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In Darkness Light-Headed

It isn't that I'm looking out the window, because here in the basement there is no window, or rather the two windows there are are glass-block, ground level: mute light streams through, but no one sees in or out. In or out. The daisies are finished, and the neighbors are building a landfill next to their confederate gray garage door: plastic deck chairs upside down, tamale cart in tatters, baby gates, jump rope, litter box. Litter box. Sand-brown pitcher's mound, two neglected dogs. Black sheep jump rope, have you any wool? Have you any will? Have you any power? Fashion-flood-flower blow the lid off? The aviary rising up/raining down its baaah: I'm happy. I'm happy in a world I don't belong in a gym in. Baby pool planter: petunias steeped in ether. My country tis of thee, I carry a grudge. This way the meadow and the happy mowing lawn. Heavy water pooling round the dumptruck at dawn.

*****

It isn't that I'm looking out the window, but I have a new ribbon for my hairdo. I'm happy I'm slappy maybe five times too many. The lobster wasn't for dinner from China, but when it all came down to it, I was a petrified forest. I could hear the particulates like wolves against my ploughshares of mountain/hideaway in my basement. There is no window, but a-lot-electric snorkeling. Squalling and blood-letting the TV, the hot air ballooning a tire on fire, then finding the will to touch her little fingers in a pinch. I was happier than ever.

But right now in the war—I define our lives thusly: technicians beat down the door in the elephant and we are drowned in it deathly in the warm citrus spray, of the hurricane Emmanuel, the admiral of patrimony. And further, the golf bag of sandtrap. In Buffalo, Ohio they are MIA, or sadly there is this: no place exists.

*****

It isn't that I'm looking, but that no such place exists makes me nervous of the swirling greeny prospects. My grass is a martini with a twist, which is to say, somebody got murdered for a beautiful life, which is to say
I have concerned my whole world with aesthetics. With aesthetics, the seeing it through to the end of making cardinals and splitting their heads to find that raindrops keep falling on my only day to golf in a world I don’t belong in a taxi in. Or on my little hands and knees astonished. Think about the rule book and shutting down. And shutting it up. The way things decay is an honor from China. I tell you a litter box. Or I tell you a music box. I tell you same animal same language. I’m happy in the bird feeder, same fucking thing, listening unrequited at the keyhole of the elephant, My country tis of thee, the happy mowing lawn.

*****

It isn’t me singing a grudge, but rather: that these are the skies in disguise of America. Autumnal unquiet, unnatural sublime. On the scene, the artist arrives with a bucket of slaughter, the remote control sticky with Atlantic-Pacific, but of course no such body exists. Or in fancy, or in sainthood. The unicorn of millionaires landfills my heartplug. Engine running sparks from Godzilla at dawn. This is your dump truck, your influence in a nuthouse in. On a horse, on a horse. Glass-block crashing in the warm citrus spray. One thing I can say is that saying one thing or a hundred and forty million is the same exact thing as the daisies are finished, or the heart of the avalanche much purpled at dawn. My friend is sad cause his family is shocking, but goodly most people in awe don’t believe it.

*****

Or it isn’t that they don’t believe it, but that I’m looking out the window not making myself clearly. The daisies are finished, and the basil plant the neighbors are building is a meditation. What I mean is a rarified will to flower from China—to Buffalo, Ohio; Cincinnati, New York. But, of course, no such place exists in myth. No such no body. My friend, I’ve put on wings or a ribbon in your hair, and now that it’s over I’ve learned you how to fly. And now, here in the sky, one just keeps loitering beginning, until inexplicably god. Splitting our hearts on our own hands and knees, we’re astonished. We’re astonished in the bird feeder, which is entirely Romantic except for everything else in which I haven’t written in: destruction.

*****

It isn’t that I’m looking out the window at destruction, because I’m happy truly. But how can this be? How can anything raspberry this still life from its
stiffness sardines? This marvel round the heavy water dumptruck? Outside
the red plastic gas can, collapsing metal curtain rods 'gainst the side of the mountain
lion/ghost garage. The theme, as is the case with all great celluloid devastation,
is in development in China on the happy mowing lawn.
If one’s lucky, one gets subtitles. One gets brute force
marching orders on hands and knees astonished—
head and shoulders, knees and toes knees and toes.

*****

Still, it isn’t so much that I’m astonished, but that I’m still looking
out the window. It’s an honor to be making this long trip from China,
but of course, no such body exists. Gold teeth. Sand trap.
This gold bag of loneliness linking my ceiling to a set of constraints,
allowing my falling in love in. In love in pitch darkness, feathered and tired
to the wishbone. If I were a bird or if you were.
If the world were in-actually ending. Drunk on our meadowlark,
knees on our toes. Litter box. Litterbug. Same fucking thing.

*****

But really it isn’t the same thing. I’m looking out the window repeatedly
on purpose. My little life purportedly decaying. Will hospice to the rescue me?
Eventually we all go windmill. The horizon, the horizon. Chinese handcuffs.
I collapse against my neighbor’s building meditation.
A landfill within me, 100% American dependency. The daisies are finished.
I’m happy just listening in a warm citrus spray. The wonder and ghosts.
Roll the dice. Duck-duck-goose.

*****

It isn’t like I don’t feel you through the window, but I’m turning away into quietude,
the vomit and beauty never-ending. I am marching orders, the 21st Century.
American sky and art in its cancer, all things lovely in lovely in love.
I am reaching for the phone to call you and explain this,
my friend you are sad, and I myself in the final analysis am happy.
What’s doom is a deep impending mood on the horizon.

*****

But it isn’t that I’m not reaching far enough, only that you are not home when I call.
So like me, you choose to ignore me—the triathlon of snails, the nations and atoms pooling. To jump in this moment—to create—is to save us negation: the bed or the box or the stanza—which is a coffin, full-bodied gravity godless. Don’t forget it. Forget it. Happy but godless, the heliotrope.

*****

Happy, I’m drinking out the window with a landfill. Fuel rod in my face. Three wishes in my heart: 1) for the neighbors to vanish 2) for the door in the elephant’s opening sky 3) to get up off my hands and knees and toes, knees and toes (astonished) and find myself a new world of wonder, somebody murdered for a beautiful life.

*****

I mean, it isn’t that I’m not seeing a beautiful life, I’m looking out the window on a sunny day in Sept. or July: I am, but I am not. And you are with me always, sad as a deafening leafening. My neighbor tis of thee, my collaborator lost, I stand where you stand.

*****

Looking astonished into my coffee, painting this address, I can feel nothing better than nothing. We are our own best suppliers of goods and evils, hell’s heaven’s heavens.

*****

In a world we don’t belong in, in lovely in love in, this landfill I’m singing, my window tis of thee.
“Daveman the Caveman” his wife, Deb, had taken to calling him, for all the time he spent in the cellar. He’d never had a nickname in his life, and he wasn’t particularly fond of this one. Not that he suspected Deb cared. Their indifferent coexistence was becoming an art form.

The cellar was unfinished. Mortar dust crumbled from the damp stone walls, dusting the cobwebs and the hard dirt floor. Dave’s workshop, through a doorway under the stairs, had once been the root cellar beneath the kitchen. Over the work table a lightbulb hung beside a high, ground-level window, and a tattered easy chair sat in the corner. Around the floor, up the walls, on the far reaches of the table, sat twenty-odd dollhouses, many of which had been finished at one time, but never quite the way he wanted, never quite good enough, before being cannibalized for the next model. His workshop suited him fine—except for the cat, the little pain in the ass forever invading his privacy. Mr. Whiskers for his part saw no reason why the cellar, his hunting grounds—for he was an excellent mouser still—should not be exclusively his domain.

Dave was in the cellar when the call came in. Just after dark, early June, rain splashing mud outside the cellar window above his work table. He was repainting the trim around the interior living room windows, using a tiny brush at impossible angles, a tedious job for which his callused roofer’s hands had little patience.

He heard the phone ring, then Deb’s step on the cellar stairs. She was still wearing her blue lab coat from the hospital, and her limp yellow hair needed washing, though he noticed only from the corner of his eye. She put her hand on his shoulder like an old pal, watching him work.
"Lorrie called," she said. Lorrie worked with her in X-ray. "She heard on the scanner some kid's lost in the woods out past Chapel Cemetery. They got volunteers going in looking for him. She knows you hunt out there."

He withdrew the tiny brush, dabbed it in paint, inserted it again. "Oh yeah?"

She withdrew her hand. "In case you feel like getting out of the cellar."

He listened to her climb the stairs. He heard a grumble from Mr. Whiskers, saw him crouched in the dark corner beneath the table, watching his every move. The cat held him in utter contempt, a feeling that was utterly mutual. Dave refused to accord Mr. Whiskers the dignity of the name—bestowed by his daughter, whose cat he'd been before she died—so he called him "Whiskers" when he was in a charitable mood, or "Mr. Shithead," or, simply, "you little pain in the ass," when he wasn’t. For his part, Mr. Whiskers enjoyed leaping upon the work table, sauntering across it just as Dave was engaged in a particularly delicate operation, maybe threading a tiny wire through a tiny hole in a tiny wall, and batting to the floor the next tiny tool Dave was about to reach for. There was nothing affectionate about their contempt.

Occasionally their disputes became physical. Dave was known to sweep Mr. Whiskers rudely off the table. The cat was known to swipe at Dave, usually when the element of surprise was on his side, at an exposed ankle or arm, usually during one of the delicate operations, often drawing blood. Upon those occasions, Dave gave chase, and, if he were able to catch him—a more frequent occurrence now that Mr. Whiskers was getting a little long in the tooth—took him by the scruff of the neck, and bowled him across the cluttered cellar floor toward a distant corner, scattering miscellaneous boxes, buckets, boards, or other debris. He couldn't quite bring himself to wring the little bastard's neck, or take him for a one-way ride in the country. He had, after all, been Janey's cat.

It took him five minutes to clean his brush, seal the paint can, cat-proof the table top. Upstairs he put on a flannel shirt over his black
Harley tee, laced up his work boots, selected from the hallway shelf the camo trucker’s cap he judged most rain-resistant. Took the keys to his pick-up from the little table top. “Okay,” he said to Deb, who was standing by the kitchen sink, arms folded.

“Come here,” she said. Dave crossed the kitchen. “You’re still wearing your potato chips.” She brushed at his bushy brown beard.

“Thanks.” He almost kissed her on the cheek. She almost waited for him to.

“Good luck,” she said, turning toward the dirty dishes.

Dave drove to the Rod and Gun Club, parked in back, away from the street, walked in shaking rain from his hat, sat at the bar, ordered a Rolling Rock. She’d never asked where he was going. Let her assume what she would. The Pirates were on the TV above the bar, the beer was cold, there were pickled eggs in the jar by the cash register. His evening was pretty much planned.

He’d lost a kid once. No one had helped him search.

One of the customers at the bar was his father-in-law, Al Black, who returned Dave’s nod by way of greeting. Al scowled, but it was nothing personal; it was his natural expression. Business was slow for a Friday, a couple of young couples playing pool. Missy was tending bar, but she didn’t chat either, only brought him his beer, took his money, and returned to the scanner beside the pickled egg jar, where she stood listening, her back to Dave. A message crackled out of the little black box, but he couldn’t make it out. Missy was wearing jeans, flimsy denim. She had a gorgeous ass.

The sound on the game was low. The others watched it like a fire. Dave listened to the announcers’ murmur, the sporadic low crackle of the scanner, the pool balls’ clacking, the quiet chatter of the players. The beer was going to his head. He found himself staring outright at Missy’s ass, watching how when she moved the denim clung to every curve and crevice. When she went into the kitchen, he found himself equally hypnotized by the second hand on the big, bright, Iron City Beer clock on the wall above the bar. The game he couldn’t bring himself to watch. His beer was empty, even though it seemed he’d been
there only a minute, so he ordered another when Missy returned.
She slid the bottle toward him. "You hear about the Gilhousen kid?"
"Tim Gilhousen?" A member of the Club, younger than Dave. Nice enough guy, a truck driver, quick to laugh.
"Yeah. His little boy disappeared in the woods up behind their place this afternoon. He was out playing with the dogs, they went inside for a minute, bang, he's gone, him and the dogs."
"How old is he?"
"Three, three-and-a-half."
"That's a shame. Hope he's all right."
"There's a bunch of people out looking for him."
Dave drummed his fingers on the bar beside his change. "Hope they find him."
Missy said, "Don't you hunt up in there? Out past Chapel Cemetery?"
"I hunt up in there, yeah. A lot of people hunt up in there."
Al's scowl deepened. Missy went back to the scanner, facing Dave now so he couldn't see her ass. He watched the second hand on the clock. He should ask Al why he wasn't up there searching for the Gilhousen kid if he was so concerned, but he knew the answer. Al's knee was bad, so bad he couldn't walk anymore without a cane. Couldn't even hunt anymore. Couldn't do much of anything anymore, except drink. Dave sometimes wondered what kept his father-in-law going, but he supposed he knew the answer to that, too. It was Janey, Dave's lost kid. His daughter—Al's granddaughter—had been killed three years before by a bunch of drunken, drugged-up kids, two of whom turned out to be remorseless, real punks, the ringleaders. They'd gotten off on manslaughter, ten to fifteen years. Al, it was assumed by most who knew him, was determined to live long enough to impose a more realistic sentence when they got out.
Dave, for one, didn't think he'd make it. He watched his father-in-law order another shot and beer, watched him suck the shot in a single gulp into his nearly toothless face, saw the grimace, like taking bad medicine. Dave seldom thought of the punks, except when he saw Al; sometimes Janey was so gone it was as though she'd never been
there. How she’d loved Al, back in the days before Al had gone to seed, back when he’d been loud and friendly and funny. Dave thought he’d been a good father to Janey, a strict, no-nonsense father, sure, but a good one, trying to do the right thing. He was staring at the second hand again. He remembered Janey’s hand going around in circles. She’d been slow, learning-disabled. The habit began just after she was born, died with her fifteen years later, her hand going round and round in little circles against her mother’s skin, her leg, tummy, back, never stopping, as if to stop would be to lose touch.

Taking a gulp of his Rolling Rock, he grimaced like Al. Tasted like piss. Must have been a skunky batch, that happened now and then at the God and Run Club, probably forgot a case in the corner, let it sit a few months going bad. What the hell. He didn’t much care for baseball anyway. Gathering his change, he left without a word, without a nod.

Main Street was deserted, stores closed, rain pelting the bricks of the sidewalks. His wiper blades were shot; he’d been meaning to change them. He turned down Pershing Street, over the bridge past Proud Judy’s, deciding not to stop there, too many cars, too many kids, too loud. Heading out toward Irishtown, he pulled in at the Pub Bar, hesitated, pulled out again. It was Al’s hangout, probably his next stop. Down Mill Street by the creek, he headed south, out of town. Up the big hill past Chapel Cemetery, he turned left on Shugars Road.

He didn’t know exactly where Gilhousen lived, but he didn’t have to. In front of the garage, up and down the dirt road, were a dozen pickups, two Hartsgrove Volunteer Fire Department trucks, three State Police cars. Pulling in behind the farthest, Dave stepped from the cab and heard, through the drumming rain, the hum of four-wheelers from the woods.

Three men stood in the drive backlit by the spotlight on the garage. He recognized the fire chief talking to a man he knew he should know; and a state cop he’d never seen. “No luck yet?” he said to the chief. The light was in his eyes, rain dripping from the bill of his cap.

“Not yet. Nothing.”
"What's the plan?" Dave said.

"Got a lot of guys searching on four-wheelers, a few fellows in there on foot."

"Folks keep straggling in," said the cop. "Like you. Trying to point 'em all in different directions."

"I don't get the four-wheelers," Dave said. "How they gonna hear the kid yelling?"

The chief shrugged. "Figure he'll make himself seen, if they get close enough."

"Hope so," the other man said.

"What if he don't?" Dave said.

Across the yard, a woman stood under the porch light. Dave recognized the shadowed face of Gilhousen's wife, the kid's mother. She held a phone at her waist, like a cocked pistol, pointed toward the black woods beyond the yard.

Taking his flashlight from his glove box, Dave climbed the roadside bank, crossing a field next to the back yard, then into the woods. The flashlight cast a feeble beam against the dark. Fog had begun to come up. Could have brought his heavy-duty lamp, if only he'd known he was coming. The trees offered little shelter from the rain, which slapped the leaves louder than his steps, louder than the sound of the four-wheelers. The carpet of decay underfoot was soggy and slippery, the wetness filling him with a raw, fecund smell.

Up the hillside through the woods he followed a meandering trail, around undergrowth, thick patches of laurel and saplings, the same trail a deer would follow. Or dogs. His flashlight faltered, then brightened again, and he realized the battery wouldn't last. He'd have to conserve. He'd have to turn it off, walk in the dark. He could memorize the path to the beam's end, turn the light off and walk it, turn it on again to memorize the next piece. Dave fixed his route in his mind: around the low branches, past the thicket, through the trees. Avoid the fallen log to the left. Clicked off the light.

For a second the shattering of the rain was thunderous, the blackness complete. A surge of panic, sudden blindness. Turned the light on, then off again just as quickly. He could do this. Took a breath, a
step. Hesitantly, following the trail in his mind, heeding the sogginess underfoot, one step at a time, slowly, then a bit faster. He hadn't gone ten feet when he slipped and fell.

Switching on the light, he saw the rock, now exposed and shiny where his boot had slid the leaves. Standing, he made his way to the log, sat. Turned off the light. Couldn't see his hand in front of his face. He tried, waving it there. Might have seen a motion, blacker than the rest of the blackness. Nothing hurt, and he was no wetter than he had been before. Drenched was drenched. On the log, he stretched his leg, wrung some water from his beard. And asked himself, what the hell was he doing here?

“BILLY!” he yelled.

Nothing but the drumming of the rain, and, lower now, more distant, the sound of the four-wheelers. What was he doing here? It was a no-win situation. But then weren't most situations? If no one found the kid, if a bear found him first, if he fell, hit his head and died, then, certainly, the kid—if he'd lived—would have grown up to find a cure for cancer. But if they rescued him, just as surely he'd grow up worthless, probably into some drug-addled punk like the ones who killed Janey. Or worse, a lawyer.

He rubbed his hand in little circles on his drenched thigh.

He stood. He was here. He was where he was. Maybe there was a good reason, maybe there wasn't. The trick was not to think about it. The trick was don't try to convince yourself of anything, one way or the other, because you can never be sure when you're lying. Unzipping, he pissed into the dark, splattering louder than the rain. Then he turned the light back on.

The fog was thicker, bouncing back a brightness that blinded him for an instant. The forest was frozen on the other side of the light, indistinct, like an idea of woods, not like the real thing at all. Nothing was like the real thing at all. “BILLY!”

He memorized the next piece of path, turned the light off, tried again. He'd been in the woods all his life, even at night a few times—the time they took his little brother's friend snipe hunting. He could handle it. He was a hunter. He'd bagged a buck—at least one—every
year since he was nine. How different could hunting and searching be? Breathing the fog, the wet smell brought an icy feeling, and he began to feel a chill, the heat leaving his body. Tripping, he stumbled but didn’t fall, made his way to the spot he believed to be the end of his memorized trail, turned the light back on. Surrounded again by the glimpse of unreal woods, swirling in ghost-colored fog.

"BIIL-LYYY!" This was how he climbed the hill.

Down the other side, the sound of the four-wheelers was only a suggestion. More distant now? Or had they gone in, maybe found the boy? Or was it just the rain, heavier, louder, drowning out the other sounds? How far had he come? How far would he go? Walking in the dark, tripping, stumbling, frequently falling, ignoring the bruises, the scratches from the branches he walked into face-first. He saw his father-in-law, his hollow face sucking whiskey, saw his snarl, his accusing eyes. Knew Al blamed him for Janey’s death. Knew Deb did too.

He walked in the dark to the end of the trail in his mind, turned on the light, yelled, memorized, walked in the dark. A mile, two miles into the woods, he judged, maybe an hour since he went in.

Stopping at the edge of the blackness, he flashed on the light. There stood a man, watching him out of the fog.

The flashlight nearly bounced from his hand, his skin caught in a clutch of chills. The man was standing ten feet before him, under an evergreen canopy funneling rain like a waterfall. He held an umbrella over his head. He was wearing a white shirt beneath a vest that failed to cover his fat front where a prominent cross was displayed, and a frightened, lost look on his face. It took Dave a moment to recognize him.

"Francis?"
"Dave?"
"Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me."
"Boy am I glad to see you."
"What the hell are you doing out here?" Dave had moved closer, close enough to see the perplexed look on Francis’s face at the question, followed by a look of hurt.

"Looking for Billy Gilhousen."
"In your dress-up clothes? With an umbrella?"
Soaked as he was, he still held the umbrella. “I have to go to work at eleven.” Francis was night manager at the Truck Stop. Dave knew him from church, though he hadn’t seen him there in three years; Dave hadn’t been to church since Janey’s funeral.

“Where’s your light?” Dave said.

“Battery wore out. I guess. It stopped working. Had it in my back pocket, but I fell down and busted it.”

“Jesus.” Perhaps it was the utterance that made Dave notice anew the large, wooden crucifix Francis wore hanging from his neck. He’d always worn it, as long as he’d known him. A religious nut, Dave had concluded early, though he’d always liked the man.

“Hurt my butt,” said Francis.

“I don’t wonder.” Dave turned off his flashlight.

In the sudden blackness, Francis grabbed his arm. “What are you doing?”

“Saving the battery.”

Rain slapping leaves in the moment of silence. “Oh.” Francis released his arm.

Dave explained how it was done, walking in the dark from memory between bouts of illumination. He turned on the light. “Okay. We head down the slope here, between those two trees, remember where that stump’s at, around, towards that laurel patch. Fairly clear, not too bad. We’ll stop up there and look again. There’s a ravine not too far down, if I’m where I think I am—little creek at the bottom. Got it?”

“I think so,” Francis said.

“Stay close.” Then he yelled, “BIIL-LYYY!”

Francis caught on. “BIIL-LYYY!” he yelled.

They listened for a moment to nothing but rain. Dave doused the light, they headed out. “Stay close,” he repeated.

Francis said, “What do you suppose the odds are of you finding me?”

Dave thought about it. “About the same as me having venison in my freezer, I guess.”

“But there’s lots of deer out here. Only one of me.”

“That’s probably the same thing that buck in my freezer was thinking.”
Francis was quiet. Dave wasn’t interested in odds, which were nevertheless on his mind; he was interested only in getting through, finishing. In the racket of the rain he couldn’t tell how close Francis was keeping, but thought he heard clumsy footfalls not far behind. At the edge of the void, he flashed on the light; Francis was maybe halfway down the path, coming sluggishly through the fog, cross-first.

“Stay close,” said Dave, waiting.

Francis caught up. Dave pointed the light down the slope, through the trees, scoping out their next route. “What do you suppose the odds are of us finding the kid?” Francis said.

Annoyed, Dave wanted to say slim and none. Instead, he called again, “BIIL-LYYY!”

When Francis didn’t repeat the shout this time, Dave yelled again. “GAAA-AWD!” It was spontaneous, surprising himself.

Francis caught on. “JEEE-SUS!” he yelled.

Seeing Francis’s smile, Dave almost smiled himself. He put a hand to his ear, listening. “Nothing out there.”

“They’re out there,” Francis said.

Dave flicked off the light. He stepped into the blackness, leaving Francis to follow. God could guide him. Before Janey’s funeral, Francis and his wife Mary Anne had visited them at home, bringing comfort and an over-done casserole. Mary Anne had gushed and preached, Francis letting her do most of the talking. It had been apparent they’d steeled themselves for the mission, meaning to be pillars for Dave and Deb in their time of need. Sure enough, the tears had flowed, but it had been Francis who’d broken down, sobbing, followed by Mary Anne at the sight of her husband. Deb had been obliged to comfort them both. Dave had left the room, for the cellar and Janey’s dollhouse.

Reaching out in the blackness, Dave felt the sapling’s slimy bark, just about where he’d memorized it. He thought he heard the rain thrumming on Francis’s umbrella, thought he heard him shuffling through the undergrowth. It wasn’t that Dave didn’t believe in God. Nor that he believed that if there were a God, it was necessarily one who didn’t believe in him, a neglectful God, or a God who tested his faith. He remembered a sermon of Father Bill’s comparing life to on-
the-job training, God seeing what we could do with this tiny speck of
dirt in the universe before He turned it all over to us. Good a theory as
any, Dave supposed. But what did it have to do with him?

The hill steepened. He hadn’t noticed the sharper decline from
above. His boots slipped in the soggy footing, he was sliding, through
brambles, over fallen branches and rocks. Digging in his heels, he
finally stopped. Turned on the light. Must have gone beyond his
planned path, or strayed from it. He’d slid at the top of the ravine,
stopping himself maybe halfway down, before it became even steeper.
Near the little creek the fog was thicker, his sphere of illumination
reduced to the inside of a milky globe. Francis was nowhere in sight.

“FRANCIS!” No answer. He climbed out of the ravine. Old trees
here, stout black trunks in the fog, and he stood for a moment taking
his bearings. Removing his hat, limp and drenched, he turned his face
to the black sky, letting the rain wash over it. He pointed the light in
every direction. “FRAAAN-CIS!” The irritating monotony of the
pounding rain made him grit his teeth behind his beard.

“BIIII-LYYYY!” No luck with that one either.

“GAAAAAWD!” Dave sat on a log and laughed.

He didn’t know how long afterwards it was, he’d lost track of time,
traveling further along the edge of the ravine, using the same, on-again,
off-again, light and dark method, trying to decide when to give it up,
when enough would be enough. Weariness weighed on his body as well
as his mind, his thighs growing heavy, his back tired. He stopped and
yelled for Billy again and again, and the last time he yelled it, a small,
clear voice answered out of the rain and blackness: “I’m down here.”

A cascade of chills crossed his skin and his breath caught high in
his chest, a revelation, biblical in proportion, the purest, most singular
sensation he would ever feel in his life.

He shone the light down into the ravine, at the little, white-headed
boy looking up from the edge of the void.

“Who are you?” the boy said. “Where’s my daddy at?”

The words tripped over his chattering teeth, he was shaking, wearing
only a tee shirt and jeans. Two dogs slouched at his feet, shivering.
beneath matted coats. “Gotcha,” said Dave, picking the boy up, wrapping his wet flannel shirt around him. Four steps took him across the swollen creek, and he climbed the other side, dogs close behind.

Afterwards, he would remember little of the trip out, fueled by adrenaline and ecstasy, eased by the luxury of the constant, dying light—no need now to conserve—the boy clutched to his chest, growing warm. The woods grew familiar, he came to a field he knew, through more woods, out to an old logging trail he’d often followed before. Fog thinned to wisps. Half a mile down, the trail came out on Shugars Road. He flagged down a pickup going by, an old farmer he didn’t know. The dogs hopping in back, he climbed into the warm cab with the boy, out of the rain at last. Five minutes later they were at Gilhousen’s.

He carried Billy across the yard, to a flurry of cries and shouts, the old farmer leading the way. Shadows converging, back-lit by the lights from the garage and house. A small crowd, the two dogs trying wearily to celebrate with them. Badges, caps, helmet brims, teeth shining in the darkness, and the boy’s mother was there, face twisted with joy, and a blanket appeared, engulfing the boy, and he was gone. They were carrying him toward the house, the crowd moving as one. They were on the porch. The only creature not celebrating was the cat, who scampered away as though his tail were on fire, dismayed, no doubt, that the dogs had made it out. Dave thought of Mr. Whiskers, the pain in the ass, and gloom clamped down upon his mood. Then he saw his flannel shirt in the mud. He picked it up, and the crowd was gone, swallowed by the house. Alone on the porch, the two dogs lay pointed toward the door.

Francis called next morning, to assure him he’d made it out of the woods just fine, in case he was worried. After he’d lost Dave, he’d waited out the night under a sheltering evergreen, none too worse for the wear, though Truck Stops of America wasn’t happy with him for not calling in. But the good news was, they’d found the boy. The real reason he’d called. He wanted to let Dave know they’d found the boy, in case he hadn’t heard.
That was all he said. “Did they say who found him?” Dave said.
“No,” said Francis. “Never thought to ask. The important thing is he’s all right. That’s one lucky little boy.”

Deb was downstairs, vacuuming the living room, unconcerned about waking him. In her gray gym shorts, one of his old tee shirts, her bony arm pumping the vacuum in a monotonous rhythm, she didn’t see him in the doorway watching her. Dave felt uneasy, nagged by Francis’s call. When Deb turned to reach under the coffee table she noticed him, a near nod, near smile. She kept cleaning.

One lucky little boy. Billy had been, certainly. Then what did that make Dave?

“Want some breakfast?” he said.
Looking up, Deb shrugged. “Sure.”

He put on coffee, then sliced some scrapple, started it frying. Took a big yellow bowl, broke in six eggs, added a splash of milk, whipped them with a fork. Breakfast was the only meal he cooked. He liked cooking breakfast. Deb came in in time to butter the toast, and they sat at the table by the tall window looking down the hill, toward the south side of Hartsgrove. Fog was still banked over the creeks at the bottom, but the rain had stopped.

“You make the best scrapple,” she said, squeezing on a puddle of syrup.

“You didn’t ask me what I did last night.”
“You went out in the woods and found the kid.”
“Yeah—did you…?”

Seeing the shock on his face, Deb said, “You’re shitting me.”

Around mouthfuls, between gulps, he told her everything, the rain, the fog, the blackness, walking blind, falling—here he displayed scratches and bruises—finding Francis Minick, losing him again, then, finally, finding the boy. He couldn’t describe the feeling he’d had. So that was what he told her, that he couldn’t describe the feeling he’d had. An abbreviated version, certainly, but more than he’d talked to her in months, maybe ever, at least in one sitting.

“That’s what you do good,” she said. “You’re a hunter.”

“Yeah.” Sudden pride lifted the hairs on his neck. Of course.
He wasn't a roofer, a drinker, certainly not a father or husband. He was a hunter.

*One lucky little boy meets hunter.*

She asked him what happened next. How did the family react seeing their little boy rescued, what did they say to him, how did it feel to be a hero, was it going to be in the paper? He shrugged. No one had said anything so he'd left. Francis said they didn't seem to know who'd found the kid.

Deb was dumbfounded. “Nobody said *anything* to you?”

“No.”

“Dave. Didn't you say anything to anybody?”

“They all went in the house, left me alone, so I left. I was beat. It was raining.”

“You should have *stayed*. You should have made sure they knew.”

“What else could I do? She took him right out of my arms.”

“You should have held *on* to him! What's the *matter* with you?”

He shrugged. “You mean like, have a tug-o-war with the kid?”

She placed her fork rudely beside her plate, turning to stare out the window. Dave, feeling suddenly empty, ate half a piece of toast in one bite. When she turned back, her eyes were damp, her lips narrow.

“You're never there. You never get involved. I let Janey go with those kids. You should have said *something*!”

He watched bewildered as she went into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. He stared at the door, at her unfinished meal. Then he went down to the cellar.

Mr. Whiskers was waiting on the worktable, guarding the dollhouse, fixing Dave in an unfriendly glare. He tried to sweep him off, but the cat escaped with a hiss, Dave kicking at him, “Little pain in the ass!” He pulled the dollhouse to the front of the table, studied it. It seemed as though he hadn't worked on it in days. Women. There was a hole in his heart too, equal to hers he was sure, but didn't you have to try to let it heal? After all, it had been three years. Three years, one month, and...four days. Wasn't enough enough? Wasn't there a statute of limitations?
After a week, it was apparent he was an unsung hero. He hadn't heard a thing from Gilhousens. The only people who knew he'd rescued Billy were the ones Deb told, two or three at work, who'd nodded politely. She'd given up. Dave never told his boss or the other guys on the job.

In the evenings he dabbled with the dollhouse, did battle with Mr. Whiskers, and convinced himself it didn't matter. What mattered was that Billy was rescued, not that Dave was recognized. But then his problem was that whenever he convinced himself of something, he could never be sure he really believed it. Believing in God, believing he'd been a good father to Janey, believing it didn't matter that his heroism would remain anonymous—did he really believe those things? Or had he just convinced himself it was what he should believe? This was why Dave couldn't be bothered thinking about it.

His heart wasn't in the dollhouse. He was totally unsatisfied with the way it was turning out, yet totally stymied as to what it was lacking.

Then it came to him. In a dream, literally. He woke at two in the morning, a vision of the perfect dollhouse in his mind, the dollhouse that Janey would adore. A Tudor style, thick cardboard reinforced with basswood for the walls, a mixture of paste and paint for a stucco effect—and a garden! With a swing set, a picket fence around the whole thing.

The vision forced him from bed, down to the cellar. For the next three hours, he measured, sketched, sanded and primed a new plywood base, cut the picket fence, sanded, primed, cut, framed the new house out—a man on a mission. He ignored Mr. Whiskers prowling restlessly in the cellar beyond the workshop, the occasional growl of discontent. He never thought of Billy. He never thought of Janey. At five he went back to bed, still high. Her shallow breathing told him Deb was awake, but they let it pass in silence.

At seven he went to work, tired and foggy-headed, but the vision of the dollhouse remained, and he was anxious to get back to it. The baseboards in the colonial he'd built last year would be perfect for the swing set frame. His daydreams overflowed with the textures and colors and angles and aspects of the dollhouse on his table and the one in his mind, measuring the merging of the two in the light from
Janey’s glowing face. As soon as he got home, he opened a can of beer, hurried down to the cellar.

On the floor in front of the worktable, the dollhouse lay shattered. On the table where the dollhouse had been, Mr. Whiskers sat grooming himself grandly, ignoring the intruder.

Two weeks to the day after he’d found Billy, Dave was again in the woods at night, behind the Gilhousens’ place. He’d parked down Shugars Road where they wouldn’t see him, toward the logging trail, and he didn’t go into the woods as far, maybe only half a mile, and everything was different. It was dry, comfortable. Ambient moonlight from behind a thin cloud cover was enough—his flashlight never left his pocket.

It was almost mundane, just woods at night, same as daytime, only darker. He followed a deer path through undergrowth to a clearing in a stand of hardwoods, boot steps crunching through the rustlings, peepings, chirpings, squeakings of creatures hidden by the night. It was a different place. The blind, black-and-white, drowning, ghostly, frightening, exhilarating, magical forest of two weeks earlier couldn’t have existed. It was almost disappointing.

He set the sack he was carrying—a pillowcase, actually—at his feet on the forest floor. The sack moved. It shifted once, paused, shifted again. It took Mr. Whiskers a minute to free his head from the cloth.

The cat looked up. Dave couldn’t see his eyes, squatted for a better look. “How do you like your new home, Mr. Shithead? Tell you what.” He pointed through the trees. “If it’s not to your liking, there’s a family lives right over there about a mile or so, probably welcome you with open arms. They got dogs, at least one cat, but I’m sure they got an opening for another one. I tell you, they’re one lucky fucking family. You ought to like it there. You ought to fit right in, cause you’re one lucky fucking cat.”

He didn’t think Deb would mind. Of course he didn’t think it till the ride home. If she did mind, she’d get over it. She’d never spoken of Mr. Whiskers except in terms of annoyance, seldom thought to feed him. He thought of it even more seldom, probably what made the cat
such an excellent mouser. Boosting his chances of survival. He was a good hunter.

A good hunter—a common bond. He nearly felt a pang of regret, but opted not to. He drove slowly past Gilhousens’, pale beneath a hidden moon, yellow home lights gleaming from the living room windows.

Deb was in bed. She’d been out when he’d left, at her friend Lorrie’s bachelorette party down at the Ice House. Lorrie was marrying the guy she’d been living with for 18 years. Deb and Dave slept in the dark, as dark as they could make it, shades pulled tightly, yet there were always two pale, incomplete rectangles defining the walls of the bedroom at night, where the light crept in. He made his way through the darkened clutter to his side of the bed, undressed, got in. Deb was not asleep.

“Daveman. Out of the cellar.” She’d been drinking. She wasn’t much of a drinker.

“Yeah. Took a ride in the country.”

“Oh? Sounds exciting.” Just a hint of a slur.

Now was as good a time as any. “You didn’t care that much for Mr. Whiskers, did you?”

“Didn’t?”

“Mr. Whiskers went for a ride in the country too. Only Mr. Whiskers ain’t coming back.”

He listened to her breathing. “The caveman,” she said.

“I got this great idea for the dollhouse, I was working like crazy on it, and I come home tonight and it’s laying there shattered on the floor. I usually push it back in far enough he can’t get at it, but I must have forgot.”

Sighing, she rolled over roughly, her back to him. “Got some bad news for you, Daveman.” He couldn’t see her in the dark. She said, “Mr. Whiskers didn’t wreck your fucking dollhouse.”

Gilhousens were at the Club a week later. Dave and Deb stopped for a beer on their way home from the Harmony Mills Mall where they’d taken in a movie—Shrek, which Dave had thoroughly enjoyed,
while pretending not to. It was their first date in years. He’d never mentioned the destroyed dollhouse to her. She’d never mentioned it to him. Their indifferent coexistence had become somehow more informed, somehow less indifferent.

He’d tried to be angry that night in bed after he’d dumped Mr. Whiskers, after her “confession,” but he’d succeeded for only a few minutes. He’d been unable to keep his eyes open. Deb’s easy, innocent breathing beside him had been hypnotic, contagious. The anger, hurt, and resentment had refused to stay with him, flying away even as he’d tried to grasp them tighter, like all the helium balloons from all Janey’s small, clumsy fists over the years. In the end, he’d been almost paralyzed by an odd tranquility, a peculiar lightness. As though along with Mr. Whiskers, he’d dumped a heavy burden.

Next morning he’d picked up the pieces of the dollhouse, stowing them at the back of the worktable where he knew they’d remain for a while. If not forever. He was not a craftsman: He was a hunter. And that would have to do.

Deb’s father, Al, was at the bar. They joined him, Deb sitting between the two men. The Gilhousens were at a large, round table at the edge of the dance floor with two other couples, playing darts, drinking pitchers of beer, having a wonderful time. Dave wondered if they might notice him, if that might ring a bell; but if they did, the bell remained unrung. He wondered who was watching Billy. He wondered if Janey had somehow survived, had been brought back to him, if he could ever have let her out of his sight again. He watched Gilhousens laughing, drinking, taking Billy for granted, as though his life was their right, was something that was owed them.

One lucky little boy. One lucky family. It had not been his fate to enjoy such luck, that much he understood. He’d been fated instead to bring that luck to someone else. Almost as if he were on a different plane. The odd tranquility returned, settling upon him at the bar, as he observed, as though from above, the mortals upon whom he had bestowed such good fortune, watching how wisely they spent it.

Deb was less forgiving. She kept glaring at the Gilhousens, muttering aspersions beneath her breath. Al nodded, slouched over the bar with
his hollow cheeks. Then he leaned forward, looking past Deb to Dave, bobbing his head in a nod that was as close to scowl-free as he would ever get. “You done good,” he said. Dave nodded back, said nothing, ignoring the goosebumps spreading over his back.

Going home, Deb reached across the front seat of the pickup, putting her hand on his thigh. She rubbed it in little circles. “I think I might have a fever.”

It had been a long time. He took her hand, moved it further up his leg. Stopped it from moving. “I better take your temperature.”

“I know just where you can put your thermometer. I got a good place.”

Holding hands they walked up the steps of the porch, Dave still on his higher plane, looking down. There, on the window sill nearest the door, on an even higher, more tranquil plane, sat Mr. Whiskers, watching his every move.
Wading the river in near-darkness, the valley still close from the smoky fires burning twenty miles east, my brother turns to me and says, *I'm telling you this for your own good.* Later, I won't remember what it is he says but only that we've crawled under a taut line of barbed wire, that the black cows in the farmer's field are just suggestions of themselves, that the smoke gnaws the color from the sky.

I have a lover four hundred miles away and when we try to speak there's only darkness, like two dogs pointing into a stand of trees at where they've heard the promise of sound, though what they hear is only an outline—not actually what stands among the boughs. Now the thin trestle of my brother's shoulders is all I can see moving in front of me as we near the truck and I wonder what I'll do when he disappears.

Soon we're drinking Millers as we drive past the smokejumper camps, out on gravel roads where we honk the horn to scatter deer, try to save something that doesn't know us. When we pull up to the house—buzzed and tired, smelling of fish—I can see my parents in there lighting cigarettes in the dark. I think this means we must want to die, despite everything we say. And what are we moving towards in speech except more words that waste their motion?
The unspeakable spoken and spoken until it becomes lost in the bright keening of the stars, those unknown latitudes we measure every message against.

All the things I’m afraid to say, about the dog no one’s cleared from the side of the road, how I see the young boys crossing under the wire fence each dusk—where do they go? Words do not do the work. We’re all liars. Better to keep silent, wait to see the beast we’ve heard in among the trees. But oh my god the owl, crossing the dim orb of that stained moon. It must be criminal the way I stand around and watch.
So, the story goes something like this: A boy—we will call him Samuel—knocks on the door of a professional pianist's studio in Bevinton, Massachusetts, and, stuttering, asks to be taught. It does not surprise the pianist (who, I should tell you now, is no less than the one and only Glenda Himmelricht, though you probably guessed so, as anyone who knows anything about music would), because she’s used to that kind of thing. And I might as well tell you now that the pianist in the story is me, but this will not skew the narrative in the least, because I have been, for as long as I can remember, the most humble person I know. As the recipient of a story, it’s natural to block out certain bits here and there, to latch onto details that seem, to you, the most important. Do as you will. But what you should remember in this story above all else is that Ms. Himmelricht has been described as a woman with a visionary, instinctive sense of foresight, and that she had understood, ever since eating her toast and marmalade that morning, that someone intriguing would arrive at her door.

What the boy’s face looked like, what my colleagues at St. Peter’s thought of me taking him as a student—these are not important. And so, imagine something like this: It is July. Ms. Himmelricht is lying on the cold tiles of her office floor, fanning her face with a book of Rachmaninoff etudes, when her door creaks halfway open and a small, melon-round head of scrappy blond hair pokes wide-eyed into the room. She watches his skittish eyes flash to the nine-foot long Steinway before meeting her face, and she does not sit up off the floor right away as if she were embarrassed to be seen in so awkward a position, because, frankly, she is not one to become unnerved by others’ judgments.

The boy begins, “I—I knocked—but I—”
"I know," she says. "I heard. Can I help you?" She asks this, but she knows why he is here—another naïve outsider oblivious to the concept of appointments or waiting lists, hopelessly deaf to the plain, audible truth of their lacking musical talents. The great pianist gets girls and boys like Samuel several times a week, young ones sent by hopeful parents to beg in person for instruction from the famous Ms. Himmelricht, the piano master, the living legend of impeccable rhythm with her blessedly large hands that span an astounding eleven keys on a standard piano.

The pianist sits up finally and shakes out her wrists.

"My name—it's Sam," the boy says. His hands clutch a small stack of photocopied music, shaking perhaps more fiercely than his voice. "My—my name’s Sam." He looks to be about eight years old, about the age she herself was when her parents schlepped their belongings—three suitcases and little Glenda—onto a train in Austria, to a ship on the French coast, and bobbed their way over to America, the land of opportunity. The pianist wonders what role to play with this one, whether she should blast into her usual tirade about abusing copyright laws or respecting privacy, or if she should at least have the boy play a few minutes and then smile generously, as she does with some of them, and say she’s sorry to turn him away—she’s not taking new students—but keep up the good work.

"I have B-b-Bach—brought—to play—"

"Well, I’m afraid that—," the pianist begins her rejection. She will send him away tenderly, she decides, for though she doesn’t like children, she still has a reputation to preserve among the community and the university (one can’t risk getting a bad name at a school as small as St. Peter’s—one bad rumor and there goes tenure). But just as she begins to send this boy away, she blacks out for a quick moment in a fit of punctuated inhales and exhales, leading to a gargantuan sneeze, and the boy is already at her Steinway, feet dangling from the piano bench like thin bodies from the gallows. It is as if, in that split second when her eyes are closed, his body has magically vanished from the doorway and reappeared, seated at the piano, without even a pianissimo sound of movement, even to her sensitive, trained, state-of-the art ears.
Perhaps it was that instant—his reappearance—that first intrigued me. Or it could have been the way he fumbled and heaved his bone-thin body into the keys, or how on staccato notes he balled his hands into fists and protruded an index finger outward from each to poke at the ivory and black, as if being dared to touch a surface of molten steel. Whatever it was that caught my attention, it grabbed me like a hand of God.

But that is irrelevant. The story stands without it. There is no other way to explain why I felt captured by his pounding and clanging, the inharmonic chords that hardly sounded like music at all, more like a mechanized, distorted monster of unmetered rhythms. Whatever it was, he had me addicted (though he was not in the farthest stretch talented—perhaps the worst I had ever heard, in fact), something that magnetized me, that left me no choice but to accept him as my student, an action of mine which I have not, in all the months since, been able to figure out. Which is why I am telling you all of this in the first place—not for you, the reader, but for me, for solace, closure, answers—it's for me, to determine what it was in his playing that was so terribly powerful, so delightfully wretched, and how, for the first time ever, I became so wrapped up in something so strikingly unmusical that I lost my ability to foresee—to foresee that he would rise to such talent, to foresee the dreadful thing he would do with his skill, and that no one would ever know it was not his fault all along, but mine.

I should remind you once again what is of central pertinence to this story: it is not simply to be told and shut away, not a tale merely to bring tears to the eyes or goose pimples to the skin. It's a recollection for sorting out, for coming to grips with the barren, gray-walled home in which I now live, as if in exile, hiding (just the Steinway and I, the clothing, soap, a few photos) smack in the middle of the country. It's to cope with the small town of people who don't know who I am. For me to understand why, when I look out my window in the morning, I see flat, bare land peppered with farmhouses, and a sea of dead, battered cornhusks smothered by an unending, anemic sky.

The pianist shares a duplex now with a middle-aged couple, and she
can hear them walking above her, the squeaking floorboards of their comings and goings. Their twin girls wear matching flannel dresses and rubber snow boots, and they hide their eyes when the pianist walks by, as if to protect themselves from some hideous animal. Their names are Anna and Sonja—she knows this much from the chalk drawings littered on the sidewalks, flowers and hearts and hopscotch squares that slurry together in the colorless drizzle.

Some niceties here are worth mentioning, I suppose: the cousin Gloria who lives just over the bridge—the pianist’s only American relative—who brings the pianist to her house on Sundays for dinner with her husband and their colicky newborn. Beef chili from a can, overcooked broccoli—it’s food nonetheless (the pianist has had to lower her standards), and she feels grateful, at least a little, to have a free meal, a friendly conversation, even if artificial, even if they cannot understand (she has told them the story, more or less) where she has come from and why. Gloria clips classifieds from the paper and saves them in an envelope, which she gives the pianist every Sunday. Jobs she believes the pianist would enjoy. And it’s true, the severance pay is quickly dwindling. But that, still, is a matter the pianist prefers not to discuss.

Picture now: Young Samuel returns the following Tuesday, promptly at 3:45, a crumpled paper sack in hand and a thick woolen scarf tied loosely around his neck. The pianist has seen, from her window, a woman she believes to be Samuel’s mother, leading the boy across campus to the Music Building—the same woman she has seen pacing around the city in a full-length down coat and mittens, no matter the season, as if she expects a winter storm in mid-summer. And so the pianist assumes, whatever the reason, this odd woman has clothed her child in the same fashion. The woman wanders by the campus nearly every day, her feet inching across the pavement, one wiry arm bracing a metal chair that she unfolds periodically—in the middle of the sidewalk—and sits. Ten or fifteen minutes, watching the cars chug past. The pianist is not one to judge, but she cannot deny that this woman stands out like a tuba among flutes, that the mere sight of her is, in a word, unsettling.
The boy nods his head down for a moment and scratches the back of one leg with the foot of the other. “Hel, Hello Ms. Himm—” he begins.

The pianist can’t help but cringe at the sight of a stringy, wet tissue hanging from the pocket of his patched-over blue jeans. “Good afternoon,” she says, rubbing thick salve over her knuckles. The last few days have seen a dry spell, not significant enough for most to notice, but enough for her hyper-alert skin to sound the alarm of an eminent chapping.

“How have you been, Samuel?” the pianist asks. Though she is not surprised when the boy only responds with a simple “Fine,” she has not prepared more in the way of conversation starters.

Before we go on, you should know that the pianist is not a very feminine woman. She is, of course, pleasing to the eyes in most conventional means of the word, but her forearms are thick and her shoulders are wide from years of unwavering dedication to an art of the upper body. She does not harbor even a dying trace of romantic instinct—from the moment she heard Chopin and Grieg, at the age of ten, the pianist knew she would never need men in her life, and indeed she has never been proven wrong. And if you’re looking for maternal instincts—well, a cobra most definitely has more than the pianist.

“Very well, then,” she says. “Off with your coat and on with your scales!”

She points the boy to her old, boxy Yamaha upright in the corner and he begins to play, though the pianist doesn’t hear the first few tones as his fingers stumble up three octaves of a C-major scale. No, she doesn’t hear the first notes at all, because she had not, until now, noticed the smallness of his hands. Not only this, but the stubbiness of his fingers, his palms being all too narrow for success. It is only two or three seconds later that she sighs and says quietly, “Oh, no, that will never do.” She cringes then when she realizes, despite all her efforts over the years to prevent it, her utterance sounds precisely like what her father would have said to her when she was Samuel’s age, that father whose memory is as pleasant as two violas playing out of tune.

Now, the pianist is quite an honest woman, and it would be the
most discordant of lies to say that she does not feel her Earl Grey and shortbread rising in her throat like the gradually growing roll of a timpani. It would be untrue to say that the pianist doesn’t consider how close Professor Flink’s office is, how Flink had raised her eyebrows as the boy tripped over his shoelaces into Ms. Himmelricht’s studio.

The pianist interrupts the boy mid-scale. “A little hot in here, don’t you think?” she says, more statement than question. She darts to the windows and shoves them open with her sweaty hands before turning to the boy again. The air outside is thick, humidity fogging the windowpanes, and sudden gusts of wind scatter small branches across the university’s tidy sidewalks. The pianist does not believe in superstition, no, but she does admit to herself momentarily that something heavy is shifting in the atmosphere.

You see, the pianist is rarely (if ever) wrong with her instincts, so she represses the urge to demote the boy into the lower ranks of community piano instructors. And over the following months, she will repress it again and again until... oh, who knows when. Partly for the boy’s sake—despite her international reputation, the awards, the fellowships, the pianist still remembers what it’s like to be timid, though it’s been some thirty-five years. And partly for her own sake, first and foremost. To release him would be to surrender, an admittance of the most shameful breed. We all have things we have to protect, after all. No, it couldn’t be done.

“Very good, Samuel,” the pianist proclaims, though it pains her. “Let’s hear an etude, and then you can go home early today.” She checks the door before the boy starts, pressing her torso against it to assure it is tightly closed. She then trills off the same catch-phrases she gives her graduate and upper undergrad students, though she suspects him too young to understand: “Feel the music, Samuel,” she says. “Just look at the keys for a moment.”

The boy tilts his head downward, moving his eyes closer to the keys in front of him.

“Think of their individual voices. Let the music play itself.” The pianist begins to ask herself, why bother?

And she is not quite sure how it happens, though she’s heard of
it happening before: the master musician, the light-switch of genius flicking on and off at an unpredictable whim. So there she is—standing over him from behind, looking down upon a blond head in need of a trim and a heavy dandruff scrubbing. Yet these details hardly catch her attention longer than a grace note’s length, because young Samuel is, all of a sudden, poised with his twiggy arms at right angles in the air, shifting his weight into the notes, dancing with the melody like a professional trapped in an awkward child’s body.

That change—I didn’t know how exactly it happened. But the small boy who’d stumbled in my office the week before had disappeared. He was waltzing up the keys as if he had written the song himself, was closing his eyes and bowing his head as his hands slid up to the high E and down to a low C and ended—both of them, somehow—with an expansion almost inhuman. Those short stumps of fingers spreading to an octave—eight notes on each hand, mind you—and those eyes clenching closed as he ended the piece, his fingers holding their stretch, the tones reverberating in the old piano’s wooden chamber, against the windowpanes, across the plaster walls, inside my chest. Like a hallelujah in an open sanctuary. Like the affirmative “Pre-cess-ly!” of my father from his armchair, clouded in pipe smoke as he listened to me practice and found, on the rare occasion, that I had met his expectations.

Who knows how long the boy held those octaves. Even I can’t tell you. Even I can’t tell you how we ended the lesson, what I said to him (if anything, other than the routine criticism about articulations and dynamics and see you next week, as scheduled, and write down your minutes in your practice log) because, frankly, even I don’t remember much else, just those unsuspecting, dirty little hands spanning those octaves, falling on the white keys heavily, deliberately.

For the pianist, any trifle can be mended with a few moments of Schubert, both hands immersed into sixty-fourth notes, black ink-spills scattered on the page. And indeed, even after her first few lessons with Samuel, she is able to shake the eerie apprehension. That is, she is able to shove aside her wonderment about the boy’s unnaturally rapid development of skill, the way he could, at the start, hardly play the
scales without a dozen mistakes, but within a week had them perfected. And how his body seemed to float weightless, without an indentation on the worn, upholstered bench cushion. The pianist cannot figure out why he practices, having no incentive other than the evasion of her disappointment, but she is able to assure herself that the boy is simply a quick learner. Naturally gifted, like herself.

Yes, until she increases his lessons to twice a week, until she has him playing on her Steinway instead of the old Yamaha, she still feels grounded. But I recognize now (oh, if I actually had the foresight I thought I did) that once I made that move, everything started to change.

I suppose, as the teller of this story, I should describe to you the lesson in which Samuel came with ice cream on his fingers, and how the pianist had to show him to the gentlemen’s restrooms to wash himself. I should tell you of this day, because every day afterward, Samuel’s childlike attributes ceased to inspire the normal revulsion in me, and from there on out, he never faltered from the code of etiquette (hands washed, music in order, no chewing gum). And I suppose I should tell you about the day he started wearing button-down shirts and ironed pants, which, though extreme for his age, nonetheless flattered me. But these events need not be developed like the day, after three weeks of instruction, when Samuel broke his barrier of silence and the pianist was no longer tempted to terminate his lessons.

The weather is quite peculiar this week, the thick, warm air of summer one minute and the cold plummet of hail the next. Samuel’s slicker is drenched when he walks into the pianist’s office, the soles of his galoshes squeaking as he marches in the room, leaving a trail of filmy brown prints on the white tiles.

“Good day, Samuel,” the pianist begins, per usual. “How have you been?” She moves to the piano, rotating the knobs on the side of the bench to lower it for the boy, completely unprepared for what is to happen next.

The boy clears his throat. “Good,” he says, then pauses. “I practiced,” he continues. “Lots and lots. I practiced lots and lots.”
The pianist startles, unsure of her ears, but the boy, still standing by
the bench, speaks again within seconds, as if reassuring her doubts that
this little chap has finally offered more than nervous monosyllables.
“See, look Ms. Himmelricht,” the boy says, thrusting out a tightly
folded sheet of notebook paper. “My mom signed her name on the
bottom. I practiced so much, see?”

The pianist unfolds the sheet of wrinkled, softened paper and
surveys what she would normally conclude to be an obvious fabrication
of recorded practice hours. A boy like this could not have practiced
thirty hours in one week, and she fully expects her ears to confirm her
suspicion. But when she looks down at his face, eyes wide and round,
brows raised expectantly like a dog waiting for a biscuit, the pianist has
a whimsical impulse to humor the child. “Very nice, Samuel. Your
mother and father, what do they do?” She envisions Samuel’s mother,
fold-up chair in hand, her gaunt body bundled tight.

The boy cocks his head and looks at her with scrunched brows.
“My parents do a lot of things,” he says.

The pianist gestures the boy to the bench with a sweeping arm.
Openly, not commanding, for she still fears she might scare him away.
“Oh me,” she says, “I mean to ask—what are their jobs? How do
they make their money. For instance, when I was a child, my father
was a bricklayer, and he lost three fingers and could never play an
instrument—”

And that is when their first real moment happens, the first time
the pianist begins talking to Samuel as a person. A child, yes, but
capable of understanding. Not simply an extra twenty dollars that
comes knocking at her office every Tuesday and Friday. Not just an
amusement or experiment, which I must admit now, was part of my
original intent in accepting him as a student.

The pianist, over the course of this conversation, does not think
about the lesson, the arpeggios and theory she had assigned the week
before, because the boy is speaking—a different boy than the one she
had known until this point—words tumbling out of him like rocks in
a landslide, like an aria from his child’s lips. He tells the pianist of
his mother, her stacks of cookbooks in the kitchen, the cabbage soup
he hates which she makes every week, her weak lungs and coughing fits at night, so loud at times they wake him from his dreams. He tells her of his father, the tall, stern carpenter who sleeps in his tool belt, who wakes some mornings unable to straighten the fingers of his hammering hand. A father who called in sick last week to fly tissue-paper kites with Samuel on Kennedy Hill.

The pianist listens to these details, their fullness and tone, but she sees in her mind not a vision of the mother and father the boy describes, but rather, her own. She sees her mother washing a paisley skirt in the kitchen sink and mending her father’s fraying straw hat by lamplight, and she hears the conviction in her father’s voice the night he decided to leave America, his foot pounding the floor with each word: Never—come—back—so—help—me—God! She remembers the bottles of gin he drank like water, and his stride up the plank onto the boat that would take him and the pianist’s mother back to Europe—for good—without her. Ten long years. Empty pockets. She remembers the day he made her choose: stay or go. And she wonders if Samuel feels clamped in the way she did, a talent discovered so young, the pride and approval of others hinging on every press of the fingers on ivory.

They have not played a single note—neither Samuel nor Ms. Himmelricht—they have not even opened the etude book when four thick-fisted knocks crack against her door. The pianist opens it in a flustered pull to find Olivia Wilcox, the department’s finest M.F.A., her sunburned arms crossed over her chest and exasperated tears brimming under her thick, black-frame glasses as she throws a conspicuous glance at the hallway clock, now nearing half past five.

A few weeks later, the pianist enrolls the boy in a regional festival. The Clementi sonatina he had memorized was quite close to perfect. And, as any musician knows, performance should begin at a young age, as a sport or foreign language should in order to be mastered, so the stage is no longer a foreign land, so walking up in front of an audience of a hundred or two is as second nature as riding a bicycle. (I still remember when I realized this: in a performance of Beethoven’s
“Sonata Pathetique” when I was eighteen, just a month before my parents returned to Europe and left me behind them for the last time, to live with my aunt and find my own way. I waltzed up onto the stage as if it were my own home, hearing only my father’s words: *You need not to think, only to play.* These words reverberated in me when I hit the last note—the wrong one.)

The pianist, however, is unable to attend Samuel’s performance—she had been called upon for the prestigious honor of guest-performing with the Munich Symphony Orchestra, and, knowing she was the best for the job (and imagining the horror of anyone but herself doing it), there had been no consideration of denying the offer. The boy would get along without her. (And, of course, he had.) Upon returning to her office the following Monday (unfazed by jet lag), her colleague, Professor Brewer, (whom she had once overheard in the restroom say of the pianist, “She’s not all she cracks herself up to be”) stops her in the hallway and proclaims almost apologetically, “That was quite a sonatina you missed, Ms. Himmelricht.” And Professor Kliemens, the cellist whose office is next door, barges in during the pianist’s “personal hour,” which the pianist never spends buying lunch downtown or going to the recreational center like other professors, but always performing important visualization exercises and soaking her knuckles in a warm paraffin solution for the prevention of future swelling. “I hate to interrupt,” Professor Kliemens says, noticing the pianist’s hands in the warm wax, “but I just had to tell you that I thought you were nuts, back in July, for teaching a kid.” Kliemens shakes her head, as if tasting a particularly exquisite morsel of food or wine. “That Samuel Parson is really something else, Ms. Himmelricht.”

The pianist responds to these compliments in the normal manner—cordial acknowledgement and agreement. But when the boy comes for his lesson without a check from his mother—yet again—the pianist recognizes the pattern. Above all, she respects honesty.

“Samuel,” the pianist says. She pulls up a chair to the boy, who is situating his sheets of Debussy at the Steinway. “Did your mother send a check today?” she asks. She looks him straight in the eyes and has not, until now, noticed how piercingly blue they are, the color
of a cloth artificially dyed. A bizarre thought crosses her mind for a fleeting instant: this child might someday surpass her talent. But that is nonsense, she knows. Her name will be glorified in the music history books as Samuel’s instructor, the woman who made the master a master. But if that horrible situation were somehow to happen, that the prodigy would climb beyond her own skill, she would most certainly by that point be dead, and at least wouldn’t have to suffer the conscious humiliation.

The boy looks away from her quickly, twiddling his fingers. “Oh, yes yes,” he says. “I have some money today.” In a wisp of motion he pounces off the bench and darts over to his red satchel, hanging on a peg by the door, all the while whispering to himself, “Yes, money today, I have money today.”

The boy returns with a small plastic bag of loose change, closed at the top with a white twist tie. Interspersed between the bronze and silver coins are a few crumpled dollar bills. He drops the baggie with a clink into her lap and begins playing whole-tone scales—a concept she introduced in his previous lesson—before she has a chance to respond. The pianist is not sure whether to react with flattery or guilt: she envisions this small boy pawing between sofa cushions, leafing through curbside litter for her payment, or stealing from the laundry-money jar (because the pianist is sure, from the smell of the child’s clothes at times, that his parents must certainly not have machines themselves or the funds to clean the boy’s clothes as often as necessary). This boy—bent intently over the keys, one tiny leg swaying from the bench—this boy, a beggar. And each lesson after that when the boy does not pay her, she simply lets it go. Until one day she forgets about the money entirely.

Because it was not about money. Not in the least.

So, imagine now a time in early September when Samuel’s mother appears at the pianist’s apartment, just as she is measuring rice into a heavy iron pot. It’s not that the pianist hadn’t sensed something odd brewing: an uncanny feeling deep in her bowels all afternoon, accompanied by a terrible bout of flatulence, had been enough to signal that something was festering in the finale of the day. Yet she still
feels a touch startled at the sight of this woman, so abruptly invading her quiet abode. She is perhaps even more startled that someone would welcome the infamous ‘Chair Lady’ inside the building, since the pianist lives in the prestigious area of studio apartments in the heart of the city—up the hill from the rose garden and two blocks from the gallery strip—and people of that caliber, of course, have earned their way up the ladder and prefer not to mingle with those otherwise, those like this woman in worn jeans and a frumpish flannel shirt.

So, this woman, this mother, fully interrupts the pianist, who is busy contemplating her downstairs neighbor’s door chime, whether it rings a first-inversion E-minor chord or a second-inversion (it’s the carpet, you see, that obscures the tones, and not, by any means, the pianist’s inability to distinguish what she hears).

“Well,” the pianist says, regaining her composure, “you’re here.” She continues measuring the rice and pours the water over the small, white grains.

“Um...yes,” the woman mumbles, clearly confused. “We haven’t met before.”

“No, I don’t believe we have, not formally,” the pianist says, “but of course I know who you are.” The pianist thinks of Samuel’s brown lunch sacks and his timid diligence, and she vows to befriend this woman, despite her instincts and what others might say.

The mother edges her way into the kitchen, moving slowly around the room with her back against the cupboards until she stands directly across from the pianist, facing her. She shoves her hands into her coat pockets, pulls them out, removes her scarf and her holey, knitted stocking cap, and thrusts her hands into her pockets again.

“Bloody wretched cold snap we’ve been having, wouldn’t you say?” the pianist asks.

“Oh. Well yes,” the mother replies.

“You may remove your coat, Mrs. Parson.”

The woman, however, proceeds to pick at a scab on her hand. She glances at the rice, just beginning to simmer on the stove top, and says, “Oh, oh no. I’ll come back later, when you’re not cooking your dinner.”
“Nonsense,” exclaims the pianist, a little too loudly. She moves to the stove and covers the pot with a lid. “I’m not really cooking anything but the rice,” she says. She considers explaining that she doesn’t really cook at all—the risk of knives and burns and whatnot—but she figures that it’s all Greek to this mother.

“Delivery should be here any minute,” the pianist explains, though the woman is clearly not interested. “They charge an infernal fee for extra rice, if you ask me, so I just cook that part myself.” The pianist knows that she may be well-off, but do they think she likes to give her money away? Hardly.

“Mrs. Parson,” the pianist begins. She gestures to her table and says, “Come sit a spell,” attempting to calm this woman with the folksier, lower-class speech to which she must be accustomed.

But the mother seems not to hear her. Instead, she walks over to the dishwasher and begins pulling out clean dishes, the steam of a freshly finished load wafting into her face. The pianist, for once, is confounded, watching this woman, this timid mother of her student, moving gracefully, as if in a dance to some silent orchestra. She places each dish in its proper place, without a sound other than her shallow, raspy breathing, one dish at a time, as if she knew this kitchen, as if it were her own.

“I have to say,” the pianist begins, “I am more than impressed with your young Samuel’s playing. The other day, last Tuesday it was, he was practicing Bach’s ‘Gigue in B-flat,’ First Partita, and you see, I had only given it to him one week prior, and he had it nearly perfected, I mean to say graduate-level, and—”

“That’s why I’ve come to talk to you,” the mother interjects. “I don’t want him to—”

“Nonsense,” the pianist continues. “Don’t worry about the money, I know you can’t pay. Clearly.”

“But well,” the mother attempts again, “you see that’s not what I’ve come to—”

“Just yesterday,” the pianist continues, moving to the stove, inserting her hands, her precious hands, into industrial-sized, heat-proof oven mitts, “my colleagues, Professor Brewer and Professor Kliemens, I
overheard them in the hallway as I was drinking my tea in the faculty lounge, and they were bantering on and on about why I wouldn’t let us jointly instruct Samuel—they’re jealous, you see, and—”

The timer cuts the pianist off with its metallic trilling. The pianist turns to the burner and shifts the rice carefully to a trivet on the counter. But when she turns around again, the woman is somehow (almost magically, though the pianist doesn’t believe in magic) dressed again in her full winter getup, hat on, coat fully zipped, scarf knotted tightly around her bony neck. The pianist jumps, for the mother, who had appeared so fidgety and submissive, now stands but three inches from her face. The pianist can clearly see the centers of her watering eyes, red at the edges and narrowed. And before the woman vanishes, gusted out the door as if by a wind, she holds her gloved hand up to the pianist’s face, points a straight, quivering finger and says, with the utmost shocking clarity, “Ms. Himmelricht. I want to thank you for teaching Samuel. But whatever it is you are doing to him—”

The mother pauses to exhale. “Whatever it is you are doing to my son, I am telling you to stop it.”

The day is one that the pianist shoves away into the corners of her most stifled memory. In fact, I did not recall it happening at all until months later, after vacating my apartment and fleeing Bevington as quickly as possible: the runway whirring below from the window of the jet plane as it built speed, lifted up, and rose into the sky, making the city lights, the crawling traffic, as small as a Christmas snow village.

And it is nearing Christmas, at that time, on this day in which the pith of the story sprouts, when the pianist makes her grandest mistake. It is the day of the faculty recital, the culminating event of the department. A chance to gather and commemorate the year’s accomplishments and bask in the glory of music, as the department chair so idealistically claims. But the pianist knows, as all the other professors know (though none stoop to say it), that the purpose is not camaraderie, but exhibition. A chance to flaunt, to establish who, among them is the finest of the fine, the most musical of the musical (which they all know, deep inside themselves, is and always will be Ms.
Himmelricht). It is three hours before the performance, and the pianist has cancelled her afternoon appointments in order to rehearse the duet with the boy. She cannot help but feel claustrophobic in the basement practice room—the only room she could safely reserve without the others overhearing their rehearsal—surrounded by four austere white walls, paint chipping from the cold cement.

The boy, for a change, appears distracted: the pianist has had to remind him four times not to overlook the rests, which are scattered throughout his part.

"Samuel!" she bellows. "The rests, the rests!" She stops mid-melody, her voice rebounding.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Himmelricht," he chants, and she wonders, for the first time, if he is mocking her. (Certainly not.)

"Samuel," she says, gathering her patience. "Let's have a break for a minute. Tell me now, what is a rest?"

"Space," he says. "Pieces of nothing stuck between notes."

"Nothing?!" The pianist has never lost her composure with any of her students, but she feels it slowly waltzing away. She cannot let it go, not with so much at stake. "What did you say? Rests are just as vital as notes, Samuel. Without notes, it is all rests. But without the rests—and in their proper proportion and placement, no less—the music ceases to be music."

The pianist grasps the boy by the shoulders with her solid, tired hands. "How important is a rest? How can music be—"

"Most important, Ms. Himmelricht," the boy chimes, shrinking from her grip. "Most important."

The pianist stands up, raises her hands above her as if inciting the gods, and says, "You need not think, Samuel, only play!"

The story, the story—what to tell? Is it necessary to tell you of the events that followed, of what brought me to leave? Is it worth the pain of recalling? Have I not told enough as it is? No, I must finish it through. This is for me, after all.

At the beginning of every fiscal year, the department allocates a set amount of funds for professors' use on students—new sheet music,
festival fees, and the like—under the discretion of the treasury chair (who, by coincidence, happens to be Ms. Himmelricht). It is because of these funds that the boy, on this evening, is dressed impeccably: a custom-fit child’s tuxedo, cummerbund and all, in traditional black and white. The pianist had, the week before, brought the boy to the tuxedo shop during a lesson, as she was sure that his mother would never give consent.

She is surprised, however, to see Samuel’s father at the performance, a man who leads him into the lobby by the hand. The father’s black turtleneck is tucked into his corduroys, and he kneels down before Samuel, pulls a thin wire comb from his jacket pocket and smoothes the boy’s hair to the side. He pats the boy on each shoulder before nudging him backstage.

The pianist’s stomach emits a mezzo piano groan (she never eats before a performance). She has decided to ignore department tradition by exhibiting Samuel in a duet with her, directly before her solo. It is, perhaps, her frenzied state of zeal—they will all finally see the mastery she has sculpted in the boy—that has made her block from memory the threatening notes from Dean Yarbrough on blue and gray University stationery: realign priorities...tuition-paying students...potential ramifications. (I still wonder, at nights when I cannot sleep and cannot ease my mind on the Steinway, for fear of waking my neighbors, if there had been any verbal warnings. I will admit now that I cannot remember.)

As she requested, the pianist will not debut Samuel until the second to last piece, saving the best—her own solo—for the end. She reminds herself that he has performed before, but nothing so important as this. The entire faculty knows the stakes: not just a community concert, no. Competition hangs in the air, and her normally placid colleagues flit here and there behind stage like bees shaken in a jar. But not the pianist. It still astounds her that after all their years of training—masters, doctorals, fellowships—not a one of them shows pre-performance ease. Professor Kliemens, leaning over her cello in the hallway, removes a dangling bowstring with an exasperated tug and cries, “To hell with it!” From behind a shut door of a practice room, Professor Brewer curses an ornery bassoon reed and storms into
the hallway, announcing to all, “I need some #600 sandpaper! Does anyone have #600 sandpaper?!” Professor Keller, onstage next, puffs his cheeks and stretches his mouth wide, then clears the spit valve of his trombone with a quiet stream of air.

The boy, however, despite the pianist’s previous worries, does not appear nervous at all. He sits backstage in a wooden chair next to her, his eyes closed, hands resting softly on his starched black pants (practicing preparatory visualization like she taught him, she is pleased to see).

The Liszt etude the pianist has prepared for her solo is indisputably the most challenging of all the pieces chosen by her colleagues, and indeed one of the most difficult in existence. She’s devoted so much time to Samuel, which has admittedly detracted from her allotted seven hours of personal practice each day, but she does not doubt her magnificence will sweep the britches off the audience. The rapid tempo, the trills on weaker fingers, the jumps of two entire octaves in just a sixteenth of a beat. Anyone who’s anyone in piano knows what expertise the piece entails. The name itself sings in the pianist’s head: La Campanella. La Cam-pan-el-la.

The audience applauds Professor Flink, who has just given a slightly slower-than-tempo performance of Stravinsky, and the pianist bends down to look Samuel in the eyes.

Let’s show them.

This is what she feels the urge to say, though she stops herself, noticing the boy’s crooked bow tie. “Oh, no,” she says, “that will never do.” She straightens the tie and pulls down the ends of the boy’s suit coat and reminds him not to sit on the tails. The audience has hushed, and though the pianist cannot decipher any specific comments, she relishes the murmurs and whispers, seeping like fog through the concert hall. She knows the audience is conversing about a name unknown to them—Samuel Parson—boldface type in the program.

The pianist blurts one last protective instruction—“Remember the rests”—and leads the boy onto the stage beside her. Samuel bows like a pro, in perfect unison with the pianist—two seconds down and two seconds up—and the pianist remembers the pride she felt on the day she soloed in Carnegie Hall, and how, in this moment, with all eyes
honed on her and her prodigy, she feels more accomplished than she did even then.

It isn’t until now, looking back on it, that I remember noting how small the boy was next to that slick black grand piano, the top curve of the lid reaching a good three feet above his head. I could have shut him inside it with plenty of room to spare, if I had wanted to. If I had known.

The boy’s hands probe out from the tight cuffs of his tuxedo, smooth baby’s skin pale under the stage lights, and his body shakes as he seats himself on a bench beside the pianist’s. She cannot help but notice his lips pursed tightly, the wetness in his eyes as he looks up at her, pleading with a gaze of an animal being put down.

They must begin. They cannot sit much longer, dangling in a silence that admits hesitancy. They will stun the audience, as planned. If they only begin.

They must begin.

And, for a moment, the pianist is reassured, for the boy starts playing when she nods. She closes her eyes and listens before her entry, laying each staccato tersely with the left, legato smoothly with the right, perfect.

The pianist doesn’t know where it comes from, what happens next. Like Victor Frankenstein, she had not realized her experiment would turn into a monster, out of her control. And she cannot recall, until many months later, why or when it all slipped away. But when the pianist enters the piece, a succession of delicate chords in the high treble octaves, the boy suddenly speeds up the tempo. An image comes to her mind that will stay with her long after this performance: after watching her mother and father’s ship depart for Europe, finding her father’s hat upturned on the pier, fluttering in the sea gusts, its straw fibers wet and thickening. As the pianist’s fingers move now and her ears fail to block out the gasps rippling across the audience, she remembers finding that hat and knowing she would have all those years—her entire life—to wonder if he’d left it for her on purpose, or if he had, more likely, simply forgotten it.

She glances at the boy from the corner of her eye, his chest
hiccupping in mouse-like breaths, gaze wide and unblinking, hands skittering quicker and quicker across the keys, leaving no space between the notes, skipping entire measures, the tones clanging like broken church bells.

The pianist’s vision becomes patchy as she hears the boy approach the finish. Like a conductor whose orchestra will not follow the wand, the boy finishes their duet an entire page ahead of her, a concluding chord in the lowest octave, stabbing his weight into the notes, firmly three times—down—down—down— releasing his hands immediately before standing up and shuffling off stage without even a bow.

And before the pianist blacks out, she sees this: the audience, the boy’s father in the front row. Hands folded calmly in his lap. Yellowed teeth breaking loose in an unabashed smile.

This is not the end of her story. There was “La Campanella.” There were notes played, notes missed, flat notes sharped and sharp notes flatted, melodies from random songs woven in and out of her solo. But I cannot remember them. The performance, each day, works its way slowly back into my mind, sliding over me like a snake around the neck.

As the pianist has heard tell from Professor Kliemens—the only one with the decency still to contact her, now and then—there was a bit of applause. Some even stood, though the pianist suspects only out of sympathy. The pianist knows of the fainting behind stage, the splashing of cold water on her face to revive her, the taxi being called to take her home. She knows of the letter of resignation, though she does not recall the writing of it. The quick packing, the change of address. And she knows, above all, that this is not the end of her story.

The pianist’s life is different now, more blank time to fill her days. She has begun taking walks. She practices some mornings. Others, she meanders through neighborhoods near her house at the edge of town, along the bluff that overlooks the farmlands, along the curving sidewalk paths where the dirty scabs of snow have begun to disintegrate into a slurry of ashen mud. Graying men drive the gravel roads into town every morning, clunking their rusted pickups over potholes. They raise one finger from the steering wheel when they pass.
Maybe, in time, her wrong notes will be righted. Maybe, in time, this new place will start to color, and the pianist will not feel as if she lives in a portrait of black and white. The neighbors will hear her through the walls and ask her to play for them—a song, any song—and she will close her eyes and return to that time in her life when the notes swelled under her skin, when she only had to breathe to release them. She holds onto this hope, and to the nights, the darkness, the corner of the dining room where her Steinway sits, lid propped open like the arms of an old friend, forgiving.
Evidence for the Bone Being a Flute
Ivan Turk defends the Divje Babe artefact

No counter-bite reciprocates the piercings in reverse. The holes compose a line, at equal distance, and of the bored diameters, there is but little difference. Spacing corresponds to human fingers.

Not top-to-inside marks of fangs. Furrows and striations ring the piercings, showing patience augured through with purpose: note, all traces of the spongiose were purged as proved by lack of marrow’s stain.

Unmatched by wolves’ teeth, or hyenas’—punctures, through the thickest part, unlikely for a predator or scavenger. The bone was found beside a fire pit, the ground there strewn with other bones yet none of these were perforated. Taphonomic evidence has ascertained the bone’s response to blowing produces diatonic scale. Location of a scratch below suggests a thumb-hole, partly drilled. We know the skeleton, in other cases, inspired music’s first attempts. In China, from the crane’s already hollow wing-bone earliest recorded flutes were made. This bone: taken from a cave bear’s thigh, four times as old, Neanderthal, but still the principle’s the same: endeavour and invention to bring back from the slaughtered—bird or bear—a sound before the netted snare, the blade and club, the flesh and fire. Before the word.

53
Max Everhart

Everywhere Lonely

So my Irish twin, Kate, calls me up in the middle of the night and says she’s twenty miles outside of Asheville and can really sense the Blue Ridge Mountains, big and black in the distance, and they’re just what she needs right now—that, and some good whiskey, and her little brother’s company.

“What?” I say and hear techno music thumping in the background.

“I need your company.”

I fling the covers away and sit up in bed. My day blowing leaves for the moderately wealthy begins in eight—no—seven hours, and the last thing I need is to listen to a twenty-eight-year-old woman with a 401K, an MBA, and an SUV spill her guts. Too: She still writes Mom concerned emails about my lifestyle.

“How could the First Born possibly be lonely?” I ask. The pumping base stops, and I hear electronic buttons being pressed followed by swooshing sounds and blaring car horns.

“My God, this mountain air is better than Prozac.”

“Perhaps you should up your dose.” On my feet now, smoking and flicking ashes on the carpet, I picture her working through some therapeutic checklist of which “Take Fresh Air” is #37. I smile. Then cringe.

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you.”

“I said I’m happy to play the host.” The swooshing sounds cease, and the music resumes: thump, thump, thump.

“Jonathan Donnelly, you’ve always been a lousy liar.”

“Guess that’s better than being a wife. Or a Republican.” In high school, Kate and I played in a three-chord rock band together called the Mangy Muppets. She had a raspy, Janis Joplin singing voice, dark red hair and freckles to match. I wore black combat boots and strummed an out-of-tune Stratocaster. Weekdays were for Chemistry and Calculus and SAT prep, but Saturday nights at the Grey Eagle belonged to us. It was there the drunks—all two dozen of them—fished
out their lighters as I did my guitar solos and Kate head-banged to a 4/4 drumbeat. Most of our songs, which Kate and I co-wrote, were about greed, need, and hurt. And I loved them all.

I stub my smoke out on the wall, fall back in bed, and stare at the stucco above me. I listen to my sister say I’m a sarcastic prick, but that it’s good to laugh and that I’ve got her pegged, always have. I listen to her reasons for wanting to go camping. At high altitudes. In December.

“All the living things, and the open space, and...”
“I don’t want to know the real reason, do I?”
“I’ve never been out in nature.”
“You do know it’s twenty-five degrees out? And past midnight?”
“I know you have an extra tent.”

She lays on the horn and calls somebody a blind idiot. Holding the phone away from my ear, I clear my throat.

“It’s too dangerous. Even people in your tax bracket get hypothermia.” There’s a pause, laughter.

“Here is what’s going to happen. I feel alive and I want to go up the mountain. For one night. Tonight.”

About to hang up the phone and go back to sleep, I hear noises: skidding tires and a thunk sound that can only mean she’s hit something—something living. I bury my face in the pillow, wait. It’s a deer. She thinks she’s hit a deer. Bambi. Maybe. Dead.

“He was so small,” she says all frantic. “His eyes looked sad.”

The crying begins. Sniffles. Teeth chattering. The car door slams. She mumbles an Our Father and gets every other word wrong.

“This is a sign,” I say. “Mother Nature just dialed you direct.” She cries harder and curses August 14th, the unholy day I was born. I tell her to check the road.

“But I don’t see anything. Will it be all right?”

I remember when we were kids birds used to fly right into the sliding glass door in our basement. Kate insisted that we have a funeral for every single dead bird. After she dug the holes and handled the carcasses, it was my job to say that yes, this bird was dead, but that some other bird loved him and because some other bird loved him he was going to Bird Heaven.

“Tell me it’s going to be all right.”
Her voice is soft now, an almost whisper. I picture her standing in the middle of I-40, searching the highway shoulder for bloodied deer tracks, a cold wind stinging her cheeks, the mountain watching. Slowly, I pull the covers up over my head and press the OFF button on the phone. Beep.

The Kathryn Donnelly Circus comes to my town twice a year. Every visit is the same. Kate brings a handmade rosary from Mom, a firm handshake from Dad, and her husband, Dennis—who takes his cell phone with him in the bathroom. Kate and Dennis peddle real estate in the Triad area, frequent Gold’s Gym, and snort coke when they close a really big deal. When in my neck of the woods, they study the housing market, plunk down $250 a night to stay at the Grove Park Inn, and insist on showing me a good time: exotic Indian dinners, Grey Goose martinis, and live jazz. These jazz clubs are invariably dim and smoky, and as my body sags from too much liquor, and I meld into the bar made of oak and search the frenetic music for some semblance of a melody, my brother-in-law starts the show.

Him: Finish school.
Her: Fall in love.
Him: Invest your money.
Her: Call your Mother.
Him: Avoid debt.
Her: Play your music.

Around Act III of this play, my gut rumbles and I have to remind myself why I live in Asheville in the first place: the nameless Hippies that gather everyday at the Fountain, the esoteric paintings in all the shop windows, the tattooed bartenders that don’t ID anybody, the Scarf Girls in the used bookstores that never take their eyes off Chomsky, and the mountains—always in the background somewhere, waiting, silent. I mow lawns and mop floors to live here. When I’m off, I wander down College Street, following the sound of music and the smell of imported beer. Sometimes when I find what I’m looking for I remember what I lost—playing music with my sister. That’s when it all hits me fast: damp basements and tapping drumsticks, amplifier feedback and ringing ears, long van rides and Ritalin, small stages and sweaty upturned faces and laughter and beer. Sometimes I remember...
too much. Sometimes I get the urge to use my fists again. That’s about the time I pack the truck and head up the Parkway with a couple pairs of Levis, a bottle of whiskey, some peanut butter and Saltines, and my Washburn Acoustic. I swim naked in the Pisgah River, hike up Cold Mountain, and touch the blue-gray clouds. I smoke dope. I breathe. I think. When the moon comes up and the temperature plummets and all the day-trippers head home shivering, I start an illegal fire and strum Neil Young. My voice echoing through the trees, I wash my mouth out with whiskey and wait for the rumble in my gut to quiet down.

Kate staggers into my living room, neck and back slumped forward, her hair redder and longer than ever, every freckle on her face aglow like the last embers in a dying fire. Strapped to her back is a North Face camping pack the size of a surfboard. Bottled water and energy bars show through the mesh side pockets. A fancy watch with compass covers her right wrist. As she struggles with the extra weight, swaying and panting in front of the TV set, I put on a deadpan. I’m in my slippers, by the doorway of my bedroom, drinking coffee. I’m waiting for her to shoot me the look: the blue-eyed laser-beam glare I used to get when she caught me reading her diary as a kid.

“Morning,” I say. She gives me the look. I move to the arm of the couch, slurp my coffee. She drops the pack on the floor. Thud.

“This is serious.”

“No, it’s not. I’m guessing your better half made a joke about ‘extra weight’ or ‘cellulite’ and you hopped in the car, distraught and over-caffeinated.” I lift up the side of her sweater, pinch a half an inch, and chuckle. She laughs too and for the moment we’re friends again. But then, her freckles still glowing, she swats the coffee out of my hand, staining the walls, carpet, and my favorite D.A.R.E. T-shirt.

“He wants children, a son. I’m not ready.”

Fists clenched, I do my Anger Routine like I was taught: count to twenty, name as many state capitals as possible, and breathe through the nose. When I get to Dover, Delaware, I remember that this is my sister—my high-strung sister—and the violent urges surging through my veins subside. It usually takes me at least until Providence, Rhode Island to calm down, and I learned this doing one-hundred and eight days in the Buncombe County Jail. Armed with a roll of paper towels
from the kitchen, she stares down at the soiled carpet. I put my arms behind my back.

“Maybe I’d be a good uncle.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“Because I had an abortion last week.”

Everything slows way down. My sister’s hands shake as she scrubs. Although my eyes are blurry, I can see that her fingernails, usually shiny and polished, look sallow and worn-down. Fighting the urge to brush the stray hairs off her forehead, I unclench my fists and bend down to help. We take turns scrubbing. But the stain won't come up.

“Fuck it,” I say and go change my shirt. Standing in front of the closet mirror in my bedroom, I don’t look at my face. Or the knife scars on my chest and arms. Prayer, the twelve-step program, regular exercise, the touch of a woman, nothing keeps the past at bay except good old-fashioned denial. I can feel my sister’s eyes on the back of my neck, blue and hot.

“I can’t hear anymore about it.”

“I wasn’t starting a conversation. It’s my problem.” She touches the biggest scar on my forearm. “Why wasn’t I there for you?”

“What could you have done if you were?”

“Been there.”

I spin around so fast it makes me dizzy, face her. She takes one step back. Then another.

“Your money was there,” I say. “That’s not nothing.” My sister shivers, a full-bodied twitch, and wraps her arms around her flat stomach. I ease past her, into the living room, stepping over the stain in the carpet.

“We can’t go up tonight. They’re predicting snow.” Blood pumps into my brain. I feel her hand, warm and strong, on my arm. A realization: no one has touched me in months. Not even a handshake. Her eyes are blue cracked red.

“No,” I say and she pulls an envelope from her back pocket, shoves it into my chest.

“Here. I know we’re not friends anymore. Or rock’n’rollers.”

I look inside the envelope, and it’s cash: ten, crackling one-hundred dollar bills that stink of silk and chemicals and fresh ink. I run my
fingertip along the jagged edge of the bills. I think about the three thousand I owe Brady Long, esq. I fantasize about new CD players and bags of good coke and extended road trips in Mexico. I taste metal. My stomach moves, and I work my way from Juneau, Alaska to Lansing, Michigan to Montpelier, Vermont without looking up. I throw the envelope back at her.

"The answer is still no." Her nose is running, dripping onto the carpet. I bend down and wipe it clean with my bare arm. "I do know another place we can go."

Thirty minutes later and we're tiptoeing through the back door of Rick's Outdoor Sporting Goods, Kate carrying a grocery bag full of Ballpark franks and two pints of Jameson. Once inside, I punch the alarm code, grab the big yellow flashlight marked JANITOR, and switch it on. I open the door leading out to the sales floor and aim the narrow beam of light down the center aisle. Kate giggles.

"Follow me," I say. As we move towards the front of the store, Kate's new hiking boots squeak and I shine the light on the various sales departments I have to dust and mop: lanterns and grills on the right, fishing and tackle on the left, and the rifles in the back by the toilets. When we reach the kayaks, Kate puts her arm on my shoulder. I stop.

"It's really dark in here. No moonlight."

I nod and quickly realize she can't see me.

"I feel like if I move a foot to either side I'd be lost."

I nod again, grunt.

"You have to clean this place? All by yourself?"

The flashlight flickers on and off. I hit the compartment where the batteries go and curse. Kate jumps, and the booze bottles clink together.

"Sorry," she says.

I feel around for her hand. But I can't find it.

"Come on, we're almost there." We move forward: ten, eleven, twelve steps. In the middle of the store, I shine the light on a mock campsite where Brenda, the store's stoner general manager, set up a four-man tent, two high-tech folding chairs, and a fake fire. Surrounding the campsite is a six-foot high cardboard cutout of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the leaves changing everywhere red, yellow, and brown.
In the valley of one of the mountain peaks is a waterfall. Kate sits the groceries down by the campfire rocks made of plastic. I hand her the flashlight, grope around for a place to sit.

"Wow," she says and props the flashlight up against one of the rocks so she can admire the view. Uncapping the whiskey, I drink and watch thousands of dust mites rise off the burning flashlight. I watch my sister explore the smooth cardboard mountains with her fingers. I watch her try to dip her hand in the clear pool beneath the waterfall. When she moves beyond the light, I sense her movements and listen for her quick breaths in the dark.

"Where are you?" She completes a second and third lap around the mountains, stops in front of the tent. Half of her is in light, the other half in shadow.

"I'm sorry about all this."

I tell her the store is closed on Sunday and Monday and to sit down and shut up and start camping.

"That's not what I meant."

I grip the bottle, take a big gulp, and feel the liquor sliding down my throat and into my belly. Kate, anxious to be a real camper, sits down beside me, kicks the leg of my chair. I pass her the bottle. While she sips without making a sound, I ignore the darkness beyond our little mountain range illuminated. I forget about the Plexiglas rifle cases, smudged with fingerprints and fried chicken grease, and the old-fashioned cash registers I clean with a feather duster, and the racks of canoes that attract spider's webs. I focus on the fire, the flashlight, and the view. Quiet.

"Here," Kate says and drops the bottle in my lap.

She sighs and I tell her that words don't echo in here and hit the bottle hard and wonder if my big sister ever got any of the telepathic messages I sent her when I was gone on coke and booze and hatred.

"You know the owner of this store gave me a job after I got out of jail. He even let me sleep in the stockroom for a couple weeks until I found a place of my own. All I had to do was find him some dope once in awhile." I feel a hand on my knee, a squeeze that pops my joints.

"I told Dennis what I did. After some broken dishes and two Xanax, he said he loved me anyway. Can I ever forgive him for that?"

All the air in my lungs escapes. I want to look at my sister, play connect
the dots with her freckles. I want to tell her something, anything, about how I feel empty and full and scared when I'm alone on my back in the woods outside and I'm waiting—waiting for the sky to drop or the trees to dance or God, upon high, to laugh. But I don't. Instead I offer her hard liquor. She accepts my meager gift, and I slap her on the back.

"Jesus Christ," she says. "Walking out of that doctor's office after."

The flashlight flickers again, and I kick it. The light still burning, I tell Kate I saw a shrink when I got out of jail.

"So are we impervious to psychoanalysis?"

"She said everything I did, the fighting, the drugs, playing music, I did because I was lonely. 'Everywhere lonely,' she used to say. 'That's the human condition.'" I feel the hand slide off my knee, gently and with a scratching sound.

"Everywhere lonely?"

The words sound heavier in the dark. I nod. We don't talk. The light shines bright on our mountains scene, and I listen for rushing water, for the red and yellow leaves to stir in the trees. I hold my breath—the way I did when the Uniforms yelled, "Lights Out." My hands and feet go numb. I know the real moon is out there somewhere, hiding behind a real cloud, and I hear my heart beating in my ear. It takes me a minute to realize Kate is speaking and that I'm not alone. She steps into the light, mascara smeared at the corners of her eyes, long strands of fragrant hair covering part of her face.

"Okay. We've seen the scenery and confessed our sin. Now what?"

"Usually I sing."

"Perfect. I want you to sing to me."

"I didn't bring my guitar."

"I brought it. It's in the car."

Pliable from the alcohol, I grab the flashlight and do as she asks. When I return, I put the flashlight back in its place and sit Indian-style by the fire. I tune up, Kate lying at my feet. While trying to remember that prayer Mom taught us about strength and serenity, I pluck the E-string.

"Kate," I say and she punches me in the knee.

"No. Sing. Now."

So I sing. At first I sing early Beatles, pre-mustache, pre-revolution songs about true love. I get into it. I pretend I have shaggy hair and
adoring fans and toss my head about as I hit the higher notes. Kate laughs. We both drink.

"I'm more popular than Jesus Christ," I say and play some more, the chord changes sloppier now that a nice numb feeling has settled into my stomach. After "Help," I reach down and stroke my sister's hair and inhale the spring scent of her organic conditioner. Even though the music has stopped, she continues humming.

"Play some of our songs."
"I only remember one."
"Then play it."
"I'll try." The opening riff—little more than a perversion of "Satisfaction (I Can't Get No)—is fast and fun. As I play, I remember opening our five-song shows with a howl and a bright red E-chord. The words pour out of me. Kate sings along, her head propped against my shoes.

"Maybe if you'd have sung the songs things would have turned out better."

Kate yawns. My mood shifts. Next, I play a Leadbelly tune, something about pine trees and a lack of sunshine and faithful women. My voice is so gravelly it scares me. I sing the gloomy chorus over and over and over again, strum the chords softer and softer each time through. Finally, my voice gives out, and I shake Kate's shoulder. But she doesn't move. I tug on her hair.

"Wake up."
"Is it over?" she moans, half asleep.

The flashlight flickering, I kick it, and the light settles on the waterfall. The light is weak, but I can make out the rocks and the cool, clear water and a sliver of trees on the mountains above the falls. I set my guitar aside, focus my eyes. But the light flickers once more then dies.

Later, I wake up with my head in the campfire, drool leaking onto the plastic rocks, one arm wrapped around the guitar. My head is spinning. I sit up, glance around the campsite. No Kate anywhere, just her empty hiking boots by the tent flap. Before I limp to the back of the store, I munch a hotdog from the opened package and fumble for my shoes, the store still drowned in darkness.

"Kate," I say and stomp my feet into my sneakers. I walk down the
center aisle, sense where the door leading to the office is and open it. Inside the light hits me quick. After my eyes adjust, I find my sister sitting on the cot I used to sleep on. She’s staring at a deer head mounted above the owner’s desk, a prize buck he brought back from Montana. Her arms pressed against her chest, she rocks gently back and forth, the cot squeaking. I put my hand on her shoulder.

“Kate,” I say but she won’t look at me.

“His eyes are light brown.”

“Don’t do this to yourself.”

“His antlers look healthy too.”

“Let’s get out of here.” I squeeze her shoulder blade, and she seizes my hand, pulls me in close enough to smell her morning breath.

“You wouldn’t ever do that, would you?”

I take another look at the head. It’s sculpture now, permanent, beyond pain, not real.

“No,” I say. “I wouldn’t.” I brush a few greasy strands of hair off her face.

“That deer I hit got away. I know he did. I can feel it in my bones.”

I pick her up like a baby and carry her out of the office.

“There’s a chance,” I say and shut off the overhead light.

After we clean up and break camp, the sun is threatening to come out from its hiding place. We lock up the store, and I tell Kate I have to go to work. But she insists on buying me breakfast before she leaves town.

“Waffle House,” she says as we pull into the half-empty parking lot. We hustle inside and blow warm air on our hands and take a booth. While waiting for the coffee, Kate stares out the window—at the mountains, big and brown in the distance.

“The trees look like skeletons.”

I unzip my jacket, but don’t take it off. I don’t want anybody to get a look at the scars on my arm.

“I wish our mountains were real.”

“Too many compromises,” she says.

Before the pancakes come, I go to the bathroom to wash up, splash water on my face. Avoiding my reflection in the cracked mirror, I soap
my hands, rinse and repeat, rinse and repeat. The water is loud in my ears. When I turn the faucet off, I hear someone banging on the bathroom door.

"I'm almost done." I elbow past a trucker-looking guy in overalls and walk back to our booth. But Kate is gone. I sit down and look out the window in time to catch her black Suburban running a red light. As she speeds down the road, her right blinker flashes and she aims the car towards the exit marked Blue Ridge Parkway, strands of her dark red hair blowing out the window. The sun is hiding behind gray clouds. Our breakfast arrives.

"I think it’s going to snow." I take the hot coffee mug from April, our waitress. I thank her and notice the iron-gray streaks running through her ponytail. She reaches into her apron.

"She wanted me to give you this.”

She drops Kate's envelope on the table. I slide out of the booth, stand, and study April's face. It looks like a topographic map, bumps and craters everywhere. She smiles, revealing clean white dentures. Blowing nicotine breath my way, she asks if I need something else.

"No," I say. "I'm not angry." Then a sense of calm washes over me, and I pick up my plate of pancakes and frisbee it across the room, careful to avoid hitting any customers in the head. When I hear the jukebox glass shatter, my hands stop shaking.

"I'm not angry." I start counting, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. April flaps her skinny arms in front of my face.

"Get it together, honey. Or I'm calling the law.”

I put my hands behind my back and pace the floor. The tree skeletons on the mountainside mock me.

"Atlanta, Georgia. Bismarck, North Dakota." April backs away.

"Stop it. You're scaring the customers.”

"Boise, Idaho. Boston, Massachusetts.”

"Frank, call the police. We've got another one.”

"Columbia, South Carolina. Columbus, Ohio. Dover, Delaware.” I clench my fists tighter behind my back while Frank, the cook, waves a greasy spatula at me. I'm nearing the end of the line, Topeka, Kansas, and I can hear things outside: police sirens, screeching tires, and boots hitting concrete.
Who rides so late on a night so wild?
It is a father with his child;
He clasps the boy tight in his arm
He holds him close, he keeps him warm.

Silhouette art by Andy Smetanka
"My son, are you hiding your face in fear?" / "The Erl-King, father! The Erl-King is here! Do you not see him in cape and crown?" / "It is simply the mist, child, creeping aground."

Dear child, come away with me! / Such games we'll play, such fun there will be; Such flowers we'll gather and wonders behold. / My mother will fashion you garments of gold.

"My father, my father, do you not hear? / The Erl-King is whispering, and drawing quite near!"  
"Lie still, my son, and rest quietly; / It is only the wind in the leaves of the tree."
Dear child, won't you come with me? My daughters will favor you, you'll see; They'll make for you such splendid tokens to keep, They'll dance you and swing you and sing you to sleep.

"My father, my father, can you not see / The Erl-King's fair daughters waiting for me?"
"I see them, my son, yes, I see what you say: / The willow tree waving its branches of gray."

I love you, dear child—I promise no ill / But I'm taking you whether or not you will. "The Erl-King, my father, he's laid me ahold! / He's hurting me, father! His fingers are cold!"
The father now shudders and doubles his haste
To bear them from the dismal waste
But reaching the courtyard he looks down in dread:
In his shivering arms the child is dead.

Translation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "Der Erlkönig" by Andy Swetanka
Blue Wave

Where you offer your fuck-crazed mood,
I’m already relieved. Mantras
are morbidized. They recoiled
in loops on the racks, reflected
the mouth and voice of Prince Bolkonski.
I eat from the flock. You contributed
nothing to this. You gave
and then burnished. Algae turned up
beneath the backstay. You broke the incision.
You devour the fairytale with an angle.
Like those weary menefregìsti that eat their fill
of the sun and fall asleep
on a wave. It’s hard to move
the solar system off the retina this way.

Translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry and the author
from Gozd in kelihi (Woods and Chalices); Harcourt, 2008 (296)
At low tide the footprints are blue
and I long for the sinkhole.

Show me what you wrote.
My poems are genitalia.

_Translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry_
_from Gozd in kelihi (Woods and Chalices); Harcourt, 2008 (8)_
Fallow Land and the Fates

The boy scrubs the kitchen and crushes
the dot to mom. Godfathers' microwaves
catch fire. Snakes, Easter eggs, gray hats
and crampon lamps flake from the pillars
on the walls. He who brews brandy
pants on screes, incantation.
Boils he who carries the mountain
and this one who unsaddles, supports yuppies.
I rotate breasts and papers. The river
makes the mesh. It's easy to find shapes
in the profiles of stones, but in the mud
there's the weight of the horse-collar. Sinking stools,
you can't pierce water! Only the scattered
water can drink water. The full water twists.

Translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry and the author
from Gozd in kelihi (Woods and Chalices); Harcourt, 2008 (115)
Along Grajena River

I helped
the peach
to braid itself.

Why did you already shut
your mouth on the mountain?
The sled

rolls,
turns round its axles.
It runs with
dogs and moose.
Boka is an ink stain.
Cut into the icy slope

and scattered powder.
The stone gives heat.
Ormož begs a hen.

I am Ban’s daughter.
I played piano
in Poker,

the garden
did not keep.
Surely I must have died.

Translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry and the author from Gozd in kelihi (Woods and Chalices); Harcourt, 2008 (87–88)
Baruzza

Vendramin! Sharpen it! I tell you
to sharpen it but not so ardently
that you break it again.

You cleaned your shoes with your shawl,
what is this, Vendramin, the mediation
between Verdurin and the Misses Nardelli?

Both nailed dogs onto placards.
Take an eraser, a lamp and a huge
hammer, they barely lifted it.

The nailing was done by servants.
The lifting was done by servants, too.
And in the time when there were no

big billboards yet, they observed
the clear sea bed at Silba.
There, where Azra coated you

with tar. Opened your throat,
spread it toward the sun,
as Isis to me, Anubis.

Translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry and the author
from Gozd in kelihi (Woods and Chalices); Harcourt, 2008 (70–71)
Hurst struggled to keep up with the van transporting Emily’s casket. He rarely drove at night anymore, and the way the oncoming headlights painted his hands the color of bone made him feel frail and hesitant, too old to attend the simple ceremonies of a death. At the American border, her body passed through easily—an unfolding of papers and a wave of the guard’s long metal flashlight—and Hurst could only watch as the van sped off into the darkness while an officer searched his Buick. The border guard rifled through the trunk, clicking his tongue. “I’m awful sorry about your girlfriend, mister.”

“We were more like long-time bridge partners,” Hurst said, leaning over the young man’s shoulder to see what he was finding in the trunk. “But we lived together too.”

The border officer’s smile extinguished as he clicked off his flashlight. “Alright mister, you can go through now.”

The sun lifted, turning white hot as it rose over the high plains. Hours of scorched Montana hissed by. South of Billings, Hurst’s car skidded off the highway and plunged into the shore of burnt grass along the roadside. He turned off the engine, slapped his cheeks, took one of Emily’s half-smoked cigarettes out of the ashtray and put it to his lips. It was sour, and he could not taste the lipstick she’d kissed onto the filter.

In nine years living together Hurst had barely heard Emily speak of Wyoming, but as he pulled into her childhood home—a place east of Yellowstone called Carson—the loneliness of the little dirt-patch town
made his heart slow. She’d admitted once it had been a decent place
to grow up, before the new highway brought in the drug addicts and
prostitutes, but she’d been clear about not wanting to go back until it
was time to return for good.

The motel was a seedy row of closed doors. Each had a concrete
stoop with a tin bucket of sand and spent cigarettes. The front office
was empty. A shoebox with a hole cut in the top and CHECKS markered
onto the side sat on the counter. Beside it, an envelope labeled Mr.
Hurst held his room key. The windows to number seven were open
and the rotten bleach odor of the motel hot tub had attached itself to
everything inside. The trash cans told of protected sex and chocolate
bingeing, a bedside table was strewn with a dozen brochures for
Yellowstone Park. Come see the erupting geysers!

He walked around the corner to a diner called Runny’s Grill. There
were no other customers except for a plump little girl, no older than ten,
sitting alone in a large semi-circle booth, rolling an empty milkshake
glass between her palms. Hurst winked at her in the friendly manner
that he figured old men were supposed to wink at children. The girl’s
eyes narrowed and she raised her middle finger at him. He ordered a
BLT, to go.

When he got back to his room, rock music ached through the wall.
He spread his dinner on the table and did his best to enjoy it, until
he realized that what he’d thought to be the music’s bass beat was
actually number eight’s headboard thumping against the other side of
his wall. The radio went to commercial and the yak-like sounds of a
man’s determined grunting could be heard more clearly. Occasionally,
a female voice offered guidance—“Slower, Victor! Slower!”—and as their
cadence wound down and spread itself so thinly across the moments,
it seemed the constraints of endurance would no longer apply—an
uncoiling rhythm, a decelerating engine.

Later, the headboard struck its final thump, the radio quit, and a
door slammed the place quiet. Hurst took out some of Emily’s things
that he’d brought with him: her favorite silver earrings, her old yellow

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robe. He set these things on a chair and watched them turn grey as the fading hour licked away the last rims of daylight.

Sleep led him into dreams of hellish sulfur pools, of falling in and sucking boiling liquid into his chest. He gasped awake and rolled over to see the clock radio surge 2:41 before blinking out. The streetlamp outside fluttered, then died. A rattling din like the hooves of an approaching herd rose up and set the whole room trembling. Coffee mugs clattered against the tile counter in the bathroom. Something fell off the wall and shattered behind the television. Hurst's suitcase slumped over in the dead light of the corner. As the shaking subsided, the concrete parking lot cracked and moaned like a frozen lake shoulder ing against its banks.

In the morning, Hurst parked a half-block short of the cemetery entrance on account of a two-foot-high buckle in the asphalt. A front yard water main sprayed a rooster tail onto the sidewalk as a whole family looked on while eating breakfast on their porch.

At the front gate of the cemetery hung a cardboard sign reading, CEMETERY CLOSED - EARTHQUAKE, but the gate itself was not locked. Beyond the circular drive, a green backhoe lay on its side leaking oil into a bed of morning glories. From the base of a tree, a crevice had opened in the earth and snaked up over a hill toward the burial grounds. It was as wide as a sidewalk and deep enough for a grown man to disappear into. Hurst walked along the crevice until he reached the crest of the hill, and the cemetery grounds spread out below him. The fissure carried on for another few hundred yards, yawning open in places as wide as a car lane. Scores of gravestones lay on their faces. A ways off, a short-haired woman in dark slacks and suspenders gave orders to a man in overalls. Nearer, two workmen stood looking into the crack in the earth.

Hurst passed a row of gravestones which bowed forward reverently. Then he saw them, dozens of coffins peeking up from inside the fissure, rusted metal domes and rotting wood boxes. A few had been thrust
upward almost breaching the surface. One had splintered open and was perhaps showing its contents to a different vantage point. The earth, he thought, was giving them back.

"Sir!" shouted a man's voice. The woman with suspenders was a man, a petite fellow with sloped shoulders and a thin cap of black hair gelled against his skull. He hustled closer on little legs. "Please, sir. The cemetery is closed."

"My friend is supposed to be buried this morning."

"I'm sorry." Beads of sweat shimmered on the man's temples. "As you can see, sir, we have a bit of an emergency."

"But I drove all the way down from Calgary."

"Please." The man took Hurst by the elbow. "You'll have to wait until tomorrow."

Hurst let himself be walked to the entrance, where the petite man locked the gate behind him. "Does this happen often?" asked Hurst, but the man was already scrambling away.

Again, the shoebox manned the counter of the motel office. Thinking he'd wait for the manager to return, Hurst took his time writing a check to pay for a second night's stay. He thought how Emily's name might eventually be removed from the top left corner. They'd combined bank accounts to simplify their lives, moved in together for the same reason, but now it seemed insulting to have her name on things. It wasn't right for her to be paying bills, for her name to be jammed into a shoebox at some awful motel. It was important to get her into the ground and off of their checks sooner rather than later. He folded the check into his pocket and went back to his room to read the Yellowstone brochures. The pictures of the park were supposed to be beautiful, but he found them hectic, ominous even. So much volcanic disorder. The whole place seemed a cancerous pock on the earth's surface.

Through the window, a little girl approached with a wooden crate in her arms. She was a rotund creature with straight yellow hair and a green uniform full of unflattering angles and colorful badges.
The uniform looked to have been made from a single piece of fabric fastened recklessly around her like a knee-length toga.

He swung open his door. “Yes?”

The girl stopped along his walkway. She leaned the crate forward to show him its contents, bright boxes of something edible.

“You’re the little brat from the diner, aren’t you?”

“I’m a Girl Scout,” she replied.

“No you’re not. I’ve seen Girl Scouts. You’re the girl who gave me the finger.”

She idled patiently, chewing the cud of her cheek. “I’m really poor,” she finally said. “We hardly have enough to eat. I couldn’t afford a real uniform, so my mother made this one.”

He looked her over. Her pudginess belied the claims of hunger. “Well, I’m sorry for that,” he said. “Your mother is not much of a seamstress. In the army they taught me how to sew better than that.”

She stepped closer. “Would you like to buy some cookies?”

He did not. But the girl’s resolve intrigued him, unmoved as she was by his meanness. She advanced to the bottom of his stoop, placing a foot on the first step, the crate of cookies coming to rest on her thigh. As her knee rose, the coarse green fabric of the uniform lifted off her shoulders.

“This is a motel,” he said. “Not a house.”

She rattled the crate. “If you buy some, I’ll get out of your face.”

The offer was tempting. There was a loose bill in the pocket of his slacks, a tissue-soft ten he’d found in the drier some days before. He’d been learning to do his own laundry for the first time in his life, and the appearance of coins and wadded Kleenexes came as a regular reminder of his ineptitude. But the ten dollar bill—fatigued and clinging to a blouse of hers—had foretold something worse than simple incompetence, something cheerless and permanent, a new life on his own beset with these kinds of small disheartening moments.

The girl huffed, suddenly impatient, and wiped her nose on the sash hanging diagonally across her torso. What were supposed to be merit
badges on the sash were actually political buttons and a dull antique brooch probably stolen off her mother’s dresser. And her uniform was not sewn at all, but clipped together with dozens of safety pins along one side of her body. Between the sutures, little lobes of pink skin peeked out.

“This is ridiculous,” he said, wincing at the visage of Ronald Reagan. “Let me fix that sheet you’re wearing.”

He stepped down off the stoop and she followed him to the Buick parked on the curb.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

He leaned into the passenger seat and drew a small olive-green box from the glove compartment. “We aren’t going anywhere.” He shut the door and led her up into his room. The girl parked herself on a chair beside the bed. He set the green box on the comforter and handed her Emily’s yellow bathrobe. “Now take that thing off.” He pointed toward the bathroom, but already she was pulling the uniform over her head. He spun away and made for the front window, dragging the drapes almost shut, catching her reflection off the glass. With the uniform tangling her arms, she looked as plump and fleshy as a seal.

“Your robe smells funny,” she said. Her fists jammed around inside the deep plush pockets. One hand emerged with a key on a length of blue thread. She gave a repellent frown and tugged at it, finding the other end of the thread fastened securely to the inside of the pocket.

“My friend,” he said, feeling a smile move across his face, “she used to lock herself out of the house when she went out to get the morning paper.”

The girl sniffed the key. “You’re weird.” She gave it one last tug and dropped it back into the robe pocket.

“Why don’t you open one of your boxes and have a cookie,” he said, “on me.” He put on eyeglasses and pulled from the olive-green box a needle and spool of thread.

“Can’t,” she said. “My mom says I’m too fat.”

He looked up over the top of his glasses and nodded. “My doctor
says I'm too thin. And now I don't eat anything because Emily was the cook, and she's recently died."

The girl pulled an orange box out of the crate and laid it on the bed. "These have the most fat," she said, petting the top of the box. "They're my favorite."

He pulled the ten dollar bill out of his pocket and set it on the bed out of her reach. "I'll need you to make change," he said, pushing the needle into the cloth. His hands began to remember how much he enjoyed sewing. The arthritis had ended his model car building years ago and kept him from fishing on account of the knots, but the new medicine he'd begun taking had pumped some life back into his hands. It was a small measure of good that came out of Emily's plunge into infirmity. He'd begun to see his own doctor again, and, as Emily slid into the throes of disease, he'd found himself somehow improving.

"Why's your wife dead?" the girl asked.

"We weren't married," said Hurst. "She was more like...." He thought how the girl might best understand. "Like a girlfriend."

"But she's dead," said the girl. "Why?"

"Because she smoked. You don't smoke, do you?"

"I'm only ten. But my mom smokes cigars."

"You mean she smokes cigarettes."

The girl itched her chapped lips.

"Well, if she smokes," he said, "then she's going to die too."

The girl absorbed his remark without argument. She began to hum and swing her legs, and Hurst found a rhythm in the idle commotion as he moved the needle through the fabric.

He explained to her that during the war he'd been known for his talent with a sewing kit. Every company needed men skilled at such things: to give a good haircut with surgical scissors, to cook a Thanksgiving dinner out of K-rations and snared pigeons. Hurst's company had called him "Seamster." It became his call sign, gave his hands some worth outside of pulling a trigger. He kept his company looking dapper as they charged across Normandy. French women,
Hurst explained to the little girl, were terribly interested in their handsome American liberators.

A knock came at the door. His hands stalled above the folds of green cloth. The girl’s humming petered out and her legs froze. As Hurst moved to the door, he heard her get up and make for the bathroom. He opened the door to a woman on his stoop wearing a leather skirt and a neon orange tube top, her makeup too heavy for the daytime. The over-darkened eyes and lips made her face look as though holes had been shot through it.

“This is a motel, not a house,” he said.

The woman itched her armpit. “I’m looking for my daughter, Monica.”

“Is that her name? Monica?” Hurst waited to see if the girl would respond. “She came to my door selling cookies a while ago.” Watching the cavernous, bruised eyes, he worried that a woman such as this could actually be someone’s mother. “I bought some of the orange ones.”

The woman was already clopping down his steps, waving a thank you over her shoulder. She stopped at the curb, dug through her purse, then unrolled a narrow dark cigar the size of a pinkie finger from a leaf of tinfoil. She lit it, mouthing a series of quick puffs, and then stood in the cloud it formed around her.

“Are you waiting for something?” he asked.

The woman held a hand above her eyes, scanning down the street, ignoring him.

He turned back inside to discover the cookies and the ten dollar bill gone from the bed. There was no answer when he knocked at the bathroom door. The window was open, a footprint stamped onto the top of the toilet tank.

Hurst trolled the neighborhood in his Buick. The post-quake disorder played out in peculiar scenes through town: men with hardhats buttressed a leaning telephone pole with two-by-fours; a woman ran X’s of duct tape across her window panes; children rode bikes through
water main cesspools. The girl’s uniform lay bunched on the passenger seat—currency toward a trade-back. Nearly a decade of Emily was in that robe, countless Sunday mornings with coffeecake and the newspaper, her long freckled legs crossed over the leather ottoman.

Something yellow moved into a backyard. He left the car running in the street, got out, shuffled along the side of a house. The backyard was full of bikes and deflated basketballs. Unmowed grass poked through an overturned trampoline.

“I’m leaving!” he shouted. “I’m leaving town, so I need that robe back.”

Little heads appeared from behind a row of bushes: two heads, then a third, then a fourth, popping up like mushrooms, the same dirty bowl haircut on each one. They were hovering over something on the ground that he couldn’t see. As he moved toward them, they went frantic, grabbing things up into their arms, and scattering just as he descended upon their position. The clear plastic ribcage from a cookie box lay empty at his feet. “Those are my goddamned cookies.” He pivoted, locating each child, their jittery creature-eyes watching him from points around the yard, their dirty little hands clutching the other boxes. “Which way did she go?” he demanded.

The smallest one, who crouched behind a punching bag, pointed into the next yard.

When Hurst pulled up to the motel, the girl’s mother had her hands cupped against the front window of his room. She rose up onto her tiptoes, the backs of her legs bulbous and dusty like potatoes fresh from the ground. There were parts of her, underneath the soot and makeup, which seemed to belong to a more sincere woman, but the outer layers of clinging smoke and tight clothing made her look desperate for vulgar attention.

Hurst swept the little green uniform onto the floor mat. “I told you,” he said, getting out and approaching the woman directly, “she’s not in there.”
“It’s not that.” She lifted her purse off his doorknob, rifled through it for another of her miniature cigars. “The earthquake,” she said, thumbing her lighter. “My toilet bowl is cracked and they turned off my water.” She motioned to the room next to his. “Can I could use your bathroom?”

“You’re staying in number eight?”

She lit a flame and puffed, her nodding chin chopping the bulbs of smoke. The cigar smelled sweet and earthy.

“Do those earthquakes happen often?” Hurst unlocked his door and held it open for her.

Slow gray ribbons snaked from her mouth and wrapped around her shoulders. “We’re not from around here.” She stepped inside, carrying with her the shawl of smoke.

He stared at one of the Yellowstone brochures, listened to the sound of her skirt dropping onto the bathroom tile, the flush of the toilet. “A working toilet,” she called out. “You must have to pay extra to get one of these. Only the rich, I guess.”

“What? Oh yes, the bathroom isn’t very nice. I wasn’t expecting a guest.” He could hear her tearing the wrapper off a new bar of soap, the faucet running.

“At least yours works,” she said.

“What?”

When she came out, Hurst stood for her, pulling open one of the huge glossy Yellowstone brochures. The bubbling volcanic mud!

“Are you okay buddy?” She stood by the bathroom door putting her hair into a pony tail. Her makeup had washed away and the dark holes in her face were filled in with tired human flesh. “You look kind of shitty.”

“I’m not comfortable with this,” he said.

“With what?”

“With having you here in my room like this.”

“I’m not ‘in your room.’ I just needed to use your bathroom.” She looked at his black suit hanging in the closet. “Jeez, you’re so uptight.”
She moved to the bed stand, fingered Emily’s silver earrings.

“I’m really not comfortable having you here.”

She flicked one of the earrings, and it settled beneath the clock radio. “I just needed to use the toilet, asshole.” She thumbed her purse onto her shoulder and made for the door.

“I don’t mean to offend you.” Hurst wanted to explain about Emily, about the cemetery, and the robe. “My friend just passed on,” he finally said. “I suppose it’s got to do with that.”

“How sad,” said the woman, angling toward the door.

Hurst suddenly wanted to keep her there in his room. As she brushed past him, he was seized with the desire to grab her bare shoulders with his fingernails and squeeze some of the pain into her. He wondered if you could pay a woman for just that.

The sullen wet smell of the cigar lingered after she’d gone. The late afternoon set the windows ablaze and the fearful shadows of magpies swooping across the curtains sank a slow, looming feeling into his chest. Hurst went walking for some air, taking his check down to the front office. A man with long sideburns sat behind the counter reading a jacuzzi repair manual.

“A second night, please,” said Hurst, laying his check on the counter. “But do you have another room available?”

“Is it a real problem?” asked the man. He wore a denim shirt with Victor sewn into the lapel. The stitching to the r was coming undone, and the man’s name would soon be Victo.

“It’s the people in number eight,” said Hurst. “A woman and her daughter.”

“Oh sure, them,” said the man. “Don’t give them anything. They’re trouble for everyone, especially me. I won’t even tell you how hard it is to get that woman to pay up.”

“So you’ll get me a new room then?”

The man held the check up to the light, swiveling on his stool. “How come you crossed out the other name?” He touched sets of
keys hanging from hooks on a board.

"I guess I shouldn't have." Against the light, Hurst could see too clearly the heavy black pen strike through Emily's name.

"Oh wait," the man said, remembering. "Plumbing's turned off in that room too." He hung a key back onto its hook. "Sorry mister. No can do."

Hurst retrieved Monica's uniform from the car and took it back to his room. Needing the distraction, he finished sewing it, taking extra care to double-stitch where the child's girth threatened to add pressure. The controlled stabbing motion of needle into cloth cast a spell-like calm over him, and he began to believe that he'd actually get to leave this place eventually.

Outside, footsteps scraped the concrete and the doorknob jiggled against the lock. He stashed the uniform under a pillow before opening up. Monica, shivering beneath the soaked yellow robe, stood shouldering the weight of her mother's hands.

"She needs to use your shower," said the woman. "Or she'll catch hypothermia."

Tar and soil clung in streaks to the terry cloth. The girl moved past him without making eye contact and disappeared into his bathroom.

Her mother guarded the door. "She won't say where her clothes went."

"I'm sorry about before," said Hurst. "I don't know how to talk to people lately."

She swung her purse forward until it settled like a codpiece over the front of her skirt. "I need a hundred and forty dollars. That asshole's trying to kick us out onto the street."

"Which asshole?"

"Victor," she said. "He's worthless. Trust me. We've been here a month and the hot tub has been broken the whole time."

The television returned from a commercial. It was a show about a man who drank snake venom to build up an immunity. It showed the
man drawing cobra's venom into a glass beaker, putting the beaker into a special refrigerator, and later, diluting it and drinking some.

"I bet he's not really even drinking the stuff," said Monica's mother.

The water in the bathroom shut off, wet feet padded on the tile floor. Monica came out with one of Hurst's towels wrapped around her, cork-screwing a tissue up her nose. At the door, her mother put her hands on Monica's shoulders, her nails like talons clenching the little girl's pink skin. "What do you say to the nice man?"

"Did he give us any money?" asked Monica.

"No. He didn't." The mother's fingers squeezed little white marks into the girl's skin. "He isn't going to give us anything."

They left him there with the TV on. The man teased a rattlesnake with a bamboo cane. He said he believed drinking snake venom would allow him to live to be a hundred years old.

In the bathroom, Emily's sodden robe bled gray into the tile crevices. He filled the tub with warm, soapy water, dropping the robe in and stirring it with his foot. But then, getting down onto his knees, he scrubbed the stains against a coarse hand towel, wearing down a new bar of soap against the ruined fabric, twisting the dirty water out of the terry cloth, and hanging it on the back of the door. It was better, he thought, but still ruined. When this was done, Hurst called the cemetery and left a message on the caretaker's machine warning that he'd be coming by at ten in the morning expecting a burial.

When he hung up, the phone rang.

A woman's voice could be heard at a tinny distance from the receiver. "Do it!" the woman's voice hissed, "Say it!" A man's gravelly twang rasped loudly onto the line. "The lady here wants me to tell you 'this is what a hunderd 'n forty dollars gits you,'" and then they hung up. A woman's laughter peeled off from the other side of the wall, and the radio came on at a volume which made the wallpaper seem to detach and levitate from the plaster.

Hurst jammed the uniform into his fist and burst out onto the stoop.
He paced around the corner, sucking the parched night air into his lungs. The girl sat in the front window of Runny’s, stabbing a glass of Coke with a straw. He stood there, waiting for her to notice him on the sidewalk. His heart was racing now, so fast he mistrusted it. He stood, angling forward, arms straight and blunt as pipes, fists shaking. When she finally saw him, he unfolded her uniform like a banner between his hands, and then he threw it down onto the sidewalk and kicked it into the garden of pumice rocks and dead bush roots below the window.

He stalked away for what felt like miles in only minutes, until he came to a bar with no windows where he ate a fried steak and drank scotch from a juice glass until he could barely imagine making it home.

In the morning, Hurst woke with the feeling of a damaged nerve running through his entire body. He showered quickly and put on his suit, which felt clammy and stretched as clothes do when they’ve already been worn. He packed his things, put the damp robe into a plastic grocery bag, and dragged his suitcase outside.

From the backseat of his car Monica’s eyes watched him approach. “Where are we going?” she insisted, rolling down her window. She was wearing her uniform.

Hurst stepped closer, admiring the job he’d done with the stitching. She looked clean and determined toward some important cause, like a soldier. “You don’t look quite so ridiculous anymore,” he said.

“Where are we going?”

Monica’s eyes floated in the rearview as they wove through town. The cemetery entrance still hung the same CLOSED sign. Hurst pushed the gate, which seemed loose at first, but then would not open.

“I can squeeze through,” she said, and as she tried to press herself through a gap in the wrought iron bars, the petite man appeared. He wore a dirty blue jumpsuit which was too large for him. “Mr. Hurst, we’re ready for you,” he said, putting a key to the lock. “Take the road to the left until you see the casket.” He bowed and fed a warm smile to the girl. “It’ll be the only clean one.”
They rode the winding gravel path through the cemetery grounds. Workmen with backhoes toiled at the far end filling in the long gaping fissure. Strips of new sod lay like stitching over the earth’s wounds. Three mud-covered coffins sat in a row beside the edge, waiting patiently to go back into the ground, and there were rectangular dirt outlines where others had been. Monica breathed against the glass in the backseat whispering words of amazement. They paused at a spot where a small crane lowered a dirt-crusted coffin into the crevice. A man poked the coffin with a shovel, chanting, “Slow-er...slow-er...,” and when the crane cable went slack the man turned to them and shouted, “You aren’t supposed to be here.”

Monica pressed her swear finger to the window, leaving the imprint in the fogged glass.

They came to the place where Emily’s casket lay, saddled with a bouquet of lilies, above a newly-dug grave collared by astroturf rugs. The sun, which had been burning through a high haze all morning, now blazed upon them and seemed to be sucking the mist of the sprinklers straight up into the sky. There were prayers from his childhood he tried to remember, but eventually he decided that it didn’t matter. He looked around at the graves of Emily’s family. Some of them were people he’d met—her older brother Wayne, her cousin Marva—and some of them he’d never heard of.

“That one died when it was my age,” said Monica, pointing to the grave of a child named *Our Dear Patty 1929–1939*. There was a cracking sound from far away and the man with the shovel screamed, “No, no, back up!”

“There’s supposed to be people here to lower the casket while we watch,” said Hurst. “I paid for them to do that.” They stood and waited, watching the sun suck the moisture off the fields of dead. After more time had passed, he said, “I don’t suppose anyone’s coming to do it.”

“Maybe,” said Monica, “if we walk backward really slowly, it’ll be the same.”
It was an odd idea, but without thinking Hurst began inching backward toward the Buick. This is absurd, he told himself, but as he watched the casket shrinking away, he felt as if he were moving for the first time in months, as though the gears of the world had started again. Their heels crunched backward through the grass and he felt himself floating away from her. Monica brought her hand to her brow, saluting the dead, humming a dim version of taps. He cuffed her gently on the side of the head. She kept humming. They drifted back.

They drove west. Sudden pioneers, exploring how far away an hour on the gas pedal could get them. The baked landscape of Wyoming turned greener as stands of pine forest populated the hills more and more fully, until the arid tumbleweed plains had been left behind, and a robust forest walled them in on both sides. The highway relented to a local road channeling them into the east entrance of Yellowstone. As Hurst handed money to the ranger, Monica announced, “He’s stealing me!”

The ranger looked bored. “Exercise caution everywhere,” he said in a monotone. “And don’t harass the wildlife.”

They drove on, into the center of the park. Green pools steamed into the atmosphere, reeking clouds of sulfur rose like the menacing flags of untended fires. The seams of the earth gaped open. Hurst could feel his heartbeat slowing before the volatile grandeur of things. They pulled over to where a single buffalo grazed in a field of tall grass. The animal walked in circles, bristling its hide at some unseen distraction.

A man in a khaki outfit snapped photos by the dozen from a tripod set up along the shoulder. “You rarely get to see them like this,” the photographer said in an Australian accent.

Monica smoothed her uniform against her hips and stepped off the shoulder into the field.

The photographer stopped taking pictures. “Stay back,” he warned her. “It’s something to be feared.”
The buffalo swung its head through the grass. One of its horns hung with a purple beaded necklace. The animal blinked and snorted at the string of beads bumping against the side of its face.

"Stay back," repeated the Australian. "When they're alone like that, it means they've lost control of themselves."

They watched her step up onto a flat rock a few yards short of the buffalo. The girl didn't look at all afraid as she stood hovering above the grasses, watching, waiting to be noticed. When it finally saw her, it raised its massive head and squared itself to her, grazing a few steps closer.

Hurst could feel the photographer's eyes urging him. "Come back, Monica," he called in a weak, choked voice. What would it be like to drive back to Carson and tell the mother that the girl had been gored to death? What an awful thing to have to say, to have to be told. There were sad connections in the possibilities for that moment, and no relief in any of it.

"Come back here." His voice was clear now, insistent. "Come back here right now."

She stepped to the rock's edge, lifting her back leg for balance, leaning into the space between. "You look ridiculous," she said, and lifted the string of beads off its horn.
Sometimes forest is machine.
It is mostly fuel. It breaks
vows of poverty
and silence. So the forest is
a kind of robot nun,
a flying nun, in that it reaches
far destinations.
One fir sprouting offshore rock
is forest. I'm part forest
and will be even sighing grody
in that expensive, hoary
silence powering down the saw.
This year I am supposed to
be looking inward,
but I only see more forest,
and above its darling production,
a hawk soaring. And if I,
who have never been
at sea, but am born adrift
on hard red winter wheat
hibernate with field mouse under
snow, I, then, can
say this morning is a new
corruption, dividing crow
from its pinetop peerage, from shadow
where it gathers wing
to leave thoroughly: it is
corrupt January,
humidity above turned wisp
and unblinking peak
of San Jacinto just a bigger
crow, or man who has
waited long enough to know.
Cops at the food mart have a criteria for spontaneity, like desert winds that bake the white suit of the eucalyptus. I look forward to hearing more about that bird you spoke of. It is like reading your poems. Mariachis play blue orange lights silhouetting dancers. The moon comes up, the heart trills fullness until I see it's a day shy. Sometimes my meaning is a day shy. Or my understanding is not fully round. Not only is moon just the word we overuse in tonight's courtroom for the adieu that travels with us, it is also not the right word at midnight for what rises, for what entertains the idea of another light. It's like we are fishing and the thing steps out of the water, shakes our hands. I am the moon, it says, and you counter it is far from being the moon. From the spare motel where we celebrate, a toast is raised for anything lunar on the balcony that shivers and flies off.
How the Moon Stays Sulphur in Its Sloughing

Midnight’s sleuth’s asleep
beside the cellphone, closed,
Orion shining down his spinning.
Forward-nosed,
any small being slings in,
loving the slow wall’s silent teamwork
and indifferent encumbrance.

The hand is ambit to the idea,
knife, vise, saw, sander, brush,
and, afterward, a game in the yard,
sweet drink, sandwich on rough bread.
Some music makes sense at night only,
and my car stereo down the mountain
suggests a loneliness narrative.

Tonight, the crewel silhouette
of the chain fence rises from the brush.
The hill’s gone dark
except this spine of property.
A postman on Sunday unfolds his chair
at the lake, watches for the rumored eagle,
froth of beer in his moustache.

I skid toward you, disappear behind clouds,
grow dark and blue, bloom along highway,
bruise where you stamped me.
I hear the fishing boats in your voice.
The wind through your uncle’s wheat field
where walking we found the dead wolf
is what I see when I kiss down belly to thigh.
I know the sky is not my mother. It is not even sky. But when I say it rains, I think of a human in it, who wants love. I take your mail, read rivals into the black phone. They said they couldn’t. I knew that. Said I’d turn back. I knew that too.

Forget cinema. Your assembled makeup on the marble counter of your father’s farmhouse bathroom, taken from the travel bag; I watch you in the mirror from the big chair in the living room, this process, this craft, that I have no analogy for in my life unless it is this.

It has two faces. What is hidden within. Please, think differently. We tend to refocus on similar things. It’s one of the services night can perform. It goes through you; there are worse ways. It is the front door.
Today at the Department of Calamitous Events Mr. Isringhausen calls us into the large conference room to give us our new assignment. As he speaks, Jandy raises a pierced eyebrow and Ferdinand sketches a constellation of stars on his arm in blue ink. Mr. Isringhausen says the same inspirational droll he says at every weekly assignment meeting. Around the room heads bob and eyes roll until he gets to the heart of the briefing and tells us what horrific crimes we are to imagine.

When I started at the DoCE some three years ago, I wrote until my hand cramped and the hollow of my elbow ached just to capture every word the boss said. Now, as he tells us we have a special assignment and that Friday's post-work family picnic has been cancelled so we can concentrate, I let my eyes drift until he says my name and my pupils reset on his thick plastic glasses staring right at me.

"Mr. Ubert. You already have this one figured out?"

"No, sir," I say.

"I didn’t think so," he says as he takes a drink of coffee from his Boise State Alumni coffee mug. "The assignment is kidnapping. There’s a lot of money in child endangerment. Get to it people. I want crimes I haven’t already read about."

I shuffle out behind Tony and Phyllis who give me a hard time about being singled-out. Last year, before Ophelia was born, when I was one misstep away from being fired, I would have gone back to my cubicle and tossed my things in a Hy-Vee bag.

But since I won an award, my job is safe.

On the day Mr. Isringhausen presented me with an award for my work on carjackings, my little girl turned two, and so I had Debbie take a picture of us together in front of the refrigerator. In the picture, shy little Ophelia is curled up in my right arm, and in my left hand the text of the certificate can just be read: In recognition of Kevin Ubert’s work to remedy the threat of rear-entry/hatchback automobile thefts in crowded suburban shopping centers which the Department of Calamitous Events estimates will save innumerable lives. All of the boilerplate is raspberry-colored, but where Mr. Isringhausen had to fill in the particulars, the text is in the green
marker he carries in his breast pocket. The certificate ends up on my desk next to the picture of Ophelia and I. Debbie takes a great picture, and in it I am beaming. I had taken off my jacket and my blue work shirt in the picture, and below little Ophelia’s sleeping head, peaking out underneath my white undershirt, is the tattoo I got in prison. This detail made me hesitate before sticking it with pins into the cubicle’s fabric, but it’s no big deal here.

Everybody in the Department of Calamitous events has been incarcerated except for Mr. Isringhausen. All the same, I don’t like to wear short sleeves that show off my tattoos like Tony or break open cigarettes and chew the tobacco like Henry or use a red bandana as a handkerchief like Ferdinand does. When everyone else shares stories about it over vending-machine tuna salad sandwiches in the break room, I smile, pretend my mouth is full, or at most shake my head when Tony asks if I’ve ever been drunk off mouthwash.

“What were you in for?” Phyllis asks me the day after the meeting about kidnapping. Phyllis is Home Crimes/Pet Endangerment Supervisor and has been here longer than anyone except Mr. Isringhausen. She’s heading up the project on kidnapping this week and everyone knows she’ll probably have the idea that gets passed on. Phyllis was in prison for stealing other people’s dogs. When they caught her, she had thirty-four dogs living in her basement. Everyone knows that.

“Oh, Phyllis,” I say and get up and slide quarters into the vending machine.

“Extortion?” she guesses. Phyllis is a small woman, but her eyes are shifty and her arms have the equine tautness of someone who lifted a lot of weights without eating a lot of protein.

“No,” I say and hit the button for a Tab. “I try to forget.”

“Drug running? No, wait, something sexual?”

We aren’t alone in the break room when she asks. It’s a gigantic, unimaginably big company, and we share the thirteenth floor with the Department of Accounting, which they are thinking of renaming the Department of Internal Finances because they just opened up a Department of Accounting for Tragedy and there has been some confusion. When she says the ‘x’ in sexual, before the word is even complete, two black-suited men with pencils behind their ears turn to look at me. Phyllis gives them the stare she surely learned in the prison
yard, and they leave before I even grab my Tab resting in the bin.

"I'll find out somehow, Ubert," she says.

Of course, Mr. Isringhausen has seen the tattoo, has seen me at my lowest state and knows the truth of my crime. He's kind enough never to mention seeing any of us behind bars even though he met us all underneath bright overhead lighting in slick orange jumpsuits with long hair and piercings and glowers. Mr. Isringhausen found us by looking over prison files, and had he been less serious, he might have thought of it like the premise for some kind of movie or TV show. But Mr. Isringhausen is serious, and we aren't like those ex-con soldiers from that old movie. We are not an elite unit of loose cannons from the wrong side of the law—at least not anymore. We are a department. We finished fourth at the company olympics they held at the park last spring. The plaque hangs on the wall next to a Girl Scout calendar Jandy's daughter sold to me.

We aren't a dream team of criminals, we are people who have Girl Scout calendars.

If I ever felt differently, the feeling went away the day Mr. Isringhausen stepped into the visitor's room in the medium-security wing and slid my file in front of me. There was a mug shot—me with an ear stud and a ponytail from the day of my arrest—paper-clipped to the top and all of my psych reports underneath it.

"What do you want?" I asked him.

"You've been selected for a special job," he said.

"What job?"

"We'll get to that," he said. He had his buzzed hair, black glasses, a short-sleeve button up and a black tie that I have seen every weekday since. I even picture him with the green pen in his shirt pocket, but I may just be projecting that memory back. Mr. Isringhausen looked around at the weeping wives and their children who chased each other around the mess of broken up lawn furniture. We both rocked a little in our chairs on the uneven cement. A guard twirled a club by the only exit.

"So who are you?"

He told me his name and added, "I work for TyFORE, son. And, if you'd like to, you do too."

A paper-clipped copy of my sins before me, I asked, "Why me?"
“Look over those pages, Mr. Ubert,” he said. “You are a spectacularly bad criminal. But you’re creative. That’s what we’re looking for at the Department of Calamitous Events.”

TyFORE was founded by Tyson Montgomery and Janet Foreman and was more or less an insurance company, though their interests were vast. One very small part of that was the DoCE, which Mr. Isringhausen has run since its inception some five years ago. It is a simple but vital department to TyFORE and in many ways the backbone, a delusion I grew to share with Mr. Isringhausen. All the Department of Calamitous Events does, and why convicts were essential to its turnings, is think up The Three Cs, which is to say the cataclysmic, catastrophic, and criminal. Mr. Isringhausen even had The Three Cs needle-pointed into a wall hanging for his office. The ideas then go to the Department of Defensive Action (which develops new safeguards against our scenarios to sell to manufacturers), the Department of Misfortunate Management (which sells insurance to hedge equity against our manufactured risks), and finally the Department of Proactive Entanglement (which develops briefs and pro formas about the offensive potential of our crimes to foreign governments and even TyFORE itself).

At least that’s how Mr. Isringhausen explained it to me, but I may have missed something because all I could think about was ending my incarceration after three years, four months, and five days. The job, I figured, would make a nice capstone to my misguided and felonious juvenilia.

I spent that night in my cell and, in the morning, left on work-release, which started with a haircut, a starched shirt, and a middle cubicle on the thirty-fifth floor of the TyFORE Building. On my desk there was a black stapler, a ruler, a wire mesh pen holder, four red pens, three blue pens, and an old IBM. I shadowed Ferdinand the first day. He was trying to talk about prison—what was my crime, which wing, did I know, etc. I politely declined to answer.

That night I slept at my old house. I had told Debbie—my wife since I was 18—not to wait for me while I was in jail, but she did anyway. She fried a large kielbasa and drank a beer (which I wasn’t allowed). As I went to sleep next to her, I wondered when I would leave her. Before I could, she was pregnant.

The jobs came in red folders labeled with some general area of
crime, like “convenience store robbery,” and we were expected to come up with a previously unknown or unlikely scenario for a carjacking that would be marketable and pitch it to Mr. Isringhausen at the Monday morning meeting. Mr. Isringhausen almost had my parole revoked three or four times that first month.

“What about if some Ukrainian guy...,” I started the first time I went up.

“That’s offensive,” Ferdinand said. “We don’t say races here, fresh meat.”

“It’s more of an ethnicity,” Henry offered.

“I’m sorry, I was just trying to visualize,” I stammered.

“Quiet, Ferdinand,” Mr. Isringhausen said. “We can’t sell ‘Some Ukrainian Guy’ insurance, Mr. Ubert, so get to it.”

“Well, what about if some guy, of, you know, any race, maybe even a woman,” I said. “What if a person, you know, this robber cat, decides the smart money isn’t even in dealing with the clerk, so instead he tries to make off with like, you know, the soda machine to hock on the black market.”

Mr. Isringhausen just shook his head and called on Phyllis whose proposed crime involved a robber spending the night inside an ice cream cooler until a lone clerk went out for a smoke break, at which point the thief locked him or her out of the store and had their way with the place. It ended up getting sent on to the other departments, and, so she claims, changed how every convenience store in America is locked.

“Is that what you would do?” Mr. Isringhausen asked me after the meeting.

“Oh, I don’t know, sir,” I said. “Maybe.”

“No wonder you were in prison,” he said.

And I would have too. Every stupid, uninsurable idea I had during my first ten months I would have done in a second. I was a criminal. A bad one.

And then my daughter was born. Little Ophelia turned it around for me.

On the night of her birth, I was working late in the office, drinking coffee until my hands shook, and the only other person on the floor, some woman from the Department of Biological Assets who quit a few months later, asked me if I was okay for the fourth or fifth time
I walked by her desk to go to the bathroom. My wife had become unbearable, and I had taken to working late to stay away from her more than to save my job. When the phone call came, I was smoking a Kool underneath the awning in the company-designated smoking yard. It was a rainy night, and there wasn’t a moon or any stars, just purple clouds and skinny drops of rain. When I came back inside, the red light was flashing on my phone, and I hit a complicated series of numbers I kept on a Post-It to listen to the message she’d left me from the back of the cab on the way to the hospital. Twelve hours later, I stepped outside for another cigarette and all of the clouds were gone. It was the morning. I was a father. My wife named her Ophelia over my suggestion of Jane.

Now at my job I imagine a darkness. I imagine how I was on the night when my daughter was born, outside where there weren’t any lights except for the tip of my cigarette, and I fill up the darkness with horrible things. I close my eyes and see criminals, sick, desperate criminals with wild eyes, coming for everything I love. I think about all the ways they might hurt my Ophelia, write them down on paper, and cash a paycheck.

On Wednesday, I spend the day staring at my computer, reading about kidnapping and playing Minesweeper. Usually on assignments like this, I avoid background research, lest it corrupt my creativity, but today I find myself reluctant to think about my Ophelia and what dangers may await her. Instead I read about the poor fates of the world’s daughters and sons. I find even that’s too much, so I take frequent breaks to get coffee and to talk to Diana, a secretary for the executives on the fifty-fourth floor, about her divorce. When I head down to the corporate cafeteria for a plate of tuna casserole at noon, I still haven’t started. The casserole is covered in sour cream potato chips. I eat a whole plate and have seconds because I don’t know what else to do with the full hour I have for lunch. Some of the other guys from the DoCE are going out to smoke. I go with them and have a cigarette, a non-menthol American Spirit, for the first time since Ophelia was born.

“How are you guys doing on the kidnapping assignment?” I ask.

Henry and Ferdinand look at me then each other. No one talks about the assignments. Everyone is paranoid, and maybe because we’re all ex-cons used to looking out for ourselves, no one socializes outside of work.

Outside there are only a few other TyFORE employees. Two women in grey suits are talking about dog training. Three men in grey suits are farther away, one is practicing golf swings as the other two smoke and watch. Occasionally they eye us nervously. Everyone knows which department we work in even if Henry didn’t pinch his cigarette as if it were a joint and Ferdinand didn’t spit on the ground through the gap in his teeth.

“Do any of the assignments ever make you guys feel, I don’t know, anxious?” I ask.

Henry and Ferdinand share an acknowledgment of my weakness. “It’s just a job, yo,” Henry says.

I spend the afternoon as I spent the morning except now my throat burns. I can smell the smoke inside me, as if it’s in my skin. Everyone stares at me when I get coffee.

“You okay, Ubert?” Jandy asks me as we shuffle out at five. “I hear you’re cracking up.” “I’m fine,” I say.

I ride the train to the suburbs and drive to the Hy-Vee near our house. Debbie left a message to remind me to pick up milk and bread. She also asked for a 1750 of vodka, but I decide not to get that. I walk quickly to the back of the store and grab a gallon of skim from the cooler and head to the express checkout lane. Like most things in our neighborhood, it’s a brand new store and everything is cleaner here than in our home, which is the opposite of how I want to know the world.

“Hey, Ubert.”

I turn and see Phyllis standing third in the line next to mine pushing a cart full of Dewar’s, hair dye, ramen noodles, and four different kinds of meat.

“Hi, Phyllis,” I say.

“Let me take another guess, Ubert,” she says. “You were in prison for a crime of passion. Some kind of sexual assault?”

It’s as if all the excited beeps, flashing red lights, and calls over the intercom come to a stop when she says it, and suddenly everyone’s eyes are on me wondering if the guy in the grey suit with the skim milk
might take a hostage or drive away in the Lexus they left running with their children buckled in the back. I smile like it’s a joke.

“Funny, Phyllis,” I say.

“Good one,” I say.

Nobody is buying it.

I go home to my yellow split-level and nod hello to my wife as I drop the groceries off on the kitchen table. When I check on Ophelia, she has her dolls set up on one side of a green plastic table while she sits on the other and mumbles some kind of kid pidgin as she shakes them to indicate talking.

“What are you doing, honey?” I ask her. “Are you having a tea party?”

“I’m playing bar,” she says. “Mommy taught me.”

Ophelia nods her blond curls as a red-haired Skipper doll mumbles her problems into a mug.

After Ophelia is asleep, Debbie and I fight before she slams the door and goes to a real bar with wood instead of juice and her old friends instead of Skipper dolls. Ophelia doesn’t wake up, but if she did I would tell her that Mommy and I have known each other for a long time, much longer than she’s been alive or I’ve gone to work everyday, and sometimes Mommy thinks about how things used to be and wants to sell the Volvo and stay up really late with our old friends. Or maybe I would just tell her that she is safe and Mommy is safe and that there is nothing to worry about in this world.

I would tuck her in and say, “Sweet dreams, Princess.”

Debbie still isn’t back when I wake up in the morning. I call the sitter and wait for her to arrive before I drive to the train station.

It’s Thursday, and I do nothing all day. I put on headphones and play black metal, the only vice I’ve kept from my time as a ne’er-do-well. I close my eyes, daring myself to imagine Ophelia surrounded by a choking darkness. When I see her chubby face with a doll clutched to her chest, I have to open my eyes again before a crime is perpetrated.

I look at the picture of me holding my daughter and my award to make myself feel better until the stupid grin I have in the picture becomes the stupid grin I wear. Jandy walks by just to tell me that she has the perfect crime so I can stop worrying about it. Jandy does this every week. Even the week when Mr. Isringhausen and one of the
men from the fifty-fourth floor presented me with the certificate. Jandy came by and told me that her idea for a rear-entry carjacking had been perfect and that I must have bribed someone. A month later, Mr. Isringhausen assigned us interoffice crime. I submitted Jandy’s idea of employees bribing their bosses. It didn’t win an award or anything, but the Department of Corporate Assurance and Insurance now sells a policy that protects against tainted awards and promotions.

When I get home, my wife and I fight again while Ophelia watches her educational DVDs in the living room. At first I don’t even know what we’re fighting about, and I wonder if Debbie does. Soon we are screaming at each other and calling each other names. In moments where we stop, nearly panting and trying to think up new ways to hurt each other, I can hear a song about personal hygiene coming through the archway into the kitchen. But then we are yelling again until I see Ophelia standing by the refrigerator. She has a blank look on her face and is clutching her doll to her chest like in the darkness I imagine.

“Mommy and I are just talking, Princess,” I say. “Isn’t that right, Mommy?”

“Don’t you fucking call me ‘Mommy,’ Kevin,” Debbie says. “Don’t you fucking talk to me.”

I don’t even look at my wife. Ophelia is starting to cry when I reach out for her hand and walk her to her pink room and read a child’s version of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* to her until she falls asleep. For her last birthday, I bought her a whole set of condensed classics that I read to her even though she’s too young to really understand everything. I want her to be smarter than her father. We’ve finished *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Sound and the Fury* so far.

“Sweet dreams, Princess,” I say before I kiss her goodnight.

Downstairs, my wife is gone.

I can’t sleep. The meeting is tomorrow, and I don’t have any good ideas on kidnapping to present. When I try to picture Ophelia in the darkness, she not only clutches her doll, she is crying and backing away from me in my own thoughts. I try to think about how I would kidnap a child if I were still a criminal. I would want the parents to be gone. I would probably try to lure the kid with candy or something. I would take them far away and send a ransom note. I would do everything that people do on television reruns. Trying to get in the right frame of mind, I think of prison and rub my tattoo. I throw a
couple of imaginary punches and think of the guards I wanted to hit and try to make myself want to hit them still.

Then I think about terrorists. Would terrorists kidnap? Wouldn’t terrorists do anything? Probably. Of course, terrorists are almost always off limits for the DoCE these days because of the entire year where all anyone came up with were terrorism scenarios. This was before I worked there, but I heard about it when I pitched the idea of a terrorist throwing a grenade on a frozen pond where kids skate. The assignment was public park safety.

"Not bad, Mr. Ubert," Mr. Isringhausen said. "Lose the terrorist hook and work up a proposal."

I was confused. "Who else would do that?" I asked.

Everyone else in the room laughed.

"Forget the terrorists, man," Henry said. "Played-out phillie."

"Over," Jandy said. "So over."

"Look, Mr. Ubert," Mr. Isringhausen said. "We made a lot of money selling terrorism scenarios, but nobody’s buying anymore. We gotta shoot where they’re flying."

I can’t get terrorism out of my head until I finally drift off.

Ophelia is asleep when I leave the house. My wife is curled up on the couch in a quilt her mother made. I don’t quite wake up until my third cup of coffee, which I sip while I walk to the meeting. Everyone around the table looks more dangerous than they did the day before with their sleeves rolled up and their tattoos showing. We’re in a grey-tone conference room with inspirational posters on the wall and everyone has their prison-yard eyes on. Mr. Isringhausen is talking about how the company picnic has been rescheduled already when I have to excuse myself to go the restroom and refill my coffee mug. When I get back, Phyllis is pitching an idea where someone carjacks a school bus or daycare van full of kids.

"You know," she says. "Like maximizing kidnapping efficiency."

"Interesting," Mr. Isringhausen says. "Keep bouncing ideas around and see what sticks. Talk to that guy with the limp who deals with automobile insurance and the lady from the Department of Parental Reconnaissance. I’m picturing insurance for the schools and daycares and maybe some kind of tracking device for all cars with kids in them."

Phyllis beams and flashes a gang sign, at me probably jokingly. No one
else seems to have anything. Ferdinand points out that Jandy's perfect idea about a kidnapper dressing up like a popular children's character is from a television show that was on last week. Ferdinand's own idea about playground equipment that could be used to trap children is decided to most likely result in death. Mr. Isringhausen tables it until we get an assignment more explicitly about child fatalities.

"Mr. Ubert," he finally says. "You should have a good one here. Wow me."

I have nothing. So I drop my pen and pick it up off of the white carpet to buy time. That's when it comes to me. I see it clearly, as if the darkness is around me without having to imagine it, as if I have always lived in the black.

"Nothing complicated," I say. My hands are nearly shaking. I want to run home that instant. "A parent kidnaps his or her own child and doesn't ask for ransom. Just wants the kid, right? Maybe to, like, punish or get back at the other parent. Maybe they just hate the other parent. We've been thinking about the parents as one buyer here, but what if we start selling to both parents?"

"You want us to insure one parent against another?" Mr. Isringhausen asks.

"No," I say. "Both parents against each other. Lots of parents out there."

Mr. Isringhausen slaps the table and says, "It's gold, Kevin!"

Everyone stares as I leave the conference room. I tell a woman at the Department of Biological Assets that I'm taking the rest of the afternoon off as a personal day and run to the nearest train line. I squeeze my hands together and touch my hair as I ride home. Ophelia, Ophelia, I think. Ophelia, Ophelia. The trip feels like an eternity. When I finally get in my car, I nearly run into an old woman crossing the parking lot.

I find Ophelia alone with her dolls and listening to one of her Beethoven for Kids CDs in the living room.

"Where's Mommy?" I ask.

Ophelia shrugs.

"Let's go get ice cream, sweetheart," I say. "We'll get sprinkles."

Ophelia jumps into my arms. We share a long hug before I lead her by the hand to the car. Will she notice when we drive past the ice cream stand? We are driving through darkness.
Awake to the breaking of the lion’s teeth, the hard billet, and the drake.
Begin not with fire but with breath.

The buildings open their pores.
The sheets tangle cool. Gone
are the smells of wool and liquor,
snowed escapes. Lunacy can be
forgiven. Here is the springbok’s
respite from the lion; fields full
of wind; and the sound of waterfall,
which so recently menaced. Gulls
spin lazy. Eyes open can light upon
other eyes. Here is the forgive,
the glance, the much-loud lusting.
It sounded, when she sang, like the heavens had opened and a host of heavenly elephants was trumpeting.

Awful and beautiful.

She was in my shower—in my shower—singing, and I was spreading peanut butter on eight pieces of bread to make four sandwiches (originally intended as peanut butter and jam sandwiches but becoming, with the discovery of less than a lot of jam, peanut butter and peanut butter sandwiches, dry but honest), which were meant for lunch. And she was singing a pop song that reminded me of steel wool.

And then she appeared in my kitchen—she who I had never dreamed would spend a night or day with me—her hair wrapped in a towel. She wore my shirt and my too-big pants rolled down at the waist and up at the cuffs. She sat at the table and bit into one sandwich, and before I could apologize for the lack of jam or jelly, she said, “Peanut butter. My fave.”

“Really?”

“It’s as if you knew.”

There was luck going on in my life that day and I thought for a moment about calling a bookie. But I didn’t. That would have been the wrong kind of luck. I was happy with the kind of luck that allowed me to sit in my kitchen and look into the eyes of this woman as she told me about her political convictions. That kind of luck will keep going and going. Forever, one’s tempted to say.

As a dessert of sorts, I pulled grapes from the fridge. She cracked some between her front teeth and, smiling, leaned forward to say right next to my ear, “Cold grapes are so taut.”
In the Kitchen: Two

He held a small tin of condensed milk over a mug and the milk—cold and thick—hesitated on the rim, swelling until it ran casually, a ribbon in slow motion. He held it for two minutes and looked up and laughed shortly, as if saying, *I'm sorry this is taking so long, but you'll soon have your coffee, and I'm sorry I haven't been talking while waiting for the milk to pour. I'm not good at filling up the empty spaces, I never know what to ask when a woman is standing near me—like you are, going from one leg to the other, eyes looking down at your feet, hands clasped behind your back—as if waiting for me to do something. What am I supposed to do?*

Then he laughed again, less nervously this time. Silly, to worry about a couple moments of silence. A moment of silence can be seen as so many things: contemplation calmness cogitation. Silence indicates comfort: nervous people always chatter to cover themselves. Silence can mean he's overcome with passion. Or, if nothing else, he's focused on the coffee.

Unfortunately for him, the woman noticed the laugh and conjectured, correctly, that he was nervous around her. She also conjectured, incorrectly, that he would always be nervous around her. In that moment—although she won't know it until two weeks later when she throws flowers at him—she made a decision: she can't bear one of those nervous types. Two weeks later, the seed planted with a silence and a nervous laugh will bloom and the nascent couple will be no longer. *Leave me alone,* she'll say.

Which is fine in the long-run, hurt feelings and feelings of wasted time aside. The dispersuasion of imperfectly matched couples makes the world better for all. In fact, the only one who is disappointed, ultimately, is the woman. Two years later, when she is hit by a milk-truck, when it would be helpful to have a med student around, he will be drinking coffee with another woman. A woman who finds nervous pauses endearing, sweet.
In the Kitchen: Three

Three things that can happen in the kitchen

I.
Your lover has made the sweetest meal thinkable for you. It is laid out before you on the kitchen table (you have no dining-room table to speak of) like a sacrifice to Bacchus; your lover stands in the corner surveying you as you survey the feast; proud, she is proud. The table contains all the foods you love more than other foods you also love but love less; at least nine courses worth; antipastas, salads, risotto, stews made with coconut milk and seafood, roasted game, tarts and cakes, berries and other fruit. None of it fits together, but everything looks individually delicious. It is more food than two people can eat; it is decadent, demonstrative, superlative. It is certainly not reasonable.

You want a bite of everything. But before you can take a place at the table, a figure—man? woman? you can’t tell because the figure wears a mask and has fast feet—jumps into the house through the kitchen window. The figure spots the kitchen table and with preternatural vehemence tips it. Then, having tipped the table, the figure runs out of the kitchen, across the threshold of the house and into oblivion.

And you watch in horror as the food—the lush and tender—falls to the floor and is quickly eaten by the mice who live in the corners. A pot-bellied pig joins in and soon all the delicious food is gone. Who would do this?

II.
Again, there is a feast before you. Again, your lover stands in the corner, proud. It could be the same feast, except there is no masked figure, nothing to disrupt your feeding on savory treats.

You partake. Splendid. Everything splendid. The best—the splendidest—is the meat pie in the center of the table. It is moist and rich and you make out the taste of sage and rosemary and maybe a
touch of cumin. You eat one piece quickly and then you eat another piece. You help yourself to a third. Why is this so good? you ask your lover. What’s in here?

Your son, she says.

You vomit, of course. Over and over. Your stomach presses against the back of your throat. You vomit in horror at this reincarnation of Tantalus sitting across from you.

And then you vomit because of yourself. Because you really love the pie; it is delicious. You desire little more than one more bite. The one bite you cannot have. You cry with desire and some sadness.

III.

Another feast. No boy-pie this time. You pour a last glass of wine and lean back and smile at the woman you love. The food has been savory scrumptious sensuous good. The woman you love smiles back and then she begins to say unexpected things—

_Hate_, she says. _I rarely use the word hate. Too strong. I use other words: detest, abhor, scorn, reject, dislike._ But you? she says. _You I hate._

—and by saying unexpected things she tears out your heart and your lungs and other attached internal organs, such as your intestines.

_Truly and swellingly. I hate you more than I’ve ever hated anyone. I hate you like the snake hates the mongoose. I have unbearable levels of hate for you. This dinner, this is my goodbye. I owe you something; even though I hate you, I admit you’ve done things for which I’m grateful. But I plan never to see you again. I have fulfilled my obligations. If I ever see you again I’ll spit in your eye. I’ll kick you in the ear. I will make you wish I was blind and that I hadn’t seen you. Even if I was blind I’d sense you and hit you with my stick. I’d sic my seeing-eye dog on you. I’d keep one of your shirts and train her to know your smell...she alone would hate you more than I, because she was raised hating you. You and I, man, we’re finished._

You are silenced. After this moment and for every one of your remaining years, you will never be sure of anything. You will remember how much you loved her and how sure you were that she loved you. You were certain you were perfect for each other. Your horoscopes had matched.
Strange Litany

Two monarchs smashed together on the petal fluttering like that. Summer’s terror almost over, the long days, the families by themselves, worlds so intact it hurts not to break them. And also that we have been guilty of such happiness, guilty in the sense we wanted more of it as soon as it came.

*

Civilization: a spot on the map. Road trip: whether to go to the battlefield where they won only to lose the next day or the one where they lost for good. Falling asleep: it can’t be I’ve written all these beautiful things about you and you haven’t understood a single one! World: we made it round to put a mirror the shape of a circle between our halves.
I wanted to know there was a design.
Not a designer, I was perfectly comfortable without the maker micromanaging the form.
Liked it better that way.
Not a designer, a design.
Also a way to alight upon it in the mind.
I wanted to know that too.
When I said that to you.
you looked at me like I was someone else.

There's the first monarch, holding forth.
Nurturing the truth by sitting on it until it goes away.

If it's true about humility, that it's wanting to hold forth without exerting force I want it anyway, want it worse than a case of liquor made from the color of the wing of the monarch.
No fair for the dark oak
to claim the butterfly
when the butterfly
wants the lavender. No fair
for you, distance
to claim sight because the rising
light places the hill
that was once close in the middle
distance. No fair
for another body
to claim me partially,
head of a man and body of a horse,
leaving me so anxious
in a state of change
I fear I’ll never want
to breed or make
a thing except myself.

Look at them! Both of them!
Navigating the garden
like it has something to do with joy,
purposeless
except for themselves.
I can’t believe this! Look at one
flattening herself into a plane
of black, charactering
a line across the bloom.
Yes that’s a hunger
not a joy, but there are those
for whom hunger leads
to virtuosity.
They chase us into woods. We call them gods.
Strange Litany

Ask me anything. I'll never say
I don't want to talk.
This isn't to say
there's no principle of selection.
I exclude what I like.

Now you ask about the soul.
Monarch with a hole
in the northwest corner
of its wing, a tatter
in the fabric, flying like that.
I should have expected it.
But the question: do you think
your soul is female? I could
never have expected, being
female, unused to you
or anyone else
using my name
to call me what I am.

End of summer, look how
I've turned you
into what I want. Beginning
of fall, first angular horizons,
look at the leaves of the aspens,
their backsides ready for it.
What turns around makes everything
a curtain on a stage
about to open up.

Queasy with sleepiness, right
before lunch, I watched
the monarch which had gone
to twice its size expand
its wings slower than it ever had.

I've a friend who says
the lamas of Tibet
find it comical
how much we hate ourselves.
I'd like to shift
from this shape
not out of hate but from delight.

But I'm not answering
any more questions.

I think you know, from what my legs did
and from the cry I made
how much I'd like
to become something else.

Ask me that way from here on out.
Strange Litany

Monarch you make
your orange assent to death.
How many times
should I look at you and should
I change my life?
And how much dexterity
can you really teach me?
Does your courage
even map onto these
worldly obligations
to friends, my job, desire
for some affection in the late
hours of the evening, etc.?

I can’t put myself ever
in your head but when I lie
on your wing, my left eye
lets my right dart forward
as yours can do.

Don’t ask something
with a lifespan
how to change your life.
Ask something you can’t
believe ever lived.
One day, my mother settled on the couch and stayed. That day, what, a while back, she came home looking terrified with some of her things in a shopping bag.

“You’re good as new,” I said and put a pile of magazines on the coffee table and got two glasses of water from the kitchen. It began to rain. I removed my golf cap and put that on a chair next to the picture of my father.

“Dad called,” she said. “Guess what?”

“What?”

“He’s on his way back, too.”

My father got his diagnosis the same time as my mother. I wanted to be positive so I said, “Maybe.”

“He said, ‘Four p.m. sharp,’” she said. “But he wants me on the couch.” She rearranged the pillows to look like my dad was lying next to her.

I tried to describe to my mother the confusion that set in when I couldn’t remember where my dad said he was going. Then I got on the couch, opposite my mother and next to the pillow that was supposed to be my father.

It was as if this was what I was supposed to do. We spent days on end. When the magazines ran out, we read newspaper flyers for pork-and-bean specials and macaroni-and-cheese dinners. We scanned furniture sale inserts. During all this, my mother joined a book club, and when the books arrived, we sat on the couch traveling to distant cities and foreign shores. “Who wants to leave the couch?” my mother would ask.

“I don’t,” I’d answer.

We made that talk to lighten things.

And when it got old, we discussed whether or not it was a good idea to get the macaroni-and-cheese dinners or the pork-and-bean specials. Of course, we weren’t serious because it would mean one of
us would have to get off the couch and go out. So it was mainly talk.
No more.

Most of the time, we read, not getting much out of it, just doing it
to do something.

However, I did recall one story about a husband who had to spend
his last days on earth stuck in an elevator with his wife.

My mother thought she’d never survive if that were the case, and
anyway, she said she thought the story was made up. Nothing like that
could happen, she argued. “They have a phone. You can call out.”

I told her it was a story and the author was getting at something on
a different level, but my mother said she wasn’t interested in “different
levels” and that was the end of that. No matter. I kept the book
nearby on the coffee table that was now cluttered with phone numbers,
mostly for restaurants that did take-out.

In the morning, like clockwork, the newspaper arrived. I read the
comics first, the obituary page second, and then ads for this and that.
If there were any specials that could be delivered, my mother was the
one to spot them. She also read, but in a different way—the editorial
page first, the weather second, then sports. My mother liked to tell me
what the weather was in different cities, like we were there on vacation,
and she would kid and say, “Well since it’s only going to get up to
twenty, we better bundle up.”

“Guess so,” I’d say back. “Better stay in and play the radio.”

“Go to it.”

And I did because I was the one in charge of the radio. My mother
was not moving from the couch, as she would argue whenever I brought
it up. So I stopped bringing it up, got off the couch and turned it on.

We were going to get the works, the weather announcer reported—
big winds, power outages, and floods that would make Noah jealous.
With that, my mother said if anything happened to me, she would not
be able to go on. She also said she was terribly afraid that something
was going to happen, she could just feel it inside.

I didn’t like it when she said that, but then I thought, what could
happen if I stayed on the couch? So I told my mother not to worry
because I was staying right where I was.
However, at noon, I had to move. My mother decided she had to spruce up the couch. She took Lysol and sprayed underneath the sheets and then dressed the couch with new ones. All the while the radio was blaring some same old same old. My mother would listen either sitting up or lying down, but she listened as if she could figure out a way of doing something about our weather. She decided if she took a bath that might work. I didn’t argue because it got her off the couch. When she finished she returned in fresh clothes like she was going to a job interview—high heels, lipstick, the works. She told me to turn the radio off so she could sit and listen to nothing but the rain pounding the roof. We could also hear people in the apartment below talking in a foreign language.

“How do they do it?” my mother asked.

“Do what?”

“Live the way they do, so far from home.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

But she didn’t answer, just asked me to get her some water from the kitchen. So I fetched a glass and handed it to her as she sat with her legs stretched onto the coffee table. Then I sat on the other end, my legs pushed over the cushions on back.

At that point, with the wind howling and the rain pounding our windows, we began to talk, talk about her life, then mine. She said I used to cry a lot, “a world class crybaby,” she’d say. When my father wanted to leave one time after they had a big explosion over me, he left for an hour or two and returned and apologized and promised never to do that again. Then he opened the door and these delivery men from the furniture store brought in the couch. My mother grabbed my father and kissed him everywhere and muttered how she couldn’t bear to live without him. That was her favorite story and whenever she got the chance she would tell it again and again.

I made it a point to pretend that it didn’t matter.

One day a friend called who I hadn’t heard from in some time. Charlie told me his father spent all his time on a couch. For some reason, Charlie didn’t think what my mother and I were up to was so strange compared to his father. He told me when his father reached a certain
station in life, he got on the couch and wouldn’t leave. And he talked a lot about the smell of death, blowing up the enemy, the fear that stayed inside to his dying day. My friend said it was in the kitchen where his father’s knees gave out. He fell against the counter top, stayed there on the floor until his heart stopped. “I found him and thought he was better off.”

When I told my mother the story she became enraged. If my friend was a truth-teller, she said, then that would mean his father spent more time on the couch than he did serving his country. Of course, if he had a leg injury or got hurt in a car crash, that would be different. That would be understandable, my mother said. Then it would make sense if the friend’s father got his needs tended by his son, given that the father was genuinely incapacitated. But to just get on the couch and not want to get off, not even to go to the bathroom or get the mail or newspaper, that was not like anyone. At least, my mother said, we got the mail, cooked, got up to use the bathroom, did things. For a man to give up like that was unconscionable, my mother said and then warned me not to talk about the father again when my friend called. When he did call a few weeks later, I changed the subject to Elaine, a girl we both knew in high school that had recently died in an elevator.

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After a night of non-stop rain, I awoke to hear tree limbs slapping the windows and making these loud screeching noises. I also heard the radio blaring in the kitchen. From where I stood, I could see the couch and the pillow-makeshift-for-my-father covered by a blanket. My mother said she decided to make breakfast and told me to grab a chair. I did. I opened the refrigerator to get some milk. But when I looked inside, I was shocked to see there wasn’t any milk or food, only the derby hat my father used to wear.

I asked my mother what she did with the food, and she said it all went into the cereal.

In my cereal bowl were my mother’s wedding ring and a necklace my father had given her. And water.

“There’s no cereal,” I said.

And that is when she shouted I should be grateful.

I didn’t answer.
"What's the matter?" my mother asked, pouring more water into my bowl.

I pushed my hand through my hair and scratched my face. I didn't know what to say, knowing that whatever I did would get us going. So I said I wasn't hungry.

"What's the big deal, then?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. I watched her stirring her cereal. Then I left and got back on the couch.

"I don't believe you," my mother yelled from the kitchen. "How long do you plan on doing that?"

"What?" I asked.

She said a million things, but the only comment that stuck was that it was time for me to get off the couch.

"If that's what you want," I said.

"I need it all," she said.

"If that's what you need," I said.

"I'm your mother," she said. "Don't say that." Then she said, "No more breakfast. I'm through."

And that was that. I said nothing more. I looked at the couch and my mother getting on. She grabbed my pillows and tossed them into the middle of the room. I went over and arranged them on the floor. Then I got one of the books from the coffee table, the one about the guy in the elevator, and started reading. My mother began to cry, which was my cue to back off and say, "Mom, you're right. I'm better off here than up there."

The next day, after the latest storm report—and it wasn't good—my mother began doing her things again: sole occupancy of the couch, cooking jewelry, and the most recent, making newspaper balls and arranging them in pairs. I thought it was her way of trying to say something to me, something about what was going on inside her. We never talked about what was going on inside me, and I figured it was now or never. So I took the chance and said, "Tell me what's wrong with me."

My mother glanced up from the magazine she was reading. "What did you say?"
“What’s wrong with me?” I said again.
“I bet you wish you were here, huh?”

It was no use. It was the same stuff. At least when my father was around my mother was too busy belittling him to spend her time jumping on me. Now, I got the full blast.

But I let it go because tears started streaking my mother’s cheeks. When I asked what was wrong she didn’t say. She grabbed one of the little balls of newspaper and squeezed. Then she pulled at her eyebrow and said, “Let’s go out. We can look at new couches. See what’s out there.”

“What about the storm?” I said.
“C’mon,” she said. “We’ll have fun. See what they’ve got.”

“Who’s going to wait for father?” I asked.
“He’ll be fine,” she said. “We’ll get some take-out for him and bring it back.”

“We could, but what about the weather?” I asked.
“We need napkins,” she said. “We need a lot of things.”
“We need a lot of things, for sure, but not now, mom.”

“Well, I’m going,” she said, “whether you want to or not. You might as well come along. Sit in the car. I’ll go in. But if you say no, no it is. For me, I’m going.”

“All right, I’ll go,” I said. “Give me some time to get ready.” But when I looked out the window, a power line was on fire in the street. And I told her.

“Afraid?” she asked.
“No,” I said.

“Good,” she smiled. “I’ll get some things placed on the table so when we get back we can eat right away.”

“Father will need to eat,” I said.
“We’ll set the table for him, too.”

So an hour later, my mother got up from the couch and made her way into the kitchen. After she set the table she looked out the window. “It’s getting bigger,” she said and brought her fingers to her lips. Then she said nothing else, simply returned to the couch, picked up a book and began to read. She grabbed one of the pillows that represented
my father and put it under her head.

Of course, I asked her what was wrong, but she continued to read, ignoring me like she did every time she changed her mind.

Then—poof, just like that—she shut her eyes. I got up and headed to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I thought about my father and how he was so proud of the day he bought the couch and how he went on and on about the deal he made to get it. Over the years, he would talk about the money he saved, the comfort, the purpose of a couch. My mother would just listen and sip her soup. I was the one that would confront my father and ask, “Why do you talk so much about a couch?” My father liked that question. He told my mother, who told me one day when she was lying on the couch. He also said his only regret was he didn’t buy other things that he could have gotten for a song.

Why I was thinking about all that, I don’t know. Maybe I was preparing to say something so that my mother could understand I accepted her, period. But when I returned with the water, she was still lying on the couch, eyes closed.

Water began seeping out from under the carpeting. I dropped to my knees with a sponge and began wiping as much as I could. I stuffed towels where the water was gushing in, near the door, but it did not hold.

I tried waking my mother by shaking her, but there was this loud blast somewhere in the kitchen, and a huge wave of water rushed into the living room. I wanted to tell my mother we could leave, go through with her plan to go couch-shopping, buy things, or bring some food back, but I said nothing.

Then, as I moved my arms off of her and slid into the water, my mother opened her eyes and shouted, “I’ll need more lipstick and my coat.”

I had seconds to save myself, no more, so I thought and swam to the entrance. I turned one last time and saw the couch breaking through the glass door and my mother with this look on her face like she had finally realized what it meant, what it was all about.
A few weeks later, against the wall where the old couch was, there was a replacement I found, a used one with a bright floral design.

I ordered Chinese and had it delivered. After I finished in the kitchen I touched the couch a few times, looked at it from different angles, and then I plopped down. I noticed that the bedroom across the way was lacking beds, dressers—vacant, like it was before.

At four, after I read the newspaper several times and clipped out coupons for spaghetti sauce, the door opened and my father walked in. He didn’t ask about mom, nor did he volunteer where he had been. It looked, I thought, like he didn’t even realize the couch was replaced and the place was different. He just removed his shoes, picked up a section of the paper, and dropped down on the opposite side of the couch. Then he said something about being glad to be home. He was tired and looked forward to a long rest. I asked if he was hungry but he didn’t answer, just pushed himself deep into the cushions and to sleep.

I waited some time as he kept at it, eyes closed, not stirring, just like my mother. And like a good son, I decided to stay still so as to not wake him. I was hungry and bored, but what could I do other than grab my pillow and wait?

As I did, the water in the kitchen started gushing again. And my father like my mother sailed through the plate glass window, the same story, etc.

I’m on the roof of a building across from the apartment. I bring binoculars to watch this family. I see a son. The son sneaks behind his mother and pushes her out the window. The father, too.

I know.
Reviews

Paul Hoover

*Edge and Fold* (Apogee Press, 2006)

Unsure of boundaries, creases or inhabitable spaces, poet Paul Hoover takes to define the limitations of perspective through a series of refusals and defiances. In *Edge and Fold*, Hoover proposes to imagine the finitude of lines and edges on the outskirts of our perception, only to unhurriedly unravel this assumption through the course of the collection. This realization is at and of a center. Hoover constructs his loci of alienation not on the margins, but through a careful circling around and entrance into the open landscapes in which we contemplate, communicate, and homestead.

In the first of two sections that divide the collection, "Edge and Fold," Hoover relies on the structure of form to certify his statements of uncertainty. Through unrhymed couplets Hoover discovers various points of language and idea both folding into the other. Consistent through much of this first section, subordinate second lines of each couplet demonstrate the dislocation of understanding in favor of reverie or careful deferment, as in "XV":

```
at the center of an eye
   where the god is hidden

by the brightness it projects
   we have not the strength

to divide ourselves by one
   because it can't speak

the field is now a world
   aimed at attention
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The field here serves to refuse boundary against our possibilities for reference and comparison, typical of many such idea-scapes that infuse Hoover’s verse. This refusal to exceed the boundary of syllabic or spatial modesty is essential to Hoover’s project. Through terse examination of the divine, language and “fields” of attention, we refuse the possibility that the predatory Infinite and Unknown circle us like vultures. In the midst of Hoover’s small line we may be sure of definable answers even as we despair the determination of time or mortality. We have a place to stop and rest in the midst of enjambment. Despite the continuation of a string of unknowing spanning forty-eight pages, Hoover comforts us with pastoral knowledge through form that illuminates with the same concentrated power as haiku.

As in “XV,” temporary division of the whole and release into absence is made possible with the pushing-away of catalogues, litany or narrative tangents. Where Whitman reclaimed the celebratory with loping free verse traversing the body, Hoover announces the habitable without traverse or lope. He enters contemplation through everyday minutiae and its correlate. In this way, then, our cognitive responses in a world inhabited by “infinite perspectives / of a book on architecture”, or where “Christina Aguilera and Andy Warhol / grace a page together” compliment the expanse of light’s shape or the violations of dream (both particular moments of deference to cosmic grandeur folded inside the slow traverse of a body across land throughout “Edge and Flow”).

The contract between object and its cognitive correlate takes hold by the end. In the final section, “The Reading”, Hoover examines objects of rebirth or growth. Wings, spines and fruit trees are added to the list of delightful, fragmentary matter of the corporeal world. Here, the realm of the tangible calms the mind. We are settled “to carry awareness / around all day”, but we discover that it carries us.

Reviewed by Trina Burke
TONY TOST

*Complex Sleep* (Kuhl House Poets, 2007)

Tony Tost's *Complex Sleep* is a fugue-like arrangement riffing on such disparate themes as semiotics, nature, technology, power, and the project of writing itself. Tost invokes figures as diverse as Isaiah, Socrates, and Orpheus. The reader, in danger of becoming lost in the fragmentary nature of these compositions, is constantly rescued by the writer's many returns to the thematic scaffolding. This may be due in part to the recursive nature of the project. In a footnote to the title poem, Tost writes:

"Complex Sleep" is an index of alphabetically arranged sentences and significant syntactical units (presented in sentence form) that made up a prose poem called "Complex Sleep" which was written between August of 2004 and February of 2005 and was intended as a reconsideration of statements, assumptions and values embedded in previously written pieces. For instance, the sentence "Two swing sets are nearly touching" from my book *Invisible Bride* was rewritten in *Complex Sleep* as "Two sentences are nearly touching." Most of the sentences however, diverged much more distinctly from a seed sentence or line.

The result is anaphora—a litany of lines wherein the alphabetical repetition of words becomes an expansive meditation on the multivalence of the words themselves: "A voice in the body / drowns a voice in the mind. A voice / invested with power makes me white with desire." The meditation is quickly broken as the alphabetical progression moves forward, disorienting the reader: "A wiener dog on the way home (judging the dead) eating a possum." The method of composition undercuts our conventional notions of context and asks us to consider the ultimate arbitrariness of those notions.

A similar style of formal constraint rules "Squint." Each line is constructed of four short phrasal units separated by commas, creating
a rhythm that builds steam with each added modification. Content-wise, the phrases have less to do with description or elaboration of meaning than with how the juxtaposition of ambiguous words with more concretely signifying words creates meaning. For instance, in the phrase “one is often its child,” “child” is the only unambiguous unit—every other word relies solely on context to reveal its purpose. The entire line reads, “The goal is far distant, it becomes the wind, one is often its child, of its inner eye.” Again, the line itself is abstract rather than specific and also relies on its context to give it meaning. Unfortunately for meaning junkies, the poem as a whole isn’t necessarily forthcoming. I am reminded of William S. Burroughs’ cut-up method of composition. If one were to cut the poem in quarters and rearrange the phrasal units according to a set pattern, the assumptions and values involved would remain intact and the form would be maintained.

This is not to say that Complex Sleep is devoid of meaning. It is to say that, for some of these poems, meaning is in evidence more in the form than in the words themselves. In “World Jelly” (the title of which, we are told in a note, was derived from the Guided By Voices Song Title Generator), the reader is treated to a number of lines that seem humorous at first blush: “Prom king grill work,” “Up upon night / with Rufus Iscariot / eating meat like / there was a stalking” or “Asshole serpent / write this down.” But this is hardly a whimsical poem. Other couplets serve as interludes of gravity: “Compare notes / with the beaten animal” and “Words taken / away from families.”

These are themes that crop up throughout the book—intimacy and isolation from the natural world, the loss of the ability to speak—and they mark a dark progression in the poem that leads us through negation and acts of cruelty. We are never comfortably in one tonal space before the terms have shifted. The speaker says, “Sun I do not / want you on my back” and asks, “When can I / be cruel again.” But the speaker does not appear to be wholly without conscience or feeling, “Desire for brethren / was not prompted / accept the light / where no light is due / The affect of our happiness / and so easily supplied / form is evidence / of the lonesome rhythm.” In presenting these contradictions so starkly,
Tost creates an almost unbridgeable dichotomy between the desire for brethren and loneliness to disturbing effect.

So it is with some relief that we reach the untitled prose poem preceding “An Emperor’s Nostalgia.” The justified lines are some visual comfort, as is the fairy-tale–like narrative wherein an emperor effectively wreaks havoc upon his kingdom as he spreads decrees (which are more like poetic declamations than orders; he tells his subjects “we are the currency of heaven”) by word of mouth. What ensues is like the parlor game “telephone,” as the decree alters through repeated tellings. “In the North, for instance, his subjects believe that, as in Heaven, the kingdom’s new currency is art.” It is a particularly telling translation on the subject’s part and the kingdom disintegrates as artistic works are traded for commodities. To fix the mess he’s made, the emperor “composes the story of his kingdom, which becomes, miraculously, his means of buying it back.” There is much to be inferred here—the relative value of speech vs. writing, the absurdity of the emperor engaging in the very same economy that has ruined his kingdom as a means of imposing order, the power the Word has over people.

“An Emperor’s Nostalgia,” then, is the incantatory antidote to the mistakes made in the prose piece. Whereas the prose closes in the terror of the kingdom, the speaker of this poem proclaims, “This is the end of terror.” A twelve-part romantic address ostensibly set in a domestic context (with house/home ripe for interpretation), “An Emperor’s Nostalgia” is the emotional center of the book and, as such, is worth the price of admission.

In a mere 122 pages, Complex Sleep manages to hit an impossibly wide variety of registers, and that alone is a feat to be reckoned with. There is one characteristic, however, that is absolutely consistent: Even in a sequence of non sequiturs, the writing is lyrically breathtaking. Perhaps it can be taken as the compliment I mean it to be when I say that I was exhausted as I turned the last page of the book. Tost asks the reader to do a considerable amount of work in order to engage his poems. Once engaged, though, I couldn’t help but be caught up in the milieu.

Reviewed by Laurie White
When *Bad Bad* arrived in the mail I felt deliciously naughty. It looked like a Victoria’s Secret box, a tin of pink popcorn, a candy-stripper’s uniform. And that title: “Bad Bad”—like something an anorexic carves into her upper thigh as self-admonishment for eating donuts—I wished I’d thought of it.

Inside: a charcoal drawing of a two-headed fawn. *Flearts & Stars.* *Bad Bad* looks like the notebook of a talented schoolgirl. Even the blurbs on the back—“...indulgent and melancholy...moments of extreme morbidity and anger”... “DECADENT! CHILDSH!”—give the impression that this is the Sofia Coppola film of poetry books.

It is, ultimately, a girl’s book. More specifically, a girl poet’s book. It delights the filthy, precocious fifteen-year-old in me beyond measure. But what to do about the shock of a “Preface” in sixty-eight parts? Or the discovery that the book is rife (yes, *rife*) with ellipses and exclamation points—you know, those things shaken out of us in poetry school lest we sound “...indulgent and melancholy...” Opening *Bad Bad* is akin to opening Dara Wier’s *Reverse Rapture* for the first time: “Oh, dear!”

But anyone willing to give the book half a shake will soon realize that it redeems itself from most projected pitfalls on behalf of the reader. Fans of Minnis’ first book, *Zirconia* (Fence Books, 2001) will nearly choke on their own delight. On the surface the books look very similar. *Bad Bad* lacks none of *Zirconia*’s imaginative, sensual, or linguistic bravado, but it feels more mature— its daring-do feels fortified with intention, control, and culpability.

The Preface is partly responsible for this, teaching us how to read the book via the anathema: *Poems About Poetry.* It’s unnerving how directly Minnis addresses her likely audience (fellow members of the PoBiz)—alternately bragging (“People say ‘nothing new’ or ‘the death of the author’ but, I am new and I am not dead”), self-flagellating (“My last book was very bad! I wrote it just for showing off...”), bem oaning the trappings of her craft (“I will never submit to fellowship committees...Because I do not like encouraging handwritten notes!”), speaking to every possible objection we might be inclined toward (“This is supposed to be very objectionable but it is not too objectionable, like
naughty beige...”), and thumbing her nose at fellow-practitioners:

   I know what will be fun! I’ll buy your book and ask you to sign it and then throw it in the trash.

   Of all the beautiful rip-offs this will be my favorite...

   Here is a book that reviews itself—reviews its own ambitions, bungles, contradictions, and boasts (“I have not challenged myself in my failures”) and even addresses reviewers in the very first poem (“And all these blurbs are for s—. Like if I were to carry around a turd and pretend it’s my baby…”)

   It would be easy to dismiss Minnis for cheap theatrics and hubris, but she doesn’t let us off the hook that easily. The shock value is tempered with joy, truth, and the utter delight of language. Yes, the book is self-indulgent, but only in service to its commentary on self-indulgence. It holds a mirror up to our own vanities, confessions, dramas and other “no nos” in serious contemporary poetry—it’s quite liberating to watch her get away with it. In this way Bad Bad seems to have taken a spiritual cue from Bishop’s “though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.” Bad Bad does nothing if not inspire readers to describe the experience of reading it by using its very own similes: “and it feels good...like a champagne bidet.”

   Unfortunately, Minnis’ ellipse-bejeweled formatting makes excessive excerpting somewhat impractical. But the use of ellipses allows the book to unfurl at a pleasing rate. The images and sensations are so vivid and numerous that we need these silences (be they pauses, spatial cues, or indicators of erasure) to maintain our enjoyment of Bad Bad, the way a gourmet French meal needs lemon sorbet between courses to cleanse the palate.

   Kudos to Minnis for writing poetry that’s fun, but never in service of a cheap joke. Minnis doesn’t need hip lack of affect or pop-cultural droppings to drive her poems. Even if, as she states in “Anti Vitae,” she once was “Told [her] poems ‘lack agency,’” it’s difficult to imagine somebody leveling that criticism at her now. Here is a poet with the full command of the English language, both past and present, at her service. If she has chosen to explode its possibilities rather than restrict them, she does it with conviction and clarity of vision. Bad Bad moves with a serpentine wisdom, venom, and grace—in and out of the Gordian knot of what it means to be a poet moving through the modern world, a chip of diamond on her shoulder.

Reviewed by Karyna McGlynn

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CONTRIBUTORS

JEFFREY CHAPMAN lives in Salt Lake City, UT, which is a great city even though some people don’t realize it. He has recently completed his Ph.D. at the University of Utah. Stories have appeared recently in *Western Humanities Review, The Bellingham Review,* and *Fiction International.* His first published story appeared in *CutBank 54* in the fall of 2000.

CJ EVANS’s poetry has most recently appeared or is forthcoming in journals such as *American Letters & Commentary, Chelsea, Court Green, Cincinnati Review, LIT, Mid-American Review,* and *Washington Square.* He lives in New York City.

MAX EVERHART holds a MA in Creative Writing from the University of Alabama-Birmingham and has work forthcoming in *Elysian Fields Quarterly.*

BAIRD HARPER is a MFA student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. “Yellowstone” has also been selected for inclusion in *Best New American Voices 2009.*

SYD HARRIET studied creative writing with Raymond Carver, Virgil Scott, Richie Lyons, and Herb Wilner. He now lives and works in Fresno, California.

MATT HART is the author of *Who’s Who Vivid* (Slope Editions, 2006) and three chapbooks: *Revelated* (Hollyridge Press, 2005), *Sonnet* (H_NGM_N Books, 2006), and *Simply Rocket* (Lame House Press, 2007). His work has appeared in many print and online journals, including *Gulf Coast, H_NGM_N, Jubilat,* and *Octopus.* He lives and teaches in Cincinnati where he edits *Forklift, Ohio: A Journal of Poetry, Cooking, & Light Industrial Safety.*

BRIAN HENRY’s translation of Tomaz Šalamun’s *Woods and Chalices* will appear from Harcourt in spring 2008. His most recent books are *The Stripping Point* (Counterpath Press) and *Quarantine* (Ahsahta).
KEETJE KUIPERS's poetry has appeared most recently in *Prairie Schooner*, *West Branch, Painted Bride Quarterly*, and at the online audio archive From the Fishouse. She lives in Missoula, Montana, with her dog, Bishop.

DENNIS MCFADDEN is a project manager for the State of New York. He lives and writes in an old farmhouse called Mountjoy on Bliss Road, off Peaceable Street, just up from Harmony Corners. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in over two dozen publications, including *The Missouri Review, New England Review, Hayden's Ferry Review, Fiction, North Dakota Quarterly, Washington Square, The Seattle Review, The South Carolina Review* and *The Saint Ann's Review*.

KARYNA MCGLYNN is the author of two chapbooks: *Scorpionica* (New Michigan Press, 2007) and *Alabama Steve* (Destructible Heart Press, 2008). Her poems appear in *Gulf Coast, Willow Springs, Indiana Review, Denver Quarterly*, and *Fence*. A five-time Pushcart nominee and recipient of the Hopwood Award for poetry, she currently holds the Zell Postgraduate Writing Fellowship at the University of Michigan, where she recently received her MFA.

ADAM PETERSON lives in Lincoln, Nebraska. His work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Indiana Review, Ninth Letter*, and *Redivider*, among other journals. His chapbook *My Untimely Death* won the 2007 Fiction Contest at Subito Press and is currently available.

KATIE PETERSON teaches creative writing and the humanities at Deep Springs College. She was born in California and is the author of a book of poems, *This One Tree* (New Issues, 2006).

TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN is a Slovenian poet, born in 1941 in Zagreb, Croatia, and considered to be one of the great postwar Central European poets. Šalamun has taught at the Universities of Alabama, Georgia, Massachusetts, and Tennessee, and was invited to be member of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 1971. He spent several years as Cultural Attaché to the Slovenian Embassy in New York. Already, eight of Šalamun's thirty-plus books of poetry have been published in English—*The Selected Poems of Tomaz Šalamun* (Ecco Press, 1988), *The Shepherd, the Hunter* (Pedernal, 1992),
The Four Questions of Melancholy (White Pine, 1997), Feast (Harcourt Brace, 2000), The Book for My Brother (2006), Poker (Ugly Duckling Press, 2003), Blackboards (Saturnalia Books, 2004), and Row (ARC Publications, 2006). His books have been translated in nineteen languages. In 2007, Salamun received the European Prize in Muenster, Germany. All poems in this issue are from Woods and Chalices, forthcoming in April 2008 from Harcourt.

ED SKOOG’s first collection of poems, Mister Skylight, will be published by Copper Canyon Press in 2009. Individual poems have appeared in Poetry and The New Republic and are forthcoming in American Poetry Review and The Paris Review. He served as fiction editor of CutBank in 1996 while earning an MFA at the University of Montana and generally circulating. He continues to generally circulate. This summer, he will be a featured reader at the Idyllwild Summer Poetry Festival in southern California.

avery slater’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in North American Review, Chelsea, Borderlands, Permafrost, Cold Mountain Review, North Dakota Quarterly, The Pinch, and other journals. She holds an MFA from the University of Washington and was awarded Cambridge University’s Brewer Hall Prize for Poetry.

andy smetanka’s recent collaborators include rock band the Decemberists and director Guy Maddin, whose 2007 film My Winnipeg featured the artist’s unique silhouette animation. Smetanka holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Montana, and he’s currently writing and illustrating a children’s book and contributing to a limited-edition production scrapbook for My Winnipeg.

JENNA WILLIAMS grew up in South Dakota, the only state to blast presidential visages into mountainsides and build an entire palace of corncobs. She received her BA from the University of Montana in 2007 and has been a finalist in the AWP Intro Journals Project and Glimmer Train’s Short Story Award for New Writers. Jenna lives in Missoula, Montana. “The Span of an Octave” is her first published story.
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