crash.

Before we left, I gave Bryce an empty Folgers coffee can and told him to gather some of the dirt from the field to take back home with us.

Ruby brings our food, two white plates balanced on her tiny arms.

“Here you go, Einstein,” she says to Bryce and he smiles. “Can I get you two anything else?”

Bryce looks at me uncertainly, no longer my shy boy. Then he turns to Ruby and says:

“I used to be alive here. I used to be alive and then I died in a war. Now me and my mommy are going to see where I died.”

Ruby stares at Bryce, then she turns to stare at me. The look on her face is totally blank.

“Bryce has past life remembrance,” I tell her. “It’s really not that uncommon in children.”

“Is that so?” she says.

I fish a pen out of my purse and take a napkin from the dispenser at the edge of the table.

“Here, Bryce honey,” I say. “Draw the map. Draw the map of the battlefield for Ruby.”

Bryce obediently takes the pen into his left hand and begins
making lines on the napkin, just like he did last year on Oprah, only then it was on a larger sketch pad.

"Bryce was a black Union soldier. He was shot and killed at the Battle of Franklin," I tell Ruby while Bryce draws.

"Sometimes my wrist hurts," Bryce says, not looking up from the napkin. "Where I got shot."

"How do you know he was black?" Ruby asks.

"He remembers in dreams sometimes. He can see himself when he sleeps," I say.

"Here, this is the battlefield," Bryce says.
The drawing on the napkin looks like this:

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X
/
/|
/ |

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He points to the curving line behind the tree.

"This is where our troops were. In a ditch," he says.

He looks up at Ruby, who’s watching his fingers as if hypnotized.

"We were hiding," he explains.

"This is where the Rebel soldiers were," he says, motioning to a place behind the hill he has drawn. "We had to run out of the ditch. We had to run here," his finger makes an invisible line towards the hill, "after someone made a shot."

Ruby stares at the napkin. I wonder how many pins it takes to make the paper cap stick to her head that way.

"And here," Bryce says slowly, pointing to the X on the left side of the drawing, "here is where I died."

"Is this for real?" Ruby says, looking at me.

"Oh, yes. He can also identify different types of artillery he used
in the war, and give details about everyday items like saddles and lanterns,” I say.

“Are you sure you didn’t read these things in a book, honey? Sometimes when you’re little, it’s easy to get confused,” Ruby says.

“Most of it was dreams. Parts I just knew, just like,” Bryce says and then pauses a moment, “just like you know what someone you know looks like. You don’t have to think about it.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Ruby says, shaking her head. “That’s amazing.”

Bryce and I shake our heads, too. Yes, my boy is amazing.

“I’ve seen all kinds of folks come through that door, but I’ve never met one yet who remembered a past life,” Ruby says. “You’re the first.”

“You might have seen us last year on Oprah,” I tell Ruby. “There were five kids with past life remembrance, but my Bryce and his map were the hit of the show.”

“On Oprah? Are you serious?” she says. “Well, you two are practically famous! I’m glad you sat here in my section.”

Ruby walks away slowly to wait on another table, still watching us as if we are going to levitate or speak in tongues or simply disappear without paying for the meal. I smile at her, my best opened-mouth Minnesota smile, and Bryce and I begin eating our lunch.

“Is it okay to tell her?” Bryce asks, his mouth full of mashed potatoes.

“Sure it is, honey,” I say, reaching out to smooth his light brown hair, the color of old wood. “We don’t want to keep you all to ourselves. Everyone should know how special you are.”

When we’re finished, Ruby comes back with our bill. We talk a little more, mostly her asking questions. I tell her that my name is Lisa Cardinal; that at one time I taught third grade, but now I don’t; that Bryce and I are from a little bitty town in central Minnesota nobody has ever heard of except the people who live there.

“How long are you two going to be in town?” she asks.

“Oh, I couldn’t say,” I tell her, looking at my boy. “Bryce and I are free spirits.”

“Well, why don’t you stop by my place while you’re here. I
have a little girl about Bryce’s age, Molly. Bryce might like the company,” she says, looking sweetly at my boy. “And we’ve never had such celebrities in our midst before.”

Before I can say no, Ruby takes the napkin, the one Bryce has created the battlefield on, and draws a map to her apartment on the back.

“You can come over for dinner tonight if you want,” she says. “Around seven.”

Beside me, Bryce is smiling. He reaches out and touches the arm of this Ruby, this stranger.

“Can we go, Mommy?” he asks, his words unusually quick and strong.

What can I say to those little boy eyes, big and clear as glass jars?

“Sure we can,” I say.

NOT ALL CHILDREN are as well-adjusted as my boy.

In India, for example, it’s not unusual for children to remember their past lives. Often, however, these strange and distant memories are very traumatic for them. Often, they suffer a deep depression or homesickness to think of the families they left behind.

When this happens, the children are placed on potters’ wheels and spun in a counterclockwise direction, sometimes for hours. This is done to make them forget, to deaden the recollections of lives that are no longer their own.

RUBY LIVES IN AN APARTMENT complex called Royal Oaks, although it doesn’t look very royal and there are no oak trees in sight. Bryce and I sing songs as we drive to the apartment, through the gates and around the shrub-lined little streets of the complex.

We sing “Like a Rolling Stone.”

Ruby’s apartment is small and quaint and full of brown and beige things. It smells like baking bread. Ruby herself looks neat and pretty with her hair pulled back in a French twist and her lips shadowed with liner, like a doll that’s too nice to play with, a doll for looking at. She smiles as she takes our jackets, as she shows us the upstairs with the bedrooms and the downstairs with the
kitchen. She smiles as she touches the top of Bryce’s head with her thin fingers.

“This is Molly,” she says, gesturing to a small blonde girl sitting at the kitchen table, cutting construction paper. “Say hello, Molly.”

“Hello,” Molly says loudly. She’s smiling, too.

Bryce holds onto my hand.

“Hi, Molly,” I say, and squeeze Bryce’s fingers. “Hi,” he says.

“Mom said I could make name cards to put on the table, just like we did at school when we had our Thanksgiving feast last year. I was an Indian. My name was Pretty Eyes. That’s what I wrote on my name card,” Molly says, holding up the piece of brown construction paper. “Pretty Eyes.”

“It’s so nice to have people here,” Ruby says, looking at her smiling daughter and then at us. “It makes the whole apartment a little brighter.”

We all stand quiet there in the kitchen.

“Molly, why don’t you take Bryce up to your room and play? Why don’t you show him your new Nintendo game?” Ruby says.

The grip tightens between me and Bryce. I’m not even sure who’s holding on to whom anymore.

“Maybe that’s not such a good idea,” I say. “Bryce is very shy.”

“Oh, Molly doesn’t bite, Bryce,” Ruby says, and she puts her hands on his shoulders. “Why don’t you go play?”


Bryce looks at me with those eyes, those big and brown Greg eyes, and I want to pull him to my chest and to hold him there. But I can’t do that, not in the kitchen of this strange woman with her perfect makeup and her perky blonde daughter.

“Go ahead, sweetheart,” I tell Bryce. “Go ahead and play.”

Bryce slowly lets go of my hand and follows Molly upstairs. I watch him, and it seems like he’s floating, floating away. I watch him climb the stairs behind Molly. One step, then two. I watch him as each part of his little body is swallowed by the upper part of the stairs, until he is gone, until finally there is nothing left to see. That’s how it is with leaving sometimes.

ICE ON THE WINGS, they told me.
A phone call from Sheila Hicks, the airline spokesperson. Her voice like a cat’s: soothing and manipulative.

She tells me about physics. She tells me about a settlement. She tells me she, the airline, they are all sorry, so very sorry.

_ICE ON THE WINGS._

She tells me it happens sometimes.

“NOW THE MOMMIES CAN PLAY, TOO,” Ruby says, and she laughs.

Ruby’s making spaghetti. She stirs the sauce in a big green pot on the stove. I sit at the kitchen table while she flutters around me.

“Lisa, I’m so glad you two came into the restaurant this afternoon,” she says. “You both just seemed so alone, sitting in that big booth. I’m a sucker for the lost types that come into the restaurant. My boss calls me Saint Ruby.”

“Bryce and I aren’t lost, though,” I tell her. “We’re simply on an extended vacation.”

Ruby smiles.

“I don’t mean to pry,” she says slowly as she butters the bread, “but where is Bryce’s father?”

I look at her in surprise.

“Well, I notice you have a wedding ring,” she says, gesturing to the band on my left hand.

“Bryce’s father is dead,” I say, leaning hard on that word: _dead._

“Oh,” Ruby says, then she gives me the look they all give me. “That’s rough.”

We both sit silently for a moment.

“I know how lonely it gets,” Ruby says, then she sighs. “I’m doing it on my own, too, since my husband skipped out six months ago. I don’t care so much for myself, he can rot in hell before I’d want to talk to him again, you know? But he doesn’t even call his own daughter, for Christ’s sake.”

I nod in agreement. My husband wasn’t like that, though. Greg was a lawyer. I was a teacher. We drove a Volvo. We were going to be happy.

“My parents live in Arizona,” I tell Ruby. “They were hippies, back in the sixties. Now they’re New Agers, in a place called Sedona. I used to get so mad at them when I was little, the way
they would just pick up stakes and follow around any old commune they could find. I just wanted to be a normal kid, go to college, get married, have babies. They never got married, though, my parents. They’ve been together thirty-five years, and they never got married.”

Ruby stares at me. I usually don’t talk so easily to strangers and I don’t know why I am telling this nosy woman the threads of my life. Maybe strangers are the easiest people to talk to.

“Maybe that’s the secret,” she says.

“Could be. The only time I ever saw both my parents cry was the day I told them I was going to take my husband’s last name,” I say. “But I didn’t mind. I met Greg in college and knew I had found what I was looking for. We were one person. We were happy.”

I can feel my heart thumping in my chest. I try to concentrate on naming everyone in my kindergarten class, instead of the field outside Moxley with the burnt grass.

“You two need to settle,” Ruby says. “I know people, it’s a gift I have. After waitressing for a while, you get to where you can tell what the customers want before they even ask. And I know you two need to find a home. Not everyone was made for leaving, and you two weren’t.”

Ruby puts her hand on top of mine. It’s been a long time since anyone besides Bryce has touched my hand like that. Her fingernails are red, the color of sweet and sticky candied apples. Her kitchen is warm and bright, and reminds me of my kitchen, mine and Greg’s, back in Red Earth. I feel like I could sit in this chair for a long time, like maybe I could grow roots here all the way to the deep, deep ground and never move. Maybe.

Then we hear the noise upstairs. A crashing sound, then yelling.

“You liar!” Molly screams.

Ruby and I run up the steps. We stand in the doorway to Molly’s room, and I see the thin trickle of blood down her cheek.

“He, he hit me with the Barbie Corvette,” Molly wails.

There in front of her, the Corvette lies upside down, its wheels slowly turning in the air.

“She called me a liar,” Bryce says. He looks at me.
"You are a liar," Molly screams. "Nobody lived before. Nobody remembers being alive before they're alive!"

Ruby swoops down on Molly, pushing the child's head into her stomach.

"He didn't mean anything, did you, Bryce?" Ruby says. "Why don't you two just say you're sorry and play nice?"

But the warm feeling of Ruby's kitchen is gone. Now it's just Molly crying and Bryce with his scared wide eyes.

"I think we should go," I say, holding my hand out to Bryce. "Come on, sweetheart. Say you're sorry to Molly."

He stares at the floor.

"Sorry," he mumbles.

"People go to heaven when they die!" Molly screams back from the refuge of Ruby's shirt.

"Thank you for everything, Ruby," I say, "but we're going to go."

"You don't have to leave, Lisa," she says. "Kids have these spats all the time, it's no big deal."

But Bryce and I get our jackets downstairs. We unlock the front door and then close it behind us. Molly is still sobbing upstairs.

"I was alive," Bryce finally says when we finally get in the car and I realize he's crying, too. "I know I was. I remember."

"IT'S JUST LIKE WATER," I explained to the skeptical audience last year on Oprah. "Water can be water, or it can be steam, or it can be ice. But it's all still the same thing."

Oprah nodded and smiled.

"It's still the same thing," she said.

BRYCE AND I STAY AT THE Holiday Inn in the center of town. It's early in September, but the pool is heated, and I let Bryce swim there in the shallow end. I sit on the edge, my legs dangling in the cloudy warm water, and watch as he blows bubbles underwater, bubbles that rise to the surface and then pop under the pressure of air.

"Can we stay here, Mommy?" Bryce asks. "Maybe I can say I'm sorry again to Molly. Maybe we can play again. I don't care if she calls me a liar."

Fall 1999
“Maybe,” I sing to Bryce, making the word long and melodic. We stay there, like that in the pool, for a long, long time.

The next morning we go to the battlefield.

The Battle of Franklin was fought just over from what is now Columbia Avenue, on the southeastern edge of town. The Union soldiers marched across the hill and down the Columbia Pike, away from Nashville, when the Rebels decided to strike. The battle lasted for only five hours, but it was one of the bloodiest in the Civil War. 9,000 men died. The Rebels eventually lost the battle, and the Union Army escaped back to Nashville, burning the wooden bridge across the Harpeth River behind them. 9,000 men. Including my boy.

We park the car in the parking lot of the Historical Society, which has an office in the house right there on the battlefield. Bryce is quiet, his brown eyes moving quickly in the bright light of the morning. I hold his hand as we walk out across the field.

“What do you think, honey?” I ask. “Does this look familiar?”

“No,” he says.

He stares at an oak tree.

“No,” he says again. “I thought I would know this place.”

It's hard to make the pieces of geography here fit Bryce's map. There are so many trees along the edge of the battlefield and little rolling hills, and they all the look the same from where we stand so that it doesn't look like a battlefield at all but more like an ocean, a rolling sea with no definite boundaries, a place that could go on forever, a place where we are alone.

“Does your wrist hurt?” I ask.

“No,” Bryce says. He sounds very sad.

He takes off across the battlefield, running in circles, larger and larger, around the giant oak trees near the road. And something inside me is pulled with him, pulled tight until it hurts, right in my chest there. I watch Bryce running across the grass burnt yellow and brown by the last of the summer sun and all I know is that my heart is beating in a hollow sound and my husband is not here as he should be and there are lots more roads just like the one that brought us into this town.
I stumble to the ground underneath a tree.
He runs to me, his breath quick, his cheeks red.
“Pop,” he says. “Pop, pop, pop.”
His fingers are curled around in the shape of a gun. I reach out to grab them, sandwiching his little soft hand in my own.
“Bryce, you don’t really want to stay here, do you?” I ask.
“You want to be with your mommy. You want to be an explorer, don’t you?”
His hands are soft. His eyes are brown. His hair is beautiful, shining like that in the sun.
“Pop,” he says. “Pop, pop, pop.”
My Mother Prays to Dream of Her Dead Father

But when she finally pulls over
at the seedy roadside carnival,
stumbles past the giant clicking numbered wheel,
the sway-back pony, the eight-legged calf,
and she finds him,
    dipping up beet Borscht
in an oil-stained apron, My god, she says, What are you doing here?,
forgetting it was her will. And what did she expect?
A pearled gate
    with auto-trumpet, a tailored
tunic, and 24-hour harp over-intercom?
Then she figures he's paying a debt;
    he was never perfect
even after eulogy upon eulogy
    meant to starch and press
his soul; she can still recall
his extravagant failures, her mother's bruised arms,
the silence he held
    like a fist in his mouth.
His purgatory now is shabby carnivals,
motor vehicle lines, bus stops,
    this human world
that he'd always thought beneath him.
But this is a dream of the living,
    not a reality,
she reminds herself later sipping coffee alone
at the sink,

that it's her sins she's come to claim,
that for years he will ladle Borscht,
weep into the salty broth, and heaven,
when it finally arrives, will be a stretch of beach,
a dream

of her father, this time holding a golden
gold-eyed fish above his sun-haloed head.
DREAM OF RECOLLECTION

It’s not courtesy but obligation that distracts the old guy staying in our house.

He’s also preoccupied with threats of sickly sweet feelings and stupidity.

A lot of thinking ahead is around here. We can tell it’s him by the wound that’s healed.

Previous to the entertainment of illumination. The illumination is overflowing.

Emotions are showing. Outlines are clear, but about the illumination a bit of it, that looks like a neck is striking his cranium. That famous Greek traveler comes up is viewed between the drapes. Slack just this second—with the breeze hardening. They recline agape. Their oral cavities spread and clamp down like doubts shiny illness in sepia tone.

They talk in word patterns. He wants to screw.

The leg is washed. The wound is recently mended. We don’t observe that right now—in the event’s puritan first dish (“one time... when a pig with tusks...”) Here,
He has to stand over her buttocks. We wait well. Right where we are, his glands begin to inflate—

Unless they're a part of the soul, his bravery will stop working. His glands are inflating—

Much deepness is here—framed with frail genital lips. Skin suspends, slashed.

A society of words put together grows with them. They converse. Her palm, frightened,

takes his sanitary buffed penis.
**BEAR BAIT**  
(or **ONCE UPON A TIME IN WYOMING**)  

_Question._ What was big Butch from Buffalo, Wyoming's sick pony?  
_Answer._ Bear bait.  

Q. And who is broken bottles in the gut of an old dead tree?  
A. Butch's buddy Bones.  

Q. And God?  
A. One headless hare doing a bloody somersault in the middle of the road.  

Q. And where were Butch and Bones bristled?  
A. From Crazy Woman Canyon on.  

Q. What were they?  
A. Trigger-talk, slavers from dogs howling, icy mist & rain, Chain-reaction.  

Q. And _Jack Daniels_?  
A. Tumbling all the way to Sheridan, a parking lot, a duplex on the edge of town.  

Q. And the real fun?  
A. A divorcee Bones dated once.  

Q. Was it a long night?  
A. Butch said something about taking turns, lighter fluid, a couch out in the snow smoldering, them laughing, her crying.
Q. And God?
A. God picks the wind up. He plays with it for a while, and then He chucks it across the frozen Powder River.

Q. And the woman?
A. The same dull shade of red as the blood that sprays from the ears of docked lambs.

Q. And the bear.
A. The bear was nowhere to be seen.
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