Dead, the Lost, the Dreaming

Michael J. Davis

The University of Montana

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The Dead, the Lost, the Dreaming

by

Michael J. Davis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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Dean, Graduate School

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Date
I could not have produced the fiction in this thesis without the following people, to whom this work is dedicated:

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Richard Katrovas
Master Lloyd Francis
and
Glover and Sandra Davis

This is for you.
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Elegy for David

Years from now, I'll see you in a dream.

Your fingertips, nailless and torn where they couldn't claw through the floe, your gaze fixed, mouth frozen shut. You'll be caught near the surface with miles of darkness at your back. And, not for one instant, will I fail to dream your eyes as small, hard stones under that sheet of ice.

I'll wake beside Jenny, her naked back on my chest, smooth shoulder catching pre-dawn light through the blinds. I'll feel her warmth and remember the coldness of that dream. Then I'll go have a cigarette in the dark living room and see your face in my exhalations: memories of you unraveling like smoke on blackened air.

And I'll see the moment I will lose you completely, the moment I will no longer feel your presence breaking against my thoughts. There, in the living room, as I smoke, you will become an idea of a friend I once had. Then I will get back in bed, put an arm around Jenny, and go back to sleep.

But these, David, are fragments yet to come—your remainder, the last ripples of you through me.

Now, I stand on your mother's stone balcony, watching the canyon. I wonder how it felt when you fell off the fishing boat, and the current pulled you under the ice. Jenny is downstairs, still broken from the shock, still weeping in her black dress.

The sky is livid with sunset, clouds black tufts against red. And your presence isn't any more or less real to me than this light or the murmurs from one of the windows nearby. An inch of whiskey sits at the bottom of my plastic cup. Behind me there is a
house full of people already trying to forget you. To dissolve you in bourbon or scotch. Some of them will succeed before others. The whiskey burns a path down my throat. And I cough without tears.

After you shaved off all your hair, we sat in the sculpture garden by the zoo, talking about the animals. You said you couldn't stand to see anything dying, and caged animals were certainly dying. Above us, a moving sculpture twisted avian scissor blades. Our shirts fluttered. We: cross-legged and aimless in the menagerie of sculptures on that grassy hill, looking down at walkers on concrete paths or up at the sky. I can see it well—the stubble on your head and the giant iron circles painted red, half-sunk into the ground. You watched them or stared up at the moving blades or murmured about the nobility of animals or the beauty of nature or something else.

Earlier in the zoo, we'd seen a sick polar bear pushing its paw along the plaster of its cell. A baby screamed, pointed, and the bear's watery eyes stared at the sound, then down at its paw, one claw moving back and forth in a groove that went nowhere, the child's scream lost in the dull gravity of the animal's stare.

So, when you said, "I'm going back to get that bear." I nodded, squinting up at the afternoon, not sure exactly what you meant but knowing that we looked different and wrong up there, backs against the sculpture's stilts. David, we must have looked like odd goslings at the feet of a steel bird-mother, moving her beak over us in the wind.

I don't know how long we sat there, staring at the people, at the soft blue sky over San Diego harbor. You said, as if believing it for the first time, "I've decided. I'm going to be a fisherman. You can have my car." And that was when I knew you were still watching the bear, your eyes on a cloud. I knew you still saw the dirty, yellowed pelt, the
notched ear, thick lips twisted into an almost human grimace as it worked its claw back and forth. When we left the zoo, the bear was still with us, walking between us perhaps.

Maybe it had always been there.

Years from now, I'll see you in a dream. And your eyes will be fixed through the ice on a blue sky—just as they were on that day in the sculpture garden, perhaps on the same cloud—two stones set in the frozen white of your face.

Jenny is beside me on the balcony now, both of us leaning on the stone railing. Her eyes are red and full of tears for you she has not yet released. Does she say something about you, about how you died in that black Alaskan water?

I'm not sure.

The wind has come up and it's in my ears. Some of her blonde is caught in the side of her mouth. Her black dress clings: I see the slope of breasts, waist, the line of a thigh. So I pull up one of your expressions, as if I could contort the bones, and make my blue eyes darken to your brown.
We Shall Not All Sleep, But We Shall Be Changed

The house was made from green-painted slats that had begun to peel in the continuous heat. From its porch, you could look down El Cajon Boulevard, see shimmers coming off the street and, at the end, the red-orange pool hall, *Mekong Bai Da*, packed all day long with Asian men in wife-beaters and khakis. There were the eucalyptus and gigantic palm trees you see everywhere in San Diego along the sidewalks but, in Logan Heights, no one ever seemed to look up at them. The trunks, for about eight feet, were scarred with Vietnamese and Hmong gang-graffiti, burned, hacked, spray-painted, kicked. The grass around the trees was brown from too much dog shit and motor oil. Most in Logan kept a Pitt, many kept two, sometimes with a Rotweiler thrown in. In the middle of the day, you could hear dogs barking all over the neighborhood; which is why it was strange that Cryshal owned at cat who liked to sit on the porch.

It's name was Lexus, and it would sit for hours in the empty flower pot on the step, usually with only its head and the tip of its twitching tail visible above the rim. Its tail wasn't twitching at the moment, however, because Cryshal—twenty-eight, thin, black, with matted hair and a lazy eye she'd never been able to correct—had just taken off her T-shirt and draped it over the pot. The cat pulled it down and rolled, twisting it around its body like a shawl, and sat there staring out at the street, as pensive as its owner. Cryshal stood still, in bra and sweat-shorts, listening. She thought she heard a car door in the alley behind the house, faint rattle of the chain link fence that lined the backyard.

As she listened, she heard barking, someone screaming in Spanish inside a house.
a backfire, car horns by *Mekong Bai Da*, and voices of children trying to blind the
snarling, one-eyed German Shepherd across the street. They rattled a broken broomstick
against the chain link and poked, rattled and poked, as the dog hit the fence with its entire
body and climbed up with its front paws. The same old panoply of neighborhood
sounds—not all at once but in a sort of rhythm—such that Cryshal could pick out most
noises that were out of place. She heard a door squeak open. At the same time, the
man’s Spanish rose to a feverish crescendo and chain link rippled with the dog’s impact.
Cryshal stood there, looking at Lexus, straining for anything inside.

She slipped out of her flip-flops and went softly to the edge of the porch where
she could look down the side of the house and see part of the alley. Nothing. So she
moved back to the busted lawn chair, in the shade of one of the posts that held up the
porch’s little roof, and peered along the street.

An old, bent, Mexican man in a green windbreaker and threadbare trousers was
inching his way along the opposite sidewalk. He paid no attention to the children and the
Shepherd. Occasional cars passed at an even pace. That was it. Cryshal watched the old
man for a while, listening for any sound in the house.

She could smell herself. She’d been sweating, but shuddered in spite of the heat.
The *New Lutheran Study Bible*—the only book she could find in the house—was open,
face down beside her chair, over a snub-nose .22. Cryshal curled her toes over the book’s
spine as her eyes swept the street again.

Lexus was gone, but she heard him rowl somewhere nearby as she slipped her
shirt back on and sat in the lawn chair, holding the .22 in her lap. Her clear thumbnail ran
absently over the safety, feeling the plastic scrollwork on the grip. Across the street, the
kids were still trying to stab the German Shepherd's one good eye with the splintered end of the broom handle. Cryshal watched them absently, the gun a heavy nugget in her hand, warm metal comfortable and smooth on her thigh. Lexus leapt up and lay on top of it in her lap, the little cat's lungs and heart working a steady beat against her thumb and trigger finger as both the cat and its owner slowly fell asleep.

When Cryshal woke up, the air was still humid and thick, but the sky had turned deep blue. Lexus was long gone. Mekong Bai Da's smudged front window was a square of orange light in the distance. And the streetlamp at the corner knocked its sodium-luminescence around the trunk of a eucalyptus, making chain link zigzags on the dirt front yards. Still holding the snub—slightly behind her right leg—she walked to the sidewalk. Empty street. It was a Wednesday evening. Nothing was going on. Deep bass echoed from a nearby car. The blue-black silhouette of someone passed in front of Bai Da's window.

The only other person she could see was the old Mexican man, now sitting on front steps about three blocks away. The yellow porch light above him made everything seem gray—except the puffs of smoke from his pipe that looked steel blue, shifting up and away like clouds of dye in water.

Cryshal backed slowly onto the porch where there was no light but the faint glow from the windows of the house next door. In the distance, a police helicopter shot its searchlight into North Park, hovering over the houses like a giant burning eye.

When a car rolled by too slowly, Cryshal pushed the safety towards the trigger and crouched in shadow, feeling quick nausea and the old jolt of adrenaline that she had
come to know as fear, or the beginnings of it, at least—the good kind of fear that kept her looking, kept her ears open and her mind working.

The car passed, and she exhaled. She might have crouched there for an hour (more likely two), watching the street, until high-beams turned on in the alley behind the house, then off, then on again. Cryshal kept the gun ready, went through the house, and up to the back door.

The door had no window so she held the gun flush against the wood. She waited, held her breath.

“Come on. Open up,” said Neng. She recognized his voice. Neng half-fell, half-pushed his way in when she undid the chain and both bolts.

“Hi,” she said, looking at him sitting on the floor, blood-crusted hand holding his shoulder. Half of his polo shirt was caked with dried blood. He squinted up at her.

“You’re Crystal, eh? I remember you.”

“Cryshal.”

“You’re Greg Lor’s girlfriend.

She put the .22 on top of the broken washer by the backdoor and let her eyes drift through the empty darkness of the house. “Yeah. Where’s he at?”

Neng hadn’t yet removed his hand from his shoulder. “You got needles and thread?”

“No.”

“Vodka or rubbing alcohol?”

“Nope, the water don’t even work.” She started to help him up, but he shrugged her off.
"Here," he gingerly placed car keys beside the .22. "Money's in the car. Get bandages, alcohol, needle and thread."

Cryshal picked up the keys and the gun. "First tell me where Greg's at."

"Leave the strap," he said, and they both looked down at the gun in her hand, safety still disengaged.

"Now, bitch."

They looked at each other a moment longer.

"Be back," she said, shaking her head in disgust, and slipped soundlessly through the dark backyard to the car.

Cryshal found him hunched over on a stool by the front window, staring through the space between moldy, linen curtain and pane. In the half-light from the street outside, Neng looked even paler than usual.

They didn't speak to each other until she'd doused his entry and exit wounds with hydrogen peroxide and started to sew the jagged flaps of skin together.

"This hurt?"

He didn't answer at first. Then, slowly, as if speaking were a monumental effort of will: "Hollow-points and I'd be dead. I'm lucky it just went through. You bring in my black bag?"
She said she did, and he grunted when she pushed the needle in. Less blood was running down his back now, but the back of his jeans were stained dark red—as well as the legs of the stool. Cryshal looked down at her left flip-flop in a small puddle of blood.

“I’m all packed up,” she said, “I’m just waiting for Tommy Vang. There’s nothing but my two suitcases and a cat.”

“Tommy ain’t coming. He’s fucking dead.”

“What about Dai?”

“Dead.”

“And Greg?” asked Cryshal, stepping around to face Neng, his skin pale, molded into a perpetual grimace.

He nodded. “East Side Piru. Mexicans. Rollin’ 60s. They chased us up to Jack-in-the-Box, Clairemont and 15. We thought we were safe. But we don’t know nothin’ about the east.” Whenever headlights tracked the windows, Neng’s attention flicked out to the street. The pills he got from his leather shaving bag kept his eyes moving from her to the street. “But they got to know about this house.”

Cryshal was crying, so Neng looked out the window. Expressionless. When he looked back at her, she was holding out a gold ring with a medium-sized cluster of diamonds set in a circle. She didn’t say anything, just held up the ring and let the tears run down her face. Neng shifted his weight, winced, and kept looking out the window.

After a long period of her staring at him and him staring out the window, she wiped her eyes. “He said his dad didn’t care I was black. And we could go stay with him in Oceanside. And Greg was getting a job . . .”
Neng smiled at her then, slowly, for the first time, looking very old and tired, though, he was only 23 that month. “Got to go soon. Fucking ESP’s on the way. I can feel it.”

“Tommy Vang said the house was safe.”

“Tommy don’t know shit. And Tommy’s fucking dead. Tommy’s the one said we go to Jack-in-the-Box, and they won’t shoot.” Then, for a moment, eyes bloodshot and pin-small, Neng leaned his head against the wall by the window and slumped, letting his body lose its stoic rigidity. “All dead,” he said. “all dead.”

Cryshal knelt down by the stool and put her arms around him, careful not to touch the wound.

And, for that brief moment in time, Neng Ahn Tron—

(23, multiple-murderer and heroin addict, gifted with incredible operatic vocal cords he will never develop and a natural ability to process abstract philosophical constructs he will never encounter)

—returned the hug of Cryshal Leena Henderson—

(19, runaway, possessing an inborn sense of visual aesthetics she will never use and the only person left alive carrying a genetic trace of Akhenaton, last important ruler of Egypt’s 18th Dynasty).

And, for that brief moment, they were both granted the anonymous comfort that Lexus the cat always felt, that the one-eyed German Shepherd had felt, even as the splintered broom handle exploded his world into hot-white pain and blood and darkness. The sense of no mind other than that of the present and the knowledge that the present is enough.
And, at least for a moment, the paths of their lives overlapped, potentialities twisting together like strands of a rope, linking Cryshal and Neng, through all the pain in this world, to that faint splinter of decency in all people—which we sometimes find the courage to call a soul.

The first bullets came through the window and door, one passing through Cryshal's right hand and Neng's cheek. He tried to stand, but someone had a submachinegun, and the second burst caught him in the throat, the left thigh, and three times in the chest.

The old man, sitting on a porch three blocks away, knocked the ash out of his pipe and watched his grandson and three or four others spray the windows of the house with bullets as he had done once himself, many years ago in a restaurant in Mexico City. Sirens would be fading into the distance before long. He began to hobble into the darkness but, when he heard the girl screaming and saw them forcing her into the back of a car, he stopped and shook his head. Some things should not ever be done to a woman, even if you were going to kill her anyway.

The old man felt a faint stab of regret that he had not waited for the girl to leave before calling his grandson. But he kissed the gold crucifix around his neck and crossed himself when he looked back and saw her little cat trot through the cone of white-orange streetlight. He walked on as fast as he could. Because, like most superstitious, religious old men, he had come to believe that the footsteps of the good were often dogged by the most vigilant and deceptive devils.
The Dead, The Lost, The Dreaming

Today, in the white room, we are compelled to move our hands. There is the smell of cleanser. Sometimes, when the window is open, there is the smell of manure, of old rubber. Antonio looks at me. He says, "I love you so much, I could eat your shit."

"My shit's too good for you," I say. "Eat your own."

And he smiles at me with that gap in his teeth.

Doctor Fitzhue forces us to move our hands. He stands behind us. My right hand feels as though the bones are being pulled through the skin. But, if I don't keep trying to make a fist, Fitzhue will come over and do it for me—which is much more painful. Then I will laugh uncontrollably, and everyone will be upset; everyone will hurt more.

Sugarpie, a large, black man without calves, will piss on himself again. There are five men with ruined legs, three of us with crippled hands, ten with damaged backs. Many men piss on themselves when they are in pain or afraid. This is something I have learned.

Sweat runs down Antonio's neck. He is grinning at his left hand. "Hijo de puta," he says as the fingers slowly curl.

Today, in the white room, only one man has pissed on himself, but Doctor Fitzhue is still angry.

He stands in front of me. "Thomas Bird. Wake up. What do you love? Do you love your mother, boy?"

I am thirty-three. I have flown the P-47 Thunderbolt and the Mustang. I have put families of Germans to the torch, razed whole villages to ash, watched men, old women.
babies fall in the streets like leaves. Doctor Fitzhue is twenty-two and has never seen combat. He lives with his wife in nearby Val-de-Grâce and calls me boy.

“Another letter,” he says, placing it on the stack of letters inches from my hands.

I look at myself in the mirror that covers the wall. I’m in the big baby chair. It’s an adult-sized high-chair with a table that rotates to the front and straps to keep the body in place. I look at my shaven head, my sunken eyes.

Six unopened letters from my mother.

“Don’t you want to hear from mom?”

“I’ll open it,” says Antonio.

I stare into Fitzhue’s eyes. He knows I want to kill him. I stare at him with an image in my mind, flowing right through my eyes into his: my thumbs digging into his throat—the look on his face, like a stuck pig, caught in that space between this world and the next, skin turning purple around my grip.

“Come on, Bird,” he murmurs, “flip me the bird.”

Antonio twists his right hand, the undamaged one, around under its straps and sticks up his middle finger. “Hello Captain,” he laughs.

I move my hand towards the stack but can’t close my fingers to pick anything up. Fitzhue watches me, then takes the letters away. And I’m almost grateful to him for that. No one speaks. In the corner. Sugarpie taps his head against the white plaster wall and hums. Antonio is sniffling. I watch the stillness of my face and think of nothing.
Know what evil is and then look at the world. We drop out of the clouds and they hear us like rats to the owl's wings. See them run. See bouquets of flowers by the side of the road, the white cane bent from impact, columns of smoke, houses restless and burning, bullets in the air like a million seething wasps. And the thought comes, as it always does: I am not evil. I am a force of nature.

I am not evil.

This is the sky. This is the hand of God. This isn't me. This is their time, their destiny when blossoms of fire open in the air. Their houses, their bodies melting into cobble on the street. I bring the current sweeping them away. I am the courier, the message burned into stone, into blackened splinters.

Today, those of us who can walk were taken out to the dirt field where junk is incinerated. We paced in a long circle so our leg muscles won't shrink. We breathed the burning rubber. Whenever we do this, Antonio finds tarantulas and keeps them balled-up in his fists. Now, it is night. We are strapped down so that we do not hurt ourselves in sleep. But Antonio's right arm and leg work enough that he can undo his restraints. I wake to his sour breath, to his tongue sliding over my lips.

If you are very still, a tarantula will not bite. It will climb your cheek and slip down the side of your nose; it may stop on your pillow and rest. Eventually, it will be gone, stumbling onto the shiny, green floor, into someone else's bed. Antonio strokes my thigh through the covers.

I watch him and feel the legs of the tarantula.

Its hair. Its soft, tentative touch on the skin of my neck.

I am motionless beneath it.
I look at Antonio and think of spraying Kirchen, ripping veins of fire into houses, across fields and streets. We brought the post office to the ground and penetrated its basement where everyone was hiding. The rats' nest cracked, and they ran out burning. A woman shaking fire in her hair like water. A fat man thrashing on the ground. I remember images in still: the dead, the lost, the dreaming standing in the road. Antonio grins above me in the dark. He squeezes my thigh. I shut my eyes.

The frost has come but not the snow. It is Autumn, late September, and the fields around the hospital have turned dirty white. Lieutenant Artaud sits with me at the dayroom window. We watch the empty fields, the fixed, gray sky, the outbuildings of Val-de-Grâce tiny on the horizon.

The picture never changes.

We do not talk. Yesterday, Fitzhue taunted me with the letters, but I don't think of that. Tomorrow, he will do it again, call me boy, slide the envelopes right against my fingers, but I don't think of that. It is enough to simply sit with Lieutenant Artaud and not speak.

His legs are made of wood. He can't make them work. Most days, he sits at the dayroom window in his bathrobe: bald head, faded tattoos covering his arms, he is impassive—looking at Val-de-Grâce where he grew up, where his wife and daughter wait for him to come back from the front.
I think of his wife and children along with him. And, watching this unchanging distance. I think of myself, as a child, waiting at the window for my mother to come home. I remember linen curtains rising, filled with evening. And soundless rain beyond. Voices and tires on the wet street outside. Waiting up, through those long hours my mother spent running our small market, what could be said, what could have possibly mattered but feeling quiet with the damp, feeling the air, how the wind moved?

I used to open the window and watch leaves on the maple trees dip and weave, imagining arcs of wind from clouds to branches to my hair lifting in sympathy with the dusk. And my memory still holds the papery light of gray, brittle days, dissolving into wet nights that seemed to move so slowly.

"I don’t believe in sorrow.\" Antonio screams as they strap him to the bed. "I don’t have regrets. I can fuck—I will fuck anything that moves.\" And I see Sugarpie, sitting by the door of the dayroom in his wheelchair, hiding his face. He has begun to weep.

Lieutenant Artaud’s breath comes in soft, even rasps. Neither of us turn to look down the hall at the French interns punching Antonio in the stomach, twisting even his bad arm underneath the straps.

But we know.

None of us are here by choice: Americans, British, Portuguese, French—we’re under orders to recover, to become presentable again. Each of us carries certificates, papers, writs under national seals, that all say the same thing: it is for the morale of the people, for the war effort, for dignity that we must recover before we are sent home, this final order that none of us can carry out.
Down the long, white hallway with the green floor that glistens like the surface of a lake, we hear Antonio scream, "Sucios. Fucking whores." Soon he will be laughing.

He was once a chef with a wife and three children.

Sugarpie was a carpenter. I was a teacher.

Lieutenant Artaud is not interested in anything. He stares at Val-de-Grâce. He blinks. And he continues to breathe.

There are 9057 kilometers between here and Los Angeles, where my mother waits, playing the piano after work or combing the bars with the torrents of women of every age and description, looking for older men, discharged men, younger men too sick or weak or crippled to go to war. anyone. My father died before I was born. And I know she’s lonely. Sometimes, I think she’s been waiting so long for me to come back safe that she’s forgotten how to do anything else.

9057 kilometers between me and my home. I can feel each one, each discrete unit of distance keeping me in this place. Here there are wolves that hunt at night. I listen to them crying and think of Venice beach. I think of the ocean pounding the sand. of all living rooms tuned to The Shadow sounding in the air over the beach, over all the unadulterated space of this Los Angeles that I miss so much, where I ate and slept and bathed and smoked and watched a column of Sherman tanks rolling down Van Nuys Boulevard.
I carry the sound of those wolves over this hard ground in my mind like a burden. And even their howls seem heavy, deliberate, portentous—so far away from the sounds of home. And I feel even the absence of sound as I fall asleep. At the piano, middle-C is always ringing. The note is a persimmon of heat, of event—a rouge-colored bubble, drifting, while my mother eternally reaches up to smooth the cheek of a man I may or may not know. The rusted, iron owl I kept on my bed stand looks at me, has always been looking at me, the flat roof of our house sagging with rain, my father's headstone forever sinking into the earth. And the silent image of our old, black hound trying to stand, its legs shivering, lips curling back unconsciously over its fangs. I enter the gates of sleep, back in my childhood form—still imprinted in the past, still waiting by the window.

I look at myself in the mirror, baby-bald and sallow this morning. Antonio broke the beveled glass in Fitzhue's office door. And now Sugarpie reads my mother's letters out loud. This is the first day Fitzhue has not taken the officers' transport from town. And we gather in the white room—even Lieutenant Artaud—to hear my mother speak.

*Dear Thomas,* Sugarpie's voice is southern and low and, for a moment, I think it is the most beautiful sound I have ever heard. *I miss you greatly.* His broad shoulders hunch as he reads, chin on his chest, ornate "Sugarpie" tattooed thick green on the dark of his neck. *The sky is clear these days, and nobody takes the drills very seriously.* *The Sorensen boy comes to the market a good deal and says how he's mad that they won't let*
him fight and do his part. I tell him you would know better than me. Maybe you would like to write him and give him some advice.

Sugarpie's voice breaks. Antonio lights a cigarette with his good hand and looks at nothing. I think of the airfield near Noirceur-sur-la-Lys, the night I woke to the groan of a patrol coming out of the sky. Outside the barracks, forms of dark planes moved on the field like giant animals.

A small, brown tarantula crawls slowly across the floor. We hear Artaud back in the dayroom at the end of the hall. Perhaps it is the memory of those planes. Perhaps it is that Sugarpie will not continue, the way the tarantula moves, stunned by hospital light. Or the sound of Artaud loudly drawing air in sharp, broken gasps that makes me join him, watching Val-de-Grâce burn. Smoke and red-orange blasts stab the horizon like the dirty, driving rain on the window, turning the grass from white to brown again.

I want to tell Artaud that nature and fate have come down, that we’ll never see Fitzhue again, that I know about this message, about the shapes of animals on an airfield at night, about Venice Beach and my mother and wolves and loss.

But, instead, I’ll say nothing because the pain I endure, just resting my hand on his shoulder, is more real than anything else. More real than even the scintillant orange of windows blowing out, the running, polished blade, the venom boiling in the vein. Turning away, Antonio laughs and burns a hole in his wrist with the tip of his cigarette. And I’m laughing too, staring at the flames while Sugarpie weeps. And I know we won’t ever hurt any worse than this.
Alio Holden was her first and only love, and she'd been lost in him, transfixed by his hairy fingers, his stink of acrylic and gesso, plaster and old sweat. Now she could admit it, now that she was on the Amtrak going south. In Alio, she'd felt exalted to a higher place: art, the way it moved through galleries and exhibitions, the young and beautiful, the ugly, the fashionably gay crowd, the straight crowd—some talented, some posing but all focused together in the San Francisco scene. And, though Lilly was no artist, she was in it and felt the pointed rush of something real, something grand being accomplished by those people. She felt carried by it. She was gaining entry into something. She was stepping through the membrane that separated the normal from the great. And she knew Alio would someday be great.

In him, Lilly had gotten culture. At dinner parties, her conversation had grown less oblique. She'd sent Hundertwasser postcards to everyone she knew. She'd taken to sitting afternoons in Golden Gate Park, trying to paint watercolors of the grassy slopes, thinking of Alio in their attic on Fell Street: chisel in hand, stone dust, crusted blood under nails. She would come home and kiss those hands, that chin, that droop of skin under his left eye, and the little scar he wouldn't talk about.

The Amtrak made a hollow swoop as it rocketed through the landscape, compressed force flowing around the coach. From her window-seat, Lilly could sense the energy of the cars, the way they rocked and jolted.

She was heading south on route San Joaquin, the 714, moving inland, inward from San Francisco's nervous vibrance to the stolidity of Fresno—where she'd grown up, where she'd lived most of her thirty-two years. And they had not been bad years until this last one with Alio in his rotting, split-level off Golden Gate.

He was a heartbreaker. Almost fifty, his eyes held the baritone of his voice so
that Lilly felt trapped by them. The afternoon he came over to the reference desk, she saw his stocky forearm, the shock of white hair around his leathery face, and then his eyes: twin flames in a darkness, scintillant and aware, though tired.

And then all she could see was Allo, feel his gaze, the weight of his words when he nodded at the milling crowd and said, "That one's mine." as if the Fresno County Library were a gallery, and there were other sculptures besides his positioned all around. Lilly had never felt more homesick and small than when she moved in with him and left the library and Fresno behind.

Somewhere, back on the dust-draped 99 or along the 152 with clouds of butterflies that clot windshields like colored sap, Lilly let the grace that comes with growing up in central California slip away. It was the ability to look up at a 108-degree sky and feel grateful because, last year at this time, it had been 110. It was seeing the dry excess of farmland stretching out into wobbles of heat, feeling amid the flatness of vineyards, cotton fields, and orchards that Fresno was thick and immovable, cut into the land.

Yes, there was a grace that had nothing to do with the big energy of San Francisco. And now Lilly could feel that grace returning. In Stockton. in Riverbank, in Turlock the train would stop, and the arid smell of the San Joaquin Valley would get stronger. She was coming home. The Lilly she remembered was seeping back; though, she knew she'd never be the same. Lilly was sophisticated now in ways Fresno would never understand, tempered, a different person—someone who'd gone, seen, and was now coming back to things she knew before, to what was sane and intelligible and simple. And, while she did not feel good, she felt better. Her sense of being small in a large place was melting away.

Earlier, she breathed moisture on the coach window and traced the sign of the illuminati, the Eye in the Pyramid. It was mostly faded now, faint lines where her finger-oils clung to the glass, but she could still see it superimposed over a rusted bridge called
Santa Fe, the telephone poles, the golden-brown hills that hunched toward the train tracks. Once, when she was on the edge of Golden Gate, right up near where it meets Lincoln Street, Lilly saw the Eye scraped into the seat of a cement bench—done poorly as if a drunk had scratched at it for days with a rock.

Nevertheless, the image was unmistakable, shallow-cut lines wavering like lightning along the pyramid's sides, the Eye, rays of light streaming from its pupil. *Annuit Coeptis* straight off the dollar in anybody's hand. She found it all over San Francisco, painted onto the sides of buildings, peeking from ivy-tangles of graffiti. It stood for everything she didn't know, everything she couldn't see, the eye-power of illuminati under that city of cats, of old narrow houses, and of rain.

The coach air smacked of latex and dust, heavy with vinyl moldiness, with the lingering whiff of cleanser. They must have chloroformed the car to kill bacteria. Now it was fit to be ridden down into deep California where perhaps the sign of the Eye rides only on the dollar bill.

Lilly was almost calm. She was almost ready to feel like a person again instead of a wounded pulse knocking through a topography at once both alien and exclusive—where the name Alio Holden made eyebrows arch, fingers tap at the corners of mouths.

Yes, one day he'd be great and famous. Even now, he had shown lots of times, he said, in small but good places, despite all the dumpy county museums and libraries, despite Fresno. He was known throughout Scandinavia, Belgium, lesser galleries in Paris. *Art Forum* did a spot on him. So he had a name and a face and a place: San Francisco, where the less-discovered fluttered around him, most in their early twenties. And Alio came dispensing advice, a stained, droopy buddha, drinking other people's wines, saying, "This is Lilly Sefley, my friend."

A friend.

A friend who'd uprooted to join his orbit—a much closer moon, maybe, but really just another satellite in his system of frothy admirers. Sometimes, Lilly told herself he
considered her much more than just that, or she held up the swimming thing as proof that he loved her. That they'd bonded.

When Lilly was eight, she took a swimming class at the YMCA and almost drowned twice. She'd carry the smell of that summer's chlorine with her for the rest of her life, how the morning sun flashed in pure white sickles on the surface, how the instructor—a tall, blonde woman with eyes like bluepainted frost—called them minnows. *Okay, all you minnows, it's time to get WET!* And how the white plastic vents slurped like they were thirsty.

She worried about what would happen if she got a foot caught in one of them, about whether she'd be devoured instantly, sucked down into the smoldering-hot gears of the machine that kept the pool lucent blue as if the water were breathable—merely a thicker type of air. And often, when her mother had shushed her objections, saying that she had to learn to swim or someday she would die in the ocean, Lilly would lie in bed, dreaming of the thick, gray backs of sharks gliding over the pool's bottom and of a long tunnel that connected to the sea where man-sized squids waited in the dark.

Twenty-six years later, there she was at open swim, nails digging into Allo's big, round shoulder—no squids but a stretch of terror between four and ten feet deep that made her feel mortal and sick. Allo helped her in. They stayed in the shallow end at first, then came back four or five more times until she could swim the length of the pool with only her fingers touching the side. That was progress, she felt. That was something like love.

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Allo could be generous. He'd never once asked her to contribute a dime to the rent or to the food. He'd cooked. He'd cleaned (a little). And when she'd ask if he would not get into bed smelling of thinner or cook the vomit-scented traceries of etching acid
from his pores into the dinner-meat's steam, he'd comply with the cute, bearish surrender she thought delicious. There was lots of good in him. Sometimes he was cuddly. Sometimes he was a rock she could cling to.

But there were also the petty cruelties, the times when she was treated like an outsider by his friends, sometimes by Alio himself. She was expected to be the hanger-on, the waitress, the one who took the coats. At parties, she'd be alone on the couch with a paper plate balanced on her knees. At home, she'd mix the drinks while Alio sat in the living room, talking with guests under their huge, lead-chipped window. Lilly tried to adjust. She tried to let things go. Like the time Ruben Causey (an overclean little man who taught jazz theory at Cal and went around calling himself an Epicure) smiled and said, "An ex-librarian from Fresno? I'd heard rumors they existed, but I never thought I'd see one." Alio laughed politely. She went in the bedroom.

She minded the patronization, the condescension, the implication that she was nothing but a cliché: the librarian from Fresno who'd fallen in love for the first time.

"How quaint," said Tamla that night they were at the party in the museum. Tamla was in her sixties. She wore a pearl necklace. "How quaint," she'd said looking across the room at someone else, "He must be very good for you." Lilly wondered if Alio thought she was quaint when he'd accept dinner invitations without telling her, when he'd record a new greeting every time she'd change it to include herself. Trivialities. Petty things. Things that shouldn't matter. There was lots of good in him. She would tell herself that, and she would be right. Even on nights when he wouldn't come home and Lilly would sit in the Papa-san by the front window, staring at the street.

Her coach was empty. There were other people in the surrounding cars, but in hers, no one. No one to talk to. No gurgling babies to question. No lonely men with
brims pulled low and arms crossed. No women with carry-ons full of fruit and nylons. Nothing. Just the moving floor that helped the train bend and the clack of the rails. Monotonous. A flat commentary for creeping twilight.

Thirty minutes ago, the train stopped to let another train pass. There was just a foot between them. The passing train sounded like helicopter rotors. Everything shook. And those faces staring out, each blurred into the one behind it. How many of them would get off in Emoryville and take the Amtrak shuttle bus through Oakland to San Francisco's ferry building? How many of them would step out, inhaling the Embarcadero, the Hilton covered with a cascade of shrubs?

She stared at the empty seat beside her and tried not to think about it despite the fact that the train seemed to encourage introspection. Lilly had been writing Allo a good-bye letter. She wanted instead to press her cheek hard against the greasy window and bond with any foot of scenery, any passing brush, any field of wheat. She wanted to light on something external, something beyond herself, and escape this inward push.

The train teased: here is this otherness. Here is open scenery. Step into it if you can. But, of course, she couldn't. Lilly could watch it slide by, slap shut behind her, become distance and past and diffusion all at once. The train was going back to Fresno. And she was going back to Fresno. And so was the red ant, dipping in and out of the pored, polyester weave of the seat beside her. And so was the sign of the Eye she'd made on the window. And so was this air, these smells, these thoughts.

Lilly remembered everything. How dim light hung over the rooftops on the hill behind Allo's apartment, skewing mist into night. The pavement, crenellated with iron gratings and dirt, the broken sidewalks, the alleyways, the narrow, stained-glass windows over the street—they all flung shadows, spoke of small, filthy niches, of pissed-on archways, of peeling, plaster walls.

Lilly remembered them as if she'd run her tongue along their surfaces. She could taste them in her mouth: the urea, the bile, the blood and dust of the city in her spit.
thinking of Allo, thinking of bathwater lapping the sides of his belly, thinking of how he'd rasp as she rode him and how he'd cup her breasts, her neck.

Her leaky penstrokes made the words come out strange. On the yellow pad with blue lines, they puffed like water stains, indistinct in some places, sharp in others. I don't write like this, Lilly told herself. Normally, her cursive was a ballet of spindles, crosscuts, pirouettes. Precise. Not like this.

The train whistle sounded more like a klaxon than a toot, thick FWRAAHs leaping off, into the air, as if they were solid and could thud down into the dirt of a passing field. Lilly paused to listen, wiping her pen on the bottom of the tablet, then continued:

*but clearly you don't care. Did you ever? Or was it a dream. Was I making up my own fantasy, and you just happened to be there?*

*And don't think you didn't cause this to happen. You, it was you, your fault. I gave you my heart, and you stepped on it. I know you know you're a bastard.*

She went on, doubled back, crossed things out, added clauses, changed words. She'd written this way for three pages but thought she still hadn't said what needed to be said—what was right and important to say—in a situation like this.

Of course, she knew any man could go wrong at any time. Any man could disappear. That was pure truth. Lilly'd known it her entire life. She first saw it in the wrinkled off-white of her father's cheeks, his half-smile as her mother gunned the car. His wave. His tousled hair in the drive of the house where she'd been born. He'd left once too often, she was nine, and her mother was crying. At a stoplight, she turned toward Lilly and said, "He's still your father." It happened to all women, everywhere.

*Everybody knows it, Allo. You have no real friends. You cry when you're sad. What kind of man are you? What kind of man does that? The minute I met you, I knew you were less. But I was stupid. I was just so in love with you. But it's not acceptable, you*
going without warning. So now I am, too.

As surely as the a in the Tea of Haight Street's Victorian Tea Room was really an Eye in the Pyramid—as surely as her father needed to disappear with waitresses and stewardesses and secretaries again and again until the heart-attack in a freeway motel—Lilly knew men could vanish like fog.

Fresno taught the lesson: the toolie fog could creep in or disappear in minutes. Once you accepted its musty caresses, came to depend on it in a sense, to rely on its obscurity as a reliable presence, it would pull away. You'd look up, blink, and see the purple mountains hazy in the distance like a hard reality. And when the fog lifted off the cemetery lawn to the tune of dirt hitting her father's casket, Lilly put an arm around her mother, waiting for those mountains to appear, and no one said a word.

_I was in love with you. You left a chicken breast in the frying pan._

_I don't know if it was for me. It was just there in the oil, and it was cold. I guess you cooked it before you left. And the video? How could you?_

Lost in herself, in the narrow passages of self-pity. Lilly felt blood throbbing in her eyes. She felt the world aching forward, second-by-painful-second. Her world dealt with passing: the Amtrak coach going by flat scenery, time and distance lapsing between her and the words of her letter, beyond San Francisco, over the Pacific Ocean in her imagination, speeding over the water toward a Rome she would never visit in the Italy of her mind.

There, where the hills are gray and formless, she tried to imagine office buildings and neighborhoods but, instead, saw a flat landscape punctuated with a city of bone-white pueblos she'd seen in an old _National Geographic_. There, in an apartment built under something that looked a lot like the _Arc de Triomph_. Allo lay awake in bed, the indistinct mass of someone else beside him under the covers. It had been raining outside, and she saw him, hands clasped beneath his head, staring at droplets moving down the window.
The rain was making light static. And behind that, somewhere far off in the formless reaches of her imaginary city, a two-tone ambulance wail shifted on the air like smoke. Lilly hovered over him, seeing his belly rise and fall, the quiet, thoughtful expression he always had in the morning.

He'd gone to Rome without telling her. He had some business there, he said, finally, on the videotape he'd left for her. Lilly found it on the center cushion of the sofa when she sat down to cry—after noticing his toothbrush and razor gone. The paper stuck to it read LILLY in Allo's childish script, something a little boy might write. And when she slid it in and saw the opening shot of the Coliseum with his voice-over, she knew he was like all men, capable of anything, of leaving her forever: "Lilly, sweet Lilly, how sorry I am that I have to go. Look. I'm going to Rome. Look how beautiful. The city, the art. I need this, Lilly. I've got a connection. A bigger showing, maybe. I would bring you with me, but doing that is again too hard this time. I'm sorry for that. And this. I'll be back in two weeks. I'll call you when I get there."

Every time he disappeared to visit a gallery, she cried for hours. The last time she redialed his hotel room in Sacramento over and over, until she got him in the pre-dawn—drunk, Lilly thought, but she had been too upset to really tell.

That was Sacramento. Before that: LA, Ontario, Mexico City. This was Italy. And there wouldn't be another. She'd felt insulted and discarded, shamed that she would not be able to perch on his arm like a crow, a lustrous bird, as they wheeled through art galleries. Lilly imagined herself turning with him, a part of him, subsumed into everything Allo represented: art, the artist, the celebrity of high culture in his element. It could have been her element, too. And they could have rippled the air with their common gravity, their weight, their presence. Lilly tasted it like black silver on her
tongue—pure silver—she could have been a pure silver bird.

After the voice-over and the grainy clip of Rome he'd lifted from some old movie, the tape showed him on the sofa's center cushion, exactly where she was sitting. The last image was a long one: Allo, smoking a cigarette, staring right into the camera, sober. no grin, khakis and a white long-sleeved shirt, one leg crossed over the other.

She had the tape with her now. She could sense it down there, in the baggage compartment of the train, sitting in the center of her suitcase like a brick of radioactive lead. She could almost hear it if she screwed her eyes shut—hear it vibrating, bleeding out the destruction it contained until her clothes were thick with it.

Lilly was going to open her suitcase carefully when she got home. She definitely wouldn't stand in front of it. No, she'd have a window open. She'd stand away and let whatever was collecting there escape into the air and out of her life. Let it torture greater Fresno. Let it attach itself to someone down the street: the cold presence of dead love, of abandonment, an icy blade sunk deep between the shoulders.

Far off, over a passing scrapyard, ravens circled in a frenzy and dove—black erasures on gray dusk. And she could only imagine what they were attacking. A crippled mouse? A nest of beetles ripped open against the twilight? A tired, bloody kitten? Anything was possible. The nameless town that followed the scrapyard had steeples. Lilly watched them pull away and then the fields again, the purple-brown haze.

*I want to get you out of my life. I want to rip you out of my thoughts, out of my guts. You're there, making me sick, Allo. I can feel you still, even though I am going away and never coming back.*

She was nearly home. The lights in the coach kept dimming, flickering out. She saw herself framed by the rectangle of Plexiglas in the far door as if she'd coalesced up, out of
the gathering black, her torso sloping into darkness, the outline of her hair a cowl. For a brief moment, she was a shade—completely indistinguishable from the drifts of shadow that creep across the fields of the San Joaquin Valley when dusk becomes night. She could have melted into them, stood invisible in the middle of a vineyard and become that black bird—not on Allo’s arm, but formed in a world of silhouettes.

The station was loud and full of mosquitoes. When Lilly stepped out of the coach, the heat was palpable, a very real presence thickening the night air. People swarmed around the train’s doors. She had to fight to escape the crowd before she could lean bags against shins and think.

Mosquitoes and moths ticked against the lamp face of the fluorescent block-light where Lilly stood, awash in its fixed, green-white radiance, re-reading her finished letter to Allo. It was good enough. It had to be. She knew that if she hesitated, she might not send it. She might soften and call him when he got back. And cry that he had abandoned her. And wake up one morning, cheek resting against his shoulder—where it would be every morning—until Allo left again and she woke up in an empty bed, knowing somehow that he was gone for good.

The sky was hung with so many stars. She was sure most of the constellations were visible: though she knew nothing of astronomy. She called a cab from a pay-phone and sat on the back of a bench with her feet and bags on the seat. Earlier, Lilly had noticed a man in a tank-top sitting there, gazing at a dark factory beyond the rows of tracks. When the man smiled at her, there were only a few teeth left in his mouth. He was gone now, but looking at the factory windows. Lilly felt sure they were similar to the man’s broken grin.

From a distance, it looked fine, like any old-fashioned factory with banks of
square windowpanes, a rust-colored, corrugated roof, and those air-conditioning units that look like small minarets. But when she sat down and looked at it directly, she could see that half the windows were shattered. Graffiti covered the walls and the huge metal doors looked like they hadn't opened in years as far as she could tell from the glow of the station's lights. In front of the factory was a row of junked cars, a six-foot chainlink fence topped with concertina wire, and then the tracks.

Lilly tried to imagine what the inside of the factory looked like, what existed in the dark, shattered squares that had once been windows. But she had no idea what the inside of a factory might look like—especially one that had gone unused for as long as it seemed this one had. Anything could be in there: a ripped mattress in the center of a dusty, concrete floor, a one-armed doll face-down on a moldering pile of newspapers, or an ocean of rusted machines, gears gummed thickly with years of dust, bits and lathe-handles sticking up at odd angles like ornaments on Japanese armor. And all of it in darkness, perfectly still.

Of course, Lilly was only guessing, imagining. If she threw a rock through one of the windowpanes, as so many had obviously done, would it disappear? Cease to exist? Wind up striking someone in the back on some distant world? Would it be like that with her letter to Alio? She wondered if he would ever get it, if he in fact had gone to Italy. She wondered whether she hadn't simply caught the FAX bus from the library after work and sat on this bench for a while, dreaming.

The familiarity of being in Fresno, of tasting its heat and breathing in its dust brought the idea to her mind: what if she'd never left?

What if her year with him had been a few minutes of thought?

What if she'd been sitting here, dreaming Alio and everything that had gone on between them?

Would he have mattered less if he were a dream?

As she stood to go meet the cab that was pulling into the parking lot on the other
side of the station. Lilly knew she'd never truly know what lies in the darkness, that she
must be satisfied with silhouettes, with black birds, erasures on twilight, seen from a
passing train.
"One of these days, I'll find those open fields of grass, those open spaces I dream of. In my dreams, I see fields flat against a blue sky. Violets, peonies, tulips, carnations—they're all there. My dreams," said Ike. "are of a lawn. They're benign. They want nothing and hurt no one. All they ask is to exist." He took a Kleenex out of his cuff and blew his nose into it.

We were sitting in the Cat Cafe. Behind Ike's head, the face of a white cat with wire-rimmed spectacles stared down at us. It was huge, covering the entire wall.

"Each night I feel closer to my dreams. Each night I can see those fields from far off, like I'm floating in space, and the entire world is covered in grass."

"Look at that cat head," I said. "Have you ever seen a cat head painted that big?"

"Once, I dreamt a butterfly. I was a satellite. I was in orbit, and my eyes snapped down like magnified photographs. Stills. And I could see that butterfly like a tiny piece of cloth, a fluttering square of cloth over the grass. I swear I saw it as clearly as I see you now."

"What could have possessed someone to paint that cat-head on the wall and then name the cafe after it? You only see things like this in big cities. I can't imagine a cat cafe in some small Midwestern town."

"That's the problem," said Ike. "the city, the dead terrain all around us, the immensity of it all. It crushes you."

"I don't feel crushed." I lit up. The smoking ban had just passed in California. No one smoked in bars and restaurants anymore. But there were a few spots in downtown San Diego where the owners didn't care. I knew the Cat Cafe was one of these because, earlier. I'd seen a thin old man sitting on a footstool, smoking with his face right up near the big front window. He made a perfect "O" with his mouth when he blew
smoke onto the glass. As I flicked the first nub of ash into my empty mug, I looked over at the footstool, at the rain striking the backwards *Cat Cafe* script above it, and tried to make out who the three men were standing in front of the strip joint across the street.

"Sometimes, I feel suffocated. I feel every building—all the weight of it—and I can't breathe." Ike pushed the Kleenex back into his cuff and took a sip of coffee.

"You could be in New York or L.A. At least you don't live there. You could move out to the beach. The ocean's pretty flat."

"I don't know." he said, taking a cigarette from my pack. "I just don't know. Sometimes, I can almost understand nuclear war."

"Don't say that. You hate yourself when you talk like that."

He swallowed smoke down into his lungs. "You're right. That's a horrible thing to say."

If I concentrated, I could read the expressions of the three men being rained on in front of the strip joint. It was named "Floating Castle". I'd been in it a few times, but I didn't recognize the men. I didn't expect to. I never recognized anyone downtown, while Ike seemed to know every third person. You had to be a certain type of person to know people, I guessed. But, if that type of person was Ike, I was happy to be exempt.

"Helen won't return my calls," he said.

The three men across the street were standing in a triad, one holding an umbrella over the other two. The man holding the umbrella was soaked. Drifts of black hair were plastered against his face, and he bowed his head slightly to keep water out of his eyes. The other two had their arms crossed and seemed to shift their weight back and forth as they talked.

"What would you do if you were her?" I asked.

"I'd do the humane thing. I'd call me back."

My cigarette was only half finished, but I dropped it in my mug anyway. It hissed in the little bit of coffee still at the bottom.
"No, you wouldn't. You've got too many problems. You'd turn off the phone and let the machine take all your calls."

"I'd never do that." But, when he looked away, I knew he'd called her enough to make it hard for everyone. Helen ran a dress shop by the beach. She started as one of my clients. In the past year, I was her accountant, her friend, and then a little bit more. I don't know why I introduced her to Ike. Maybe I did it because I thought she was the sort of thing he needed.

"Most people see more than one person in their lives," I told him. "Why don't you go out and meet someone? You've got enough cash to go out from time to time."

"I bore people. I'm losing my hair." He looked at me as if I had the power to change it for him but wouldn't.

The men were still standing across the street, under Floating Castle's electric green sign. Now a woman in a ripped T-shirt and jeans was standing in front of them. The drenched shirt flapped and re-gripped her torso when she gestured, arms slashing in wide arcs. She was saying something to the two men under the umbrella. They kept their arms crossed. And the man getting rained on still had his head down.

"I don't understand women," I said.

"Helen might really understand me. She's the only one."

"Don't be so romantic."

"I'm beyond romantic. I see clearly. That's the bad part, the clarity."

"Everybody finds someone else."

"I'm beyond that," said Ike.

"And, still, she doesn't call you back."

"If she'd let me, I'd help her understand."

"Don't you leave messages?"

"Her tape is too short. I have too much to say for that tape."

"Yes, you're clearly too brilliant for her answering machine," I said. Ike leaned
over the table, dropped his cigarette butt into my mug, and said nothing.

We left the Cat Cafe slowly: me getting up and stretching. Ike half-standing, coughing into a napkin. The place was small. It only took us a few steps to get out the door before I looked back. Behind the scarred wooden counter, the teenage girl with peach lipstick and a cold stare turned on the radio. Putting down her Coke, she glared at us for a moment, then looked away.

I didn't want to get too wet and considered stepping back in to ask her for a paper to hold over my head when Ike grabbed my arm.

"Talk to Helen for me. You've got to."

I looked across the street and said I would, but the men and the woman with the ripped shirt were gone.

I was on the couch in her apartment.

"We went to this place that had a big cat face painted on the wall."

"He's nuts," said Helen, disgusted, gripping my shoulder and swinging onto me in a horse-mounting straddle.

"He's going to be a great poet some day." I meant it, but I smirked anyway.

Poetry wasn't the sort of thing Helen cared about. In fact, the thought of Ike, sitting in the back of his bookstore, writing poems all day, probably turned her off.

Helen dyed her hair red every few months, belonged to a gym, and had a hard, tan body. She also had a little boy named Nicky—always around somewhere, spying on his mother when he wasn't at school. He must have had some idea of what Helen and I did on the couch or in the bedroom. And wondering what he thought of the whole thing bothered me enough that I always kept an eye out for him. Doubtless, the kid had seen a lot. Though, at the moment, she was kissing me enough that I didn't care.
I had her skirt hiked up, my hands on her rear. Helen took her blouse off and half-unhooked her bra, then stopped. I felt good for a change—certainly good enough to let Ike drop. But she froze up, staring at me.

"Why are you here?"

"Why do you think?"

"You're here for me." There was a faint twist of doubt behind the words.

"Sure."

"He didn't ask you to patch things up, did he?"

"Does it matter?"

"He's so deep and weird, you know? He takes things hard. He could do something."

"Ike doesn't have the balls. He's afraid of everything," I said, wanting to get the conversation over.

"Balls have nothing to do with it. He's like a child. He leaves these long messages."

"Here," I slipped the bra off her shoulders. "Forget about it."

"I'm seeing somebody new. A college teacher. He talks like Ike sometimes. reminds me of him."

"Yeah? And who do I remind you of?"

Helen sighed and stood up. I couldn't tell if she was disgusted or just put-off, but I felt that I'd be going soon. When she turned, we both saw Nicky standing in the hallway.

"Damn it," she yelled. whipping her blouse back on.

The boy froze.

"You get out. Wait. How'd you get in?"

Nicky looked down.

"You got the extra key? You went in my things and got the extra key?" Helen
walked toward him. I didn't want to have to watch her hit him or anything like that. I'd seen enough of that when I was a kid from the business-end of my father's strap.

"I think I'll go now," I said.

"Yeah, you too, get out."

"Come on, boy." I walked Nicky out in front of me. He jumped slightly when the door slammed. We went down the stairs and across the lawn to my Mercury. Nicky's face was blank. No tears. He seemed a little numb.

"What're you going to do now?" I asked.

He just shrugged.

"Get in. We'll drive."

We got on the freeway and left the beach area behind. Helen's apartment was two blocks off the Pacific strand and, if you listened when it was quiet, you could hear the surf. I kept glancing over at the kid. He stared out the window as if he could still hear the waves.

"Your mom's got a lot to think about."

He nodded but didn't look at me.

Ike ran a bookstore-press downtown and wrote his poems there, too. I was an accountant for him and several other small shops in his area. It was a good arrangement, and we only talked business once in a while. Still, I could have told Nicky exactly how Ike would look when we showed up. He was always the same: bent over his desk, smelly cardigan, fingers stained with ink, crumpled papers and loose sheets covered with scrawl. Ike looked up with a startled expression when we came in.

"It's Nicky," he yelled, running fingers through his hair.

"Hi." said the boy.
"How's life?" I asked.

"Fair. Is Helen here, too?"

His face fell a little when I told him no, but he was genuinely happy to see the kid.

"So, Nicky, how's your reading?" Ike knelt down and clapped Nicky's shoulders. When he smiled, his teeth were long and yellow.

"Okay," said Nicky.

"You didn't finish that last one on the five-hundred raccoons, did you?"

"No."

"Well, let's find you something else."

We went through the bookstore and into the large warehouse in back. Ike flicked the lights on with a loud crack, and we saw two huge presses, some computers on tables, and stacks upon stacks of books. The place smelled just like Ike: ink and dust.

"Alright, then, let's go," he hollered. There was a little forklift, the kind you drive standing up. Ike let Nicky get on in front of him and take the controls. The lift jolted, but with Ike's guidance, they started zipping down the main aisle. The thing went a lot faster than I expected. I wondered if Ike came here and drove it at night when he was bored and lonely, cutting loops around towers of paperbacks. Ike whooped as they disappeared down a side passage and then swung back onto the aisle. I walked on behind.

When I caught up, Ike was grinning, fists on hips, watching the boy wander around a few short stacks of children's books. Nicky would pick one up, stare at it intensely for a few moments, then put it under his arm and find another.

Ike glanced sideways at me, never losing his grin. "So you talked to her?"

"Yep."

"And?"

"I think she needs more time."

He folded his arms and looked down. "She's seeing someone, isn't she?"
I watched Nicky move back and forth, brow furrowed, as if choosing the right book was the most serious thing he'd ever face.

"Well, she's going through a lot, I guess."

Ike's face began to contort around his permanent smile. "That loose—"

"I want one of these," said Nicky, holding up three brightly-colored books.

"No, take them all. You can have them all." And it looked like Ike was about to cry.

I thought of Nicky's expression as he stood in the hall. I thought of how many times he must have seen his mother on the couch—with me, this new professor, Ike, whoever else—and how the kid just took it. And I didn't feel like looking at Ike anymore.

"Okay, Nick, we've got to go. Mom's going to worry."

It was twilight when we rolled up to her apartment. The lights were off, and her Camaro was gone.

"You still have that key she mentioned?"

"She leaves one under the mat sometimes," he said, looking at the cover of one of the books.

"Okay. Good luck." I extended my hand for a shake, but Nicky just shut the door and dragged his feet across the grass, the books down at his side.

The next evening, I went back to the Cat Cafe. But now it wasn't raining, and the street was packed with the sort of downtown rabble that keeps anyone from standing anywhere too long. Every time I looked up, I saw the same teenager behind the counter, giving me the fish-eye just for being a customer. I was the only one in there besides her.

"Say, how come there's a big cat head on this wall?"
"I don't know." she said, instantly pissed that I could speak.

"Can I get a refill?"

"We just ran out." She turned her back on me and stared down at something. I figured she might have been reading a book back there or might have just been staring at the floor, waiting for me to go so she could turn on the radio and live free.

"Shit," I said and walked out.

Outside, I put my hands in my pockets and stared at everyone going by. The foot traffic was normal. People tried not to look at each other as they passed, wearing all the self-protection, the shifting glances, the hiding in plain view that comes with getting from one corner to the next. Above, skyscrapers hunched over San Diego like unnatural growths, like something in the concrete was trying to expel them. I thought of what Ike said about dead terrain. I thought of the girl in the cafe behind me—probably burning two holes in my back with her stare. And FLOATING CASTLE fluttered on in electric green.

I crossed the street, looking at the giant cloud-castle painted over the front of the building—door and all. Walking in, I was suddenly aware of the music, the cheap tinsel all around, and that there weren't any dollars wedged in the little blonde's garter. She flicked her foamy hair towards the sailors seated right at the runway and eased off her bikini top with moves designed to provoke a hail of bills. But only wisecracks fell from the shaven heads.

"Push 'em up. Come on. Play with 'em," someone yelled. And when she complied, rubbing her palms roughly over her breasts, a dollar fell out onto the runway—only to be snatched up when she bent down for it.

She kept the same angry smile. She kept dancing. Her look said she'd heard this song before, and yes, she could dance to it because that's what the place was all about. It was what you'd expect: runway, tables, and an assortment of girls, made to stand around behind the bar unless they were dancing or otherwise making money. If you bought them
a glass of champagne, they'd fill it for themselves, pretend to take a sip, and set it down out of sight. And in places like this, they always wanted you to buy them a glass of champagne.

When the blonde stepped down, everyone jeered. A few of the sailors threw wadded-up napkins.

I went back outside.

Standing in front of the cafe's window, I stared through the glass at my friend behind the wooden counter. She stared back at me. She'd seen me leave the Floating Castle. I waited for her to communicate something—anything—hate, anger, sadness, contempt. But she was blank. Nothing. And I thought of Nicky sitting alone, reading his books, eyes moving from one oversized word to the next.

Her living room was full of roses.

"Ike?" I asked.

"William."

"He's the professor?"

"He's in love." she said, sliding her arms around my neck and putting her lips against mine.

"Great." I wanted a cigarette. The roses gave off a thick perfumy scent that made me feel about to gag. I wanted to smell something burning. I glanced around for the kid and felt my pockets.

"Smoke?" I asked.

"Forget smoke." She pushed me back on the couch, undoing her clothes in a hurry.

"Your son?"
"Gone to play. I changed the locks."

"You know, I've been thinking, what if he gets hurt while we're in here balling?"

Her clothes were half-off. She gave me a look.

"What if he's out there with some older kids smoking hash or something? What if he just needs to talk to his goddamn mother? Do you even talk to the kid, Helen?"

She shook her head. I had disappointed her. "Why are you here?"

"Nice roses," I nodded, zipping my pants back up.

"How are your dreams?" I asked, but it didn't seem like Ike heard me. He stared down at the steak I'd ordered for him, poking at it with his fork. "Your dreams. Are you still, you know, dreaming about grass and all that?"

"No change. Nothing ever changes." His voice wobbled a little.

"Nothing ever changes." I echoed and just looked at him. Maybe I was feeling guilty about the way things had been going. I couldn't forget that business with Nicky getting kicked out of the house. I thought I might tell Ike the truth. So I bought him a steak, but maybe he didn't like meat.

"Don't think." He took a shaky sip of water. "Don't think I don't know what's going on."

"How's your writing coming?" I speared his steak and put it on my plate. If he wouldn't eat it, I would. I was paying for it.

The restaurant was one of those big, dark places designed to give its customers privacy while they eat. Except for the green-shuttered lantern hanging over the table, we could have been floating in an abyss. All we could see was a thick pane of floor-to-ceiling smoked glass running past our booth. And we couldn't hear a thing but our own voices—pure class all the way, and Ike wouldn't eat.
"I'm never writing again."

"You said that, what, two months ago?"

"It's your fault." Ike slapped his hands down, making the liquid butter in his baked potato jump. Silverware clattered.

"My fault?" I paused in mid-cut, keeping my knife and fork in the steak.

"Your. Fault."

Our waitress whisked quietly up to the table. "How are you two doing?" She smiled with the bottom half of her face.

Ike and I gave her the same flat look.

"Great," I said.

"I'm doing fine," said Ike, taking out a cigarette.

"You can't smoke in here." Her smile began to deflate.

Ike flicked his lighter, but the flame wouldn't come on. His hands were shaking.

"You can't smoke in here."

"Tell me—Erin—where did you learn to smile like that?" I asked.

Now, instead of a pretty little smile, I got a hard, flat line. "If he lights that, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Why me? Do I look like I'm smoking?"

"Stop it," said Ike, still flicking his lighter.

"Not you. I mean him," she said.

"No. You meant me."

"No, I didn't."

"You were looking at me."

"Stop it," said Ike.

"You like your job? You want to keep working here? Erin?"

"Look," she began.

"No, you look—"
"Stop it. Stop it," screamed Ike, half-standing, fists shaking on the tabletop.

"You're fucking her. I know. You're fucking her. She told me." His eyes were wide open, then, and the rest of his body quivered almost as fast as his mouth.

"That's it." Erin left.

I stood and threw down some money. One more word out of Ike, and I felt ready to come across the table at him.

Walking out, I had to navigate the labyrinth of booths, blackpainted walls with lassoes and saddles bolted to them for effect, and wall-sized partitions of smoked glass. I was in such a hurry to get out of there that I almost walked through a few of those partitions. Whenever I passed a table, people would stop talking and stare. It must have been the look on my face. Or they heard Ike following: "You were my friend. All along. Fucking her. It was you." That sort of thing.

By the time I got to the parking lot, I was trying to control my breathing. I knew my face was red—the sort of red where I start making bad decisions. Though, even now, it's hard to say whether breaking Ike's nose was completely wrong. I think I lost it when he started screaming, "Judas!" at my back. That was enough. I was trying to get my key in the door of the Mercury, and I thought I could feel his spittle on the back of my neck. He seemed that close. Then I remember him sitting on the ground, holding his nose, moaning. And the image of his face right before I hit him is impressed permanently in my memory—somewhere between terror and fascination, a wince, the unlit cigarette still in the corner of his mouth.

We sat staring through my Mercury's windshield. Ike had a bloody handkerchief over his nose and made breathing sounds like a fish dying at the bottom of a boat.

When we got there, all her lights were on. There was an emerald Toyota next to
her Camaro. Ike still held the handkerchief but only dabbed from time to time at the sides of his nose, wincing. I avoided looking right at him, feeling bad about the whole thing.

We didn't go up. We just leaned against the car, smoking, staring up at the dim splinters of light filtering through the blinds in her half-open window. A lady jogger passed by, leashed terrier scuffling at her side. Wind moved chimes, tinkling from the awning of a house across the street. Far away, the surf crashed.

Then Nicky walked up. "What happened?" he asked, but Ike didn't say anything, didn't even look at him. Ike was in another world, completely fixated on the breathing sounds drifting faintly through Helen's window.

"How long have you been out here?" I asked.

Nicky looked down and shrugged. "Can I have one?" he pointed at my half-smoked cigarette. I gave it to him and started up a new one for myself. He leaned against the car, too. After a while, his little coughs seemed to blend with the sounds coming out of the window, the chimes, the ocean.
The Setting Sun

I was born by the Pacific in the guest cottage of the architect, Marcello Cruise, and my father and I still lived there long after my mother died in the bedroom giving birth to me. I grew up alone, and I spent a great deal of time walking the wide lawn that separated the guest cottage from the main house, through the cypress grove, and down to the rock beach. At night, I would lie in my small bedroom and listen to the surf hit the smooth, black rocks.

Though our guest cottage was only three-hundred-and-four yards from the beach, the cypress grove blocked all view of the ocean. On nights when my father would fall asleep at his desk, I would slip out my narrow bedroom window and up the trellis to stand on the roof in the salt breeze and watch the water. Even on moonlit nights, it was hard to discern exactly where the surf stopped—dark ocean on black beach. Only the whitewater was visible when it yawned back from the rocks. I was forbidden to look at the beach at night, doubly forbidden to walk on it. My father never told me why. “The beach is dangerous and no place for anyone at night,” he would say.

“Has anyone disappeared there?” I asked him once.

“I would not be surprised,” he said.

“Has anyone been tortured there?”

“It’s not unthinkable.”

“Beheaded?”

“It’s possible.”

“Disemboweled?”
“Son,” said my father quietly, “the beach is older than we are. And, that means it
has seen a lot of bad things pass over it.”

Now it has been seventeen years since I lived there. And, while the cypress grove
remains, the huge house of Marcello Cruise, with its beach-modern, art-deco, cubic glass,
its verandahs and skylights, has become a photographic art museum funded by the old
architect’s foundation. The cottage has been torn down, and the stretch of Del Mar beach
Cruise owned has reverted to the people of California; though, you’ll now only see one or
two surfers, far out beyond the break on hazy afternoons. And you’ll wonder where they
came from, the sense of stillness just as thick and present beneath the sound of the waves
as it had been in my youth.

I would stare for hours at the forbidden beach, wondering why I was allowed to
travel all over it during the day but not at night. And, sometimes, I would see the
silhouette of Cruise or his tall, beautiful wife, Jeanette, watching the ocean turn bright,
rust-orange before smoldering into dusk. There were many evenings when I also
watched it from the edge of the cypress grove, staring down the gentle, grassy slope that
grew sandy and then became completely covered with black, oval rocks the size of a
man’s fist. To those who circulate through the house and the grounds today, it is merely
a well-placed photo gallery with cypress trees and a lawn, but to me it was home.

It was there that my father decided I would be a lawyer. On my ninth birthday, I
did not receive the green army men I’d been begging for. Nor did I receive monthly
subscriptions to The Uncanny X-Men or The Savage Sword of Conan. Instead, I
unwrapped a green, leather-bound Northrop and Winslow’s The History of English
Common Law, Fifth Edition, my father not knowing whether he should grin—
embarrassed that he had precipitated this, yet convinced that giving me the book marked
the beginning of something. It was an important moment for him there, in our tiny living
room, a tall glass of scotch balanced on his knee. And, I imagine, he felt it was only a
matter of time before I became receptive to the law.

"You should read just a little every now and then, let it sink in."

I opened the book. The print was tiny. When I lifted it, the book seemed as
heavy as one of the potted plants behind the cottage that it was my duty to water every
other day. I pictured watering the book. What would grow out of it? The subheading on
the page I opened read: *Torts: The Efficacy of the Spontaneously Combusting Haystack
Precedent and its Effects*. I had no idea what these words meant, but I didn’t like the way
they felt on my tongue when I sounded them out to myself. My father sat back and
quietly sipped his drink, smiling not so much at me than at my future, which I assume he
thought would have to be better than his now that he’d given me this. I thanked him for
the book, and he nodded, staring through the bare, living room wall, at my future or his
past.

My father did piecework for the city of San Diego as a translator of Spanish,
Portuguese, and Castilian, re-writing manuals and all manner of legal documents. He
also volunteered to write appeals for prisoners who could not speak English. I learned
years later he had had a generous helping of his own legal difficulties with my mother,
who had tried to divorce him before discovering she was pregnant, and with her wealthy
family after her death. Marcello Cruise and his wife had been friends of my parents
before I was born. My father rarely mentioned how his married life was back then. And
it was from Jeanette Cruise—by letter and only after my father’s death, the Cruises’ flight
to Mexico, and my own exile in an Austrian boarding school—that I eventually learned meaningful things about my mother, how she had believed in natural birth, and how she had died when the incompetent midwife could not staunch her bleeding. My father received nothing after my mother’s death. And the guest cottage, where they had been staying for a few months, became our permanent residence.

Perhaps my father had come to respect lawyers through constant, forced association. That I, a nine-year-old-boy, with hair in my face and a habit of not speaking for hours at a time, could become a lawyer seemed as ludicrous as that book he gave me on my birthday. I put it on the window sill above my bed and sometimes stared at the gold letters pressed into the green leather binding. There it stayed until rain through a hole in the weather-stripping puffed its pages like an accordion, and I had to use thick, rubber bands to keep it closed.

I understood, even then, that my father carried equal portions of idealism and desperation, and I believed, along with him, that without Marcello Cruise’s friendship, our lives would change for the worse. My father ate dinner with Cruise up at the main house several times a week to make sure, I suppose, that this would never be the case. Cruise’s silhouette on his verandah was, for me, as meaningful and ubiquitous as the setting sun: he was our benefactor, my godfather, and I had been up to the house to speak with him perhaps less than ten times in my life. Father always brought back something interesting for me from those dinners, lime-marinated fish with peppers and chilies, poached eggs in pastry triangles with Bordelaise sauce, filet of beef with foie gras, truffles. I grew up on macaroni-and-cheese, Hamburger Helper, and Rice-a-Roni, interspersed with three-star, European, restaurant cuisine from Cruise’s kitchen. And,
with the blessed ignorance of a child not yet spoiled by a lust for fine living, it was all the
same to me.

Not so for my father, who would incline his pale, balding head toward me and
raise his eyebrows angrily whenever I mentioned how much I liked Rice-a-Roni. It was,
after all, the *San Francisco Treat.* I wanted to go to San Francisco someday so that I
could see it served in restaurants, spilling out of doorways, simmering in giant, brass urns
on every corner—my fairytale city.

"More, please." I'd hold up my plate, and my father would look from me to the
stove as if he could not believe I was his son.

"We'd never eat this sort of thing when your mother was alive."

"More, please."

"She had taste, that woman." He'd get the skillet and scrape the remaining
chunks of oily pilaf onto my plate.

"Thank you." I was immune to those references to my mother. The few things
he'd tell me about her were things I didn't care about: how good she was at tennis, what
she liked to eat, how she pronounced her R's. Half of my father's bedroom closet was
still taken up with her clothes, all covered in plastic, smelling of mothballs and dust. I
wanted to know about *that.* Why he kept those clothes there remained one of the great
questions of my childhood. And, though I was forbidden to bring it up, I could not
understand why talking about it bothered my father so much. If I mentioned it, he would
slam dishes into the sink or lock himself in his small study, where I would watch him
through the keyhole eventually start talking to the air and drinking large amounts of
scotch under desk lamp light, books on every wall, two and three volumes deep, and
stacks of papers everywhere—bond-white, yellowing, or crumbling brown.

His study was just as forbidden as the beach after dark. To me, he moved in a
forest of paper, a hairless, Oxford-shirted creature, grudgingly evolved to its
environment. I was home-schooled so, when he’d leave me to my studies, I’d
occasionally sneak up to the keyhole and watch him. I never got tired of watching my
father work. Sometimes, a ray of sunlight would slant down through the dusty window
of his study and illuminate his head as if he were a prophet in a medieval etching.

How was I to know that he was translating the words for murder, robbery,
stabbing, rape, the drunken bar fight, the broken bottle, the final prison sentence going to
men and women in cells, those with bruises pooling on skin already marked with scars
and serrated, gothic letters, animals, and Christ? My father sent words of life and death
that would change people forever. I have often tried to imagine what was lost in his
translation. Did he play with syntax, for example, to soften the administrative English?
Did he alter terms: No, you may not yet see your child as opposed to never? The court,
Signor Montiel, says your wife must go to Chowchilla for eight years, but she’ll be up for
parole in three as opposed to It is the ruling of the court that your wife be remanded to
Chowchilla Women’s Facility for eight years to be served consecutively?

One evening, when I was eleven and my father was safely away, having dinner at
the Cruises’, I slipped into his study. I sat at his desk, in the forest of paper, and ran my
index finger along chains of black ink in a language I could not understand—Portuguese.
I supposed, from the huge, blue dictionary open under a file folder. I remember the
distinctive smell of Mont Blanc ink—a bit like acrylic paint but lighter and more watery.
And it is that smell that I have now come to associate with the charged air of legal
documents. I sat in his hard, straight-backed, wooden chair for hours and looked through
forbidden case files, criminal files kept by prosecuting attorneys and public defenders,
understanding very little beyond parts of police reports and the summaries of trial
proceedings that were there for my father to translate.

It was the crime-scene photographs that occupied me most. I have never been
able to determine why the photos were still in the files by the time my father got them. I
can’t imagine that he ever needed them for translation. I was shocked, and yet I kept
looking through file after file. I would remember those images for the rest of my life.
that of a man, cut from collar bone to genitals by a machete, his belly fat yellow in the
color photograph. Photos of a girl, not much younger than me, who had been beaten by
her father until she shit herself. Photos of eyes so purpled and swollen that only dark slits
remained. Perfectly round bullet holes in faces and backs. The glittering green of
shattered beer bottle glass beside a woman’s cheek. It was as though I held a new
dictionary, a secret manual for the translation of good into evil, normal into perverse. I
had discovered a key to a world beyond that of the guest cottage and the lawn. And, even
if I could have gone back to comic books and innocence, I wouldn’t have wanted to.

I remember a memo: victim will NOT testify—says he loves big brother—what
can we say to get him on stand? jotted on a small piece of paper that had been folded
around some photos like a matchbook. And inside: images of a boy’s body discolored
with bruises, a purpled gash in his neck where a pencil had been pushed in, slowly, as a
prelude to being raped by his older brother. There was an evil magnetism to that phrase.
victim will NOT testify—says he loves big brother, and so many levels of sickness.
Repulsive, yet interesting, I'd tell myself, knowing all the while that it was voyeurism that kept me interested and little more than that.

So this was going to be my future, this place where case files clinically and methodically described human depravity, open and dissected in full color. At eleven years old, those photos helped me become a peeping-tom. And, though I would not admit my voyeurism to myself for years, I also spied on Marcello Cruise and his wife several times, sneaking across the lawn, late at night, toward their bright rectangles of light. And, of course, it was Jeanette Cruise I was really going to see.

Sometimes, I'll stare at moon over ocean where sunset was just an hour before, where currents and riptides shatter into small blades of light all trembling in unison, and I'll stare until I feel that I am trembling myself. And then I'll know that I'm thinking about her, about how it was climbing the outside of the house—handholds from hedge to stucco to outset, cubic glass, to the corner of the skylight, to the upper ledge that ran by their bedroom window.

She was thirty years younger than the old architect, and she had a pale beauty, a privacy surrounding her, that embarrassed me even on that first night when I crouched on the ledge two stories above the ground—but four above the level of the beach, which was farther out and as dark as I imagined my own, interior, self to be. I was eleven, and I knew I was corrupt.

I was convinced that staring at those pictures had confirmed me in their evil. I had stared at them so much that I saw them in my dreams. And I imagined that I was then in sympathy with all the darknesses of the world—the black chains of my father's translations, the great, onyx face of the ocean, the man-sized shadows under the cypresses.
that had scared me my entire childhood as if a crowd of shades stood staring every night at the cottage. Now, I imagined they were only waiting for me to join them. Half-scared by what had seemed to be my fall from the gold-pressed letters and bright receptivities of goodness and light, I crouched outside Jeanette Cruise's window and watched her get ready for bed.

Few of us can remember the first time we did anything—really remember, as if we were actually doing it. We might recall the occasion, the circumstances leading up to it, the aftermath, even bits and pieces of the thing itself. But to truly remember, to remember the first time as if it were a first time, that is to say, just as it happened, is a gift. There have been few things in my life given to me in such detail. But I can picture Jeanette Cruise. And, remembering, I see her again as a thirty-nine-year-old woman and also as a bright field in which undergarments and skin seemed equally bare, equally private. And both of these ways of remembering her are true.

Looking through her window, I never saw her naked. That didn't matter because, in her night shift, rummaging in her bureau drawers, mid-length, black hair wrapped in a bun, she offered an intimacy that went beyond the thrill of mere voyeurism. I recall the movement of her shoulders, a thin strand of hair in front of her face, how the pink-white satin of her shift clung to her hips. Her bedroom window framed a new picture for me—one that was no less powerful and compelling than the crime-scene photographs: though, this picture was living, its effects more profound. The more I watched her, the more I was convinced that I had access to forbidden knowledge, a secret, adult life that my father had given up when my mother died.
I came back a few nights later, let a week pass, and came back again. Marcello Cruise, almost seventy and, to me, already ancient-looking, would go to bed before her, always seeming very tired, bumping into things, saying one or two words at most before taking off his robe and bundling himself under the blankets of their high bed. The light would stay on for up to an hour, Jeanette moving around the room, talking quietly to herself, undoing her hair and brushing it out in the small, bureau mirror.

They seemed aimless and mismatched to my childish sensibilities. Marcello would plod to bed with deeply grooved face and buzz-cut, a huge belly, and a sense of heaviness around him at all times. His wife was just the opposite—someone who could make the carved chairs and thick-cushioned bed seem to compliment the way she moved. She made everything around her seem lighter and more finely worked. Because the house was higher than the guest cottage, there was a much grander view of the sea. After their light would go out, I'd slowly inch past the window and lift myself onto the red-tiled roof, where I'd sit and sometimes fall asleep, waking up at dawn surrounded by fog.

The summer I turned twelve, my father began taking me with him for dinner at the Cruises'. This involved both of us showering and otherwise slicking ourselves up a whole hour ahead of time, which irritated me.

"You never got so dressed up before you started bringing me," I'd say and watch my father's face darken as he'd move through the cottage straightening things.

"What do you want people to think? That we're worthless? That we don't know how to take care of ourselves?" By people, he only meant the Cruises. By taking care, he meant putting up a good front, which, for me, entailed using the right fork and only speaking when spoken to. It was an ordeal. And my father's nervousness made it worse.
made bringing me to dinner into a test of his parental abilities every time. Before we’d go, he would move from room to room, rearranging things, dusting, humming nervously to himself like a flustered 1950s housewife. And I was compelled to sit quietly on the sofa so I wouldn’t muss my hair or wrinkle my khaki pants and long-sleeved shirt. He had me dress as a miniature of himself, and I quickly learned that slicking my hair the way he wanted was preferable to not doing it and hoping he wouldn’t notice. He always noticed. And we’d invariably end up in front of the fogged, bathroom mirror, him standing behind me, raking his heavy, black comb over and over across my head. I missed those free, unsupervised hours when he’d be up at dinner, and I could sneak down to the beach or sit at the edge of the cypresses and watch the sun disappear.

The first time he brought me, I ached to turn and look through the verandah’s glass doors at the setting sun. The room, just off the verandah, where the Cruises ate, contained an oblong, Plexi-glass table with beveled edges, designed by Marcello Cruise to catch the sunset. Beneath a china bowl that held a soup with a name I could not pronounce, the table glowed dull orange, inter-veined with the most delicate, blue, prismatic shapes, which had to have been deliberate imperfections in the Plexi-glass. Rather than being fascinated by this, to me the table only seemed a feeble reflection of what the sun did on a much grander scale to the Pacific every evening. And, even at twelve, I began to sense a certain ridiculousness undergirding the entire situation.

Here we were, my tense father sitting beside me, carrying on a conversation in Spanish with Marcello and surreptitiously vigilant lest I burp or slurp or turn to watch the sunset. Marcello Cruise presided at the head of the table, gesturing violently with his fork, sometimes when it had food on it, the upper hemisphere of his belly pressing
against the Plexi-glass. The table glowed like a sheet of hot iron just taken from the fire and, for a few minutes while the sun was at a particular angle, I found it hard to look at anything. How did the Cruises keep from going blind, I wondered. Maybe they normally kept a tablecloth over it to mute the brilliance.

Of course, Jeanette Cruise was there, sitting across from my father and, if I could not look at the table, I certainly could not look at her. The one time I dared, she was already looking at me. She smiled, and instantly I felt shot-through with awkwardness and embarrassment. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I was sure my deviant nature would seep forward, and I looked away so she wouldn’t see it in my face—the times I’d looked in on her, the images of the dead and tortured permanently recorded in my memory.

“And what do you expect?” asked Marcello, switching into English. “Don’t you dare talk to me about Frank Lloyd Wright. Everybody falls back on Wright when they don’t know the first thing about him.”

My father nodded solemnly, agreeing that he knew nothing about Frank Lloyd Wright. And the dinner continued, dishes brought and taken, by the Cruises’ old, gray-skinned housekeeper, whose name I never heard spoken and whose hoarse voice I can recall having heard only once or twice. Afterward, my father stayed to smoke cigars. Jeanette disappeared silently upstairs. And I was sent home, where, exhausted by the ordeal, I went directly to bed.

I continued to look in on the Cruises that summer, and I came to understand, in my vague, childish way, that their marriage was not conventional in any sense. They never touched and rarely spoke to each other directly. What should have been obvious to
a normal child, growing up around adults who behaved in predictable ways, was for me
the product of slow, almost subconscious, observation and deduction. They were the
only married people I knew, so understanding that theirs was a marriage based on
something other than passionate, romantic love took nearly a year of voyeurism and a lot
of thinking.

Marcello and Jeanette were like two, docile pandas in the same enclosure: aware
of each other, quietly chewing on their bamboo, and never directly confronting each other
about anything. Such was the nature of their arrangement, and it was only because I
considered them a distant, if extended, family that it interested me. I was the ghost
outside their window, their invisible companion and protector. I began to visit them so
regularly that my father would certainly have caught me sneaking out if he hadn’t needed
a double scotch to sleep at night, increasingly worn-down by the demands of his job. I
was grateful for those double-scotches. I feared his whistling belt.

There was a large investigation going on at that time. A border guard on patrol
had been shot through the heart with a high-powered, hunting rifle. Now the guards were
wearing Kevlar and carrying M-16s. INS detectives were arresting Mexicans for being
Mexican. Students at UC San Diego had camped in the lanes of the 805 freeway to
protest racial profiling. And, when I slipped into my father’s study to view the latest
installment of mutilation and murder, there were new, different kinds of pictures in thin
folders—front and side shots of very unhappy men, all with brown skin.

“I’m leaving,” spat Cruise, making an angry flourish with his fork. “This country
has always been racist, always will be racist.”
Dinner had progressed as usual, Marcello and my father speaking over-heated Spanish, my father allowing his old friend the last word on everything, while Jeanette and I methodically reduced the contents of our plates. But, when Cruise said he was leaving, I sensed something breaking in my father—as one hears the sound of a far-off window shatter in the night and wonders just how much and what kind of violence is being done.

"You have nothing to fear," said my father, gripping the edge of the beveled Plexi-glass, which was now like a dark mirror in the dimly-lit dining room. "You’re designing the new convention center, for God’s sake."

"Which can be easily done, very easily my friend, from the villa, without machineguns and violence everywhere I look."

The Cruises owned a villa outside Cabo San Lucas, on the sea, in a desolate place called Mulaje. And, whenever Cruise got agitated with current events, he’d threaten to go there and never come back; though, this time he seemed serious.

"Don’t you know what you’re saying?" My father was flushed, leaning over the table, fists down between the dishes. "Don’t you know what goes on in this city on a daily basis?"

It seemed as though they were about to hit each other, the old man momentarily taken aback by my father’s sudden show of force then doubly angered, standing himself.

"If anyone knows violence, it should be you, working for the white, racist establishment."

"What are you saying? I bring understanding. Without comprehension, there’s only ignorance."

"You bring hegemony."
“What is this? What is this jargon? What’s happened to you?” asked my father in Spanish.

“Don’t you ever speak to me in that language. Never again. You don’t have the right.” Marcello was shaking, fists clenched. My father stepped back as if he’d been slapped. On my way out, I heard him screaming, but I couldn’t make out the words. Maybe he was just screaming. Maybe there were no words.

Jeanette led me through the house and down to the beach. We took off our shoes and let the tide lick over our feet. Only the faintest residue of dusk remained, a violet stain just over the horizon. Jeanette had put on a large, red coat because, although the days remained sunny and beautiful, the airflow off the Pacific had turned the darkness cold.

She stood behind me and wrapped the coat around us both. Neither of us said anything for a long time, letting the surf replace our silence. Looking back, it would be easy to say we were shocked numb by the argument. And that would be mostly true. Marcello and my father being tremendously important presences in both of our lives, despite the fact that they were volatile and upsetting men who had never been this angry at each other. What would also be true would be to say that I was stunned to be this close to her. I could feel her against my back. I could feel her breathing.

“You know, your mother gave me this coat a long time ago.”

I had nothing to say to that. Jeanette’s body was soft and warm. and her white cotton blouse conducted that warmth through my shirt into me. She could have said anything to me. She could have done anything to me. And I would have believed it was good and true, coming from that warmth.
"Your mother also loved to swim," she said. "She'd go swimming in the ocean at night."

"I'm not allowed even to look down here at night. If he knew I was down here, he'd get his belt."

I felt her arms tighten around me. "And he's never told you why, has he?"

I slowly shook my head. The lights of the second story of the Cruises' house were on, and I knew if we turned, we'd see them hovering bright yellow over the trees, but I wasn't sure I wanted to look back at those lights. Just like I wasn't sure I wanted Jeanette to tell me all about my mother right then.

"When your father and mother came to stay with us, your mother was very sad about a lot of things. The only thing she cared for was to go swimming at night. And, one night, I don't think she wanted to come back. I think she thought she'd swim until she reached Japan."

Jeanette paused and I could sense her sorting information, as one does when tact is important. She kept her arms tightly around me. I watched the dark waves become white before sweeping back again into darkness.

"She was a good swimmer, and I'd never go with her because, you know. I'm not so good in the water. Your father found her washed up, almost drowned. I think that's why he forbids you coming out here at night. It took him a long time to get over it. You know, she was pregnant with you when that happened." This was too much information for me. Being held by Jeanette Cruise was suddenly too much for me. Having seen my father browbeaten and enraged was too much for me. I started to pull away as the ocean
garbled something else she said, the water cracking loudly against the large rock moored about twenty feet past the break like a perpetually sinking ship.

"Go home now," she said and released me. I took her advice and walked all the way back to the cottage, where I hid my face under blankets and tried to imagine my mother, a woman I'd only seen in pictures, covered in kelp on the black rock beach.

Later that night, I listened to my father, drunk, throwing books against the walls of his study, cussing, half-crazy. I thought. He screamed at my dead mother, at Marcello Cruise, at himself. And I got down, under the bed, and turned my face to the wall—as if that was the most appropriate thing to do, what anyone would do. I smelled the dust, felt the cold, hardwood against my cheek and kept my eyes shut.

Days passed, and my father did not go back to normal. He no longer wanted to eat. I made Chef Boyardee from cans, smelly tuna sandwiches, cereal with skim milk for dinner. The Cruises' housekeeper still brought our mail down from the house. Fed-Exes from San Diego County Superior Court piled up just inside the door. My father began to smell like scotch all the time and, when he spoke, his words rode the fumes, thick and toxic in the air around him.

The morning the movers began, my father put two folding chairs in front of our cottage door, and we watched them carry things from the Cruises' house to three large, brown panel trucks, wind rippling the lawn in slow currents. I remember the cypresses nodding like they understood and approved. I remember bubbles rising up the neck of an inverted bottle of scotch, how beautiful the pale fluid looked when it caught the light.

Three years later, I would be in an Austrian boarding school, and it would be Jeanette Cruise who'd write to tell me that my father had returned to the cottage one night
and tried to set it on fire. He failed. He stripped down and swam nearly a mile-and-a-half through the darkness before drowning. But I would have to construct all this in my own mind. I'd have to imagine it. I'll always have to imagine it.

Whenever I look at the Pacific, I am reminded of my father along with that ocean's darknesses and the hypocrisy of its name—the jagged teeth of its surf anything but pacific in its violence, how it slaps the rocks and spits and rages as if it were boiling up to some angry pitch that will someday wipe the coastline clean. I am reminded of my father swimming at night, so far out that sky, land, and water are one behind him. If he would stop to look for the horizon, he would only see a thin line of greater darkness. He remains that way for me, the sound of the surf far behind him. His breathing is ragged. His hands splash into the water, pushing it down and back. And, if one of the waves, one that had touched my father's hands, rose up tonight from black water and formed his knowing, sad-eyed expression, and if that wave could speak, and if it said to me: "You know you are one reason he's dead," I would answer. "Yes," and then let sadness rush back over my life.

I remember the night the Cruises finally left, without a word to my father and me. I snuck out of the cottage and carried my blanket up to their dark windows. One had been left ajar, and I slipped inside, wandering through empty rooms. I climbed the stairs and sat cross-legged, wrapped in the blanket. Ocean seemed to stretch away just beyond the glass—another of Cruise's optical illusions. Through the long, second-story window, the waves looked chipped and glassy. I watched the Pacific and listened to the silence: no surf, no gulls. Nothing but soundless, dark water and moon. The house was designed
for this solitude. The second story of its sea face was almost entirely windows, thick
glass serving as insulation, soundproofing.

Sometime during the night, the temperature fell, and a deep, moist cold radiated
up through the floorboards, making me curl in my blanket—a human nautilus, staring at
the ceiling, at reflected moonlight wavering there in bands like slow lightening. And I
recall seeing a dark crack, its jagged mouth coming slowly through the paint.
You rise up in the mirror like a ghost: hair coarse, matted, your face chalky, damp eyes fixed on me in bed where I try to sleep with my head between the pillows. I hear nothing—but see you looking down at me with that uncompromising stare.

The sodium floodlight fills the backyard with shadows. The dark pool, the poplar tree, the islands of azaleas and geraniums brambled with light and dark. I look out the backdoor window and think of you, seeing you in this, as in all things. The long steeple of the sprinkler's shadow. The arch of your foot. The hanging poplar branch that waves to me in the wind. It's way past midnight, and I feel you all around me, in the presence of these thoughts.

Sleep and the hours and dreams.

It comes in the middle of the day, watching a fly climb the brown, linen curtains of the living room. It comes in the morning at the scarred kitchen table.

I've been staying up nights. In the afternoons, I'll stop what I'm doing and quietly, suddenly, pass into sleep. Times of day mean less in the desert. When sleep comes, I let it. There's no reason to fight.

Waking up at sundown, I've found a millipede in the bathroom sink and watched it crawl down the drain, a black worm with legs like hairs, its body rippling faintly.

Mornings, there are coyote tracks on the unpaved road that runs a few hundred feet to the highway.

Dirt-filled cobwebs hang under eaves.

Lizards sun on cement steps.
When the water truck comes, the pool gets flushed. Reservoirs are refilled. Faucets work again. I'll watch a man connect a canvass hose to white tanks beyond the pool. I'll stand in the dining room window. He'll be startled when he sees me.

In the sun, the cobwebs flutter like gills.

There are no lights on the highway at night. There is only your flood above the backdoor, lit by a generator in the basement. From a distance, its searing whiteness can seem almost blue. I look through my reflection in the backdoor window and imagine how desolate you felt living here as a girl, the time spent with your father in silence. There is no television or radio or phone. There are no clocks. I buried my broken watch by a stickerweed bush.

And, up to this, the pin-parallel of the 80 and the horizon: flat-wound. asphalt ribbon rushing to real and immediate space beneath my Chevy.

I drove east from San Diego, and I remember the lines on the highway between there and the desert. Towns: Dulzura, Potrero, Boulevard, Ocotillo. Sunflower in brown grass. Dying sparrow in dirt. Switchbacks on the Tecate Divide, smoking black with controlled burns. From the highway, the darkened hills held columns of smoke.

Your letter fluttering like a trapped bird between windshield and dash. Your letter, without the door-key you taped onto it, lighter now, weighed down only by meaning in the ink. Please, you said, go. Please, you said, mistake, miserable, forget. Now, you said, now, together. And then you said love.

These words were all I had. all I needed.

Your father's old house would become a speck in the lifting distance. After the hills, the plain of scrub desert held the idea of that house: something just ahead—a space. making the transaction between gas-pedal, tires, and steaming asphalt consideration enough for seeing you again, for us and new.

It seemed like the whole world was burning. Molten. orange sunset in my rearview mirror. head craned forward and down to avoid the glare and still watch the blur of highway blend into twilight. I was exhausted. I hadn't slept. And then, stepping onto your gravel drive,
ash-faced house more like a sepulcher, or clipped from a black-and-white photo, than a living space: thick dust climbing windowpanes, cockeyed drapes and blinds evoking heavy-lidded eyes.

The narcotized desert pitched low and flat in all directions.

It seemed like the whole world was burning, yet you wanted to meet here. When I read your letter, words glowed as if flames were twisting up behind me, shooting up the corners of rooms, bright, risen vines of fire. And this house of ash, these empty miles in which telephone poles were removed years ago in favor of underground cable, so nothing stood but mountains in the distance—even this house, abandoned and small, seemed consumed, reduced to dusk, a deadbolt, two padlocks on the front door rusting in their slots. Your key opened everything, the door swung inward, and I stepped inside. I was exhausted—as I am still exhausted. And no amount of sleep can cure me.

Sometime after dawn. The morning light came purple-white through the blinds. I woke up on the floor under the window. The walls inside were pocked, beige. Bare walls. I went outside. Bare sky for miles—pale blue, uniform, endless.

The empty backyard pool was collecting leaves. The poplar tree, dying and gray. The sun small, cold. The train of army ants in cracks on the patio: a constant procession. The light clinging to everything, onto me, onto the ants. Through glass in the smudged patio door, a sea of dust motes glittering just inside.

Later, on my back, on the roof, arms and legs spread, mouth open, my jacket bunched under the small of my back, my white shirt, half pulled-out, puffed at the waist: nothing moved but the breeze in my hair.

Nothing.

Not a bird.

I had been sleeping. From my side, I could see the still, silent plain and the highway with no one on it.

The dull scrub desert in the afternoon.

And I saw the moment the sun dipped behind the mountains. And then the stars, giant
I felt the earth spinning, the precession of dust and air. I didn't see anything that day but desert and sky, my filthy Chevy Blazer, covered with moils of dirt, parked on the gravel drive.

And I moved through the rooms, leaving footprints in the dust, thinking about the year I'd spent driving from San Diego to LA to see you on the weekends. The map of the world above your bed with yellow tacks for places you'd lived: France, Ghana, Haiti. Switzerland. Others I can't remember. I want to take those tacks and push them into my chest, to map your life into my skin. Yes, I am a place you've lived, a place you remain like steel pushed into flesh.

Standing over your moth-eaten bed, I read your letter again and inhaled the dust of the past. You liked to laugh at me when I'd arrive exhausted and late. And you with insomnia, always pacing your apartment. You'd lie about your week and then say nothing mattered. You'd tell me I was the only thing between you and the edge of the roof—and then laugh at my expression. But I understood. That's what you have become for me: where you remain, steel pushed into flesh, keeping me from the edge.

I've fixed what I could, weeded around the poplar tree, slashed tall grass with a rusty scythe from the basement, killed insects in the kitchen, washed floors, had the pool restored. Yet, more than once, I have suppressed the urge to torch this house and wander off at night into scrub and rock. To look back and see it swollen with flame, moisture squealing in the wood.

I've never played with fire but, since I've been here, I've lit a tumbleweed and kicked it down the highway at night, each kick burning the nose of my shoe. Embers, sparks, flames shooting out. Tumbleweeds are lovely when they burn. And, in the morning, they're black and gray, half-collapsed, half an intricately-woven lattice of weeds and thorns crumbling slowly in the wind.

The highway stays deserted, and it doesn't matter if I sit on the broken line and stare into that burning globe until its fire dies and wind begins to peel away the ash.

You grew up here, in your father's house. I don't know why you lived here. There are no signs—only broken furniture remains. Anyone could have built this, a one-story house off
highway 80, with nothing to commend it but the desert itself, beautiful, empty, and hard.

You rise up in the mirror like a ghost, and tonight I see you at the edges of shadows, your beautiful white arms, the points of your smile. Tonight, embers could hiss in the pool; windows could bust outward like glass balloons. We could watch from the dark, see flames in the place where I stand now, framed by the backdoor window. We could walk up the empty highway and leave ashes for the wind.

It's ridiculous, but I hesitate to make the long drive to Archangel to buy groceries because you might show up while I'm gone. I've dreamt about getting food, putting it in the Blazer, and driving back—only to find that I never left, that I was standing at the living room window, staring at my car. I have even gone so far as to check the refrigerator to be sure. My exhaustion is complete, a perfect thing. It's hard to tell whether I'm dreaming or awake.

I lie down in the narrow darkness of the kitchen, dim outlines of old, gas range and sink cabinets towering on either side of me like opposite mansions on an unlit street. And I try to face the possibility that you're never going to come, that you've overdosed again, without me there to rush you to the hospital so sleeping pills could be forced from your stomach. You always were enamored with sleep, with calm before sunrise, with mirrors in dark rooms.

And it is there that I know I will find you.

I've seen you rise up from the pool, float across windowpanes, stand, for a moment, at the far end of a room. And I wonder whether these visions mean that you are a ghost, or that I am. I've watched you in the apsis of stars from the roof at night. I've stared into a burning tumbleweed and spoken your name.

Sleep: after a long silence, it is right to accept that you are awake: it is appropriate to speak. But think, simply think you want me back, and it is done.

I know the view from your apartment. You, sitting at your desk, left hand holding up
head, fingers raked into tumbling blonde. And through the window: gray-brown, digital, LA haze, creeping to final permutation of ashen discharge and exhaust. You live on the 22nd floor. But elevation won't remove you from the loneliness of rooms at night or the sight of headlights crawling the Figueroa past desolate Department of Water and Power, cadaverous in footlit grays. In Los Angeles, chainlink runs for miles, smoke and concrete and parched sky and, beyond it, on a clear day, you've seen me waiting. Now it is appropriate to speak, to come back and see what your letter has accomplished.

Think, simply think you want me back, and it is done.

Think of Santa Ana fires on the broad pan of the horizon; the newest crack of sunlight there, and me, hundreds of miles south, watching from the side of your father's house, as a possum feels its way up the middle of the 80. Think of the rubber plant in the hallway outside your apartment, how management won't allow it to die, your mauve carpet, your recycled air, the entombed presence of your aged neighbors—bricked-up in their wealth, wrinkled and frail, yet dried and preserved like ancient leeks in an urn. Think of the fact, the absolute fact, that you cannot hear raindrops strike the three-inch-thick window, that the window cannot be opened, cannot be broken, is mirrored from the outside and tinted from the inside. Think that you're paying for it to be that way. Think of giving up your dog when you moved in and what that trade implies. Think of the pills you take every night and ask yourself why you cannot sleep without them, how you need them to make your body disappear, inch by inch, until you're empty and clear and your mind opens into dark sky and there is no more you. Think of all these things as reasons—or, if not reasons, then sensations—that made you write to me after a year of silence. And know that I am waiting.

The weather is hot or cool by turns. The firmament is predictable only in that every day it is as blue and pure as ornamental glass. I walk out the front door to look at the night. Now the sky is blue-black and the stars are beautiful, quarter-moon making shadows on the ground, making the 80 seem darker and straighter. The floodlight on the other side creates a halo around the house. And I wonder how the sky would look if I doused the place with gasoline and let it
burn to morning.

I found them. ten ten-gallon containers from Archangel. arrayed neatly in the back of the Blazer. I don’t remember filling them. I thought I dreamt the trip. the green. sun-blistered paint on the walls of a hardware store, the old man walking up the dirt boulevard. the skin on his head destroyed by sun, the dust over everything, the Dennys with no one in it. and the dust and the dirt and the broken cars lifted on cinderblocks, the line of rusting motorcycles locked with the single chain. Somewhere, the child’s voice with words I didn’t understand.

I thought I dreamt it, but the gas cans have made me realize that. perhaps. there’s more than I remember. When I reach into my pants pocket, I know that my hand curls around a box of kitchen matches. That box seems so heavy, so much more real than anything I am. And the rags stuffed into my jacket pockets? What do they signify? Will they smell like gasoline? If I search the ground, will I find the long, dark stain in the moonlight, leading back to the house? If I light the rags and drop them onto the dirt in front of me, will I see the streak of fire hit your father’s house like a torpedo, open cans of gas turning rooms into fireballs? A long, bright passage of flame in the desert, from house to highway, azaleas, geraniums, poplar, scrub consumed like so much grist.

If I did this thing, I’d do it because your words had failed me. I would have come to your father’s house and waited. I would have read and re-read your letter until the sheets were bent and frayed. I would have subsisted on those words as if they had become my air—waiting, watching the horizon, the highway, the progress of a thousand details, making them right, preparing for your return. And I would have felt betrayed and lost when you did not come. when your words no longer nourished me.

The sodium floodlight fills the backyard with shadows. And there I’d want you to understand me. I’d leave you my letter, my own message. I’d puncture the night with fire. And on those flames, I’d write these words, so that this would not be mere destruction: the pool, the poplar tree, the islands of azaleas and geraniums brambled with light and dark.

I see you in them, as in all things, twisting in a sheet fire.
The long steeple of the sprinkler's shadow. The arch of your foot. The hanging poplar branch that waves to me in the wind. Will these words fail me as well? I light a rag. A marble of flame begins at its tip. You'll read my story in this passage of fire.

It's way past midnight.

And where there is nothing left—not ash, not carbon, not words, not memories, twisted and corrupt—read my love for you, as clean and pure as the sky.
Somebody set a snare-drum up on the part of the driveway he couldn't see because of the palm trees, and it was driving the Chow crazy. Joel's biceps were still twitching from carrying the dog up the ladder. The Chow was only a few months old but already big, not the sort you'd normally carry up on the roof with you. He didn't feel like going all the way back down and having it out with whoever was doing drum rudiments down there. Let the dog bark. Besides, it was Halloween. Joel could do a lot worse than somebody playing drums in his driveway.

The snare snapped out a little roll, a couple of rim-shots, and then some on-again-off-again tempo he could almost make out if he squinted and tried not to think about it too directly. And it was killing the dog. She'd run to the edge of the roof (it was a flat roof), fire off a couple barks, run around in a circle, come back to Joel, lick his hand, sniff his beer can, and then do it all again. It was great fun. It was just the sort of thing Joel wanted to be doing Halloween night in San Diego.

He picked up one of the crushed beer cans, one of the faded ones that had been up there for a while, and tonked the dog on the back of the head with it—not hard, just hard enough to add a variable to her pattern. He was surprised the can made a sound. Joel supposed you'd have to throw it pretty hard to tonk a can through all that fur. The dog looked like a huge, reddish-brown hand muffler that a sleigh-rider would be wearing in some old picture book. Still, there was no denying that sound. When he threw it, she looked back at him affectionately with her stubby black muzzle and plug-dumb grin. Yep. They were having fun, alright.

That drummer wouldn't quit. And, somewhere else, someone was making noises like they were beating a cookie tin with a rock. Maybe they really were beating a cookie tin, thought Joel. There's no telling on Halloween night.
The music of chaos was everywhere. Down in the canyon, it sounded like primal scream therapy. Real primitive shit, deep vocal-cord-ripping cries coming up out of the bushes. But when Joel went over to the edge to take a look, there weren't any fires or lights down there—just a big black void the size of a football field.

All over the neighborhood, you could hear blood-curdling screams, organ music, chanting, chains clinking, what have you. Joel's neighborhood loved Halloween. If people couldn't get their hands on a scary-sounds tape, they just played whatever they had as loud as they could. You'd be going down the street, listening to the sounds of murder and moaning and snarling, then all of a sudden you'd hear "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" and that would be it for the mood. Last year, Joel's neighbor, Eleanor, played CCR's entire *Cosmos Factory* all night long for that very purpose. Whatever the holiday, she did the opposite—which wasn't the only reason Joel liked her.

He must have liked her a lot, in fact, certainly enough to take care of her Chow. Eleanor didn't like it that white mucus wouldn't stop running out of the dog's nose. So she hadn't given it a name the day she brought it over.

"I just don't know about this Chow," she said. And Joel felt she was telling the truth. He didn't know about the Chow, either. Eleanor took in lots of animals but only kept the ones that seemed like they were going to pull through. The rest she gave to Joel. He did what he could, but really, he had no idea about animals and usually wound up putting most of them out of their misery at the bottom of the canyon.

So the Chow. Joel had taken one look at all that mucus and figured it wouldn't be long before he put the flat of his shovel upside its head. But he gave it a few days just in case because taking care of it provided him a reason (the same old reason, but that didn't matter) to go next door and keep Eleanor posted.

So the Chow. It wouldn't eat, coughed incessantly, and there wasn't much to be done about the mucus. The only thing he could think to do was force-feed it Robitussin three times a day for the cough, keep its water clean, and try not to look it in the eyes. He
called it "dog" or "Chow" until it started getting better, but then he couldn't think of a name.

Maybe it was the Robitussin that worked. It started to eat the spoiled things he gave it from the refrigerator. The Chow cleared out about half a year's worth of old food, but it drew the line at his jar of old kosher pickles. That's when he knew the dog was well. Nothing with sense would have eaten those pickles.

The day before yesterday, Joel took it over, proud enough that he almost felt embarrassed. But Eleanor had gotten infatuated with the kitten she kept in the front pocket of her overalls as she hung up laundry in the backyard. The kitten made little mewling sounds and pedaled the air with its forepaws.

It looked healthy.

"I don't want a big furry bitch in my house," she smirked, "You keep her. You're a bachelor."

Joel didn't know how to respond to that. He didn't want to force a dog on Eleanor. "Well," he said.

The Chow growled at the kitten.

Then Eleanor caught him staring at her lacy red panties. So he waved off the crease that was starting to appear between her eyebrows and added, "Come on, dog." Sometimes, he referred to the dog as "she" but, most of the time, it was "it, the Chow, the goddamn dog."

He crunched a can and dropped it next to his lawn chair. Joel kept the chair up on the roof for emergencies, times when he couldn't take the closeness of the place. Up the edge of the canyon, backyard abutted backyard and there were about two or three feet between houses: inner-city but nice and cozy, lots of palm, pine, and eucalyptus to buffer the street. Freeway Eight ran the other side of the canyon, but even that wasn't much of a problem. All you heard was a quiet swoosh. After a while, you didn't even hear that. So it was a good locale with low crime, but everybody was always in your business.
Sometimes, a person had to go up on the roof and just sit.

Like tonight.

He was dressed as a caveman. It wasn't much of a get-up, just a leopard-spotted loincloth and club. But he put on face-paint and knew how to suck his belly in just enough to look something like a younger Buster Crabbe in those early black-and-white Tarzans. The beauty of it was that Eleanor wasn't into physical looks. She had wavy black hair, blue eyes, and a little stud in her nose. The stud didn't bother him, and nothing about anyone's appearance seemed to bother her. He liked that. Eleanor didn't take care of herself much—and that was sexy. She didn't even shave under her arms. When she had her overalls on, he'd watch her hang laundry on the lines that ran across her backyard, watch those fans of black hair under her arms spread out, and think to himself, this girl's deep, this is the one, she's a real person. So he said fuck it, if she wants to go to that thing down at the convention center with me, I'll be a caveman, and I won't be shy about it, either.

When he asked her the other day, she said she might. But Eleanor hadn't come home, and he'd been waiting since about noon for the sound of her bicycle to tick up to her gate. Meanwhile, the sun went down, her house got dark, a drummer set up in his driveway, and Joel took the Chow and a case of beer up to the roof for some quiet time—yet another thing he wasn't going to get.

The dog started growling and shaking when a guy in a bird-mask and jock-strap started doing a rooftop dance about ten blocks away. All the roofs were flat, and it seemed like at least twenty people had gotten up there, waving torches and bottles around. Good for them, thought Joel, and tried to bean the Chow again, but the can went wide.

The drummer had started throwing in a "Hah" or a "Mercy" every now and then, really getting fast with those sticks. Joel couldn't make out the primal screams anymore, but the cookie tin was still going strong and, as predicted, "Born in the USA" was starting
to filter through air—only, Eleanor wasn't the one playing it. That thing down at the convention center was probably stupid anyway. Nobody goes to a convention center Halloween night.

It looked like the dog had to pee from fear. She kept shivering and sniffing the little green rocks that carpeted the roof, eyeing certain spots. Let her mark the goddamn roof, thought Joel, I'm sick of this. When he was halfway down, she looked over the top of the ladder.

"Good luck," he said and kept on going.

The guy in the driveway looked about nineteen. He stopped playing but kept his foot tapping when Joel walked up.

"I live here," said Joel.

"Buggin' you?"

"I'll make it."

The guy seemed alright. His stomach poked out under his T-shirt, and his jeans looked like the biggest pair you'd find in a department store. He might have ripped the little angular holes in the knees for effect. He had a baby-face but compensated for it by grimacing musically to his foot-tapping. They paused to listen to the chaos and look at the palms sway around the drive.

"Why out here just tonight?" Joel asked.

"I live up the street. Can't take the holidays, you know, with all my sisters. They all want to dress up and go trick-or-treating. I can't stand that sort of thing."

"Me neither."

"Okay, King of the Apes." He ran a hand over his bleached flat-top, laughed, and started pattering a quiet little march with the handles of his sticks.

"Yeah, I guess I am dressed for the occasion," said Joel. "You know, you're pretty sharp on that snare. What's your name?"
"I know I'm cool. Name's Harry Vukovitch. I'm about as cool as you can get and still be alive. That your dog moaning back there?"

"More or less."

"Dogs scare me."

"They scare me, too. Hey, I've got a big old bass drum in my back room."

"Yeah?"

"I rock. I was in marching band all through high school."

"You do rock, then."

"Yep. Mind if I sit in?"

"It's your driveway."

Joel ran in and found it buried under a pile of junk in the pantry he never used. He set the drum on the kitchen floor. Through the window, he could hear the snare doing a peri-diddle. That's what Joel would do. He'd be a Halloween drummer. And screw the Chow, she could stay up there.

"Woah," said Harry when Joel carried it out. "It's purple."

"Uh-huh. It's a serious drum. You wouldn't have an extra bass stick, would you?"

"I stayed away from band."

"Too bad for you." Joel slipped the straps over his shoulders. The bass was bright purple with an orange star in the center of each head. Around both stars was printed EVELYN PACE H.S.

"Where's Evelyn Pace?"

"Denver." said Joel. "Let's rock."

Harry laid out a nice, easy rhythm—one Joel could handle with a single stick and no talent. Though, after about ten minutes, Joel thought they didn't sound too bad. Once Harry decided that Joel could carry the beat, Harry started embellishing a few fills, even humming a little bit. They were getting something going in that driveway: a little patch
of symmetry against the mixed-up night.

A few houses up the street, a French-doored balcony looked like lightning was shooting back and forth inside. The other windows of the place were washed with colored strobes. It was a big party. And from the pitch darkness of the other houses around it, Joel figured that it was the party all his neighbors were at. He didn't want to think that Eleanor was probably there, getting loaded with someone not dressed like a caveman. He also didn't want to think about why he hadn't heard a thing about it. So he started skipping around while he whacked the bass with the stick in his right hand and palmed the wooden rim with his left.

"You are one rude, bad-ass motherfucker." yelled Harry without stopping, high on his own improvising more than Joel's uninspired double-beats. But it didn't matter. They were something. When he felt too tired to go on, Harry wouldn't let him quit.

"Use the other hand." Harry kept yelling, "The other hand! Shit!"

Joel didn't know how Harry found the endurance. But all he had to do was look up at that party, and he wanted to keep on drumming until his stick went through the drum-head. Sweat coated his face. The Chow was almost hoarse from barking. And, somehow, "Born in the USA" had become "Black Magic Woman" to the pulse flowing all around them.

Harry hollered, "This beats candy! This beats all the candy! Candy! Hah!" and moved into a new riff. "Prince got nothin' on me, baby!"

The parrot Eleanor kept in her window sat on its caged perch. Joel stared at it dumbly. He was concentrating now, working the hell out of his left arm, trying to keep up with Harry—who was getting so carried away that he kept upping the tempo. The parrot just sat there, perfectly still, like a fat drip of wax in the moonlit blackness of the windowpane. And, even though Joel only half-understood what he was looking at, he thought the bird seemed unalive, cold, unaffected by anything.

Joel turned away. He didn't want to look at that parrot. Then again, he wasn't
sure he wanted to face what was coming down the street in the other direction. A boy in a skeleton outfit was being wheelchaired towards them by a horned demon with running sores all over his face.

Harry and Joel slowed and then stopped playing to watch them approach.

"This is my dad," said the boy when they got there. The stocking parts of his costume hung limply in front of the wheelchair. It wasn't hard to see that the boy's legs stopped at the knees.

The demon nodded. "Yes. We heard your music. You boys are good."

Harry did something between a bow and a nod.

"Good-o," said Joel.

"My dad plays the trumpet and so do I."

"That's right," said the demon. "We're up at 1435. We're not much for getting too far from the house. Basically, we're all alone."

"You bring your axes?" asked Harry, eyebrows up, looking like he'd caught a second wind.

"Yes we have, as a matter of fact."

There was a storage-sling on the back of the wheelchair where the demon had balanced two small trumpet cases. It took them a second to set up, peeling off a few testscales so they could get in tune with each other.

"How about 'Straight, No Chaser'?" asked the demon. "You boys know that?"

"All over it," said Harry.

"Like it was my mother's name," said Joel, who stayed with them for about three bars before sending bass shots off in random bursts. The boy and his demon father were pretty good. The boy blew, and his cheeks inflated like balloons about to pop.

When it was over, everyone congratulated Harry and then looked at Joel.

"I know," he said. "It's not really a bass-drum song."

"That your dog over there?"
"What's next on the list?" asked Joel.

They played on. The demon and his son were quite the musicians. And, of course, Harry was all over it. They mostly played complicated jazz pieces. But what was jazz without some heavy bass hits thrown in? Joel marched around when he felt like it. avoided looking at the parrot in Eleanor's window, and when the party up the street started dissolving, he managed to avoid looking at that, too.

"Hey, caveman, I think you got it," said the boy after a fifteen-minute "Bye Bye Blackbird".

"Mama didn't raise no chump. I took high school band."

"Well, it shows." When the boy played, he made the stumps of his legs go up and down to the tempo. Along with his inflatable cheeks, he was something else.

Harry was happy. A big, square-toothed grin stayed plastered across his face the whole time. He hadn't figured on a session springing up in the driveway.

It beat the candy. Even when the girl with the old man's face showed up carrying a saw and a hammer, it still beat the candy.

"Hiya," she said. "I can play this saw with this hammer."

"No foolin'," said Harry.

"Yeah. And this is really my face. Accelerated decrepitude. If it bothers you, I'll leave."

"Stay," said the demon.

" Doesn't bother me," said Joel.

"Halloween's the only night I'm normal."

"Forget about it," said the boy. "We care about music. We're musicians, not models."

She seemed about to faint for a second, eyes fluttering, head swaying back. Then her old man's face broke out into a grin that made veins stand out under her wrinkles.

"I'm gonna play the beans out of this saw. I think I love you guys."
"Don't love us too much. We're dangerous," said Joel.

Harry started belting out a rhythm at medium speed, which Joel picked up with his bass katchoom-katchoom-choom and the two trumpets doing angry little swoops. The demon had his mute out and, before long, embarked on this long cataphonic exploration, squeaking the horn up like something dying in a bad way. Joel didn't understand any of it, but he liked it enough that he almost stopped seeing Eleanor's face in the back of his mind. And suddenly, the old-man-girl was knocking that saw up and down, bringing out notes with her little ballpeen hammer. There was no question where the cookie tin noise had come from. Here was this crippled girl, sitting all alone somewhere Halloween night, hitting a saw with a hammer for all the world to hear. Joel liked that. If he'd had a saw, he might have done the same thing instead of throwing beer cans at the Chow. He wondered if she played that saw with the light on or off.

The party up the street was all broken up. People had come filtering down to listen to them. And most of them were dead-drunk. There was a giant ape who had to keep staggering over behind one of the palm trees, vomit clinging to the fur of his belly. Two lesbian flappers made out on top of an Olds parked at the curb. Some kid with an unreal orange afro and a pink tie-dyed shirt nodded cross-legged in the driveway. Dracula held hands with a Fifties-girl in a poodle skirt. The Thing massaged the shoulders of a long-haired priest. Frankenstein's severed head sat on the curb. Somebody broke a bottle. Somebody yelled, "Play, you sons of bitches."

They kept going. The demon was on fire, his trumpet waggling out sounds you'd never expect. Harry was in a fog. Skeleton-boy's cheeks bulged as he worked those stumps up and down. The girl with the old man's face had rouged her cheekbones before she came over. When she concentrated, her skin scrunched up under that rouge like a wizened old rat about to snap.

I'm a Halloween drummer, thought Joel. Look at the caveman go.

Once, he thought he saw Eleanor in a pixie outfit under the carob tree across the
street. It looked like a giant beige locust, replete with chitinous mandibles and full-length wings folded over its back, was standing with an arm around her.

"Bug spray!" yelled Joel. "Bug spray, you mother!"

The crowd had gotten bigger, and the listeners picked it up, yelling it back.

"BUG SPRAY MOTHER!"

"Bug—spray—mother." echoed Harry, changing the tempo to fit this new addition. The horns kept working. The saw kept knocking. The lesbian flappers thought it was great. They stomped up and down on the hood of the Olds and yelled the words.

Joel's shoulders were almost completely numb. He had to take breaks from time to time. Nobody minded when he wasn't drumming. It was his skipping and dancing that seemed to keep the crowd going, screaming "MOTHER!" on every fourth beat.

What a night. They lit one of the palm trees on fire, but Dracula put it out with a bottle of flat beer.

The next day, Joel woke up around noon and got the Chow down off the roof. She whimpered and licked him as he carried her under his arm.

"Quit it." he said, but she only whimpered more and kept her little purple tongue moving on his hand.

His driveway was a mess. It was a good thing his truck was in the shop. That Olds had gotten stomped pretty well. Trash was everywhere. Palm fronds had been burned. Someone left a pocket knife sticking blade-deep in one of the trees. Joel had to put his foot up against the trunk to pull it out. Somewhere, there were two pieces of paper, one with Harry's number and one with the demon-trumpeter's, but he didn't know where.

When he went back in, the inside of the house looked worse than the driveway. He'd invited everyone in after the bug spray song. And whoever wasn't drunk by then must have felt pretty lonely. Joel's three cases of warm Millers had vanished like
nothing. He didn't remember the end of the night, but there were cans all around—enough to suggest that the party probably lasted until dawn.

Joel smiled in spite of his pounding head. You didn't need fancy strobe lights to have a party. All you needed was liquor, a drummer named Harry Vukovitch, and a girl who could play the saw. He looked out at the hot street. It was already starting to bake. San Diego got like that even in winter, cold at night, warm during the day. He couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

He was in the middle of cleaning when the girl with the old man's face rang the bell. Joel turned off the vacuum and opened the door.

"Hiya." She was wearing dark glasses and a Pittsburgh Pirates baseball cap, the loud kind with black and orange stripes.

"Hello," said Joel.

"Want to hang out?"

"I'm cleaning, but if you don't mind the mess—"

"Mess I can handle. Whiskey?" She held up an unopened bottle of Jack Daniels. In her other hand, she had two thick little glasses.

"Sure. I always drink whiskey an hour after I wake up with a hangover. Come right in."

She giggled and walked past him. When they sat down at the Formica table in the kitchen, the Chow padded up and nuzzled one of her liverspotted hands. She was wearing short shorts and no shoes. Joel looked at the stark white sag of her legs, webbed with varicose veins, broken vessels—and she saw him look. She took off her glasses and hat, shook her hair out.

"Say when."

"Use your best judgment," he said. "What's your name and how old are you?"

She giggled again. "Cheryl. Twenty-three."

"Joel. Twenty-nine."
They shook on it.

"So it's just you and that dog, huh? What's its name?" Cheryl brought her glass up for a sip. She'd filled it to the rim, his too.

"Eleanor. You know, I like the way you play that saw."

"I like the way you play your drum. Joel." And when she smiled, the hollowed bags under her eyes, her forehead lines, even the deep grooves under her mouth contorted as if her face were a latex mask. "I live across the street. I see you come and go sometimes."

"Yeah, well, I work for the city. Take care of the municipal pools, keep them clean, chlorinated, that sort of thing."

"Sounds deadly boring."

"It pays the rent. What do you do?"

"I whittle. I mostly whittle and listen to music in my garage. I'll take you over later."

"You carve wood sticks."

"Not just sticks. I whittle anything, everything. Even metal." She knocked back the rest of her whiskey and made a serious face.

"That's the life." His hand was next to hers on the table. He held it and she squeezed his fingers. Joel looked at the liverspots, the aquamarine veins standing out in hard relief.

"Pretty ugly, huh."

"It's relative," he said, looking down at the Chow who'd stretched out and gone to sleep at their feet. He didn't know what he might do. A few minutes ago, he'd seen Eleanor's face in his kitchen window. Her eyes were cold when she looked in at him and Cheryl. Joel felt some sort of emptiness in the pit of his stomach, some sort of dropping sensation. And it wasn't the whiskey.

"We sure played last night." Cheryl filled her little glass again.
"That we did," said Joel, leaning over and kissing her lightly on the lips.

"Ah. What," she stuttered.

"You want this Chow?" He upended his glass.

"Uh . . . sure . . I . . are you sure?"

"It's about time I let Eleanor go."

"She won't miss you?"

"I doubt it. Trust me."

"I think I'm going to like you," she said and got up.

On his front step, she turned and gave him a hard kiss. Joel watched the splotched ravage of her calves as she crossed the street, the Chow trotting beside her.

He shut the door and sat on the couch in his living room. There was the vacuum in the middle of the carpet. Something about it standing there made his throat feel tight. He sighed a few times and massaged his head. Joel could see through the big circular window in his kitchen. It looked into Eleanor's house. And there was the parrot on its perch, bright green, almost luminous in the sharp afternoon. The parrot looked at him and he looked back. Night was coming on.
Dreaming the Hyena

There was a time when I thought a great deal about the sky. I would climb the steps of the old, Spanish bell tower in Balboa Park and rest my head against the skirt of the green-bronze bell, watching the clouds for hours—how they sometimes seemed like the faces of fat, old Englishmen from a previous century, or obsequious and narrow, with bulbous eyestalks and pinched expressions. Now I have become a cloud.

I noticed the beginnings of my transformation one evening late in summer, when the soft, clear light of San Diego mingled with the warmth of empty sidewalks, and the city seemed to murmur in its sleep. I had taken my wife, Julie, and Evan, our little boy, to see the hyena in the zoo and then into the surrounding park with its vast rose gardens and crumbling, baroque arches.

Evan was obsessed with hyenas. And, as every man wonders in his youth and no doubt fantasizes—even if only for the slightest moment—about being a tiger or a bear or some other impressive creature, my boy dreamt into himself the loping gait, the laugh, the composite, snub-nosed face which is neither lynx, nor baboon, nor dog, but a golem of parts.

The hyena. We'd hear Evan's laugh through the bedroom wall late at night when the house became his. In the mornings, we might find a water glass on its side, sofa cushions on the floor, a rough spot on the carpet where the boy had curled to sleep. And beside this phenomena, the greater issue, the issue of my transformation, went unnoticed by my family.

Standing in an open rose-atelier that evening in the park, I was watching an impish, little cloud change from a mouse into a pointing hand, when I felt Julie's angry
grip on my shoulder. Evan was nearby chasing squirrels, cackling and snarling with the hunt.

"You blame me," I said, still watching the cloud, "but I can deny him nothing."

"How can you let this go on? He's an outcast at school. He has no friends." Her voice was full of hurt. And, in an abstract way, I pitied her being so caught up with our son's small concerns.

"Growing pains, my love. Think: his life will never be as wonderful as it was when he could become a hyena at will."

"I didn't give birth to a hyena. Hyenas eat dead bodies."

"So you've read up on them, then?"

She let go of my shoulder.

The hand was pointing its finger west at the sunset, clouds tinged dark against a pink-orange horizon. When I finally looked around, I noticed that my wife and son had gone and that my clothes were soaked with moisture—not from the outside, but from my skin. My collar was drenched. I shivered as a breeze played over my face and neck. At the time, I could not have guessed that I was becoming like the ones I watched in the sky.

The hand was already re-forming into something else, and I thought: a mouse, a pointing hand, something still to be observed, even more after that—syllables in a heavenly sentence, a riddle at sundown. The wind blew around me, and the flowers were nodding. I made for the Spanish bell tower, walking as fast as I could. Once there, I stayed, leaning my head against the corroded bell, until the last light faded, until the clouds were puffs of black smoke barely present to my eyes.
The next day, I went downtown. In the central branch of the library, I looked up
an introductory text on meteorology for the first time since the sky had come to fascinate
me with the blunt syntax of its shapes. I learned that clouds are classed in many types
and sub-types with names like *cumulus, stratocumulus, cirrus*. I loved the sound of the
words more than the science they indicated. From the Skyline Room at the top of the
library, I repeated their names: *cirronimbus, cumulus, stratocumulus, cirrus, altocumulus, stratus*, and smiled as an angel slowly became a dog over the harbor. These shapes were
not something one found discussed in meteorology textbooks.

I stood before the floor-length window and felt like laughing. Angels became
dogs and piles of coins. A man became a dragon, then a rearing horse. And I reflected
on the dual nature of all things, objective and subjective, while a flight of black seagulls
glided over the old, whitewashed Saint James Hotel. Four floors down, on E Street, I
could see people walking as if asleep—slowly, unaware, dreaming.

I placed the book on the reshelv counter and took the stairs, thinking of the
Enochian angels that are said to have appeared to the alchemist, John Dee, in a series of
visions. Freudians cite this as a famous example of subconscious preoccupations
manifesting in a conscious mind. Objective and subjective: Gabriel whispers the Quaran
into the ear of a poor, Quarashian tribesman, who becomes Mohammad the Prophet;
cloud particles range from 5 to 75 micrometers and can combine to become owls in
flight; and the solid earth sits below the blue depth of the sky.

When I pushed through the glass doors of the library, I left the handles beaded
with moisture. My clothes were soaked again. And, in my reflection, my face was
blurred at the edges, translucent around my cheekbones, at the corners of my jaw. I
thought to myself, cirrus, stratocumulus, cirronimbus, stratus, how you must laugh at the forms of earth—we measure your ice crystals to the thousandth of a centimeter, while you show us what we are: cats and trees, fields of eyes.

She said it had to stop, and I could see that she was right. The boy had gnawed the furniture. I'd stayed at the bell tower until nightfall again. And Julie greeted me at the door, knowing exactly where I'd been. She tried to smile, but I could see she'd been crying.

"What's that?" She stared at the wet footprints I left on the rug. "You've been out in the rain."

"Remarkable. How did he do it with such little teeth?" The seat of the armchair was ripped, its wooden feet bitten and dented.

"He's old enough. It's not like he has his baby teeth anymore." Julie looked out the living room window at the moonlit street—dry, empty. She looked back at my footprints as if to unravel the contradiction, but her mind was overtaxed. A puddle of moisture had formed around my shoes. I was wearing my dark blue suit pants, a white shirt, my emerald tie, but I was so wet that the pants and tie looked black, my white shirt damp and clinging.

"Are you ill?" she asked. "A fever, maybe?"

I said I didn't know. The armchair was a replica Victorian tea chair and had cost $600.00. I said I'd talk to the boy. I found him under the blankets, yarling quietly in his
sleep. A patch of blanket moved up and down with his little breaths. And I watched a stain form around where I was sitting at the edge of his bed.

Julie stood in the doorway, biting her lower lip. We had been married for almost 10 years, and not once had she been unfaithful. She was a good wife, though boring. For her, day clicked after day on the lathe of commonplace sacrifice that associates the housewife with martyr and saint. She did her duty, loved punctually, and wanted only for her son to grow up to be sensible—a mailman or a plumber, perhaps own a construction business, or work as a civil servant. She frowned at me and motioned with her hands, but I didn't want to wake Evan up. Let him rest, I mouthed. Even hyenas need to sleep. Besides, the room had become very humid. Evan's moon landing poster, already yellowed and crackly, had curled around its tacks. The windows were fogged like a bathroom mirror. Beads of water had formed on the ceiling. They dripped onto the bedspread. stap. stap.

"Daddy?" His head poked above the covers, light brown hair scraggly in his face. "You're blurry."

"You know why I'm sitting here. You're my son. We should speak plainly."

"Because I bit the cat?"

We regarded each other for a moment.

"Let's forget the cat at present. Let's talk about the furniture."

"I'm getting my hyena teeth. They hurt." He bared his teeth. normal. healthy teeth. Nothing vaguely hyenaish. He was long past teething. The doorway was empty. I could hear Julie pacing in our bedroom, the wooden floor creaking as she turned.

"Hyenas have no use for the legs of expensive chairs."
Evan looked at me, faint, bestial twirr in the back of his throat. "They might."

"It's unlikely. Hyenas are scavengers and often predators. They would not hunt furniture."

"Can I hunt the cat?"

"Yes," I said. "the cat would be more appropriate."

He was satisfied with that. Soon, his eyelids grew heavy, and he passed back into sleep. I reached to smooth his hair but, to my surprise, my hand passed around his head in a small puff of vapor.

In our bedroom, I saw myself in the mirror over the bureau before it, too, started to fog. I was losing definition. Or it may be more accurate to say that I was being redefined: my suit pants and shirt were still filled by the body of a man, but my face and hands fumed constantly, masses of agitated vapor. My eyes and mouth were barely distinct.

Julie took no notice when I entered the room. She was barefoot, still in the day's wrinkled sundress, a lock of curly brown against her forehead.

"You," she frowned, "need to be a stronger father."

"Can't you see that I have other, more immediate concerns?"

"A father should want to safety of his son."

"You mean of his furniture."

"I mean Evan might be getting introverted." Julie stopped and stared out the window at the empty baseball diamond across the street. She sounded frustrated. worried. I knew I should walk up behind, put my arms around her, and murmur comforting things. But I had no desire to murmur anything. to misrepresent my true
feelings. I felt airy, detached, preoccupied with my own, inner transformation. I was introverted, myself, and what was wrong with that?

"He reads too much for a boy." Julie said to the window, massaging her forehead with the heel of her hand. "He has no interest in sports. Can that be normal for an 8-year-old?" Deliberately not looking at me, she laid down on the bed and continued staring out the window. The sundress had climbed far up her legs—those pale tubes of flesh that had once created such desire in me. She wanted me to touch her. I looked at her for a while, then drifted out of the room.

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I didn't care to delve into the more involved meteorological works but, the next day, I returned to the Spanish bell tower with new understanding, the holy cloud names on my lips.

It was convenient that I was a tenured, English professor with the summer off and enough time to follow my interests, which is, after all, what tenure is for. I had grown accustomed, since my first idle climb of the tower at the beginning of the summer, to visiting every day and staying until nightfall. I often had Julie pack a sandwich—peanut butter and jam in a brown bag, like my grade school days, with the sky dazzling and clear, insects of all varieties hovering about the roses, and the dirt-encrusted statues: Cornelius Agrippa, Junipero Serra, Bacchus, Saint Didacus looking on from alcoves and the bends of walkways.
I was never so happy as when I reached the top of the tower and saw the bronze bell alloy oxidizing against blue sky. It was there that I felt most at home, and only with great difficulty could I tear myself away after sunset. I would have slept there, if I could, to rise with the first light, a muezzin of the clouds. But I knew I had a duty to my family, to my wife. We had not touched each other in more than a year. And, though all substance had gone out of my married life, I had forced myself to be beside her every night, falling asleep to the sight of her back.

Maybe I was able to carry on because I had become detached by the sameness, the monotony of married life. But I prefer to think of it as having reached a more elevated frame of mind—an awareness that the thoughtless routines of daily life were hardly ever identical. I learned this from watching the clouds. The creases in the gray sweatshirt she wore to bed were never exactly the same. The strands of her brown hair fell in unique arrangements every morning. The whorls of bedspread were as various as the ocean. And, above it all, the clouds slowly changed, and I changed with them. Though, I’m sure to Julie, as to anyone unused to the great, parallax shift of the sky, it seemed like I was standing still.

Moreover, in the past weeks, I had come to notice more movement in the clouds, more intelligence, variation, and humor, the ever before. Where most men saw only static puffs against blue, I read the drama of shapes, the messages there. I felt we were intimately linked. The clouds had no desire to criticize me for my shortcomings as a husband and a father if, indeed, I had any. The clouds accepted and did not judge.

I remember, in particular, one small cloud, who would often separate from the others, always forming a smile more dazzlingly beautiful than any I had seen on earth.
Then she would tell me a story in the most intricate shapes—an empty birdcage, then the small bird in flight over mountains. Or a Roman centurion throwing a javelin becoming an elephant dead on its side in a battlefield, for example. I sometimes wondered why these extremely delicate images were not noticed by more people and mentioned in the media. But I came to realize that the stories had always been there on display. Though, perhaps at this point in space and time, they were meant only for me.

The morning after speaking with my son about the chair. I saw my cloud again, saw her sweet smile. Leaning my head against the bell’s skirt, I smiled back, opened my arms outward, and bowed. From the wings of a giant eagle in flight, she formed Julie’s face, grinning peacefully. I nodded in agreement. I knew what had to be done.

I went home early that evening, several hours before nightfall, blown back and forth by the wind as I drifted onto my street. I didn’t know how I’d tell my wife that I had found a new love, but my task was clear. Silently, I slipped in the half-open door. In the dining room, they were eating dinner—my wife, my son, and a tall, blonde man they called David. I watched them eat. Eventually, their talk turned toward me.

“Obsessed with the clouds?” he asked.

“Crazy,” Julie said. “I haven’t seen him since a year-and-a-half ago.”

A year-and-a-half. At first, I thought it was impossible, a lie to put this David at ease. But I realized it was somehow true when I looked at the house, clothes I had never seen any of them wear before, the cut of their hair. No one noticed me hovering at the
edges of the room. I watched David arch his eyebrows and spoon soup into his mouth. I watched Evan—something different about him now, more boyish and less feral in the cut of his bangs, the way his eyelids shifted quickly to scan David’s face in an off-moment. Where had he learned this calculation? And Julie, her forehead no longer wrinkled with concern—had time passed so quickly for her when, for me, hardly a day had gone by since I’d left her lying on our bed?

“Does it feel humid in here to you?” asked David. Julie shrugged her shoulders with a smile I didn’t recognize. She would not allow her face to do anything but smile, fixed like a rubber replica of itself. And I could see into her crass desperation. I could see her driving urge to have a man, any sensible man, as a father for Evan. I saw her bending toward David like grass under wind, bending the centerline of her being, everything to accommodate him. And my son looked directly at me, then, as an angel once did from a mountain of cloud. We grinned at each other, objective and subjective realities converging for a moment in us, between us. I was a father. I was a cloud. I was a cloud-shape of his father that only he could see. And something beautiful and knowing in his face told me he understood.

“Let me air it out,” she said. “That might help.” She opened several windows, creating a cross-draft, and I was gone.

There is a passing sadness, sometimes, that hangs on my memories of Julie, her silent disappointment that I was not more interested in barbeques and baseball games.
She was a sensible, laborious woman, and I believe she once loved me, but this thought does not bother me overmuch. Here, in the blue depth of the sky, all we do is think, and many memories pass through us that we render for the amusement and education of those who would notice them. In truth, I have led several lives. Though, I have always been a cloud, which is to say I have been many things—for Moses an open hand, for Charlemagne a crucifix, over Teotihuacán a rain of gold, a tiger on a balcony in France, a man gazing from a tower, one shifting into another with the endless vicissitudes of the sky.

And my son still dreams of being the hyena. Although, he has grown up too sensibly to allow himself to remember when awake. His dreams are of romps through plains of tawny grass. Ibises watch from trees as sick gazelles straggle from their herds like ripened apples on a low branch. He sometimes notices a grinning cloud, his thick, ropy tail twitching on the veldt; though, he has not quite learned to read the messages there. And, in his dreams, my son hunts, laughs, rediscovers the meaning of joy. I smile down at him, watching him grow rough and free. And there is hope for him yet.