First Bird Falling| Short stories

Drew Colin McNaughton

The University of Montana

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FIRST BIRD FALLING

short stories by

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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Megan had just turned down the radio to tell me I could get out and walk the rest of the goddamned way to Denver when the birds started falling. The first bird was a duck. It hit the car with a clacking thud, left a tuft of feathers under the wipers and a splatter of wet crimson where the beak cracked the windshield. Megan pulled the car to the shoulder, cut the ignition, and turned to me.

"Get out," she said.

But I stayed there staring at the windshield. I could see the small chip that the beak had made begin to spiderweb through the cold glass, the cracks razoring their way to the edges. Megan had her eyes closed tight, but I had never seen something like that before.

"Crazy," I said.

Megan held her fingers to her temples, rubbing in quick tight circles, and when her eyes popped suddenly open, she kept them focused on the wheel.

We had been in Kansas for about two hours, and the snow that had fallen the night before, in Chicago, had turned into sleet, and had just recently ceased altogether. We were headed home from her sister's wedding and I hadn't brushed my teeth in days. I could feel the plaque on my incisors chewing away at the enamel. The wind shuddered against the car. We weren't even halfway home.
“I didn’t see it,” she said, holding her palms up shoulder level, lifting them skyward.

“That’s because it fell, I think,” I said.

Above us, the clouds were tearing apart like cotton. What better reason for the bird to fall?

Megan got pregnant in Chicago. Or maybe I got her pregnant in Denver before we’d even left for the wedding, but that was where we found out, so Chicago it is. We’d stood together, bent over the plastic test applicator, in the pale light of the bathroom and watched the small pink plus sign appear.

“Oooh, shit,” I’d said.

“Nice, Eric,” she’d replied. “You sound like you missed a fucking jump shot.”

She’d hidden the test under some magazines in the garbage then, and I’d tried to hug her. I’d even said things about everything being alright; how we’d get through it together but I had no idea what I was talking about, and had hoped even then that she’d see I was no more a father that day than I ever will be. She had let me brush her hair, and after a while said she was just as scared and confused as I was, but during the reception I’d watched her spit out the champagne after the toast and I knew she had made a decision. We’d hugged her parents goodbye on their cold porch and it had burned like hell when her mother pinched my cheek saying that I was a keeper, sure thing, a keeper.

In the car I suggested we go back, see if the bird was dead. Megan yanked the parking brake and told me to go ahead.

“Promise you won’t just take off? Leave me freezing out there?”

“Promise you’re not going to haul that dead bird back here?”

The bird lay sprawled on the road behind the small car, some of the feathers torn off during impact floated up in the wind, forming small tornadoes, whipping chaos
through the cornrows. The wind was like nothing I'd imagined, it picked up speed from somewhere past the horizon, and seemed to come from all directions. I knew the iridescent greenblue chevrons on the duck’s wings meant it was a male. There was something wicked about the beak, the way it was splintered from base to tip, the pale gelatinous ooze, it must have been brain, that seeped from the skull. I tried imagining the bird alive, in flight. All I could think of, though, was that cartoon duck; a stuttering, incomprehensible thing. This bird, motionless, smashed on the asphalt, it's neck corkscrewed twice and a patch of down missing from its chest.

My neighbor had two geese when I'd lived in Maine growing up. A pair of honking things that would burst into a flailing mania of when anything approached. Those birds had beaks that began as bulbous orange knobs at the skull, and tapered to flat shovels. If you were close enough, got them nervous enough, they would open their beaks between honks and somehow hiss like snakes. I used to sit at the edge of the chicken wire cage tossing handfuls of pebbles to hear that sound.

When I bent to lift the dead bird off the asphalt, I noticed its wings were covered in a thick layer of ice. I remembered hearing on the radio once that geese, ducks, and other migratory fowl can sometimes get icing on their wings, the same way a 747 does. The birds that get covered with ice will exhaust themselves trying to keep up with the flock until the weight and exertion become too much, and they free-fall. I thought about this as I lifted the bird and threw it, spiraling, into the tall grass of the shoulder. Down the road I could see her head in the car, her neck twisted to see what could be taking me so long, out here alone in the cold. She should have been smoking like she usually did when she had some nagging anger building up in her, but she had stopped cold turkey two weeks ago.
The night before the wedding, the night we found out about the baby, it snowed and snowed. Her parents’ home smelled of incense and we slept in her old bedroom. She had blushed when I saw her collection of pink dolls.

“A lot of toys for a girl who calls herself a punk rocker.” I’d said.

“I don’t call myself that anymore,” she’d said.

“I know.” I told her.

“You grow out of it.”

“Maybe,” I said.

She told me she’d had her first experience with a boy there in that room. How was that supposed to make me feel? She showed me, out the window, the tree in the backyard where she’d caught the boy peeping into her window months after they’d broken up.

“The night I caught him,” Megan said. “He fell, and my father had to drive him to the hospital.”

“He could have died,” I said.

“Yes, but he didn’t.”

I felt like I should have told her then, for some reason, that I was sorry for getting her pregnant. I should have told her how I had even thought about taking the car back that night, alone. But I didn’t. I left her alone in the bedroom and watched TV in the kitchen, and kept the volume down so low that I could hear her family moving around in their sleep. I snuck back in after a few hours, and she curled into me when I climbed into bed, but I was too scared to sleep.

I was eight years old when my family went on the Cape Cod vacation. I had come down with pinkeye, smallpox, or chickenpox, something that kept me from going. My family left me with my aunt Caroline for two weeks. I remember seeing her walk through
the living room naked on my last night there. She was pale, loosely wrinkled with a scar that sliced horizontally in a fold just above her graying pubic hair where the doctors had once pulled out a stillborn baby boy. She’d told me some of the details when I’d asked one morning, over oatmeal, what could make such a scar. Later, when my father had come, sea-tanned and sunglassed, to retrieve me, she’d told him that we’d had loads of fun but all I can remember is that deep line of purple stretched out, folded; the word caesarian.

Megan said we should stop for lunch soon when I got back to the car and I told her that the duck was indeed killed on impact. I remembered the radio program about this phenomenon, how the wind, temperature and moisture have to be just right for the ice to form on the waxy feathers but that when even a small amount begins to collect, there is nothing the bird can do. I told Megan about the bird’s wings, and how heavy he was. Megan even turned down the radio so she could hear what I was saying.

Just then a black and white shape streaked from the sky and bounced on the asphalt just in front of the car. Megan screamed and jerked the steering wheel to the side and the tires squealed but did not miss the body of the thing that thumped beneath the tires. We swayed back and forth together in the car for a long time while she recovered.

“What the hell was that?” she demanded, her hands trembling on the wheel. Looking back, I could see the shape of the new bird, still spinning from our force. Black, white and gray feathers snaked after us, caught in our wake.

“That, I think, was a Canada goose,” I said.

I tried to explain what I’d heard on the radio to Megan, and told her what I thought was happening to the geese. It felt good when she listened like I knew something. There
was an exit to a town called Lynnburg. As Megan flipped the blinker we were talking about how scared the geese must be.

“Imagine that,” she said, “all of your instincts screaming at you to keep up! Keep flying! Stay with the group! But still you just keep falling.”

It seemed like things might be ok then, the way we could talk about the birds kept us from taking things too seriously. I smoked a cigarette and tried to find something besides a country station on the radio.

“So maybe it’s not that scary,” I said. “Maybe it’s like drowning or something. Like something you don’t know is happening.”

“Don’t be so naïve.”

So, things wouldn’t be ok, that was fine. I should have known that. I did know that. Or I didn’t know it, but the whole rest of the world did.

In Megan’s room in Chicago, we’d talked briefly about the reality of the baby, about keeping it.

“We’ve been together for two years Eric,” she’d said. “It’s not like we shouldn’t be able to deal with this.”

“It’s a baby,” I’d said, “I can’t just deal with it like it’s a flu or something... something I’ll get over.”

“Great, you just compared my baby to a disease.”

“No. And influenza is a virus Megan, cancer is a disease. A baby’s forever, like a 

\textit{diamond}, a little bouncing baby diamond. Is that a more fair comparison? A diamond?”

She’d almost thrown the glass she was holding at me right then. I was excited, I needed her to explode, to scream at me like she did when she used to get drunk in the
afternoon's with me. But she just slammed the glass on the nightstand and it didn't break, and she even wiped up the water that spilled out onto the hardwood floors.

"Just leave it, it's just water," I'd said.

"No it's not," she said.

We pulled into Lynnburg's restaurant, a fifties style diner called Big Buff Faye's, with a cutout of a burly woman flexing a bicep and holding a dinner plate on a billboard in the parking lot. When we got to the entrance, there was a note taped inside the window, scrawled on a receipt that said 'Closed for a while,' and I turned to show Megan but she was staring across the road toward a barn in a wheat field.

When I followed her gaze, I could see a herd of people gathering in front of the barn doors, some figures were just arriving and joining the crowd. The wind had stopped, and the sun was coming out, but it was flat light, and not warm at all.

"I'm going over there," she said, already stepping away from me.

I followed her across the road and as we drew near, I could make out the individuals in the crowd more clearly. Some were standing together in small groups but most of them were bent over, tromping through the grass with their arms outstretched, chasing something. Then I saw the geese. There must have been around fifty of them, holding their heads high, chests puffed, as they waddled and scattered quickly. Some of them dragged their heavy, limp wings at their sides, rustling about with awkward difficulty. I reached for Megan, but she picked up her pace and went for the birds.

At the edge of the crowd was an old woman standing alone, her head wrapped in a gray wool shawl. She winced when I touched her shoulder, asked her what was happening. She explained that the geese had just started falling that morning, and that this group had
come down all at once. Some of the geese weren't hurt at all, but many had broken their wings so the others wouldn't leave.

“We’re trying to get them into the grain silo,” she said, nodding toward the gaping doors of the building behind me.

“What for?” I asked. *They’re going to eat them*, I thought.

“Sort out the healthy ones. Some of those birds aren’t going to be able to fly anymore. Plus the other ones are all icy and they can warm up in there, there’s food they can eat. They’ll fly off.”

I could see Megan getting everyone organized into a chain, locking arms in a semi-circle, closing in.

When I was ten, I remember watching my neighbor kill one of his geese while I waited for the bus. I stood in my yard while it rained that morning, shielding the paper-mache sculpture of Saturn I had made for an astronomy project with my raincoat. My neighbor stepped out of his door in his long underwear, and I crouched low so he wouldn’t notice me. He was a large old man with broad shoulders and a long gray moustache. He had one arm like a sailor, hairy and brutish, and another that was gnarled and diminutive that was cramped and bent to his chest as if always pointing at himself.

“Part dwarf, I am,” he’d told me the first time he’d caught me staring.

I watched him stride from his front door straight to the bird pen, kneel down and extend his strong hand, palm up, toward the wire mesh making a soft cooing sound in his throat. When one of the geese finally approached, put its head through the mesh and started to nibble at the grain he held, the man flashed his teeth and with a sudden overhand twist of his wrist, grabbed the goose by the neck. Then, still on his knees, he yanked his arm back like he was starting a chainsaw and the goose slammed against the
chicken wire flapping and straining but the hand was knotted on its neck and I heard a crunching sound just before the bird stopped flailing.

I came home from school that day and saw that he'd killed both of the birds. They hung plucked and pink from the cage, side by side, wired there by the neck. The neighbor brought us one of the birds the next day. He had cleaned out their entrails at some point, and I remember how my father, and even my aunt Caroline chided me that Thanksgiving when I'd refused to eat the stuffing from that hole.

In the field, the line of townspeople had funneled most of the geese into the barn when I saw Megan break off from the end of the line. She turned, backtracked a few paces and then stopped, reaching into the tall grass below her. I jogged over to her but when I saw the dead bird at her feet I stopped. Her back was to me but I could tell she was crying by the way that her shoulders kept jerking upwards, the way she slapped her hand to her mouth. I reached for her other hand and pulled. She wouldn't move.

"Its dead," I said. "Come on."

I leaned back with all my weight on my heels like a child, trying to pull her away. I remember that wonderful release, Megan snapping her hand away from mine and the crisp cold sting of the frozen wheat on my cheek as I fell. Even if I could have known that she would give birth to the boy two months early, and that I would stand with her to watch the tubes and machines whistle and hiss, and eventually walk out of the hospital for good. If I knew she would raise the boy with a man in Des Moines who filled vending machines, it still would have been an entirely physical realization, our parting, and all I will ever remember is what I saw: a lone slice of blue in the gray sky; caesarian, and the glass stiff feathers of a dead bird pointing up from the field.
First Animal Memory: A Nest of Fledgling robins

Their little shelled pistachio heads bob up and down. Their beaks, impossibly agape, are silent. My brother’s stone, tossed knocks them - nest and all – from the barn beam. Three of them survive the fall. At six years old, I can see how their heads are ringed with those delicate feathers like lint and they’re bald on top and with their mouths open like that, and with the bobbing, so they look like little old men, laughing. They are little old men. Why not? The three of them are all facing each other with their oversized eyes closed. The mother is gone. What would she think to come home and find this? We are frightened at what a stone can do, and amazed at ourselves. Someday someone will try to explain that because we didn’t have a mother we tried to hurt the fledgling robins, to show them how it felt. What has happened is nothing at all like that, not at all. My brother has the heart to bend down, to lift one of the quivering birds from the dusty floor and place the warm body – you would not believe how light it is – like a gift, into my open hand.
Recall

And this is the way my mind has tangled the memory of my mother.

She arrives two days after Christmas, five years after my birth, their divorce, bearing gifts. She is with a man who I can only remember as small and oily and dark, like a dirty wrench, but quick. He expresses himself in rapid jerking motions and expletives, tells my father that my mother will take his four children from him. My father is dangerously silent.

My mother arrives a week before Christmas with a man like a twitching slick wet rodent and he bops around on his heels reminding my father that he had entered into a verbal agreement allowing this man and our mother to take all four of us to the circus, but it is winter. And my father reminds the man that there is no circus. Turns to us, says, There is no circus.

- My father sits alone in the dark living room and does not hear me creeping toward him in my slippered pajamas. It is late, the same night of my mother's visit. It was the night my father punched the skinny bouncing man who tried to grab us, and sent the man into a catatonic clump at the base of the stairs. And because my father does not hear me, his youngest son, creeping like a secret, I stop and sit quietly to watch him ponder the silver pistol he holds on his lap to protect us from the man who'd threatened his return. But I am tired, and though I try to stay awake until my father falls asleep, to see what this would look like, to sneak closer to the gun, though I fight to keep my eyes open, he was sitting in the chair, frozen, when my memory of the night fades.
My sister didn’t fall out of the tree as much as she seemed at the time to leap from it. I was either five or six, and I had been chasing her up the ancient willow when she jumped and missed – by an easy foot – the branch she’d hope for with her thin open hands. She sailed past me on her way down. I could see the cross-hatched soles of her shoes. I could see that her eyes were closed. It was important in that instant that she seemed asleep and it was when she struck the first limb on her way down, her nine-year old body pinwheeling, all the air forced from her lungs in a bored groan, that I could put words to what I understood of gravity. My thought: Something bad will happen. All of her weight came down on the outstretched arm she’d hoped would break her fall but only snapped, like green wood, beneath her.

Some time passed where she seemed dead there on the ground. Her broken limb was flailed out from her body. I could not move to help her rise from the lawn. When she did stand, I could tell that there was nothing holding the broken arm together except the sheath of skin where the bones of her elbow should have been. There was something of the mutant in the way the skin stretched, the way her hand flapped against her leg beyond her control. As she staggered across the yard, still staring at the impossible arm, I worried what she might tell our father. I held myself to the massive trunk and was too frightened to move up in the branches to hide, too frightened of the distance between where she had fallen and the branch I stood on to try and step down, though I was much lower in the limbs than she had been. She hadn’t cried out when the bones shattered under her, she had remained absolutely silent.
I would walk into our living room seven years later, after a soccer game I’d lost, and see my sister supine on the couch, striking herself in the stomach with a tightly closed fist. She concentrated before each blow, her eyebrows raising themselves to a ‘V’ and the muscles in her cheeks knotted as she set her jaw. She told me when I asked that she was worried, terrified, she might be pregnant. A boy, party, back of the car.

“Holy shit”

“I know, huh?”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m killing it.”

She balled up her fist in front of my face, as if proving something, and swung it sharply against her belly button.

“You’re doing it wrong,” I said. “You keep tightening your stomach. It won’t work like that.”

“You do it. I’ll close my eyes and you punch. You punch. Hit hard.”

She held a pillow over her head and I readied myself. I imagined a small target, swimming beneath her skin, somewhere between her ribs and crotch. It didn’t seem so serious to me, the thought that a baby – because that is how I imagined it, fully formed and thumbsucking – might be inside her. I didn’t even know anything about sex, not really. I imagined a boy on top of my sister though, some kid in a leather jacket, collar flipped up. And when I punched her – so hard I felt the knuckles strike her spine on the other side – it was that boy in the jacket I was hitting. She rolled off the couch retching. I thought, *She’ll barf it up.*

“You punched a baby,” she said when she gained her breath.
And we must have started down that road, laughing, because we could think of nothing else to be done. She told me that it hurt too much to laugh, but that, of course, made it worse. She looked out the window for a while, when we’d calmed down. While she kept an eye there for the headlights of my father’s truck pulling into our driveway, I called Planned Parenthood to price abortions, but the woman on the line heard my sister’s laughter in the background and hung up on me.

It wasn’t like you’d think. We weren’t sad about the thing. She was my sister, and when we laughed about it we laughed because the thought of a baby was as unreal to us as it is real to you, in your imagination right now. That’s the thing. You have to understand that she didn’t scream when the bones crushing beneath her own weight severed the nerves in her elbow. And though it turned out she wasn’t pregnant, that she hadn’t even gone all the way with the boy in that car, memory won’t let me forget what really happened.

I remember the next day we went swimming. I remember the way my sister looked when she realized that I could see the place just below her heart where the skin had already become a cloudburst of purple in the outline of her brother’s fist.
Contractions

I am eleven. I hear the bellow of her pain before I see the thing and it is slipping out impossible smooth from inside. Her hind leg has become tangled in a loose coil of barbed wire. When she walks, the wire bounces behind her in a knot. The calf is going to fall into the nest of wire when it emerges. Though I do not understand that stress has caused this, though I am eleven and do not know that the calf is already dead, I see the eyes of the mother, eyes liquid brown ringed at the edges with the white heat of each contraction and the knowledge - she must have known - that her offspring is dead long before the body itself falls to the ground and the thorns of wire tear open the thin hairless skin and long before the crows who wait patient and wise will rise from the limbs of the dead elm at the field’s edge together, and though I step forward to help, to pull the wire from her legs, it only makes her run and here is what matters: her eyes looked at me, hot and weeping, they set themselves into me and made clear, more clear than anything ever will be, that I did this thing to her. I am eleven and the calf does fall into the wire, wet and dirty now, head lolling about in chaos and half covered in an embryonic sac like raw egg whites and with each turn the mother attempts to see her calf, it is dragged in a circle so that when the mother panics and runs, the corpse bounces through the dust after her. The mother must wait then, out in the open pasture, for the crows to lift from that tree, but they are as frightened as we are, so we wait together in exhausted silence for a black silhouette to rise from the tree line.
Burning My Cat

I was drunk, twelve years old, stuttering home from my neighbor's, feeling the stolen Jack Daniel's slosh up and down in my stomach that warm way it does without any food to deaden it. I was on the dirt road and it was blue-lit with that cold clear moonlight of late fall hitting the frozen ground of Vermont with its flat silent light. There was still some color to the fallen leaves during the daytime, where they'd landed an easy month ago. They shone red, yellow, purple even during the daytime, but they were all just blue blue blue by the night road.

Muenster was a yellow cat. The reason I thought he was just a log at first was the moon smacked the color out of him, made him blue-gray. The car must have been coming from the south, because his paws pointed absently in that direction. He looked as if he were accusing somebody of something, but lacked the energy to pursue it. Well, I thought, maybe hit got hit twice. Maybe his body rolled after the initial impact. I could not think clearly about the thing yet. I said his name out loud, Muenster. I don't know. I thought something might happen.

The worst thing was pulling him off the road. It was cold enough that the same ice crystals that glassed the surface of the puddle beside him had frozen Muenster solidly to the hard-packed gravel. I heard the crack of his small bones as I lifted his tail, the ripping of the fur that stuck hard to the road and I felt the sudden remorse of his suffering by realizing I could not gather him all at once. I began scraping at the tufts of hair stuck to the road and I was crying and drunk but I didn't know that in a few moments, I would hear his frozen body clatter like china when set him on the dining room table, that I would soon be laughing as hard as the time I did when the same cat burped like a fat man, as much as I was crying then on my knees getting fur and pebbles under my nails scraping...
at the road. We would burn him with a pile of brush the next day. There are no ceremonies for a thing like that, for a family like ours. You just kind of toss him on the pile once it is already burning and watch curiously, hoping the heat is enough, as the animal is consumed by fire.
What Did I Tell You

One boy is around six, one around nine years old, and they are sitting on the angled slab of granite that the waterfall has slimed with green algae like a tongue. It must be six, seven feet down to the shallow water, the bouldered stream, beneath them. The old man, who I know is the same old man who tried to touch my sister once when he was drunk, is yelling something at the boys, which I cannot hear over falling water. The oldest boy stands, cups his hands to holler something back, does a hip-wiggle taunt that drives the old man to rise from the lawn chair. Drives him to step onto the waterfall itself, where the boys never think he’d dare come to scold them. The smaller boy stays seated and the older runs, but the old man tries to lift the boy from the slippery stone and his foot whips free of grip and his body does the same hip-wiggle move that the nine year old boy did before he loses to imbalance and falls as a tree falls to the rocks below and it is the only sound I remember when the weight of all of him came down on his wrinkled, frightened head.

I had to run from where I was sitting, across the road, over a small chain with a sign warning against just this type of thing, climb down the loose rock wall, and step about three feet into the water where the current was strong and running brown/pink/red, before I got to the body. He was already so cold. He was too heavy for me to lift with twelve year old arms, and when the other man who’d seen it jumped in to help me I had already tried to lift the body from behind and felt the cracked eggshell feeling of the back of the skull and I may have already realized there was nothing, now, to be done. That there was still the body to be lifted from the water had not occurred to me yet. That I would have to answer questions; this also, hadn’t crossed my mind. I was thinking of those two boys, who I did not know, wondering what in the universe they would, years later, call this day.
My Brother is in the Desert

“You stabbed me in the ass,” I say.

And what happened is my brother stabbed me in the ass. I’m fourteen, he’s sixteen and a half. He’d been chasing me in circles - through the kitchen, around the chimney, through the dining room - holding the knife. When Crash, our German Shepherd, stepped in front of me, I stopped. That’s when the knife, a kitchen blade with a seven inch long, inch-wide steel blade split through my Levi’s and sunk itself an inch into the meaty part of my left cheek.

Outside of the bathroom door, that I’ve locked behind me, my brother stands listening. And this is it: I’m standing on my tippy toes with my pants off twisting to see the cut which, wiped clean, looks like a little mouth. It is a small mouth, speaking. And when he knocks at the door he can’t tell if I’m laughing in there or if I’m crying but he says he’s sorry anyway.

Tonight I watch the news of the war, and I realize my brother will get to see the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the Fertile Crescent. I imagine him chasing an enemy under rainbow clouds of chemical magnificence and what the fuck can I say to him in a letter about this war? I can tell him I want to see him again, but he can’t hear the way I’m saying it through the paper, he can’t write back and in the two weeks it will take for my letter to cross the ocean and the desert, what will happen is a mystery. Everything we know about each other happened at the end of that knife.
When It Was Cold

I am outside the cabin I've rented in Roxbury, Vermont. The trees are snapping. Because the temperature fell so fast this evening, from thirty-five above to ten below – it is some kind of meteorological record-breaker – the trees pop in protest. It is late March, and it should not be so cold, I think. I just stand in place to listen to the trees and it sounds like a fire sounds, when you’re close enough to hear the explosions, coming through the maples like those snapping flames in waves because inside the trees the sap cannot react before the cold air enters and causes it to crystallize. The trunk of the young maple I am watching suddenly, unceremoniously, and with very little grace, explodes. The trunk, what was a straight and smooth-skinned thing, only eight inches thick, has shattered into a splintering of itself, leaving the tree top, the weight of the tree, to choose which direction it might fall.

I am amazed, therefore, when the tree was still standing there with its ruptured trunk – like a detonated firecracker – the next morning. It takes twenty minutes with an axe to make that tree fall.
Chicago

The mind can capture something like 25 images a second. I read that somewhere. What does that mean? What is an image? And then I remember.

On a street in Chicago downtown headed for the Checkerboard Blues lounge. Crossing the street, our Japanese friend, Atsutaro, points at an approaching car and the thing about it is the car’s door’s open and the voice that is screaming in what is pain or fear is a woman’s and all I can see, all my memory allows me to ever see, is the leg in a fishnet stocking holding open the door of the car and the stiletto heel so sharp and there is someone strong holding her back by the throat but not hard enough to strangle her voice which pleads OHMYGOD PLEASE HE IS GOING TO KILL ME and what on earth can we do? We can chase the memory of the car around the corner because it has already left us; we can remember that the leg was part of a woman who was beautiful, it clear to me that this leg was part of something beautiful. But we can’t catch a thing like that, so fast we can’t quite capture anything but this leg, this gorgeous leg jutting to hold the door, a strong shadow hulking in the driver’s seat, the memory of a voice.

I have formed my memory of Chicago around this night. We went into the Checkerboard, there’s this guy there playing amazing guitar and singing in that deep throaty way they do. There’s beer, which doesn’t taste right, but helps. You have to realize that her voice, her leg, is all I have left.
Corvids

I am standing in awe of the crowd. They cluster in the limbs of the dead elm, swallowing with their black any cold winter sunlight that might have penetrated the stark limbs of that tree. As I walk the hard-packed snow of the trail toward them, I cross some invisible line where the ravens fall into organized and sudden silence. By the thick mass of their bills, their throaty calls, their size, it is clear they are ravens. And at the base of the tree, a crow - by its smaller size, by the thinner, shorter bill - crouches in fear. And it must have been him that silenced the ravens above him. I am close enough to see the crow flash its eyelids from the front to back of the eye, the white nictitating membranes, to show that the crow is afraid. I cannot hide, but lean quietly against a spruce.

The crow on the ground makes gentle cooing sounds and spreads its wings, trying to flatten and disappear. The ravens hop from limb to limb in the tree, towering, looming up there. It is the first time, I realize, that I've seen something loom. Yet looming, it is obvious now, requires silence, profundity, danger, in a combination delicate and ominous in a way that only dark life from the sky can be.

There is a single, rasping call from one of the ravens. In a swelling reply that is a wave of sound pushing left to right through the limbs of the tree drown everything in a thick crackling call that is not succession or choir or flock, but one raging voice. This is ritual, I think, a trial for an outsider. The crow might have taken from a kill unwelcome, it may have courted one of the female ravens, maybe the crow was just in the wrong place by luck, fate, kismet. I don't know. But I am an animal, and I can physically feel the fear expand from within that bird, press the seams of the crow body on the ground. As the ravens become excited, hopping in place, bobbing their heads and releasing guttural
groans that fill the pouches on their throats, I see nothing in their expressions that indicates love. It is a systematic death for the crow.

It begins: one by one, the ravens release their footholds in the branches, swoop, thwack the crow on the ground, ascend to limb. The first blow strikes the crow on the wing, and a single feather is carried in the bill of its assailant to the tree's uppermost branches and held as a prize – but another is diving, and another - open-beaked, plucking, then ascending; and they are a single arc that etches a circle in my memory to make this cycle permanent in me as they pull free so many feathers that by the time I've rushed the tree, dipping for snowballs to drive them away, the crow is barechested, its wings are scraps of flesh, he is punctured and splayed and pink on the snow and when the ravens lift from the dead elm – and there is still beauty in the single act of so many birds rising - lift in the gentle rustling of pinions touching pinions; scattered blackness rising up and up, chests warming with effort above a ruined pink chest growing cold.

Then – movement that still feels dreamt, movement no one might have seen coming:

unison release, each raven beak opening to let free the feathers of dead crow; a black snowfall of feathers, the ravens chasing them to the earth silent, till they all have touched down on the white plane of the snowfield. Impossible constellation. Black stars.
Easter Dinner 1998

Someone said there's no better name for the all-American family than Nuclear; it is always on that razor's edge of exploding. More than that, the longer you occupy the same space as that family the radiation it puts off wears you down like plutonium, makes your hair pull out in tufts. We are more than nuclear, there are four of us kids in my family, a father and a stepmother and a half-brother make seven. I do not account for the soul of the son my father and biological mother lost before any of us were born.

There were candles in the center of the dinner table that year. I remember my older brother holding his hand above the flame until the skin blackened from smoke and heat to prove he could take it. I remember it was the year my older sister returned home for the first time since she left at sixteen. My stepmother eyed her with worry, waiting for the crystal of their mutual peace to shatter. My father scowled at them, of course, with the kind of disapproving fascination he's always had toward his willful daughter. The oldest daughter soothed us all with her even and heartfelt presence, holding inside a security that yes, this will be fine, fine. I just kind of looked at everyone and wondered where all of this food could fit. Potato, I thought. Roast beef, I thought. It has always taken me some time before I could think about things in the way I now complicate my life with supposition, reflection, worst of all interpretation.

And then our dog, our Malamute-Wolf mix, our loving pet of ten years, lost control of her hind legs as she attempted to stand in the dining room. She had struggled to rise each time she'd stood for weeks, her hind legs wavering as heat wavers beneath her, the nerves firing off all the wrong signals to the muscles. But on Easter they slipped out of socket, her hips, and she let out a scream more wild than the wolf blood inside her ever
knew, and there was the sudden collapse of her body to the hardwood floor and her rising jaw and a shriek every human in the room felt in them all the way down.

And no one made a move for a long, long time. Forks fell back to their plates with a sound too gentle for the moment between the rising voice of the animal suffering at our feet. We looked at each other with eyes like fish. Like deer in panic. We were animals and we were all afraid.

It was my father who rose from the table. He was so calm when he approached the dog, until she began her second wail. She looked right through him and he collapsed before her. That was all we could take. There was this swelling sob that came out of him, this large man with stony eyes and shoulders like anvils that lifted from within to raise the shuddering feeling he had for this animal. And that swelling sob hit us all, and because we all loved him, because to see him break shattered something in us, we could not help but weep together as he lifted the animal in his arms, let her bite his chest in her pain, carried her to the dining room doorway. He waited there for quite some time before one of us rose silently from the table to unfasten the latch and open the door for him.
The deer have stopped visiting our home at the base of the mountain. It is November, so cold now that the air cracks the window of our apartment. It must have been the breaking of the glass that woke me. I sneak out of the bed and put my hand up to the crack, and feel the swift breeze cutting its way into our dark apartment. This beautiful woman I love is sleeping in the bed, and only mumbles my name when I place an extra blanket over her. She doesn’t hear me put on my jacket and step outside.

We live in a place shaped like a cube, a renovated workshop where herds of hippies lived in the sixties. I sometimes forget that trains exist. Once, my girlfriend said to me, just before sleep, There still are trains. You can here them from where we sleep at night. Small wonders, like the deer who came each day in the summer; the deer who gave birth to a stunning set of fawns, and circled our house when we’d opened the windows and the front door, when we played music they seemed to like. The fawn who touched its wet nose to the palm of my girlfriend’s open hand in the doorway.

I remember them, the deer, like family. They were, like many families, living cautiously and I wonder what it must be like for prey like them, to wander through the world as though assailed by it. Their ears are living things beyond their immediate control and there are few things about deer that you could call brave. I worry that they, like me on nights like this, cannot close their eyes to sleep, that instincts force their perceptions like a taut wire on a harp speeding their heart until, with sudden release, it stops. And this must be why the spotlight of a car’s headlight at night can freeze them. In that overwhelming light they might lose themselves to sensation the way fighting the ocean is not as easy as drowning in it. The light just kind of enters them, becomes the whole world, and the
immediacy of the metal bullet hurtling toward them is nothing, like God is coming for them; they breathe in, and when the air shudders from their lungs on impact and their bodies soar skyward they must believe it has been the light itself, not the vehicle of the light, which has crushed them. I see them sometimes, the deer that have been struck dead. Last summer, I passed one each day on my way to work and her stomach was slowly growing in the warmth, as if feeding, as if new life was being invented inside her body. But it is cold tonight, too dark to see the deer even if they are here.

Inside, she is awake, wondering why I am having trouble sleeping, do I want to have some tea? If I could change into a million smaller selves, I would send each one to the places she and I have been, to the places we will go, just to feel all of it at once. I tell her the window has broken, but that it will get fixed, maybe tomorrow. I tell her I think the deer will come back any day now.
DEAD FISH

My wife Claire says she wishes my sister would stop looking at our daughter like she is going to steal her. She tells me this on the evening my sister drove six hours across two states to see us. I can see Erin in the yard now, twirling my daughter Sara by her bony ankles above our uncut lawn. Sara’s spinning head is a new shade of maroon each time around and I worry as I imagine all of her eight-year old insides rushing out somehow onto the grass. Claire stands with her back to me, shuffling through my sister’s purse.

“What are you doing?” I ask her. She is holding an orange pill bottle up to a shaft of sunset in our kitchen, reading the label that says Zoloft.

“Don’t,” I say, pulling the bottle from her hands, tossing it back in the leather bag.

At dinner Erin sits beside Sara and they giggle, making mashed potato sculptures on their plates.

“It’s daddy,” Sara squeals, pressing a few sprigs of greenery atop a circular wad of potato. My eyes are chunks of chicken. There is no mouth or nose.

“You’re so good,” Erin replies. “You’re a genius.”

“Dessert?” Claire steps out of the kitchen holding a grocery store cherry pie. Erin called last week to tell us that when she’d finished grading her students’ thesis papers, she’d come up for a weekend. Claire told me she had some reservations about the idea.

“Last time she came up here, she just kept crying,” Claire complained.
I had just hung up after telling her we’d love to see her.

“I just don’t think she’s stable, Neil,” She says. “Especially now with Sara’s being older.”

“She’ll be here Friday,” I said. “There’s nothing I can do to change that.”

The way Claire looks at me whenever she feels my efforts are inadequate involves a quick outward thrust of the jaw and a lowering of the brow, so that her eyes are mostly hidden when she sets them to mine. She looked at me like that on our wedding day when the caterer, a jittery man I’d hired at the last minute, freaked out and smashed an armload of champagne flute and scared my father with a corkscrew. I didn’t step in and do anything; I just kind of stood there, which disappointed Claire. That day at the wedding, my mother refused to use her oxygen tank in the pictures, and Erin told Claire she was beautiful. It was windy and the preacher got drunk at the reception and told everyone that he’d never read the whole bible.

Erin was married once, to a man who named Benjamin, who networked computers in Boston for more money than I can imagine. Six years ago, when she was working at the elementary school, one of her first graders died in the classroom. Her husband, in one of those cosmic turns, left a note on her car windshield that same day, telling her he was in love with one of their mutual friends, a bank teller. And the reason Claire worries is that when Erin came to visit, just a week after the little boy turned blue and fell out of his desk, is first because how she looked at my wife and said she felt herself to be a curse on all children, and second, Claire caught Erin staring at our daughter, asleep in her bed one night, crying and holding a pair of scissors. I was confused when Claire began screaming that night. When I came in, nobody spoke, but Erin was weeping in the corner, crouched
and holding the scissors in her shaking hand. Sara woke up and stared at all of us for a long time before she began to cry along with us.

I am a pharmacist in a drug store called Ahab's Ph-arrrgh-macy. There's a huge sea-weathered cut-out of a pirate above the entrance. We're the only pharmacy in Maine's Malmouth Bay County. Most of the people that come and go through the doors no longer laugh at the name. The tourists, though, they like it. On Friday, Mrs. Randall was at the counter, telling me how her son Franklin and I used to be the greatest friends and until I reminded her about the time he nailed my cat to a fence post after running it over with his big brother's bicycle.

“Oh you boys,” she said. “Always up to something.”

Erin jingled through the door then, in a leather coat and sunglasses. Marie, from her graduating class, gave Erin a hateful glance from the checkout line. Still pissed about Tommy O'Connor after twenty years. My sister stood behind Mrs. Randall mouthing a question to me: Frankie's mom?

“Yes.”

“What?” Mrs. Randall flashed startled glances left and right.

Mrs. Randall did not remember my sister when Erin introduced herself. She gave her a strange look, grabbed her heart medicine, and left, glancing once more back at Erin, as if frightened, before pushing through the door into the sunlight outside.

“Well, I'm home,” Erin said, pushing her sunglasses high on her head.

“You're early.”

Erin picked up a magazine and read for a half an hour until my shift ended.

Tonight, in our dining room, I see Claire eyeballing my sister when I pick up the last of the dishes to carry into the kitchen. Sara lets Claire lift her from her seat, rubs a fist
into her eyes as she follows her mother up the stairs to bed. After helping with the dishes, Erin asks me if it is ok that she is here.

“Of course,” I say. Reaching to dry the plate she holds toward me. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“And Claire?” she asks.

I can hear my wife upstairs, reading to Sara from a book of fables. At the sound of her name, she stops mid-sentence.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry so much,” I say.

I have just clattered the last dry plate into the cupboard when Claire comes down, wipes the counter beside the sink, and tells me that Sara has finally fallen asleep.

I reach into the fridge and pull out three beers, and we head out onto the porch. Even in late May, the air this far north holds a damp chill, so I plug in the small space heater on the deck. Claire and Erin start to talk about the Linguistics class Erin teaches at BU. They talk to each other like strangers, so I walk down the path to the beach towards the rushing waves, now out in the dark with the tide. I lean against a tree near the shore and watch the silhouettes of ravens picking through what the waves have left behind. One of the birds flaps around frantically trying to disengage what must be a hermit crab from its wing. I hear footsteps and Claire steps from the path onto the sand beside me to tell me Erin’s gone to bed and that maybe I’m right, she seems much better.

“Maybe the medicine helps,” I say. Skipping a rock off the crest of a wave.

This morning, I wake up on the floor again, wrapped in all of the night’s blankets. I’ve been rolling off of the bed away from Claire in the middle of the night lately, taking the covers with me. We tried to stop it once by pushing the bed to the wall, but I ended
up rolling over her to get to the floor anyway. It’s puzzling. I unfurl myself from the blankets now and peer over the edge of the bed to see Claire sprawled out on her back, a pillow clutched firmly in one hand. *How does she do that?* I wonder, remembering times in college when I would wake up and find her bright red handprint on my wrist, her already up and gone to class.

I head downstairs to make coffee and find a note on the counter from Erin, saying she and Sara went to find some blueberries and we’d make pancakes when they got back so don’t eat and is it ok that she took the two yellow baskets for the berries? I pour coffee beans into the grinder, wrap it in a towel so the noise won’t wake Claire when I turn it on. When it is ready, I fill a mug and walk out onto the porch to watch the fog rise from the sand.

There is a tough old man named Harold Fenwick who lives just down the beach from us. He has lived there for forty-six years. I have heard him, every morning for a month now, hammering new planks onto his porch. His wife died last year, and though he is the kind of man who once heaved a roadkilled deer onto the hood of his wife’s car, to show her he knew about a thirty-year old affair, he has grown suddenly and irrevocably silent. It is curious to me that I cannot remember the name of his wife. Ethel, Henrietta, something. I am thinking seriously about what I might say to him on a potential visit, when Claire bursts out of the screen door and I spill half of my coffee onto the porch.

“Where is she?” Claire demands, still in her blue nightgown.

I hold the note out to her, watching the puddle of coffee drip between the boards at my feet.

“It’s okay,” I say, resting my hand on her shoulder.

“You’re really happy about this, aren’t you?”
“What are you talking about? They’re picking berries, Jesus. She didn’t take her knife juggling.”

She pulls away from me and carries the note inside, up the stairs and into the bathroom. From the porch I see Sara and Erin holding hands as they skip up the trail back towards the house, clumps of berries spilling from the baskets Erin swings at her sides. Her hair, once jet-black, is now streaked with gray, like our mother’s. It fans out behind her as she bounces. Sara sees me on the porch and vaults onto my lap, knocking what was left of my coffee across the deck.

“Where’s Claire?” Erin asks, out of breath.

“Shower,” I say, taking the two baskets from her hands.

“You’re so lucky, living here,” she says, looking through the trees at the waves coming in with the tide.

Six years ago, after my widowed father moved to Tucson and sold us this house, Claire said “Now we’re a real family,” as though we’d been pretending for quite some time. We still had a photo album somewhere, the three of us posed before our new home, Sara’s little arms wrapped around Bubbles, the teddy bear I had to burn that summer when she got chicken pox. Claire gave the camera a smile that said We’re fine for now, but we need new shutters.

Erin makes the greatest blueberry pancakes. There’s cocoa in the batter, that’s the trick, she says. Just a little. Claire went down to Bethel to get some things for the house she told us just couldn’t wait and when Erin offered breakfast Claire lied and said she’d already eaten. I heard her wheels spitting gravel as she pulled the Subaru out of the
driveway. Sara looks up from a pool of Maple Syrup and tells me that she hates her mother.

"Don’t say that," I tell her in my slow, serious voice. "She loves us."

Sara kills a pancake with her fork and slumps back in her chair, crossing her arms.

"If she really doesn’t want me here... ” Erin starts.

"Jesus Christ, no," I say. "We are happy you are here. You know we’ve missed you."

"Mom says you scare her but you don’t scare me,” Sara says, head down.

"So she missed me?" Erin asks. "Did she miss me, Neil? Hmm?"

Later, Erin and Sara take poles out onto the dock. I tell Erin that I’ve got some papers I need to sign, insurance forms for Sara’s school next year, and stay inside to wait for my wife. I am surprised with how easy Erin is with Sara. They look the same, more than even Claire and our daughter do. Sara has my sister’s jaw, her stick legs, her sullen and silent moods. From the house to the east, Harold hammers nail after nail, the sound walking that line between rhythm and annoyance.

Sara is using the fishing pole to poke at something in the water at the end of the dock. Erin is searching through the tackle for lures, she has her back turned. It is the sound of our car pulling back into the driveway that panics me. I try to get out the door first, but Claire has already seen them and when I follow her, I notice the way she holds her hair all up with one hand when she’s frightened. Sara turns when she hears her mother’s footsteps on the wooden dock, and then turns back to the water. Because she knows that her mother wants to stop her, Sara jabs the stick as many times at the water as she can before her Claire’s shadow covers her, and she is still.
“Dead fish,” Claire says to me when I get there. “Your daughter likes to prod dead fish.”

In the water, a milky white cloud of scales and disintegrated flesh spreads out, slowly making its way to our shore. The scales glitter like sequins. The fish is a cod, and the mouth parts, which have rotted seem to open and close with the water’s movement. Sara smiles from her hiding place behind Erin’s leg. It will not be easy to explain this.

“You know what, Claire,” Erin says. “I did it. I told Sara to go over and poke at the fish for chum.”

Claire starts to make that ridiculous face; pushing out her jaw, furrowing her brow, but she starts to lose it. She steps awkwardly past my sister and starts jogging inside. I think about running after her, chasing up the stairs to the bathroom where she will inevitably be hiding, but I turn and sit beside my daughter instead. Erin throws her pole to the ground, and then childishly stumps off, following Claire.

“Are you mad at me?” I ask my daughter’s back.

Over the water, a flock of cormorants lift and swirl toward us like a cartoon hive of bees.

“Sara, you know there’s nothing wrong with you, right?”

I move toward her, but she flails against me when I reach for her hand. And when she runs past me toward the house, I feel too heavy and out of breath to follow. I can hear them inside, my wife and Erin, and their voices are sharp and I pick up the fishing rod that is pointing out to sea.

At Henry Fenwick’s house, the porch is beautiful. It sweeps the full diameter of the seaward side of his two story home. Henry is wearing a sweatshirt and a pair of jeans and his face is a deep maroon as he pounds each nail home. Every twenty-four inches a new
joist, perfect. He doesn’t see me watching him do this, from the tree line edging his property. Helen, that was his wife’s name, Helen.

He stands up from his work, three long nails in his mouth. I can remember when Erin and I were younger, he would take us out in his boat. My mother would look as far out to sea as she could, but my father would never come along. Erin, on these trips, would always tell me the secrets she never seemed able to on land. Once, she told me that Tommy O’Connor, her high school boyfriend, had tried to rape her, that she had to kick him in the nuts to get him to stop. We always would wave back at my father as the boat raced from the dock, and he would solemnly lift a hand in recognition when we returned.

Tonight I will tell Erin she must leave. They sit across from each other at the dinner table and I can tell that something is on the verge of exploding. Sara picks at the chicken with her fork, doesn’t eat anything. Erin pours herself another glass of wine, the last of it, without offering any to us. She looks directly at me for a long time.

“What?” I nearly scream.

“Oh, grow up, Neil. You taking her side in this?” she asks.

I want to hit them. I want to run from my wife and sister and daughter and abandon them here. I could make it to Boston in six hours. I could catch a flight to London. Even now, though, I am not inventive enough to think of an interesting escape. Erin leans into Sara’s ear, whispering something. Sara giggles.

“Leave,” I say.

“Me?”

“Go back home. Don’t you see what you’re doing to us?”

Claire reaches for my hand, but I stand up over my sister, bend right down into her face.
“Go. Go. Why are you here?”

And it seems clearer than anything that what I am doing is the wrong thing; clear that this will not, in any long or short-term sense, be an affable solution to the problems of family. But Erin rises from her seat anyway, tosses her napkin over her plate, and rises up the stairs to gather her things.

When we hear her wheels pulling out over the gravel, Claire is bent over the kitchen sink. She is wiping the face of a plate clean, looking at me like I’m some disfigured stranger. Sara is using her fork to carve a written message into the table, I take my time drying carefully each plate my wife passes to me, but we no longer speak.
IT IS FREEZING

My brother has brought his fat wife into my home. He and I drink all the beer in the kitchen and she watches the TV in the living room. He lost his job with the local phone company that was bought by Qwest last month and he's going to ask me for money again. I live in Swanton and work a few miles away, at a bank in St. Johnsbury, in the northeast corner of Vermont. And it's the kind of place tourists drive to when they see postcards and they take pictures of trees with sap buckets and red barns and Holsteins back with them to Connecticut. Then they move up here, like my neighbors, the Cunninghams. These people will forever use the word quaint. My girlfriend, Josephine, is a French-Canadian girl who said that the word ‘quaint’ translates to something like ‘boring’ in French, but I think both these words are wrong for this place. I was raised in the same house I now live in where quiet serenity was the furthest thing from common and I think about starting a postcard company with my family photos, the ones my mom would take when all of us men were fighting in the living room. My father pins Rick, my brother, to the living room floor. He's eight years old in the picture, and my father is spitting a fat oyster of phlegm on his son's closed lips.

Tonight Rick needs four hundred in a hurry. Oddly, for phone bills.

"Patty calls her mom at night," he says, wringing his hands together. "She talks all night about that Iyana show. You ever see that show? The black woman, on TV?"
Rick doesn’t get to go many places without his wife these days, and I give him the money because he is family, because his wife is fat and loud and the thought of that woman squinting hatefully at me is frightening, really. And she’s from New Jersey. Fucking New Jersey. And FAT. Heavy women are one thing. I was raised by a heavy woman, a woman who could stack a cord of wood, smack you so hard you’d tell your friends it was your daddy did it, but Patty, she’s just lazy, and that’s what I mean when I say a fat woman.

They leave happy, though, with the money that I needed to replace the clutch on my truck, but it can wait, it will have to wait now. It is mud season, so the driving will be slow and I’m not worried about them crashing into a tree even though he’s drunk. Rick knows these roads in April, how the slop of sand and gravel sucks tires into ruts - no shit - a full yard deep. It is warm tonight, too late now, though, for me to go into town, so I grab one of the beers Rick brought and head out to the barn.

I acquired two pygmy goats when my boss at the bank, a Mass-hole named Aaron Tanner III, told me he was looking to get rid of them.

“I’ve just never seen such a horrible mess!” he said, leaning against the doorframe of my office. “You know those animals are destructive, that’s not just an old wise tale, Geoff, they really are.”

“Wives’.”

“What?” he asked.

“Wives’ tale, Aaron. An old w-i-v-e-s’ tale.”

His wife had bought them from a petting zoo in Burlington for around $500 apiece, and they’d let them into their expensively decorated home. My boss and his wife are recently from Boston, and they are people who will always do things like this. At work,
he'll ask me questions about simple things, changing sparkplugs, where to find the circuit breaker in his house. When I answer him, he tells me he was just testing me, but the truth is he just figured these things out in a book, probably hours before asking, and was testing himself.

“That good old rural know-how,” he’d say. “Ahh, it’s nice to know you people really do exist.”

I would smile and think, Ask me how to flat-rate the APR on an equity loan you fucking flatlander; I can answer that too. But then it would pass on the drive back to Swanton after work. I got the goats from him, and that’s something.

I painted LOVE SHACK in big red letters over the doorway to the barn even though the goats, Zippy and Speedball, are brothers. I named them after two kids I grew up with who were decapitated snowmobiling. Their real names were Frank and Maurice Cinder. They were racing, and back then snowmobiles weren’t as fast as they are now, but they went side by side through a barbed wire fence they couldn’t see. Alison Bancroft, the school librarian, found them when she was snowshoeing. Both of their heads had come completely, but not cleanly, off their bodies, and they were still in their helmets.

The barn that I keep the goats in was built before the house; that’s how things were done then. It was finished in 1799, and leans drastically to the east, but it doesn’t leak, and the goats have far more room than they need. Zippy has somehow managed to climb onto a four-by-four beam three feet from the ground and leaps down to greet me when I come in. Pygmy goats are fatter than regular goats. Their bodies are the approximate size of basketballs, and they have quick agile little pegs for legs. I’ve once seen Speedball, who’s a darker gray than his younger brother, balance on a beam no more than an inch wide for no other reason, I believe, than to see if he could. Zippy pulls at the
leg of my jeans with his teeth, and we play a game where I press my open palm to his head, hard like a walnut, and he shoves against me with everything in him. It is the spirit of these animals that I enjoy. My father would have hated them. They do not produce milk to drink, not enough meat to eat, nor are they capable of any labor other than the acrobatics of their own design.

It is warm here, in the middle of April, and I can see the cloud cover breaking up, the stars coming out. That means it will be cold tonight, and I leave the lights on in the barn for Zippy and Speedball. They bleat through the crack in the door as I walk back up to the house, but it’s not an agonized sound or a lonely one. There’s a message from Josephine on the phone when I get in. She still has a thick Montreal accent, and she tells me she’s coming over, that she will spend the night and bring wine, so to clean up a little. She’s commanding like that, in a way that women here are not. Foreign in a way that is fitting, not LL Bean and NorthFace foreign, she smells good and knows how to clean dead animals.

When I am forced to view myself at times like these, swiping the thick coating of old spaghetti sauce, beer stains, and spilled pepper from my countertops, I realize I am merely a thirty-year old occupying my parents’ home. They have both been dead several years now, but it still feels, it will always feel, like their house, not mine.

Josephine is serious when I answer the door.

“We must talk about this one thing first,” she says. “I am not sure about the way you and me are, but it is good for me. I am moving back to St. Claire in one month. So know this.”

We are good together, Josephine and I. I can lift her hair and smell beneath it a smell that is not perfume, not shampoo, but it smells like cinnamon and coffee. We’ve
been together only a month, since she came into the bank to talk about buying a home nearby on Lake Winipisaukee. She had a lot of savings back in a bank in St Claire, near Montreal, enough to buy the house. Lately the exchange rate’s been bad, nearly fifty-cents on the dollar, and she’d have been getting screwed if she bought it directly. I’d told her to transfer her savings to a bank in Montreal that we’re affiliated with, so that she could exchange at a higher guaranteed rate, almost sixty-five cents on the dollar and save almost $12,000 Canadian. She said she’d have to give it some time and think about it. She’d appreciated the way I’d been honest, and not fucked her over. I loved the way the word ‘fuck’ came out of her mouth, and in a moment of uncommon spontaneity, told her.

Some nights I will fall asleep with her and she will wake me in the middle of the night and describe a dream and I actually think they are beautiful. Most people have the most fucked up boring dreams, and the saying I heard is true, talking about those dreams is like rapping about quilting. But her dreams are gorgeous and when she wakes me to tell me about them its not an annoyance, like it would be with other women.

In the doorway, I ask her about the house she is still planning to buy, how she plans to deal with her job at the bakery, me, her things here. I must have be panicking, because she holds her palm to my open mouth to quiet me and pushes me the rest of the way into the house.

“You need to take time with this, I only said it first so it would eat at you all night. I need to go home because my father is ill, but you have to understand that I must do this. I want you to think about it. We will not talk about it; it is not my choice. Let it weigh on you, not me.”

She pulls the wine and a bag of rolls from the paper bag she’s brought. She works at a bakery in St. Johnsbury, a little ways south of here. It is owned by an old Canadian
couple who needed her help. She basically runs the bakery, and has been making good money there; it’s popular all over the northeast. The wine is from Canada, and we dip the bread into it from time to time, sitting on the back porch in two thick blankets. It is still above freezing, but cooling quickly.

"Is your father dying?" I ask.

She shrugs. "He smokes these cigarettes, unfiltered, and his fingers are yellow. I think that is my first memory. I had a toothache and he put whiskey on my mouth and it tasted like cigarettes."

It is not a real possibility for me to follow this woman to another country, only a half hour away, leaving my job, my home, Rick, Zippy, Speedball. Rick would move into the house if I left, but he could never afford property taxes. He lives in a trailer with Fatty and their dirty cat, a longhair that always trails a clump of shit somewhere woven into the fur of its tail. They live near the main town of Swanton, next to a gravel pit where all the retarded children have come from. I have a clipping from the Times Argus after trainload of chlorine gas flipped near the trailer park in 1963. The reporter asked Mayor Gil Bucklapp of St. Johnsbury, who was just a hick himself, if the frequent birth of mentally handicapped children was linked to the train wreck.

"That train, the one with the, eh, chlorophyll or whatever, may have killed all the fish in Fenton Pond and turned all the rocks by the track bright white, but the retards (laughing), they been here way before that."

My brother one time asked me to teach him some of the things I’d learned in college. He came over to the house with a notebook, one he’d had since high school, and sat across the table from me. We drank beer and ate potato chips and I storyboarded the branches of government for him. This went on for three months; he picked up history ok,
but just the battles. He could give a shit about English lessons, so we moved right into math, and he excelled. I taught him how to use the Internet and a word processing program. The next week we put together his first résumé and the phone company hired him, so he stopped coming. Those three weeks were the closest we’d ever been, Patty would stay at home watching talk shows, probably on the phone with her mom, and Rick would actually stand up from his seat and whoop when he caught on to a concept. He told me how much he liked logging, but how he was sick and tired of working with people whose dream in life was a bitching 1978 Firebird and a double-wide.

Josephine gets cold when the wind picks up, and she steps back inside. I cannot believe she will leave me here. I have had few women in my life. Girls I can’t remember at the Johnson State, who are all in offices in cities now. I dated a woman in my office, Gayle, a few years ago. After we broke up, though, she married a man even younger than me and moved over to Burlington to make a family. Josephine grew up in a town like Swanton, but St. Claire is close enough to Montreal that she has seen it swallowed by suburbia. Her father sold the farm to Wal-Mart for development, and quickly spent the money on boats and a Range Rover. She tells me that there is no difference between suburbs in the states and those in Canada, but I want to believe there is.

She comes onto the porch from inside with a cup of tea, tells me to come inside and start the fireplace. It has become bitter out here, with the wind, and I consent. The fireplace in the living room is my favorite part of the house. My father would sit in front of it when we were little and tell us the story of the Giant Indian. My brother and I would sit patiently and listen while he slowly explained how the Abenaki used magic to make a giant. Half-bear, half-man, the Indian was either named Quichotte or Paul, depending on my father’s mood. The giant could split a tree with a swipe of his paw, but the giant was
gentle, and brought a turtle to the surface of Lake Winipisaukee, now Turtle Island, so that when the white men came the Abenaki could live in peace. There are still Abenaki on Turtle Island, but the giant has been angry, like my father, for no reason. He lives in the forests here, and when there is thunder, he is coming. I was fascinated by my father's ability to abstract telling the story. It was the only time that I remember him doing something impractical. The fighting and all that was a lesson, at least in his mind, so that he would raise men, not sissies.

The fire starts easily with an armload of cedar shingles, and Josephine sits between my legs here in front of it. It seems irrational of me to worry so much about her leaving, to feel so angry about her not allowing me to talk about this with her. I feel like the woman in this relationship - can I even call it that now? – and she tells me some things, just scattered details, about her father.

“He can break a bottle with his pointer finger. Really. The bones or tendons or something in it were smashed between logs and he can only force it to bend with his other hand and when he lets go – pop!”

“Pop!” I say.

The wind is still picking up outside and the windows shudder a few times. Josephine gets up to pee and tells me that the house is cold, cold. I follow her and realize the pilot must have blown out in the basement oil furnace, so I tell her to wait while I go to re-light it. It is so cold already in the bathroom that Josephine squawks in surprise when she sits on the toilet.

My basement has dirt floors, spiders, fieldstone foundation. I had the wood stove my parents used hauled out, replaced with the oil burner I have now. The pilot won’t re-light for more than a few seconds, probably moisture, ice in the lines.
“It is working now?” Josephine asks when I come back up.

“Probably ice in the line, condensation, an earwig stuck in the pipe, I don’t know. Just hold on, ‘k?”

I step to the doorway and put on my coat to go outside.

“I am waiting for you by the fire, my hero.”

I turn around at first, thinking the wrong thing, that she means she won’t go, but when I see her smirking at me I realize she’s just being a flirt. I step out the door.

A cold snap is what happens at the edge of a fast moving high-pressure front. That is what is happening tonight. It must be below freezing right now, and it will drop twelve more degrees in sixteen minutes. A sixty-degree drop in an hour and a half. I hear the trees popping. The large maples in my yard will be fine, their bark is thick and resilient, but I can see that many of the smaller ones have split, and one sapling has actually shattered at the base and fallen over. There is a ring of sawdust, shrapnel from the pop of the expanding ice, in a little ring around it. Zippy and Speedball are huddled in the corner of the barn near the light, watching me fumble through the toolbox for the blowtorch. They do not move from the corner to watch me leave, but bleat when they realize I am leaving.

Taking a blowtorch to a gas line is a delicate task. I am not reckless, I bleed the propane for the pilot first, shut off the line, let it air out, and only heat it a little. It is freezing in the basement, lying here in the dirt. The pilot lights but sputters, lights and sputters, then holds a flame. When the main burner turns on I head back upstairs.

“Fixed,” I say. But Josephine isn’t in the living room to hear me.
I realize she is not in the bathroom or either of the bedrooms, or in the kitchen. Her coat is gone. I rush the door and swing it open in a panic, in just my jeans and T-shirt. She's in the yard, wearing her thick wool coat, my hat, her boots.

“Shhhh. The trees are crackling, listen,” she says.

I step up next to her and we stand for what must be a long time listening. I think it sounds like Quichotte, Paul, the Giant Indian, is coming for us. Deep in the woods so many trees are popping it sounds like a fire roaring toward us, away from us, then toward us. And it seems to be in waves like that.

“I will talk about you leaving,” I say.

“I am cold. Freezing,” I say.

“You have your little goats! Let us bring them inside, the tree noise is probably scaring them. We will curl up by the fire and they will eat off our clothes and we will fuck like animals and they will see it and get quickly fucked up in the head.”

Inside, Zippy and Speedball make a mad dash for the couch and play tug-of-war with a pillow and it is all a huge mess. I have a sudden sympathy for my boss’s wife. She was being sweet to let the goats in the house, but I have to shut them in the bathroom after they destroy just the one pillow.

“I mean it, what I said, we will talk about this.”

When I say this I hope for performative speech, that the act of repetition will make my words tangible here, with her. I just sound like a pussy though, and she can tell, so she ignores me. She faces the fire and pulls her shirt off, over her shoulders whisking that hair in a fan.

“You can’t fuck me into being docile, Jose.”
Why do I call her Jose? I sound like a Vermonter when I say it, like I'm trying to shorten a complicated word to make it easier for myself. She spins at me quickly, and I can see that something of what I said struck a nerve.

"You are bad at listening to me," she says. "I told you to keep quiet, and you talk about this. Whant’n the FUCK can I do? He is dying, I need to go. You get that, right? Right?"

"Right?" I ask.

"You want this or not?"

She is pointing at her crotch. Both hands. I wonder what happened to her as a little girl. Seeing her do that, point at herself, at her cunt, scares me.

"You don’t? What do you want then? You are a 'baby needs a bottle'.”

"That’s not really a saying."

She puts her shirt back on. The goats are upset by all the screaming and I hear a loud splash in the bathroom. Water comes seeping under the door.

I begin screaming at the goats for no reason; my father’s rage. It goes on like this, me screaming and frantic, while I shut off the water in the bathroom that sprays from the top of the hot water pipe one of them disconnected and Zippy and Speedball crouched in the bathtub. Josephine follows me into the bathroom, tries to soothe the goats while glaring at me sopping up the water, which probably burned them when they kicked it. Good. Fuckers.

"You ok. Zippy? It is ok," she says.

"Speedball. That one is Speedball."

"Do I leave now? Are you too angry at me for me to stay tonight?"

"Are you still going to take off, what did you say, 'in one month'?"
"Yes."

And I don’t really hate her for that. The leaving for her family thing is honorable, in a way. I want her very badly to stay with me and to have that bite mark broken-bed kind of sex where she tells me after that I ‘ravished’ her. But it seems dirty to fuck like that now. She pointed right at it. She calls it a cunt. She’s the only woman I’ve ever met who’s said that word about that part of herself. She rubs Speedball’s head and he closes his eyes. Zippy tugs at her shirt with his teeth. They like her more than me right now.

“It’s fine if you stay. I’m not angry at you. I am, I mean. You have to take things easy with me, you kind of dropped a bomb.”

She smiles, and then a gigantic explosion shakes the house and the power goes out. Zippy or Speedball or Josephine scramble over me screaming.

“Josephine?”

“Geoff?”

“Stay here. I’ll get a candle or something.”

I have this old kerosene lantern in the kitchen that I sometimes use when I am drinking alone here. The light it makes is small, and I like the smell. I lead Josephine back to the living room and find Zippy and Speedball on top of each other, quivering behind a chair in my bedroom. I lead Speedball back into the bathroom and his brother follows by instinct.

“I have to see what that was,” I say to Josephine. “Want to check with me?”

A great sugar maple, probably older than the house, has burst open at the base, fallen, and severed the power line. One end of the thick cable is still swaying, arcing against the limbs of the tree and showering white sparks across my lawn. I had never
thought that the cold could do such a thing. The sap inside must have crystallized so quickly. It is too cold for us to breathe and the moon is bright, like deep blue daylight.

"What does one do when this happens?" she asks.

"Call Rick."

The Cunninghams will let me use their phone. Mr. Cunningham writes for an environmental watch group based in Hartford, Connecticut, where he moved from with his family. He answers door wearing a one-piece flannel jumper. It has sheep and clouds on it and those little slipper feet for toddlers and it's pink. He blinks at Josephine, failing to connect me – a plain familiar face – with this woman in front of him. It takes a long time before he thinks to let us in.

"It exploded?" he asks.

"Yep. Pop! – like that, but louder, like a rifle. I'm Josephine," she says, putting out a hand. "You see the sap froze and..."

"Can I use your phone?" I ask.

"Shouldn't we call the power company? I mean wouldn't they be the people who should deal with this."

"My brother is five minutes away. The power company's down in Hardwick, probably getting twenty other calls like this, other things."

"How did it get so cold so fast?"

He is just now realizing that the temperature has dropped from 40 above to 20 below.

"Just did," I say, dialing.

His daughter and wife come down while I'm on the phone with Rick, who tells me to give him about ten minutes. Both of the women are wearing the same little pajama
outfits as the father and they, like him, stare at Josephine. In their own way, these people are respectable. They care about issues in the environment, but don’t know how to run a chainsaw. The daughter is home schooled, but can’t relate to the children in town and gets beat up by other girls during plays and other ‘peer exposure’ events. Josephine and I thank them, politely refuse the tea offered by Mrs. Cunningham, and head home.

Rick brings that wife of his to my house when he comes. She gets out of the truck pissed off already, sloshing around bitching about how late it is, what a pain in the ass that her husband has to come up here at two in the morning to do the power company’s work for free.

Rick disconnects the power easily, but with a practiced caution that he’s always had around dangerous things. I once saw him untangle a horse’s rear hoof from a barbed wire fence. The horse was flailing and gashing itself more and more, but Rick just walked up to it, slowly bent down, and worked the wire off of it’s leg without the horse moving at all. He had to slap it on the ass for it to gallop off. He’s talking to me as we walk inside.

“They can fix the pole, but you shoulda called them tonight cause they’re going to be busy tomorrow, sure. Fucking tree just blew apart, huh? I never seen them do that before. Member that time I shot the squirrel out of that top limb with Dad’s .410? Poor bastard. From the hip, too. Couldn’t do that again if I tried.”

Somehow Josephine gets talking to Patty inside, and they’re heating up water for cocoa in the fireplace. Patty is laughing, jiggling. The strange thing is that Josephine is laughing too, genuinely laughing, like they have something in common.

“You know she’s beautiful,” my brother says. “I never had someone like that before.”
I realize that he is talking about Josephine, not his wife, though I know that for some reason he thinks all of those things about her too.

"Thanks," I say.

"Zippy bit her right in the ass!" Josephine says. "When you were outside. I forgot to tell her about the goats."

"Almost shit right then, swear to God Almighty I almost did."

Patty is laughing and shaking her head. She’s tolerable like this. Not miserable, not angry at me for not warning her. Rick says he wants to see it. They are laughing the whole way out the door, in the truck, this will keep them laughing and laughing, which is fine by me.

Josephine and I have had sex in front of the fireplace before. But tonight, when we’re both on our backs afterward, we are silent and changed by it. We’re just lying here, and what matters is that I can imagine my life with this furious woman, years from now. She’d told me after Patty and Rick left that it felt like family when they came to help us. I tell her that Rick said she was beautiful.

"Yes," she says. "I am."

In the morning we will have to re-light the fire from the coals, though the temperature will have risen by then, and over time the cold will give way to a long and steady warmth.
At 5:43pm., a seventy-six year old woman crashes her car at twelve miles an hour through the plate-glass storefront of a Bon Marché on Fourteenth. Her heart had failed her; and for a while, she was driving dead. We arrive after the cops remove the body and the place has already been photographed once. Sara clicks numerous photos, crouching like a journalist, while I adjust my tie and begin scrawling down estimates to hand in later. We aren’t asked to judge, we aren’t even able to; we put a price to the things you lose in fires or accidents or other acts of what some would call God.

Glancing around the store from inside: carpeting (gas and oil damage from car, rips from glass), $5,600. Window, roughly 23 square feet, (uni-directional tinting), $8,900. Non-structural beam (aluminum), $1,700. I walk through the store with the clipboard, the occasional crunch of glass from my steps the only sound. Including miscellaneous damage, surcharges, and business loss, it’s probably just under $30,000 worth of damage, done by a woman with a handicapped license plate.

On the other side of the store, I see the reflection of Sara in a tall mirror. She is posing behind a sequined gown, jutting one leg drastically forward. In some ways, I want to believe Sara is in love with me, and these lapses of professionalism are signals to me that she feels the same way for me that I do for her. She pouts her lips at herself in the mirror, tilts her head so a lock of red hair falls just above her eyes and sees the reflection
of me and my clipboard standing behind her. She rolls her eyes and I ask: “What do you see?”

“Uh... the pole: four grand, the window: about ten.” She scans but doesn’t look hard enough.

“And...?”

She rolls her eyes, gropes inside her pocket for the other roll of film, just staring past me at the Buick that interrupts the store like a rhinoceros.

“The floor. Jesus, look at the carpet, don’t you see? The glass. The oil, gas?”

“Oh.”

She needs to see these things. I want to tell her that even though we are not in a difficult place here, that we’re not required to console the owners, that we can just leave when we’re done, our job is important. She needs to see this.

Later, at home, I turn the television on and sit in my white-walled apartment to watch the animal channel. There is a special on about the Serengeti. I watch as a male lion charges three unprotected cubs, audibly crunching through the necks of the first two before the mother returns. The male holds the body of one of the mangled cubs in a pink and dripping set of jaws as he retreats, the survivor pokes playfully at her dead brother. There is nothing the researchers can do, the narrator says, that this cycle is all part of some scheme science is only permitted to observe, never to interfere. I fall asleep but at some point I wake up sweating again, and I toss and turn forever until I finally decide it is no use, all this struggling. I step out my front door.
When I was nine years old, the year before my father received a letter from the United States Army telling him to go to Vietnam, my family rented a summer camp on Mallet’s Bay. It was 1973. I woke one night when I heard our cat, George, thumping clumsily into my bedroom door. He had developed a brain tumor some months earlier and my mother wouldn’t let my father shoot him. I had heard them talking about it that morning, drinking coffee on the deck.

“It’s not going to get better, Laura. The thing is dead on its feet.”

“George is part of the family,” she replied. She was always the one who would let the cat sleep in their bed.

“Look I can just... forget it, it’s fine.” My father looked away from my mother, back at the paper on his lap.

When George started to lose his mind it became more of a parlor trick than a worry. We’d bring him out for guests; show off how we could get him to fall over if we blew in his ear. When he started falling on his own we were nervous, and by the summer he was too unsteady to be let upstairs, for fear of falling. He had been majestic once, with long white hair that, even in mud season, he had kept an impossible, glowing white. That morning, with George on my lap, I sat quietly listening to my parents, but I had already decided what I was going to do.

I live in the part of the neighborhood closest to the interstate. The rent is scaled because the constant shrill scream of tires, the sad moan of eighteen-wheelers. Sara lives just across the street from me. On a night with the moon out like it is, I could walk right up to her door and tell her that I don’t care about work, that I want to tell her about my secret crush. A forty year-old man wanting to make love to a beautiful girl nearly ten years
his junior is no mystery. I held her hand once, at the scene of a car accident. The family was everywhere, and it was Sara's first day. She wore a white blouse and blue high heels. The EMT's had thrown plastic sheets over the body parts, but we had to take pictures, assess damage. When Sara began to cry, it was obvious that I needed to say something.

“It's not our fault,” I'd said.

But that just made her cry harder.

“I can't do this,” she'd said.

“We don't have a choice,” I'd said.

She looked angry, like I was her father. I wanted to kiss her, to make her realize that we were alive, that the mother in the car who had died was not her mother, not my mother, just a body. I held out my hand to Sara. That's when it happened. I didn't know her at all, but when she touched me, when we touched, she stopped crying, like magic. If I had a child, this is the kind of thing I could do for her. In the car, after we'd left, I made a mistake.

She'd left her purse in my car, and when I looked through it, I found the flask. It had her name on it; there was no denying it. That smell, when she's interviewed, it all made sense. I brought it to her house the next day, a Saturday. I used it against her; I told her that it was grounds for termination. I don't know what I thought would happen. We were in the living room. I had the flask in my hand like a gun, pointing at her. I asked her to make love to me, or I'd tell our supervisor about the drinking. She knocked the flask out of my hand and pushed me back toward the door. Her eyes went wild and for the first time, I realized they were just a dull shade of blue, nearly gray. She was in her bathrobe, and I pulled the belt loose. I didn't feel her slap me. But then I was outside with my
erection, looking across the street at my own house from hers. It felt like junior high again, like I was a boy who could never imagine living in this world as a man.

I could hear my father’s breathing when I opened the door to let George into my room, twisting the handle, him falling in by himself. When I bent to pick him up I could feel something matted into his fur behind his shoulder. Wincing from his smell, I placed him, wriggling, into my denim backpack, slowly zipped it closed. From the bedroom where my parents slept in separate beds I heard shifting and the cat wouldn’t be quiet, he was beginning to claw frantically inside the bag. I could see fireflies blinking on the screened windows. They had somehow gotten trapped inside.

Sara and I agreed to keep quiet about what I’d done. I told her I was sorry, and she kind of laughed and agreed. I told her about my mother, about the assisted living home I had to put her in.

“Do you think that she’s going to die there?” Sara asked me.

“It’s not like people get out of those places.”

“You never know,” she said.

We were at a one-car accident on Harrison, right by that place with the fountain. There was a woman who’d been run over, and I told Sara to look away, that I could photograph this one. There was hair and skin on the front of the car, the clear impression of a face - eyes, nose, an open mouth - in the wrecked radiator of the Lincoln that hit her.

“Why was her face so low to the ground?” Sara asked me.

“The vehicle struck her as she was falling, maybe she jumped.”

“Maybe she was lying there, like asleep or something, and then the car came.”
Sara walked off to speak with one of the coroners, and I went back to taking pictures. It was a disappointment to realize she would take so easily to this type of work. I guess I was hoping she'd cry again. And she was right. The eyewitness, a boy holding a skateboard who bounced up and down because he had to pee, confirmed it. There's no telling why the woman was lying in the road.

I walked out onto the dock that night, holding the backpack strap tightly. The moon's spattered reflection echoing the gentle slap of waves far off shore in the deeper part of the lake. George had been in a panic, but by now had reached a state of exhaustion and I could feel a damp spot where he had wet the backpack, could see the darker patch on the bottom and smell the acrid heat of it soaking in. The canoe was tied off to the left of the water, as I pulled on it to drag it in three startled spring peepers leapt from the bow, one accidentally inward where he hopped insanely before plunking over the side of the red fiberglass boat into the black water. The canoe rolled up and down in the water as I placed the backpack in front of the seat, jostling the boat awkwardly with my own weight. I placed the extra paddle on the dock, glanced once back at the dark windows of the cabin back on the shore and pushed off, the lump of George in the backpack at my feet.

When my mother fell at the nursing home, it was because she had wandered off the grounds, probably got confused. She had been in a state of confusion, as far as I can recall, ever since a blue sedan with government plates pulled sharply into our driveway and killed the memory of my father, her husband. I had recognized the man in the driver's seat as the one who had stopped me on my bicycle, asked me to point to the house that
matched an address. Even then I lacked foresight. I stayed where I was down the street and when the my mother opened the door, all I remember was her holding George in her arms and the look on her face when, over the blue and yellow bars on the driver’s shoulder, she saw me. Now, my mother is in the hospital and the nurse says there are things I am supposed to do. She tells me that the pictures I’ve brought are helpful, but that I need to visit on a less irregular basis.

There were other boats out on the lake that night, with people on them, mostly drinking in silence that was interrupted occasionally by an outburst of either anger or comedy, I could not tell the difference in the dark. I didn’t want to be noticed, so I paddled to a spot where there were rocks sit dangerously near the surface, marked by buoys where motorboats couldn’t go. I thought George might have been asleep then, he was quiet, which was good. I had read a tourist’s map once and it said the lake was named after a French explorer named Henry Champlain and that during prohibition, Canadians would smuggle booze across the border and that some boats, ones that sunk to the bottom, were haunted. Stories were told that the ghosts of drunk Canadians made whirlpools and screams on nights when the moon was out. I sometimes would wear goggles, swim out into the deeper waters where I was not allowed, and look toward the depths for ships, but saw only a dark, greenish haze, the occasional fish startling a mouthful of water into my lungs.

I stopped beside one of the white buoys and picked up the backpack. George suddenly sprang to action, squirming spastically and I almost tipped trying to unzip him. The zipper was caught on something, which may have been his claw, and I panicked,
flung the struggling pack hard, up and out over the water where it floated, as if suddenly inflated, on the surface. George’s body fighting and snarling, trying to rip his way through from within. After the splashes, the bag sank and I watched as tiny bubbles surfaced, the lake suddenly quiet and calm.

It isn’t difficult, walking the streets at night, to imagine these people all losing control, hurting each other. I see a pair of teenagers walking past cars on my street, peeking into the window with cupped hands. These thieves are cowards, though, they only need to hear a siren to flee. They are weak like deer are weak; afraid all of the time. Looking for trouble and running away from it. I see these people’s bodies at work, in pictures. These kids will die in a stolen car, and there is no way for me to tell them the way they’ll die, there’s nothing I could say to prove to them that they need to change their lives. All they would say is, What do you know Mister, what do you know?

I had already started paddling back when I heard George break the surface. I turned back, and I saw his small white head nearly above the water and his screams, his piercing yowl and the tiny wake his body made as he sped toward me in the dark. I thought for a moment he was better; that he was healthy and youthful again. I stopped paddling, and when he came close enough, I leaned back and turned my head away, raised the paddle and shut my eyes, swung it down hard, felt the sudden shock of the impact and the water splash back on my face and chest. When I finally opened my eyes he was floating but just below the surface, his head twisted awkwardly, facing me. His long white fur swirled around him loosely, caught there in the moonlight, which it held for some time before he sank slowly into the darkness with the Canadian skeletons.
I paddled hard then, trying to get myself to shore and away from what I had done. I sometimes wake in a jolt, holding an imaginary paddle, still trying get there and not knowing the distance in the dark.

My mother was waiting on the shore with a dark blue towel and wrapped it around me. She never told me she had seen what I had done, instead she held me very close, squeezed the breath out of me in a moment I have tried to relive and forget all at once.

In the hospital, my mother lies on the aluminum bed but the room still seems empty. She faces away from me and mumbles to herself that it's going to be ok, Laura, it will be ok, and I know I could never say what I feel to her because she says it first. I will make nearly a million dollars from her life insurance. I will move close to the ocean then, somewhere warm but quiet. I look out into the hall. Sara is probably still sleeping at home. I take my mother's whole head in my two hands – it weighs nearly nothing now – and I stroke her long white hair until she is still and her breaths long and even. I sit on the windowsill and watch her shoulders rise and fall. There will, I know, be nothing to say until she is gone.

Today, I knock on Sara's door. We stare at each other, like fish, before she says I can come in. I can't do this, I realize. I will be a rich man in less than a month, I want to say to her. Leave with me, I want to say. I'm sorry. I love you. I am leaving. I cannot speak at all. What have I done?

“Come in,” she says.

She is wearing that robe. She opens the blue door all the way.

She steps out of my way, says, “Make yourself comfortable.”
First bird falling
is a mallard.

Clacks against the windshield,
cracks razor a spiderweb in the glass.

January in Kansas. After stopping,
she says, “It is always like this
with you.”

And, Why is that?

She stays behind the wheel
while he steps independent
into the wind. On the frozen pavement
he pulls the heavy bird up
by the neck. Stupid bird had no chance
this winter. The duck –
wings glazed in ice – too heavy to
stay with the flock
(to the east, look up – there is the V of them)
fell heavily and he imagines a spiraling descent
into the windshield of a hurtling station wagon.
When it happens – the wings get iced like
a 747 does – the duck must panic,
instinct must endure and he will try to
keep up as the others fly south unimpeded.
Listen to the way their wings shuffle! The haunting ring of their calls
(they are calling the fallen).
There is a deep blue rip in
the clouds above the plain.
Her neck in the car
cranes back to see him
swing the duck for a toss by the neck
into the cold brown grasses by the highway.
There are microbes on his fingers from the feathers;
maybe lice, or worse, for her to worry.
He will think back on her later,
when he’s in Texas in summer.
Despite the heat, he will see
what you see: A feather
glassed ice at the tip of a bent and frozen wing,
rising from tan bristles of wheat,
pointing skyward.

What poisons our mind more than this memory?
Can you say you’ve heard the scratch and crackle of the straw that holds a bird?
Because we speak a different language than memory,

can you tell me anything?

That is what your voice will be like,

a gust of paralysis.

Waking in an apartment at six years old

a boy sees his mother stride nude across a
dawnlit room and the scar slicing horizontally
above a graying patch of pubic tuft
lumped on all sides by folds of loose skin that seek to cover but only exaggerate
where he came from.

In the word caesarian there are
cresses and memories.

First rock thrown by a brother took
down a nest of fledgling robins.
Praise their little shelled pistachio skulls.
Lint, the suggestion of feathers,
quivers with the commotion of their unrest.
Praise the gawking beaks spread pink and wide
for the hope of food.
O the silent maw of desire, of need.
Praise the four surviving the fall,
sprawled open-winged across the floor of an unused barn.
Surviving the fall, but not
the abandonment of a mother.
There only to bear witness.
Look at the humiliating places that death leaves us.
An intruder to this winter forest sees a flash of wingbeats
hears the shuffle of feathers as papers against each other.
A hawk rises away from
a vertebrae solitary in the snow,
gummed with ligament.
It is enough for one bird.
12:30... back to work. Hi ho hi ho hi ho.
A tower of glass is nothing without sun,
but I have seen them climb the wind
to rest upon the ledge above the street
peregrine neck bent to open mouth with meat.
Suppose the pigeons struck by cars in Chicago were all piled in a single lot,
could it be asked,
“Hast thou not dropped from heaven?”
Have I learned yet that there are senses I lack and that flying dreams are just that and have
I learned that out the office window the Parisian skyline is not something to inform my
interior landscape or that the fledgling falcons perched on the ledge forty-six stories up
cannot see through the mirrored glass to see Mr. Sax surf porn on the internet (35 full
minutes only $6.95!) and have I learned that though I loved you my mother there is no
more for me now of you than there ever was and that though I gravitate around the idea
of belonging and though I gravitate around the idea of lifting that I will not fall warmly into the roots that clutch... they are not there for me.

Dozens See Christ Atop Pizza Hut Billboard.

And my shoulder blades to sprout feathers

"An Angel! My God, the thought of such a thing."

And my hands to climb

"Odin held two ravens upon his shoulders, read that in this book."

And my body to leap

"Bullshit."

To fall.

"No, really."

To still live.

In the modulation of the extremities alone there is not in the homo sapien enough atmospheric displacement to incur the gravitational resistance necessary in the creation of the aeronautical phenomena of lift.

The Ayatolla Khomeini stood before a crowd of thousands to celebrate the spring migration of houbara and talk of the appetitive soul of the infidels.

Above, chased by falcons, the cloud of fat-bellied houbara pepper the sky as they scatter.

Regroup.

Some are struck by talons.
A few feathers fall into the hands of a child.
And in the Book of the Dead, the birds
come in numbers beyond the human mind
they come for us all;
they shall come for us all.
Houbara birds,
who come through the Arabian Peninsula
as they fly over the Pyramids, the Nile,
south – to African marshes
are the falconry students’ prey
for only two weeks
as they pass through.
Houbara, houbara, houbara bird.
They fall en masse,
fallen by talons.
In May, the marshmallow Peeps are lined up at half-price in the window.

_Easter’s Memories – 80% off Thru Saturday_

Glow-yellow, they are stationed
in military formation behind a thin
cellophane wrapper.

Certain swallows miss the flies they chase above the wheat fields in the Midwest.
One of the birds dives and strikes the wire of a wind harp on a hillside
with a resonance the wind has never had.
Indeed the time of the singing birds is come,
and the sound of the wind on the plain through strings has changed with the body of a swallow in the wires.

Behind the bars of the prison in Deer Lodge, Montana a man has captured two hundred red-breasted robins. With floss tied to each bird's thin leg, to each limb of the thin man; the birds take flight, the lift is enough for inches, before the small birds' hearts burst inside their proud chests and they fall, still tethered to the man, forming a constellation of feathers that we still cannot decipher.

At Lake Mary Ronan a loon and her child slice the still black merciless water. With her child nestled at the base of her soft neck she can not dive she can not eat she can not escape.

And to the west a column of cloud is rising to split this silence with thunder.

A fisherman in Pyongyang keeps his cormorants on a leash. They are stiff-feathered divers who fly under the water for him.
Once he said to them,

“Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

That melancholy of our fate, then, arose in earliest history,
in our earliest history.

Standing in the pale fluorescence of her mother’s bathroom when we stood together to
see the applicator’s end reveal the small pink plus sign I was not wishing for and in an
instant I can see everything are these the moments that they speak of? when I can see the
fetus abandoned in a doctor’s dumpster some day soon will I be as incapable then as I am
now or is there really such a thing as grace divinity ability coping and the lemons-to-
lemonade theory of dealing with life’s problems

“Ooh, shit.”

“Nice, You make it sound like you missed a fucking jumpshot.”

“We missed something.”

“We can deal with this. We can make it through this if we are strong.”

“It’s a baby, baby. Not a cold.”

“You just compared my child to a disease.”

“A virus, baby, a virus. Babies are forever. Like diamonds. A bouncing baby diamond.”

In an embryonic sac

are we birds in an egg?

Where are you?

Animal bipes implume,
look on your weighted limbs, ungraced
by feather, leaded with thick bone.

From a pregnant sky fall
boulders of ice.

What to do, then?

In a field, five hundred geese have landed to stay with the few who will die.

The ones who lay still fell too heavily and struck the earth too hard and they will not rise.

The ones with ice-coated wings that drag behind them will need to die but they will have to wait.

The ones who stay will eat and gain strength and not understand how ice can cause such harm. The ones who fly at dawn will look back more than once to be sure the others are still.

In a field, five corpses of fallen birds are glazed with ice.

When the sun rises enough, their glint can be seen from miles above.

What does it mean that what we remember is never enough?

When we will forth a bad mood, why is it real?

Why then, might we not will forth wings, loved ones, second chances, cures?

There is something of the moron about all of this, I know, and I know that the needs of moments are not the needs of all time but why then are they real and why then are they insistent?

Man Recovering From Fall Leaps Again

And my bones to hollow for loft

“Is that him again?”

And my fingers to feathers

“Zeus, was it, that turned into birds, could fly?”

And my body to leap
"No way."

And my body
to leap.

In aerodynamics it is the albatross who is king, and while the metacarpal bones retain merely the tensile strength of a faber-castell #2 pencil they allow for flights of up to 340km without even momentary cessation. Homo sapiens lack this capacity to endure.

Does anyone have a story of redemption?

I once, driving, bumped an old man who'd charged my car shirtless with his arms stretched out.

God he was skinny.

And pale.

Skinny though.

Mainly that's what I remember, his bones.

At the sea marsh, the sawgrasses catch on my nylon pantlegs with the microscopic teeth running their slim length.

A bittern, master of camouflage,

eyes me from his statued vertical pose

These birds have learned to hide by swaying

as if by the same breeze shuffling the reeds they live in.

Frantic panic of the hidden!

I cannot fly but to be seen and still he approaches!

His bill pointed skyward, the bittern is motionless as I advance.

Now!

His sudden flight slips my feet up
the silt sucks me in and I will not be able to
climb out of this and the atlantic
is a slice of blue between the blades of reeds that beckons with hands of wave for my
return.
A goose freshly slaughtered on a farm in Maine
hangs from chicken wire by the neck.
Who could do this?
It is plucked a pale appalling pink
with a slice opening to the purple cavity
of the chest and abdomen while
at Christmas dinner my aunt and Gloria my father’s
girlfriend and my father himself chide me for
refusing to eat the stuffing
from that hole.
Wherewithal to resist our history
comes with the price of memory
that some call recollection
some call reinvention
and all along it was ours to play
with the ability to misalign the event
the sensation of a vision too ethereal for words and who, then, all along was it that called
us down from our place above all of this, coating us in ice called past filling us with the
gloom of what was?
The power or process of reproducing or recalling what has been learned or retained especially through associative mechanisms is not mere process, remember, but primarily power.

We soared until we knew we were soaring and our hushed wingbeats slowing and our necks outstretched to see and our feathers to grow cold and heavy and our bodies to fall and our bodies to fall.

In the mouth of a condor
bacteria grow as nowhere else.

A bite could be fatal,
but they bite the already dead,
and they soar above us watching,
we think they are waiting in the thermals
for one of us to fall to our knees,
clutching our chests against death,
so they might descend on us.

They would rather soar,
catch a sudden warm updraft
and float silently, seeing
nothing but sky.
SUMMER DAY, BOY WITH GRANDFATHER

The grandfather sat on the porch and pointed again at the boy in the driveway to get him back to work. The boy thought his grandfather was too deaf to hear him.

"Asshole," the boy said.

"Fuck you," said the grandfather.

It was hot and the grandfather had told the boy he better rake them nails he stuck in the driveway. The boy's strategically placed attack spikes had worked, and punctured both front tires of the grandfather's riding lawn mower. The boy had seen a movie and the shiny fast good car dropped spikes and sent the dirty bad cars spinning, bashing happily through the guardrails, bang-banging off the cliff to joyous explosions on the rocky coast. Instead of exploding like it should have done, the grandfather's mower just slumped forward and stopped like it'd gone quick to sleep. The mower had three gears and was the orange and was the only thing the old man drove these days. Earlier, when the old man had got off the useless mower and found the boy hiding in a wooden barrel in the tool shed, he'd hit the boy hard on the skull with his brass-eagle-ring fist.

"What?" asked the old man. "Keep raking."

The boy dropped the rake and ran as fast as he could across the driveway, through the prickers, under the fence, until he gained the peak of the hill beyond the field. The grandfather stayed on the porch, wishing that the boy would hurt himself so that he'd have to call his daughter-in-law to bring the boy to the hospital.
The old man wished each step would land the boy in a gopher hole so his small leg bones would snap like green wood. The boy sat on the hill and moved his hands in a way at the old man. The sky was striped with jet exhaust. The old man thought, Why aren't there any birds these days? There used to be so many birds around here. The old man was setting up camp on the porch. He thought he would wait the boy out like an enemy. He thought that the cicadas sounded like uneven electricity.

The boy watched the grandfather strike a match and hold it to the end of a cigarette, wishing the old man would die from smoking so his mother would let him spend the rest of the summer at home, where his friends lived, and not up here where it smelled bad and was always too hot and there was only a small dirty creek for swimming. The grasshoppers made a dry clicking sound with their wings when they jumped.

The boy remembered last summer at the camp for kids whose moms or dads had died. One girl his age still had a mom and a dad, but she had watched her sister get crushed under a truck, and they let her in too. The counselors had said the boy could come back this year, but his mother said it was too much to spend for her, and he would have to stay up at the farm with grandpa. The boy wanted to be at the camp where they could swim in the lake and canoe if they wore their life vests and make a memory fire shrine for his father like last year. He knew his mother was sad to leave him because she'd cried too, pulling his tight hands off the car door before she got back in and drove away from the grandfather's house. It was only a week ago, the boy realized, just seven days.

The boy saw a plane way up above him. It was just a blink of sunlight and a far away whooshing sound, but the boy imagined it spinning down with a scream from the sky and crashing boisterously into the porch, eliminating the old man in a gust of fire. Oh, the grandpa would not hit the boy with his brass-eagle-ring-hand then.
The child tried to throw a rock to the house, but it was much too far. In the tool shed, he had hidden a grouping of matches bound with a rubber band. He thought he might light them all and throw them at the old man when he was asleep. His head still hurt from where his grandfather had struck him. He began to cry. Then he kind of stopped. The old man had said, Dammit, boy, you don’t know anything! After a while, the boy watched the old man snub out his cigarette with his boot and go into the house.

Inside, the grandfather pulled a beer from the fridge, and it began to sweat. He pulled one of the boy’s socks from the pile of clothes in the living room, slipped it over the can from the bottom up. Beer Cozy, he thought. The TV was showing a cartoon where a giant robot crushed a woman under his foot. The old man looked over some bills and around the house, where he’d lived always. The windows were piled with the dry shells of bluebottle flies, while the living wiggled about on the glass, not understanding. He thought, We’re poor people.

By sneaking, the boy had made his way to the creek. He decided he would wash his head under the small rock waterfall to see if there was blood in his hair from the old man’s fist. The water felt good, but there was no blood in his hair. It sounded like a radio under the waterfall. Come in! Come in! the boy called to the other soldiers. They were too frightened to answer. He was the only soldier left worth anything.

Where the water pooled below the fall, the boy had once found frog eggs and tadpoles. He searched for more because he liked to pop the tadpoles and look at the long brown string of their insides. Instead of tadpoles, though, there were actual full-sized frogs. They had black dots along their backs and were the as big as the boy’s palm. Why take off my shoes, the boy thought, just to wade a little in the water?
The boy sunk up to his eyeballs in the water like an alligator to creep slowly toward the frogs resting in the shallows. By lifting quickly from beneath, the boy cupped a good big one in his hands and pressed it hard so that it could not leap away. The frog was heavy and cold and kind of squeaked when the boy squeezed too hard. The frog was happier when the boy was careful not to squeeze too hard. The old man had warned the boy about the creek. The grandfather showed the boy a scar thick and knotted and purple on his white ankle where he'd scraped it on a bottle in the creek. He'd said it hurt at the time, but not anymore. The boy told this story to the frog in his hands. The frog liked it when the boy spoke to him.

The grandfather looked at the field across the driveway, but could no longer see the boy. He hoped the boy had tried to walk to the highway that you could hear from the hill there. He hoped the boy would get lost and bump his head so that he'd not remember who he was and some fat woman who saw him on the highway would adopt him, raise him in the city. Feed him hot dogs roasting and buttercream cakes and never bring him back. He didn't want the boy up here with him in the summer because the boy's dead father was, of course, his son. The boy always cried because his daddy was gone. The old man blinked and thought, I lost my son. The grandfather wanted to be alone, simply that.

He thought of the first week of the war, the letter from his wife at home explaining that his own daddy died under a tree and there he was in the hospital in Korea getting a white-hot triangle of blown-up shrapnel dug out of his thigh. He thought about his wife, who was beautiful and alive then and at the end of the letter made a P.S. to tell him she was pregnant with their son. He stopped thinking for a while. The beer cozy kept the beer cool longer, and it was kind of funny because it had pictures of Winnie the Pooh on it.
The boy had an idea. He wondered about how high a frog could jump from. The waterfall was high for a frog, he thought. If the frog could jump from the waterfall, he would let him go. The rocks at the top of the waterfall were slimy and wet, and the boy slipped once and dropped the frog, but the frog didn’t want to go far, just into the grass. When he caught the frog once more, he told him the plan about jumping from the top of the waterfall. It is a deal, the frog would have said. The boy swung the frog up and out and it spun and it had its legs out and it did a belly flop, perfect, into the pool.

The boy couldn’t see the frog come up but if he leaned out over the edge he could see better. The frog was not floating belly up or splattered on the rocks, so the boy decided that he’d free the frog forever. If a frog can jump from here, and not splatter, thought the boy, I can jump and not splatter or float belly up in the water. The boy stood the edge, wondering.

The grandfather looked at the grass that was needing mowing badly and sipped at his beer. If the boy came back, the grandfather figured he would try to explain, real quiet, about tires and nails. He promised himself, too, that he’d look and see if the boy had a cut from where the old man had swung his big eagle-ring-hand down on the boy’s head hiding in the barrel. Forgot about the ring, he thought, twisting the bird around and around.

He had let the boy’s mother live at the family home after the death. She was pregnant with the boy, and the doctor had to be called when she gave sudden birth to the child right in the old man’s bedroom. The doctor had a cast on his arm, so the grandfather had to hold the child and cut the cord, and because the woman had nothing to her name, he had to pay the doctor for his useless help. The old man thought about the
blue shirt still in the drawer, stained brown on the cuffs with the blood from the woman, and the way she promised to pay him back for it, but never could.

The old man looked at the lawn. The grass would die in this heat without water. The old man had a nice lawn, wanted to keep it that way. He felt he could do at least that much. The hose was broke open in the middle, though, where the boy had chopped at it with a rock days ago. Many years ago his wife had grown flowers. They were dead now, and the mower was broken and the hose was cut, so now maybe the grass would die too.

The boy made a pact with the frog he had thrown that since the frog was free to go, he’d have to go tell the old man if the boy splattered on the rocks or floated belly up in the water when he jumped. The frog, free to choose now, would choose to help the boy. With his arms pumping for forward thrust and butt-end ready to push off the boy yelled Geronimo! and jumped. And his wet shoes were on the slimy stuff on the rocks, so they slipped and he rattled down over the rocks and the sharp one like an axe blade cut a clean white gash clear to the bone at the back of the boy’s big frightened head.

The grandfather knew that the noise had came from behind the house by the waterfall he’d told the boy he’d be in trouble for playing on. I don’t need this, the old man almost said out loud.

After he fell down, the boy knew something was wrong because of the way he couldn’t see anything or hear anything. He saw flashes of things. He saw:

- The waterfall jump-off rock with a chunk of foot-slip slime missing.
- The frog, blinking, saying, Oh boy, I will go tell the old man something bad happened. The sharp rock like an axe blade washed clean with waterfall water.

But then things would go black and quiet again. The boy knew he was sitting down, but he couldn’t feel the ground anymore. He tingled all over instead.
The old man needed to use a heavy maple cane to get up the hill to the creek. There was a path with roots and mud. In the woods, the air got thick and heavier, and made his thoughts curl up and spin around like they were wet. On the way, he saw flashes of things. He saw:

The rusted belly of his father’s tractor by the trail, shot full of holes the day his wife died.

The dead apple tree shattered by the same lightning storm that killed his last cow, Hattie, seventeen years before.

The boy sitting with his arms slack to his sides under the waterfall leaking blood out of his head into the creek.

He could not have done this with his eagle-ring hand.

The grandfather was not strong enough to pick the boy up in his old arms, and the blood kept squirting out of the boy’s head each time his small heart beat. Have to cover that, surely, thought the old man. Lose too much blood and you die. He’d seen it in Korea. Men cut clean through with bayonets spraying like popped water balloons. Other men screaming swearwords, getting the other man’s blood all up their noses, when they tried to plug up the bayonet squirt-holes with gauze. The boy’s head had a kind of flap you could press down but it would not stay closed like it should have done.

The grandfather sat next to the child in the water and pressed closed the hole with his hand. The boy and the old man looked at each other for a while. The waterfall made a sound that was loud, but quiet, too. The child felt the hand on his head making a warm glow. That was all he could feel. The old man knew something must be done. Holding the flap down, he pulled the boy to his feet. Up, thought the child. The old man led him out of the creek and was heavy with the water in his pantlegs.
When they passed the tractor full of holes, Bang-Bang! thought the boy. He was getting his eyes to work. When they passed a root, the old man stumbled and thought, This is it, but caught his balance just in time to steady them both. When they passed a branch the old man used an open hand to shield the delicate skull of the child. When they saw the house tilting and solemn in the clearing ahead they thought, together, Well, finally, home. And the old man and the child disappeared into the shadowed doorway of the house in whose dark rooms, years ago, they were born.
My wife started grinding her teeth at night and I'd been trying to convince her to wear one of those mouth guards that boxers wear. We were married thirteen years ago next December. Nearly a month ago it started, lightly, and because I thought she was whispering to me, I leaned in close to hear what she was saying and I heard the hushed rubbing of her molars. The sound itself scared me. I don’t know why, I guess I thought she was having a nightmare, the muscles in her neck were tense in that same way they are when she has the recurring dream about an enormous dog writhing in agony, helpless, that she cannot save, and I woke her up. She shifted under the covers, said, Stop pushing me Edward, and turned back toward the wall. It started again the next night. It sounds like ocean waves at first. Shush, shush, like that. But then when I get my ear right to her cheek it’s like two wet boulders crushing against one another and I can imagine the small ivory toothchips flaking onto her tongue. That’s when I asked her about the mouth guard.

“We should start worrying about this type of thing,” I told her. “You might grind them down to nothing. You’ll have to get dentures.”

“You worry about it, Ed, you go ahead and worry about it,” she said. “A mouth guard?”

She said it like a mouth guard was some device I’d made up, something to ward off imaginary aliens. Then she got out of the bed to make coffee. I stayed there, looking out at the large oak reaching toward our bedroom window. A black bird, maybe a grackle or something, landed in one of the branches and looked in at me, cocked his head, and took off again. Delia started slamming pots and pans around to get my attention.

We are both newly retired, and we talk about moving west to Oregon and making wine like we always wanted, but it is more my dream than hers, something I read about in
a book. This morning, after I made her Eggs Benedict far too runny, she told me she wished I did things the right way more often.

"What do you mean?" I'd asked. "You can't even make Eggs Benedict."

"You try, Ed, but it's just that sometimes I wonder if you've really been excellent at anything. Have you? Have you ever felt like you were excellent, that you absolutely excelled at something?"

She asks these types of questions because she is consumed by them. And when I used to answer them, everything would open up between us, we'd have these debates about moral obligation, poetic truth, ideologies, those chasms where you speak to invent an individualized doctrine for yourself, but now it just left us exhausted and silent, like we'd suffered a communal stroke. I no longer have the energy for her interrogations.

I turned to face her. I said, "You don't like the eggs."

She went into the back room, where she paints, shaking her head because I'd missed her point. She's only fifty, I'm sixty-six, but where my hair has gone pure white and thinned, hers still hangs thick and chestnut brown, like when we met. Some nights, before bed, I brush her hair for her. She enjoys this, and I try to tell her how I still find her beautiful, but it comes out all wrong most of the time. You'd think that I'd have figured out how to push her buttons by now, but most of the time it is the things I say warmly, affectionately, that come out all wrong. We'll end up arguing about whether or not I meant to demean her by complimenting the way she's held her good looks. One time she threw a wet paintbrush at me for saying that her skin was still smooth, and not all papery and crumpled like the women she volunteers with at the homeless shelter.
This afternoon I call Ronald, a doctor and friend since high school, to ask what I should do about her teeth. I admit my fear that somehow she is abusing herself because of me.

“Oh, get over yourself Ed. You guys are so happy you’re boring.”

“What if we’re not, Ron? I don’t feel happy. I feel stuck, static, you know.”

“She’s just drinking too much coffee or something,” he said. “Does she drink coffee?”

We drink decaf, and I tell him. He tells me that a few sips of booze, a martini or something, before bed might help. He says it will relax the muscles in her jaw, keep them from spasms. As advice goes, it seems less medical than I’d hoped.

“What about mouth guards?” I asked.

“She’ll still do damage to her teeth that way. Trust me, try the booze first.”

Tonight, Delia and I drive to a Greek place for dinner. On the way, I apologize again for the morning’s eggs, but she says to forget the eggs, let’s talk art tonight. She’s been painting a series of decent landscapes lately, selling a few to hotels for their lobbies, that sort of thing. She tells me that the Best Western called this afternoon and they like what they see.

“Sometimes I just miss teaching, though,” she says, twirling linguini on her fork. “I miss my kids.”

“You're painting’s are selling. That’s good, right?”

“I think that’s what I used to be excellent at, teaching. Do you think you could describe my teaching as excellent?”

“You said we’d talk art.”
I look down at my chicken. I separate the capers from the rice. I tell my wife to drink more wine. We order another bottle. I realize I know nothing, really, about art. When I look at a painting or sculpture or photo, I get the vague impression of enjoyment, but there is nothing like passion behind my judgments. When we lived in the city there were gallery openings that we would attend, but I had to stop going because I could not be in a room full of people like Delia who had that fire about art burning in them without secretly feeling like they were faking it.

The waiter has brought us a new bottle of Cabernet. He fills Delia’s glass higher than mine. The waiter has cleverly wrapped the bottle in a cloth to catch the drips. I mention this to Delia, and she is predictably unimpressed.

She says, “What good is conversation when I cannot even speak to you?”

“You know, I called Ron about your teeth,” I say.

“You did what?”

“He says that you are being stubborn, he agrees with me 100%.”

Delia drops her head into her hands. Says, “You have no idea, sometimes, none.”

“No idea about what?”

By the time the check comes and we’re walking to the car, she’s swaying a little. This is good, I think to myself, I’ve done this much right. She’s calmed down about my conversation with Ron. I rub her shoulders when we get back home. I feed her another glass of wine while we sit quietly reading in the living room. When it is empty she says she’s tired, headed for bed. I stay in the recliner with my book and she kisses me and asks if I feel like bed yet, but I am not tired, I don’t want to just lay there awake and keep her up.
I like the sound of the house when she’s in the bedroom. We moved into this new house last year; our retirement gift to ourselves. I worked at a branch of Prudential in the city for thirty years proofreading policies for legal glitches and loopholes, sewing them up with language. It is so easy on paper; you’d be surprised. Barrington, the suburb we now live in, is quiet, wealthy, trim. At night it is actually peaceful, and I congratulate myself again for moving out of the city. A dog barks, a few drops of rain start to fall.

I wake up to the teeth. The alarm reads 4:00 and I sneak out of the bed and turn on the lamp. In the sudden light, I can see her jaw moving slowly in and out, the thick knots of muscle in her temples are cramping, and the lower ones, on the jaw itself, grow enormous with the force of her bite. This horrible thing is happening to her, and she does not understand my concern because she can’t see herself. I could use the camcorder. I could show her. But she needs to stop. I shake her, hard.

“What?! What!?”


Together, we creep quietly down the hardwood stairs. She holds my shoulder, I have one hand on the aluminum bat we keep in the closet. I feign fear as we tiptoe from room to room. I hold my hand out flat to keep Delia at a safe distance when I pop my head around an uninspected corner. After a search of all the rooms, we creep back into bed. For some reason we are still whispering.

“Should we just stay up, now?” she asks.

“I really did hear something. I did. It was a ‘thump’ then a ‘pop’ that I heard,” I say.

She touches my cheek, mothering me, and then rises and moves into bathroom. She leaves the door open and I watch the mechanics of her peeing, wiping, flushing. When she
comes back into the bedroom it's as if she's forgotten entirely about the intruder downstairs.

"I still can't believe you," she says, cinching her robe tight. "Telling Ron like that."

"What if the noise is a raccoon, or a skunk or something, and when we open one of the cupboards it comes lunging out at us?"

"I don't need your fantasies."

I pick up my slippers, angry that my ruse, clever as I feel it was, has failed me. I can never disguise my intentions with Delia. When I proposed, on a weekend trip to the Upper Peninsula in Michigan, she started to cry before I'd even knelt, whimpering "I do. I do. I do." I had thick black hair and pectoral muscles then. Delia had these legs, my god, and we would even make other couples jealous when we'd walk into cocktail parties hosted by friends. When she taught community college art classes her students would call late at night and this was years ago and though I know it was nothing I would hear the boy's throat close when I spoke into the receiver and I would know he was lusting after my wife and I was crazy thinking about it. Delia told me once that if it was anything like lust, it was of a cerebral, artistic variety. As if that would eradicate my anxiety.

We decide to stay up this morning, even though it is still dark. She hands me a cup of coffee when I get downstairs and complains of a headache, of too much wine last night.

"I'd hoped you'd been trying to get me drunk. Take advantage of me," she smirks.

"You know I'd never do that."

When I say this she looks at me in this way she does sometimes that makes me think she could leave me very easily. That I still do not know what my wife desires from me is one of those dreadful mysteries. But maybe I'll get her even more drunk tonight; falling-down drunk. I wonder when we stopped getting that drunk together. Too drunk to
drive; too drunk to fuck, my dad used to say. Maybe we’ll pass soundly into sleep together in that way we used to after late nights with friends. The poppy field sleep of the Wizard of Oz.

Delia shuts the door behind her when she enters her studio, which means she will be painting all day today, so I step out into the yard to try and find something useful to do. There’s a creek that flows past the property that has fish in it. Nothing you’d want to eat or anything, but fish. It was something the real estate guy was insistent upon when Delia and I were buying the place.

“You can eat carp you know,” he’d said. “I mean, not these ones, but you can eat carp.”


I’d laughed. The real estate guy – cropped blond hair, buck teeth – must not have known what anagram means. I was happy, I remember, that I’d been able to share that joke with Delia, stupid as it was.

The man who mows the yard hasn’t come yet this year, and when I step across the lawn toward the stream, I kick tangles of fallen twigs off of the dead grass. Along the banks of the creek, there are these small mounds of earth that have popped up, ringed by white shards. Eggshells. When I bend down to look closer, to pick one up, I can feel that the shells themselves are soft things, not like regular shells. They’re turtle eggshells. The excitement of my discovery makes me stand bolt upright too suddenly and I almost slip into the creek on the slick mud under my feet.

“Turtles!” I say as I enter Delia’s studio.

I hold one of the shrapnels of shell in front of her. Evidence! And I watch the confusion transform to calm belief on her face.
"Where'd you get these?"

"They're busting out everywhere! They must pop out of the mud and scoot into the water."

We walk down to the creek together, and the mounds are clearly evident, but there is no movement. Delia gets bored quickly.

"They must all be gone. They've all hatched," she says.

"I'm sorry. I wish I'd known sooner."

"No. I mean, you couldn't know, right? I have to get painting."

She walks ahead of me back into the house.

After lunch I drive into the city to get a few things. I stop by Ronald's office on Lark Ave. Ron is re-assembling a plastic replica of a heart that a young patient dismantled.

"The booze didn't work?" Ronald asks, not even looking up from the plastic maroon organ.

"I tried wine, a lot of wine. But you should hear it, Ron. It's like broken ceramic getting dragged on concrete. Do you know what it's like to wake up to a sound like that? I swear I'll smother her. It's unbelievable, the sound. And how can't she tell? I told her she should have a mouth guard, she denied grinding her teeth. I told her again, she said 'Maybe I do grind my teeth, maybe it's a change in our lives. Deal with it Edward, deal with it.' If I could deal with it, Ron, I would, I can't. It's driving me insane. I slept an hour last night. One hour."

"I could prescribe sleeping pills," he says. "But that won't solve anything, really. Maybe it's stress, maybe she - "

"We're retired Ron. She PAINTS all day. It's not like we're EMT's for chrissakes."
After a while, I calm down. Ron drops a few muscle relaxants into my palm, tells me they’re for emergencies, and I start back home.

Delia is sleeping on the couch when I get inside. I try not to wake her, but when I start to unload the things I’ve bought, she jerks herself into a sitting position. I hold up one of the bottles of liquor I bought, a blue Sapphire Gin bottle and ask in my deepest voice,

“Martini?”

“Ick. When did you start drinking so much?” Delia asks. “You never drink. Two days in a row?”

“Come on. Let’s say it’s a vacation. It’s spring. I feel jubilant. Let’s get slammed.”

She rolls her eyes, looks out the window, says, “I called Gloria, at the school. Turtles hatch at night. They’re probably snappers, snapping turtles, that’s what she said. Dogs and possums dig up the nests and eat the eggs. That’s probably what you found.”

“Oh, yes?” I say, but I am already filling a tumbler with ice.

“It’s six o’clock, you’re drinking?”

I take a large gulp to answer.

For dinner, we eat Lean Cuisine Beef Stroganoff together in silence. I have already had too many glasses of gin.

“Do you know what I’m going to do about your teeth?” I say.

“My God, you’re already slurring your speech? Will you slow down? What’s the matter, Ed?”

“First, so I can sleep, I’ll finish this.” I raise the glass in front of my face. “Then, so that you don’t end up having to gum your food because your teeth have become fine
powder," I hold the few muscle relaxants in the open palm of my left hand. “These are for you.”

“Pills. You want to medicate me over this. Are you insane? I’m not taking those.”

I start to giggle. I point at her plate.

“You didn’t,” she says.

Delia starts to poke through what’s left of her dinner, prodding through the noodles with her fork, searching for signs of tampering. And, in fact, I didn’t. Wish I did, a little, now. But, of course, I didn’t.

“I didn’t. Calm down.”

“Something is the matter with you,” she says. “Something is really wrong.”

I try to stand from the table dramatically, but drunk as I am, I hit my knee on the edge of the table, tipping the candles over.

“I need a drink,” Delia says, reaching for my glass.

For some reason it is times like this when I am overjoyed that we’ve never had children, but I am sometimes overwhelmed by the fear that Delia secretly yearned for them. When we were younger, she’d said that children weren’t her style. Now, though, it is far too late. She sighs after her second sip, fills her own glass.

“Fuck it,” she says.

Because she doesn’t swear often, the word fuck is sharp and caustic and strikingly clear from her mouth. This is not the way I wanted things to be tonight. A few drops of rain start to splat on the roof. Outside the living room window, I can see a thin strip of light, Chicago, sending a pink glow into the night sky. The rain grows steady, coming in waves of hushed sound.
Delia winces a little from the gin, says, "You know my teeth have started to hurt more than usual. Cold drinks, hot drinks, they hurt my teeth now. I’m not taking pills, though. You know I won’t take pills."

“Well it’s like this,” I say. “I’m just lying there at night trying to think about other things, but it’s like the continental plates are shifting next to me when you do it. It’s not that I’m complaining for my sake. I’m drunk, who knows, maybe I’ll sleep right through it.”

“Cover me with a pillow tonight,” she blurts this out like it’s a sexual thing, which confuses me.

“When I fall asleep, you can come in and cover my head with a pillow, kill the sound.”

“I’m not smothering my wife in her sleep.”

She lifts her palms to the sky, “Well, that’s where this is going, right?”

There can be no solution for this, I believe, that will not make me into some sort of monster to her. I can look at her now and see just where the jaw muscles are under her smooth skin. What if it never stops? What if I never sleep again? How long can a man live without rest? I am a slave to my own paranoid meditations.

“Open your mouth,” I say. “Open it. Please.”

As I investigate her gaping mouth, it occurs to me that I’ve never seen her like this. I’ve felt her mouth with my tongue, sure. I’m no prude. It’s just that it is so wet in there, so exposed. When I try to poke at her molars she clamps down, narrowly missing my index finger.

“What did you see?” she asks.

“You have the most amazing teeth, don’t you want to save them?” I ask.
I would not think less of Delia without teeth, or I would. I wouldn’t tell her that, though, and I need her to trust me. Why can’t she trust me?

“I didn’t get a good look. Open.”

This time I turn her mouth toward the light falling from the lamp above us. She has three silver fillings, a cavity, some black fleck of food in her teeth. The dangly thing in the back wiggles as she breathes. She starts laughing and the thing goes crazy, jiggling like a speedbag.

“Okay,” I begin, “Ma’am, please be honest here, I’ve heard everything, but have you been grinding your teeth?”

She smiles. She wouldn’t get a mouth guard, even if that would have helped because she can’t even wear bracelets. She says they feel like handcuffs, necklaces are nooses to her. She wears her wedding ring, but that’s it, and it’s sweet that she will suffer like that for me. She twirls what’s left of her gin around and around, the ice clinks against the glass.

“Do you think I could have been a really, really good painter? I mean, not these landscape things, but actual – capital A – Art?”

“No,” I say, gauging her reaction. Nothing. “You’re far too good looking. Artists – capital A – are weird women with fake Indian jewelry and black paint under their eyes and horse teeth and they are all flat-chested.”

“You’re sweet,” she says.

Outside, we walk down the driveway toward the creek. The heat of the day has made a fog that hangs thick, about two feet above our heads. The small pebbles grind under our footsteps.

“It is so nice here at night,” Delia says.
I can't disagree, so I take her hand in mine. The slight tumbling sound of the creek is caught and magnified by the fog. The muddy bank where the shells were this afternoon is alive with moving things. With barely light to see, I try to step gently, bringing her closer so she might be able to make out the small shapes scraping their way from the earth. Each turtle hatchling is a small alien thing. Their arms wave frantically as each emerges from the wet soil.

I catch one that has started heading away from the water, rather than toward it, with the others. I bring it close to Delia’s face. The small beak, that will one day be hard enough to break bone, is open, frantically gasping.

"Feel it," I say. "The shell’s all rubbery. It isn’t even hard yet."

She traces a finger along the soft back of the turtle and makes a small noise. I set it back on the ground, and aim it toward the creek. We both stand quietly in the dark for quite some time. She closes her eyes. I hear the creek itself, but under the sound of water is the soft scuffle of bodies moving toward the safety of the water. One of the baby turtles is not moving. When I bend down to prod it awake, I realize it is dead. Delia is still standing behind me, eyes closed, listening. I think she might hear the noise – plink! - its small body splashing as I gently toss it into the water. She is smiling, immersed in the sounds of our home, our small discovery. I realize now that I may have stepped on the turtle when I bent to lift the other so that she could touch it. We both turn. I take her hand to lead her back toward the solid squares of light shining from each window of our home.
It seemed like it was the end of the night but of course it wasn’t because God can’t even define the vanishing point and a dead cheerleader doesn’t really end things if you look at the big picture like I do. But we threw her over the railing that night, wrapped in an afghan because Drunk Stu said that was what she would have wanted, an afghan. I knew since his mother died that he’d be the one to listen to because at her funeral he’d never cried and that had meant something to me about how someone can face adversity with such flagrant pragmatism. “Guess I’ll have to make my breakfast tomorrow,” he’d said. But the girl we’d just thrown out, the girl whose body was floating south wrapped in an afghan with a tag reading Made Especially For: Stuart Clybourne, that particular girl would never be gone to Drunk Stu the way his mother was. Ferdie lived with his father the same as Drunk Stu, both ducking into their houses, working their way between fists just to sleep in their own beds. I was different because I had my mother, I would soon be gone to college on scholarship, though it was still very real for me.

She’d showed up at Ferdie’s house around nine but who knows because it had been getting dark at five for weeks so maybe it was earlier. Her car’d gone off the road almost a mile back and she was hurting, only a small scratch, some glass slices in her forehead, but her ribs hurt, and I guess that should have been a sign. We’d been working on emptying the same tank of nitrous Drunk Stu had stolen three weeks earlier from his dentist’s office. When she knocked I let her in, so maybe when it all gets sorted out on Judgment Day I’ll be standing there stupid and confused in the middle of the blame spiral, all this shit shooting out from an epicenter of ignorance. She took a balloon when Ferdie held it
out to her like she’d done it a thousand times, and a lot of people pass out but after a few minutes when she didn’t get up, I took her pulse and then all this happened. I could say it wasn’t always like this, but it sure as hell seemed like it most of the time.

The worst part of the night wasn’t what happened on the bridge though, it was the cold. The wind in Great Falls in February comes off the plains in an upsweep screaming like the wails of a thousand starving children. It doesn’t matter if you’re an Ethiope dressed as thick as the Michelin man, you will feel naked in that kind of cold. Yes, the worst part of the night was driving in that cold in my car, in my very identifiable 1966 Ford Fairlane, no heater, windows permanently half-down, listening to them in the back.

Drunk Stu, who’d been the one to yank the phone cord out of the wall when Ferdie picked up the receiver to dial because he’d be damned, he’d said, if he’d go to jail over a fucking girl what dies from a nitrous balloon, was in the back of the car saying,

“Turn off the damn lights. Quiet down. Ooh, turn this song up!”

- Ferdie, who’d come a long way since pissing his pants an hour earlier and always said he’d be the one to call if the CIA wanted another hitman, rocked himself back and forth in his arms next to me saying,

“Oh, fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck, ooh, fuckfuckfuckfuck fuck... Fuck!”

- Drunk Stu, who’d also been the one who’d first said we were all going to go to hell for this, smoked a cigarette, saying,

“She’s gonna bounce off the ice you dumb fucks, she’s gonna be sitting there in the moring and some little girl, her sister or some shit is gonna say ‘Mommy what’s that in the river?’ and that’ll be that.”

I just kept my mouth shut and drove the speed limit.
She didn't bounce when she hit the ice, I could hear the crash from inside the car after Drunk Stu hefted her over and the red and white afghan flashed over the guardrail. Ferdie watched to make sure the body didn't resurface while I sat silent in the car, and I imagined I was watching with him for an instant, and had the sudden fear that her hand would break through from below and she'd drag herself, undead, on top of the ice to be found at daybreak.

After he was back inside we drove to Denny's where my mom worked nights.

"It's only midnight," Drunk Stu said from the backseat.

Ferdie, who sat next to me, said, "I can't remember her name. What was her name?"

He was crying and Drunk Stu was quiet because he didn't know it either because she went to a different school but I knew her name was Thaedra Burnstein because she'd told me earlier that night but I'd be damned if I'd give them a name to put to her face.

"It'll be in the paper soon enough," I'd said. "It'll all be in the paper."

"You boys want wheat, white or what?" my mother asked from the foot of our table.

"Ooh, could I get a english muffin?" Ferdie asked.

"An english muffin and that's an extra fifty cents."

She didn't know anything about what we'd done and couldn't have. I had furry teeth from the beer and cigarettes and the shit in the coffee was clinging to the deposits and my God, all I wanted was a toothbrush and a bed and friends that wouldn't embarrass me in front of my mother. But that night, seventeen years old in Great Falls, Montana, you didn't really get to choose these things. As if things are different now.
It was snowing when I got home, I could hear the tick of the flakes on the glass as I fell asleep, shuddering awake again and again when the sensation of a cold wet hand struck my cheek in dream. It was clear and late on Sunday when I woke and there were no sheriffs storming into my bedroom flashing badges and teeth. On the phone, Drunk Stu told me we needed to talk, that Ferdie didn’t go home last night.

“Well who dropped him off?” I asked as we drove east toward Ferdie’s grandmother’s trailer.

“It’s just that I think he might be talking to someone,” Drunk Stu said. “That little shit!”

Ferdie was four-nine in his basketball shoes, five-six when he took a jump shot. Drunk Stu was six-three barefoot and had first gotten chest hair at fourteen and could’ve pulled Ferdie’s arms off if he’d said something. But he would never tell, he had nothing to gain. Great Falls is not a place where back-stabbers are heroes, cowboy justice is not yet dead and Ferdie knew it.

Ferdie’s grandma is Blackfoot, half-deaf and blind, so she opened the door and felt our faces to make sure we were who we said we were. Her hands were soft and warm and barely brushed my cheeks before she switched over to Drunk Stu’s face that she’d always said she could recognize even before she touched it by the smell but today she squeezes his cheeks tightly before nodding us inside.

“He’s in the back,” she whispered. Then more loudly, “You boys done something, you feel guilty enit? Want to come over her to get to Ferdie Bird’s good side. I know what you did. You got to drinking again. Devils.”

She kept talking to Drunk Stu while I slipped past quietly to the half-opened door in the back of the trailer. Ferdie crouched in the corner of the bedroom under some hanging
mobile with feathers and Indian shit all over it. He was definitely not sick, but I could tell from the door that he was really out of his mind by the way he kept mumbling and rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet.

"Let's go for a drive," I said.

I pulled drunk Stu away from Ferdie's grandma and we were in the car headed back into town which was stupid really, because we'd just have to cross the bridge again and there's apartments that look right at it that could've seen us last night but just then was when Drunk Stu remembered the tag on the afghan.

"Holy Fuckin Christ Shit-ass!"

The girl had been underwater for ten-and-a-half hours and we were all getting pretty edgy. We talked about what we could do. The afghan was lashed together with garbage ties, which I had tried to explain earlier wasn't a good idea cause those things break real easy but right then all we wished was that they would. Ferdie said he had a plan.

"We'll just scout the river, go out and find the body and cut the afghan off it and no one'll know the difference."

"My fucking mom put that tag on it," Drunk Stu said. "She didn't even make the fucking thing, she just mail-ordered a bunch of the fucking tags and bought the blanket secondhand."

"We'll find it before anyone else does," Ferdie continued, "and we'll get the afghan off'n it and push it back under and everything will be okay then I think, it will be better... like new."

He was crying again and before I could say anything Drunk Stu lashed an open palm against the back of his head and screamed at him for being a sissy, for not having brains enough to realize that three boys hauling a waterlogged body out of a river might
draw questions. We decided to search at night, which turned out to be pretty stupid because after about a week, when the girl’s car was found and the search parties were out, they were up all night with floodlights on the banks and down by the dam and there was no way we were going to volunteer because Drunk Stu said that’s just what they’d expect.

“You know how in those cop shows how the murderers is always them guys standing in the crowd trying to be real real helpful and all that. Well if we’re not in the scene, you know, we ain’t even suspects.”

At school everyone was talking about her. I sat through math class envisioning Mrs. Dayton holding up a frozen arm asking me if the angle at which it was frozen was complimentary to the angle I had scrawled on the board as an answer. I knew even then that it was ridiculous to obsess about her, that something like kismet, fate, God, or the spirits Ferdie’s grandmother warned us about, would be the ones to decide our futures.

As it happened, I had the best ACT scores of my senior class, which I was sure was a mistake, but it came in the mail one day and my mother wept, saying how proud my father would’ve been if he hadn’t gotten asbestos poisoning in the mines up toward Libby. I couldn’t tell Drunk Stu or Ferdie about the test scores, about the offer from Montana State for a full-ride, the same way I haven’t told them about the few minutes that I’d spent in the bathroom with the girl that night, Thaedra, and listened to her worry about her father and cheerleading tryouts and her sick dog Herbie and I never said to them that I had convinced her, trained her on nitrous balloons, how you can’t take too much and I didn’t tell them that she’d nodded and said, yes, it sounded like just the thing to take the edge off before she would call her father to come pick her up. Drunk Stu and Ferdie eyed me when I came out of the bathroom, sitting on the couch in the basement smoking cigarettes, and the balloon was already in Ferdie’s dwarfish little hand. I didn’t tell them
that she probably wouldn’t have done it, that it was me who’d talked her into sucking on that balloon, and I regret that in a way.

In May, after a baseball game we’d lost, some rancher south of town reeled in the afghan and recognized the name. It was Drunk Stu’s dad, Drunk Chuck, who answered the phone when the man called. I was in Drunk Stu’s room drinking a warm Coors listening to his demo tape and I could hear enough of the conversation to hear the word ‘blanket’ and ‘Clybourne’ when his father popped his head in.

“Why you throw out that blanket your momma made you?! You ungrateful sheeit, you know how much that meant to her.”

Drunk Stu made something up about how he’d let someone borrow the afghan one night, and how they’d never given it back, but it was no use, I could smell the bourbon his father was breathing into the room and I knew how he got over things like this and all I could do was curl up in the far corner of the bed and listen to him beat the shit out of his eighteen-year-old son with the cordless phone. When it was over, I stood behind Drunk Stu in the bathroom while he sopped up the blood under his nose with toilet paper and said how it was nothing, that it was easy to take his old man’s shit, that it made for good song lyrics.

“I’m sitting there alone... he comes in with the phone... plastic crushing bone...”

Later we star-69’d the other phone, the one that wasn’t broken, and a woman answered. Drunk Stu grabbed the phone from me because all of a sudden everything had become confusing, and I stammered something like ‘hehehehehe...’ before he was holding the phone himself carrying on a conversation.

“...and it washed right up?”

His eyes darted some distrust in my direction.
“Heck, I can come pick that up right now. Nope. OK, down Gallatin road then. White, you said? Yep, ‘cause it’s my ma made that for me godresthersoul and I’d sure appreciate it back here where it belongs.”

How I’d wished for that composure, he was cool incarnate with that phone, countrygentleman and all that, just sweet as could be.

“Hehehehehe'- whatn’ the fuck was that, retard? ‘I, I ,I, kk.k.k.k.killed Thelma.’”

“Thaedra,” I said.

We grabbed Ferdie and headed south together, there was a sign to the ranch for me to look for, so I tried to focus on that, but then on the side of the road was an arm on a pole and a tattoo I hadn’t noticed on her arm but we were going too fast for me to read it and then Drunk Stu was yelling at me.

“You dumbass, Circle H ranch! You didn’t see that fuckin’ sign?” he twisted his head to look behind us.

It was a sign; a plywood arm on a pole pointing at the dirt road to the left and the tattoo said “Circle H Ranch 0.2 mi.”

“Once we get this blanket,” Ferdie said, “I’m going down to Arizona to that Pueblo rez ‘cause I seen pictures and those desert Indians got it good.”

“Sure,” I said. “Why’s getting the blanket so important anyway?”

“Cause there’s gotta be her hairs in it an’ shit and I don’t want nothing, not even a hair, left of this,” Drunk Stu said. “Jesus! Why’d it have to be some sweet old woman?”

I stayed in the car with Ferdie while Drunk Stu knocked on the screen door of the white house. We talked about Arizona and I warned him about scorpions and snakes but he said he knew all about snakes because he’d killed all those rattlers under his grandma’s trailer with a pump-action pellet gun.
“I heard you’re going to Montana State,” he said.

“It’s not for sure, man. Where’d you hear that?” I asked.

“Got eyes and ears all over,” he said, waxing Indian-wise. “Mrs. Dayton told me about the scholarship. Why keep that a secret, not like we’re jealous. College can suck my dick for all I care. Bunch of liberal-ass earthball hippies an’ shit.”

Drunk Stu came backing out of the screen door then, holding the blanket, or half of the blanket, and I could just see the silhouette of the woman holding the door for him and her arm was thin and long and looked cold there against the doorframe. Drunk Stu popped into the car and we were off.

“Even washed it for me,” he said, holding up the afghan.

Half of the blanket was missing and the water had stained it a light brown and almost all of the original color was gone. Looking at the way he was grinning, his chipped teeth all angular, I thought about what would drive a man, who was only fishing, to reel a thing like that out of a river, about what would drive a man to beat his own son with a telephone, but Drunk Stu was so happy and I looked over where Ferdie was beside me and he was just staring at the blanket and he looked old, like some sad grandfather, and then there was just me looking at them, back and forth, back and forth, not yet knowing that I could speak.