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The currant

Now come the thought of a blood-filled bell.  
Now come a rude well of air; mineral blush on the prairie.  
Now come the bat, flown scrap of patience, slung through my door for light, destructive as a small god. We’re deep with small accidents. The hand I adore 
flies through a closed window for love. Not for me are pale candles pooled on the floors of the carnival gourds. Not for anybody could a clean shape burn through them. Frost clocks the sky. One forecast, quiet as the gray pearl of a pigeon’s breast, descends to a wire fence and grows fat for our hurts. One forecast gleams, but a flock of them is as common as weapons we took to ourselves and had taken to us. What hour can we ask to shepherd us in, so thin, clownish with a scar and others? We who dream the freak currants of November, dream the high tides, the final map of a body lost at last, touch them and go blind as the chain-link eyes of the fence. The hand I adore wades through the red, raptured currants. 
I dream I will never shut my eyes again, and this time I can see it. I heard a bell through blood.
THE GODS ARE REAL

but I believe in the power to make them up, and in the eventual need to wake all of us, if we are merely dreaming. The dark girl I was swarms up a pine, just ahead of a boy—brighter, younger—worth the years she’ll hang from like a cotton gallows god left to sip secrets from the gallows tree. When she hears one, she hears them all: Imagine a future where every man you love will break your body or your heart. You’ll still love them—it’s crucial to love what can consume you despite knowing what you know, but still,

The gods are real, she tells another lover, and nurses up a thread of bitter smoke from the navel of the spoon he must give her not to hate her. Eye to eye at an altar, there’s enough blood for two gods, but they can hardly bear the one they feed together—who can bear to see their brand so illuminated on another? Men and men and emptied bottles slip between the years ahead—she’ll drown in gods—she’ll fuck her way through what she thought they were, skull cracking on a floor like the stone left eye of a gallows king.
O god, the body breaking yields a doubled heart, wet as a molted cottonmouth, the husk still surging in a current of cold. The year of old animals—of oath and cure and relapse and brute love—splits the gods between us. They swim between us. They sip the slaughtered names, dole out scars, then gamble with seeds as white as weak light, having buried the body of a girl halved like a trickster’s war. The gods hang fruit on their gallows tree and reach up for my familiar heart. They want what’s left to ask for. They ask me to believe in something else.
I sleep-walk through town & palm
the pommel of an anger again. It’s old
news by now, how I ride it,
get ridden. I tell you, now a word’s
the weapon, & the weapon’s a vehicle that turns
back towards the mouth that built it. &
we’ve been walking on
hilt for so long—you can’t help but fear that
I like it. I fear that I like it, too.
When this is just a dream, a thought
tumbles down like a dial on a wall-safe,
& you leave one ear on my chest. There, you hear
three blackbirds knife through a hot sheet
of equatorial rain, & the weather & I
are of the same body, mechanism, & crude
catalyst, at last. There, there is
no flight but in the fuel of a word
broken open, so that outside every bedroom
we fooled gravity in a mailbox looms,
planted on its lone leg, its trigger-mouth
swallowing what has not yet been said. Keeping
the message safe & the message whole.
What means something whole, now? I tell you, time
is the safe, then the hand that reached inside it.
What knifes through the weather is wearing a number.
What weathers through you is drawing a line.
BERLIN

Last month, I turned forty, and my husband took me to Berlin. It is a city that is many cities, or so my husband promised. And, though we went in June, it was winter too. It was cold, and the sky was like the spoked underside of a gray umbrella.

We went to Alexanderplatz, and to the Tiergarten. We went to the zoo. At night we took the train.

My husband and I have been married for thirteen years. On the Berlin train, the lights flicked on and off and he held my hand. When the teenage inspectors stepped aboard, speaking my language, calling "Tickets, tickets," I closed my eyes and pretended it was wartime. I pretended I couldn't get off the train. I didn't tell my husband.

Anyway, it was true. I couldn't get off.

• • •

When I was a girl, I asked my mother: "How did you know you should marry Dad?" And my mother, whose hair was the color of cigarette ash even at twenty-eight, said: "I knew. I had no doubt." Later, after I met my husband, I asked my mother again: "How did you know?" Her answer was the same.

I had met my own husband. But I did not know. When I had a daughter, I would answer as my mother had.

• • •

I have no daughter. In Berlin, I was forty and my husband clasped
my hand, and I looked at our two hands on my lap. The train lights flicked on and off.

Once, as we argued in the kitchen over something (I don’t remember now whether it was Shannon or Jane) I picked up a triangular shard of china (I had broken a dish) and drew blood from my palm with its tip. I pressed the tip to my skin as if it were pencil lead, and sketched a neat white star. “You see?” my husband said. “What if we had a child? What if we had a child and she saw that?” He knew I wanted a daughter.

My mother used to call my father her “sworn enemy.” She would smile as she said it. Later, when I was married, I visited my mother at home. We drank coffee from striped cups, and my mother asked after my husband. I winked, complicitous. “Alan?” I said. “My sworn enemy?”

My husband and I grew up in the same Pennsylvania town. We gazed at identical views through our separate windows. Square lawns, fenceposts like mean fingers. Other windows, evening windows, their pretty, boxed light.

As a teenager, I spent most of my time in cars. Sometimes my husband was there. He was not yet my husband and he wanted to touch me. Other times, I was alone. I clutched the steering wheel. After fighting with my not-yet-husband, I drove through nights heavy as velvet drapery, pounding the steering wheel with my fists.

“This is life, little girl,” I rasped, aloud. My voice was viscous with tears. I did not know who I was talking to.

Now, I have no daughter, but I speak to other women. I know who
they are. They are Jacqueline and Lily and Michelle. They are my women friends and we speak each day on the telephone. In May, I told my friends about my husband’s gift to me. “Berlin,” I said. “He has always wanted to go.” I smiled grimly, and though I couldn’t see them, I could tell that Jacqueline and Lily and Michelle smiled too, in just the same grim way.

• • •

Berlin. We went to Alexanderplatz and to the Tiergarten. At night, we took the train.

My husband was drunk. We had eaten a rich dinner in the Charlottenburg district, and I could smell Bordeaux and onions as the train rattled my husband in his seat, pushing him close to me.

The train was a long hallway, benches pushed flat against its walls. A man and woman sat facing us. They did not touch. They did not speak. But my husband was drunk, and his mouth was rubber at my temple. “Happy Birthday,” he said. “I’m glad we’re here.”

On our wedding night, my husband said, “Shouldn’t you be harder to get?” At least I believe it was our wedding night. It might have been another. This is not self-pity, little girl, this is life. Sometimes, even now, I don’t know who I’m talking to.

• • •

On the train, my husband was drunk, and I was embarrassed. The man and woman faced us—their gazes straight, their faces stricken—as my husband puzzled his way into my neck, nosed my jaw, and whispered happy birthday. “Kiss me,” he said.

I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to see the stricken man and woman;
I didn’t want to watch them, watching me. So, as we flew past Weberwiese and Strausberger Platz and Schillingstrasse, I made my way back to the morning, to the Tiergarten. Where I had raised my chin and watched a piece of sky, leaves like green airplanes, airplanes like crossed fingers. My husband had walked beside me.

Some nights, I lie next to him, and though I am repulsed—by the kelp inside his seashell ear, by the diameter of his neck—I want him to touch me. No one is watching. He doesn’t. This is not self-pity, little girl. For I know I am complicit in this and many things.

• • •

On the train he touched me, and I was embarrassed. I didn’t want the man and woman across the aisle to see.

We flew past Klosterstrasse and Spittelmarkt and Hausvogteiplatz, and my husband pressed his face to mine, his cheeks wet as a dog’s nose. Finally, I leaned in.

The man across the aisle looked down at his bright blue shoes. The woman beside him fished a slim book from her purse.

• • •

At Potsdamer Platz, the train stopped. Men swarmed the aisle and blocked the windows. They looked like the navy curtains in my mother’s living room, stopping the light with their dark suits. Just before the doors closed, the man in the blue shoes slipped quickly up, laced his way through the crowd. The woman beside him did not appear to notice. She was reading her book, folding and unfolding the upper corner of a page.

I watched the man flee, but I was thinking about my husband. We
will ride to the Artim Hotel, I thought. We will ride the elevator to our room, where the heater will hum one note. I thought, too, of ovarian cysts. Of an article I’d read describing cysts so nearly alive they’d grown hair and teeth. Much of the time now, I think many things at once. It is not like when I was young.

... Soon, the man in the blue shoes was outside the train. He stood on the platform, and peered through the window, at the woman’s hunched shoulder, her back. His face was very still. He raised his hand, and knocked on the glass.

The woman turned then, and I knew. As they knew. As they had known all along. They had been secretive as criminals. Still, all along, they had known each other, as husbands and wives do.

The man knocked. The woman looked back at him in grim, habituated surprise. I saw then that she was young. Her skin was pink and her hair was the hair of all young women. Blond and copper and brown. Darkest at the roots. She looked at the man. He waved at her through the glass. He smiled, cruelly. He was young, too.

She shook her head. He waved: goodbye, goodbye. She shook her head: no: no, please. The train pulled away from Potsdamer Platz. The woman turned from the window.

My husband was drunk. He was leaning in, sniffing my clavicle. “Shh,” I said to him. I wanted to say “stop,” but the word did not emerge. The woman flipped open her cellular phone, and spoke softly to it in German. Was she speaking to the man? To her maybe-husband? My own was fixing his hand to the small of my
back, pushing me even closer, and saying it again: happy birthday, happy happy. The woman closed her phone. She began to cry.

• • •

Last month, I turned forty and my husband took me to Berlin. We went to Alexanderplatz, and to the Tiergarten. At night we took the train.

On the train, I watched a woman. She spoke German in a soft and waterlogged voice. She cried for three minutes.

My husband—the man whose affairs would have put scars on my palms and inner arms, scars shaped like ampersands and jagged mountain passes, if ever I'd been brave enough to push—leaned close. The abandoned woman watched us. She had stopped crying.

My husband—my enemy, my accomplice—kissed me. He kissed my nose, my dry mouth. "I love you," he whispered. I wanted to say, "stop," but the word would not emerge. The girl watched my husband kiss me. I caught her eye. I knew her, but I did not reveal myself.
Unison calling

With the scientific name Antigone, the sarus crane holds a band of red around its head, a rope worn into the flesh in mourning. They sing this morning, heads back, the female first, then the male. She says two things and he, one, brief in speech. They are the tallest in the world, taller than most men. I have never seen a crane so beautiful, my father says, and as he can’t hear me, I don’t say anything, his aids left behind again, not liking the sound of his own feet and insects of wet spaces meeting. The cranes grow from what is wet, not his dry mouth, words lost in a syndrome that drags his face in red patches. For some time, Antigone was alive and kept to her father’s side, even after she was condemned, inside a cave, wet place. Her losses, mother, brothers, sister, father. If one crane is killed, the other will call for days in mourning. Of the pride of lions my father finds, he presses on the glass like a child, asks: see them? I’ve never been so close. The cranes dance at times of their own choosing.
It's said a ghost (that I have never seen) haunts here:

Prix Pagi, Paget, Piaget, at work in the mill he built, before the Kickapoo cut him apart and left his head in the hopper.

The school bus goes here last, down the hill to a place of ghosts, broken stores, trailers laced in vines, of foundations of another world, a time when a woman would knock coal off the passing train to keep warm (Mary her name), blonde children who never talk but get off the bus and walk across the tracks to a place that always floods. We turn around and return on the old pin and truss one-lane bridge, us in the last seat waiting to jump on the bump, the bus driver's backwards mirror frown, no need to see her mouth, just her eyes, for she rarely says a word.
In midair, our assistant pastor Wally looks like a roll of Charmin squeezed too hard. But Big Jim, our pastor, could be the Passion incarnate. Arms extended and frame drawn to its full six-and-a-half feet, his body is a cruciform rising from the dry riverbed toward the bridge where we stand.

The bungee jumping was his idea. I'd suggested taking the kids to build houses in Kentucky or maybe to help the cleanup in Louisiana. But Jim had wanted a more lasting truth. "Let them know, even were they cast from the highest precipice, God's angels would bear them up."

Watching both pastors reach their apex, I feel guilty for doubting this plan. The two men glide into their second descent, and the thirty-odd children around me—our Glad Tidings Battalion of God's Royal Rangers—crowd the rail for a view. They laugh and shriek and wave at Big Jim, calling on him to testify midflight. Their voices are shrill to the edge of otherworldly, none older than fourteen, this trip a last fling for the eighth-graders who begin the slide to adulthood at high school in the fall.

It's on the second ascent that something goes wrong. Wally, per the laws of physics, recoils less than on his first spring upward. But Big Jim rebounds just as high the second time, maybe higher. The college student who strapped in both ministers seems more perplexed than alarmed. He shields his face from the sun with one hand, as if eyeballing a set of geometric reference points to explain what he saw.

The third time up is definitely higher. The fourth time brings Jim parallel with the platform from which he leapt. He would be eye to eye with us, the faithful, except his lids are closed, and it occurs to me that—never having bungeed before—he's unaware of a
problem. He's just letting his body absorb the rhythm: fall and rise, rise and fall. As if nothing could be more natural.

The fifth time he overshoots us by the height of a toll booth. The sixth time, a goal post. The seventh, a small office building. He's picking up steam too, springing faster. I try to remember some fact from high school that could help, maybe involving exponents.

Without warning one of the kids starts praying, and before I know it they're all on their knees, hands folded or palms stretched to the sky. They ask the Lord, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, to restore Jim to the platform, and though I can't be sure, I think a few of them say to take me or Wally instead. It's what they've been trained to do. When they fail a test, Big Jim tells them to pray. When a family pet dies, pray. When a father downs too much liquor or a mother cries behind a locked door or a sister goes to live with relatives out-of-town: pray, pray, pray. Sometimes it works, other times not. But whatever happens is God's plan. So that's an answer.

I envy them. When my wife's doctors found the cancer, Big Jim prayed at the hospital, then later in my living room. And after the requisite time, he asked for my help leading the youth group. He said he knew how Cindy and I had wanted children. His arm around my shoulder, his wooly beard grazing my cheek, he said that he, too, had been laid low before—troughs of desperation, nadirs of despair—but he thinks God showed him those places so he'd know how high he could be raised when the call came at last.

Jim rockets past the platform again while, down below, Wally sways like Wonder Bread on a string. Wally hollers that he feels faint, so the college kid starts winching him up. What else can he do? The kid's the only person on the platform not born again. I take my eyes off Big Jim long enough to consider him: gray cardigan over a concert tee, blue deck shoes, a chrome stud everywhere the Lord gave him extra skin. His far-off look says he's already thinking
about what comes next—media interviews, drug tests. Not that I blame him.

There is a sound like a rubber band breaking, and the bulk of Jim's line comes spiraling down, whacking the bridge like a snake-bite. The children stop praying, and even the college student's hand goes slack on the winch. We cock our heads to follow Big Jim shrinking skyward, a lost balloon.

Later, Wally will say Jim was called home. He'll say it's how the Pastor wanted to go—straight line, sure ascent. I can see the thought already brewing behind some of the kids' expressions. When Wally uses the word *lucky*, he'll be met with fervent nods, the occasional *Alleluia* or *Amen*.

But standing on the bridge, I'm glad not to be in Jim's shoes. I grab his bungee and hold the frayed end toward the kids. I shake it at them, though I don't know exactly why. I want to say something—about the meeting of horror and wonder, about faith—but my tongue refuses to snag the ideas, so I just stand there with the cord in my hand, kind of gurgling. The kids seem to take pity on me, and I think we might still find an answer if we look for it together. But then Wally lolls onto the platform, red-faced and winded. He flops onto his back like a fish in the boat's bottom and shouts Praise Jesus, mostly because I think he's shocked to be alive. The kids flock to him. Praise Jesus, they echo. God be praised. Even the college student mouths the words.

I fling the cord from my hand and watch it skitter over the bridge's edge. The kids are on a roll now—*Praise Jesus*—*Praise Jesus*—*Praise Jesus*—*Praise*—their voices less like a song than a single extended note. It occurs to me that Jim might come down eventually and that maybe I should call someone, but who? Fire department? Air Force? 700 Club? As the chanting subsides, Wally fumbles for
a prayer, his voice quavering at the high end of tenor. I imagine the long walk to the van for my phone—my halting account of events—offering all I know before the silence, awaiting a response I’ll never get.
The girl at the temp agency laughed every time I returned. I'd gone through six jobs in a year. Janitorial. Data entry. Shelf-stocking. The previous winter I was a bank courier. Endless hours escorting double-locked canvas bags across barren southwest highways. Once I dozed off and nearly drove right into Nogales, Mexico. So the agency tossed me a labor gig, raking tar and gravel across roofs before plastering it with Coolcoat, this oozing sealant that protects space shuttles. Scraping molten sludge on a Tucson roof in May is as soul-sucking as you'd expect. But that's when I learned Mexican beer's best, since most other guys were Mexican and they came prepared, little grills and chicken and limes and cabbage heads and enormous tomatoes, and they'd cook it all up for lunch, toss back a few, listening to banda music on their little portables. Being civilized is a good way of fighting the heat. One time a kid, this high school dropout, fell off the roof, deadweight. Landed in the white-rock lawn. Just lay there. The whole thing was quieter than it sounded in my head. I almost tumbled off once, too. You get dizzy up there, all that sun. A Mexican reached out, reeled me in. They never fell. He saved me a concussion and a lifetime of ugly face. Sat me in shade and made me sip water.

"No cerveza," he said, wagging a finger.

That was my last day on the rooftop, and what followed was bliss, a dreamy temp gig that comes along once in a lifetime: steady and interesting, money good enough I could buy Dos Equis at the bar after work. You factually need to drink beer in Tucson. Otherwise just shoot yourself, because there's nothing like walking into a little bar like Geronimoz (long gone now) down by the university after ten hours in air so searing you can actually see undulating waves moving across the earth like some hellish shadow. No joke. And you walk in
the bar and feel that cool conditioned air and the blinds are drawn, no more squinting against overwhelming whiteness, your eyes ease up, you get a Mexican draft and break a lime wedge over the mug and sit quiet, slipping back into normalcy. Your skin ripples with pleasure. That glassy twinkling of pool balls in the back. The drone of early innings baseball, Dodgers starting up, Vin chatting away. And you drink into darkness and if you're hungry you stop for tacos on the way home, and back at your apartment open the windows, turn on a fan, sleep naked and sheetless because that's the only way to keep from sweating all the life out.

Water's this thing in Tucson. There's an angry minority who think it's some precious commodity. If you leave the faucet on when you brush your teeth, they get pale and in their heads they start shrieking, Wasting! Tucson breeds nuts who want to hoard water, probably so when mankind dies they can be the last to drink a cool glass. I've always gotten a kick out of pestering these idiots. My crazy high school English teacher practically invented Earth Day. “Here,” he'd say, “wear these buttons in support of the earth!” The earth! He rode a bike and ate carob cookies and had this water bottle that looked like a sack of I.V. fluids. On mornings I wasn't sure the world could handle all his good intentions, I'd sneak in the faculty bathroom and leave all the faucets and toilets running. He'd come into class furious at his coworkers. “They keep doing it! Wasting water!” Almost shaking with anger. It was pretty funny.

Anyway water isn't vanishing. It just moves around. That's scientific. Look it up.

But my cushy temp job put me smack in the middle of the water wars: I worked for the county, giving tickets to people who violated watering policy. The policy was ridiculous. No watering after eight am. No watering before eight pm. Only water on days starting with T if you lived on even numbered streets. Never water

Bernard 29
on weekends unless it was a new moon. If a rattlesnake leaves the
downtown bus station at seven and a roadrunner leaves Mesa at four,
you're allowed 20 ccs of water on the fourth Sunday of May. Of
course everyone broke the rules because the rules were too stupid
to follow. It was all about money. That was the year the city needed
revenue to beautify downtown. (That's a joke Tucsonans get. Every
year is the year the city needs revenue to beautify downtown.)

Enforcing the rules made me act like an asshole, which was
fun. One good thing about living in a big world is that you can get
paid well to be an asshole. You don't even need any training. Plus
they gave me a nice truck, a Dakota with ac and auto windows. My
first day I picked up my morning route and they had me do patrols
in Sahuarita, a community south of Tucson. Old retired folks living
by golf courses (we didn't regulate golf courses). I drove through
this sub-development with fake red adobe-style houses, most with
approved white rock lawns. In one yard this old codger was sitting
out in his aluminum chair, watering tomatoes. He reminded me of
my uncle (dead, kidneys): wearing jeans and a denim shirt buttoned
at the wrists, big straw hat. Ten in the morning and it's 97 degrees
and this guy's dressed like it's winter in Ohio. His eyes flickered as I
parked. He kept watering.

I grinned.

As I walked across his driveway, I dragged my forearm across
my forehead to get the sweat off. "Hot day." The old guy just sort of
chewed on the inside of his lip. Kept spraying. "Nice tomatoes," I
offered. They were, too, a mass of hairy green plants curling on wire
cages. Five feet tall. The fat red globules were so ripe I could smell
their sugars.

"Son, I'd offer you one," he said, choosing his words, "but I
think you an a-hole."

I wrote the ticket and told him he had two weeks to pay
before penalties kicked in.
He set his hose down. "Your daddy raise you to harass honest hard-working people?"

"My daddy didn't raise me." I handed him the ticket. Two hundred dollar fine.

He looked up at me, his face twitchy. "I served in wars. This ain't right!" he yelled.

He was understandably upset. But the neighborhood was quiet. No kids. No cars. His shouts sort of trickled away and he obviously felt embarrassed about yelling.

I shrugged again. "I'm just the messenger."

He looked at the ticket in his hand, at me. "People like you kill this world."

I nodded somberly.

Then I wrote him another ticket, said, "Oh, fuck you," threw it at him, and drove away.

I always liked monsoon season, Tucson, late summer, when the rains come. Mornings the skies are clear blue, but midday these fortresses of white clouds march up from the south, and by afternoon pitch-black storms are bombarding the city. It's fast and crazy, an inch of downpour in ten minutes. Lightning, wind, booming thunder, like the world's breaking apart.

My manager was the county water supervisor, a slim white lady, Celia. I saw her twice a day, at eight to get my morning route and back at lunch for the afternoon route. She couldn't let me know in advance, in case I'd warn people. She needn't have worried. I liked giving tickets. Over lunch one day, Celia said I could make extra cash. "Tax free. Buy some cds. Take your girlfriend out." She pulled a blond strand from her eyes. "Whatever you kids do."

We were eating taquitos buried in crema and guacamole from Los Betos. I bit into a shell and the chicken or beef or whatever had something hard in it that I had to spit into my palm. Celia made

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a face. “Sorry,” I said. “So, what now, I overturn rainbuckets?”

I figured she was lying, teasing me. She was cute and flirted a little. A little older than me, five years or so. She’d gone to the city’s private Catholic school: she had her high school diploma framed above her desk, next to her UofA diploma. There were pictures of her and two daughters, and also a photo of her and husband down on the Sea of Cortez, he’s on a dock lifting this huge fish and she’s holding a beer and laughing. She was a good boss. Joked around. She got that life was pointless. Sometimes she complimented my snap-button shirts, which I was proud of, I spent serious time at Buffalo Exchange. “I like the blue one,” she’d say. “It makes you look like some sort of desperado.” I liked that. And sometimes I imagined her at home, getting ready for bed. Putting cold cream on her face. Her husband reading in bed, or already asleep, snoring. Farting under the sheets. Dumb husband stuff. Maybe every now and then she’d look in the mirror, think how empty life was. Kids, husband, domesticity. And for that moment she’d rather be somewhere else, somewhere real. With a guy like me.

It was a childish delusion. Kids—and that’s what I was—are hopeful that way.

Celia said, “You have a look that says, I know an opportunity when I see one.”

I smiled. Like I said, I was proud back then.

“In Colorado, it’s against state law to collect rainwater, and we’re starting to explore just that type of thing in Arizona. There are groups in Maricopa County.” She lowered her voice. “It’s unhealthy. The acidity, I mean, ask someone at the hospital how many children come in because they’ve been poisoned by acid rainwater? This kid, I read last week, he needs a new kidney. Because of drinking rainwater!”

I shook my head. It all sounded like bullshit. “So how much do I get paid?”
"A hundred dollars a week. All you do—well, you don't need to provide any evidence, nothing like that. Just be discreet, is all. Don't get caught. If you do get caught—"

I made a quiet sign, finger to my lips. She nodded. "Exactly."

The phone rang. "No, I didn't make their dinner," she said to it, "you were supposed to make their dinner." She rolled her eyes at me. She was wearing a red button-up blouse with these little flaps on the shoulders, all militaristic. The top couple buttons of the blouse were undone. Her cleavage was truly wonderful, and all she gave was a hint. She was a nice girl.

As she kept talking, she passed me an envelope. The whole thing seemed easy, and Celia was sort of hot, and I wanted to impress her. I never stopped to think ahead.

I opened the envelope in the truck. A one hundred dollar bill. First in my life.

Listen: I'm the type of guy who remembers his first hundred. Not so many people can do that. It's a way of separating the Celias from the Mes of the world. It's a sharp distinction.

Sam Hughes is the fancy university neighborhood where Ana lived, old Mission-style houses with leafy trees and grassy yards, so much green and shade that you can forget you're in the desert. Most of the houses even have custom-built pools. Originally, rich white Spanish people lived there. Now it's just any rich white people. The backhouses, like the one Ana rented, were built for Mexican maids who cooked, cleaned, raised the kids. Ana babysat and I teased her that she was the maid. She didn't laugh.

The first time we met, Ana was jogging and breathing hard. She was wearing a long white t-shirt and jogging shorts. The t-shirt was so sweaty you could see a blue bra beneath.

I was sitting on the curb, smoking a cigarette.

She jogged past, slowed down, stopped. Walked back.
"What are you doing, mister?"
That cracked me up. Mister.
"Not being fit and healthy like you," I said. "Guilty as charged!"
She frowned. She had these swooping brown eyes. "You were staring at my house."
We both looked at the big white house down the block. It was true, I'd been staring.
But it was Celia's house, not hers. "You live there?" I said. "You don't live there."
"In the guesthouse I do. Seriously, what are you up to?" She was looking around for help. That was the year with all the stories about Mexican immigrants kidnapping and raping jogging girls. Really. It always turned out to be the girls' boyfriends, but the fear never faded.
I mashed the cigarette. "Walking home from work. Got hot. It's hot. You're hot, too."
She considered this. She wasn't stupid. I saw her smile, even. "I definitely meant it both ways," I said.
She laughed in the way people can't help. Despite knowing she should be suspicious.
"We might as well get a drink sometime, don't you think? You drink, don't you?"
She was grinning now. "Beer's bad, don't you know how much water it wastes?"
I said she could explain it all to me at a bar. Inside I thought, Jesus Christ, another one.
Ana was fine, of course, but even nowadays I get annoyed about water. People conserving it. Like how the ice caps are melting. I haven't seen any ice caps melting where I live. You have to trust experts, I guess. This world now, it's the kind of world where you have to have faith in

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people you don't know if you want to avoid sounding like an asshole. I prefer other kinds of worlds but no one asked my opinion.

That first evening I was buoyant: this good-looking smart girl gives you her number? The desert is singing your name. I looked at the little slip of paper about fifty times as I drove into the western part of Tucson, the far side of the freeway, past the community college. It was after sunset. My first incursion. I was in barrio savaco, this poor old Mexican community, mostly grandmothers and grandfathers who'd lived there for decades. No drunk young guys sitting around pissed at the world, just old folks with tiny backyards and gardens of peppers and epazote, cilantro and tomatoes. Beans. Squash. As Celia advised, I covered up the county markings on the truck. I waited until the sky was that blood red it only gets in the desert, and then I jogged down alleys and swung over stone walls and discovered worlds I'd never known existed, enormous and intricate systems of tubes and trash bags and woven banana leaves that cascaded into ceramic cisterns, these people of the desert preserving the water like the very ancients. It'd rained three times that week. I nudged the cisterns and heard thick splash. I ducked my nose to the hole and smelled the water, musty, a little sweet.

Entering one backyard was like stepping into a new country: a green globe hung above the door, a bulb inside it, radiating soft light. It was a Japanese glass buoy (at the time I had no idea what it was, a fish bowl, maybe). The ground was beaten smooth, and red bricks were fitted into the earth in a spiral path. The porch was like a sailboat: beams not purchased from a store but genuine saguaro ribs, polished and lacquered, holding up an airy canopy. It sighed with storm breeze. There was a fountain that glinted kaleidoscope, stuck all over with bits of glass, pottery, Jaritos and Yoohoo bottles. Bottle tops. Gum wrappers. Anything that gave off a little light. Each step I took added to the radiance. Somewhere far off in the desert there was

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thunder. Inside a woman was cooking, I heard oil sizzling, smelled garlic and onions. Baseball on the radio, in Spanish. That wonderful crack of a beer can being opened. The top of the fountain was crusted a little with pigeon shit, white splatter with dark shapeless splotches.

I looked down the center hole. Water.

I was about to break it when I had the sudden awful sense that someone was watching me. No one in the house; more like outside. Not anyone specific. Just everyone, everywhere.

But guilt passes fast when you feel a hundred bucks in your pocket.

The first night I got twelve in one hour. It was easy: pick up a rock, shatter the cistern.

A few people had ten gallon water buckets. Next time, I thought, I'd bring a knife.

Ana and I met on a Friday at Geronimoz. I wore one of my spiffy western shirts and she had on a denim mini-skirt. Days long gone. We split a pitcher and played shuffleboard. She put a whole The Cure album on the jukebox and I pretended to like it. She was a typical Tucson girl: Mexican parents but she wasn't Mexican, no way. Wouldn't cross the border to see her abuelos, wouldn't eat burritos, not even Taco Bell. She was a university student and babysat for money. She called it some French name. I thought, babysitting's babysitting, but kept quiet. I wanted to stay out, go down to the popular bars on Fourth Avenue, see the house band at O'Malley's, but she kept checking her watch. "Curfew?" I joked.

"My landlord gets worried. She's nice, though. She lets me swim in the pool."

I remembered Celia, suddenly. "She? Is she single?"

Ana nodded. "Her husband died a few years ago. That's why I babysit so much."

I told her how kind that was. Then I said it was sort of
late, and I'd walk her home. It wasn't a huge revelation, that Celia's husband was dead; but it was. It embarrassed me. Lusting after a single mom, that's no good. I was quiet as we walked. It hadn't rained all day so it was dry and warm. We strolled across the university campus. Ana pointed at the buildings her classes were in. I asked if college guys were as awful as they seemed and she laughed and said yes, absolutely. She talked about how she hoped to be a corporate lawyer and would live in Seattle all her life. She looked at me. "And you? What do you want from life?"

I thought about telling her how I felt things inside that I couldn't explain. The sense that I needed to move and keep moving, and one day I'd be tired, and that's where I'd stay.

Instead I said, "Mostly I want to plant a garden." Bullshit. I knew it sounded romantic.

She looked at me a long moment with those dark eyes. It was the right thing to say. We crossed Campbell Avenue hand-in-hand, trying not to get hit by drunk-driving college kids. At the house she stopped, stepped close to me. I heard splashing in a pool out back, Celia, probably, cooling off in the warm summer evening. Ana kissed me and said I should call her and she went inside. I crossed the street and sat down. I hoped to see Celia, to be honest. But soon enough the splashing stopped and no one appeared and I walked home.

The next day was all sun and Celia was on the phone in her office, gabbing with a friend, I could tell because she was laughing and lowering her voice when she talked. I stood in her doorway and gave a big thumbs up. "Hold on," she said. She looked at me. "What?"


"That's really great, good work!" She gave me a high-five over the desk. I saw the picture of her husband and felt bad again. I wanted to linger a minute, tell her how great it was, her working and being a mom at the same time, all that. But you try to be nice to

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people you don't know well and it makes them think you're a creep. Crazy world.

That afternoon my patrol area was the suburbs on the northwest side of town. I drove through the cheap new housing developments and wondered if there'd ever been anything other than cheap new housing developments in Tucson. Kids swam in a community pool. I found six people breaking the law: watering yards, washing cars. A kid who must have been twelve started crying when I gave him a ticket. "But my dad told me to water!" he said. "I'm so busted!" I told him not to worry, it was his dad's fault. That didn't cheer him up.

One tattooed guy had a pressure-hose going, cleaning oil stains off his driveway. There was a huge puddle of runoff in the street, all rainbow-shimmery with grease. The pressure-hose was a loud machine. You could barely hear the Sepultura playing in his garage.

"Fucking say that to my face," he said. "Come and tell me I have to pay a fine."

I put the citation on the ground. "You have two weeks or penalties kick in."

I ran to the truck and sped away as he lasered the citation with the hose.

His temper made sense. The heat was excruciating for a while: for two weeks it didn't rain. Over 110 degrees every day. The weatherman said, "I said it would be like this." There were billboards of him, smiling above those words: I Said It Would Be Like This. A dry summer, the first year of a drought, they said, and every day I drove around the city, passing out tickets. People yelled and cussed at me. I learned when to keep the truck running, just in case. I was rarely sent to nicer neighborhoods and one day I asked Celia about it. She was paying bills over lunch, which for her was some celery slices and a little tub of peanut butter.
“Here’s some advice,” she said, glaring at her calculator. “Don’t be a single mom.”

“I’ll try my hardest to avoid it.” I laughed. She dipped celery in the peanut butter, crunched loudly. She offered me one. I shook my head. I tapped my afternoon route. “Sahuarita again? Second time this week. How are the routes chosen? Do you choose them?”

She was flipping through a pile of yellow receipts. “Sure as hell ain’t the governor.”

“But, I guess. What I mean is, why do I only go some places? And avoid others?”

She put the receipts down. “Seriously? Why do you think? Money money money.”

I shrugged, stood, and headed out for Sahuarita. I drove around the neighborhood and no one was watering. Not a soul. I stopped at a familiar house. The old guy’s tomato plants were on his front lawn, brown, crisped, sagging, dead. The curtains moved inside. I drove on.

And that’s how it went. Day after day, driving around, ticketing. I felt official. A part of the bureaucracy. I didn’t like it much but it wasn’t so bad. The pay was solid. Regular paychecks never hurt. I had a shirt with a badge sewn in. I had the truck, its official markings.

And nights the markings vanished, I ducked low, struck deep, loosed waters into earth.

It was exhilarating and it paid well. I was bummed when monsoons were forecast again. All people want is to feel special. Just every now and then is enough.

Late nights me and Ana talked on the phone. I’d look out my apartment window and wonder what she was doing. I sat in front of a fan in boxers, drinking beer. Trying not to sweat. The air even smelled hot. She liked talking on the phone, in the dark like that. She’d just go on and on. Sometimes I dozed off. You shut your eyes.

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and listen to a voice and it’s late and dark, like dreams, and there’s something natural to it, soothing, that I hadn’t felt in years.

“The storms really are supposed to come back,” I said. “Big ones, too.”

“The rivers will run,” she said. “We could sail to the Pacific from River Road.”

It’d hit 115 degrees that day. Not a drop of rain.
I wanted to see her again and said as much.
“I have to babysit this weekend,” she said. “I told you.”
I said I’d come over. What did kids know? Kids didn’t know anything.

“We’ll lock them in the closet and swim in that big fancy pool your landlord has.”
She laughed. “You can’t come over. She’d kill me, kick me out! Tomorrow,” she said.
“Promise, tomorrow.”
“Tomorrow,” she promised.

So on a Friday evening Ana came out beautiful and smelling of soap. I didn’t see Celia inside but it didn’t matter. We went to Rosa’s up on Campbell, which isn’t that expensive, ten bucks a plate, but for me it was a splurge. Ana wore a white summer dress and had this yellow butterfly barrette in her hair and we were in a well-lit place with happy adults. She looked sexy, I mean even her throat was sexy, it was like the first feminine throat I’d ever noticed. We ordered margaritas and guacamole and carne seca plates and both got a little drunk.

“I’m a happy camper right now,” she said, laughing. Her voice was low, meaningful.

The bill came and I pulled out a hundred dollar bill and asked the waitress if it was okay, if she could change it. She shrugged, no big deal. Ana looked at the bill and I could tell it impressed her. I asked if she wanted dessert. She shook her head and sort of smiled at
me and I got the hint. It was the best meal I’d eaten in months, and I was just a little drunk, and when we got back in the truck I wanted to drive, and with windows down I felt jubilant, floaty the way you get in the desert at night, and we drove through the rich foothills that overlook the city, and Tucson shimmered below us, like a city of amber, we could see the little veins and arteries of late traffic, and for once the city was mine.

Ana said we could go to my place and I lied and said a cousin was in town, visiting, it wouldn’t be private. She was quiet. I drove back into the city and she slid her hand over and we touched fingers. That truck didn’t have bucket seats, I know that much. At her place I idled the engine and she invited me in. She told me I had to keep quiet. We passed through a sidegate and she made me wait while she unlocked the guesthouse. Then she beckoned me in. I tip-toed past the pool and I couldn’t resist, I leaned over, touched my fingers to the waters. They were warm, which disappointed me. Ana shut the door, cleared books of poetry off her bed. She said, “Just don’t use the bathroom, the pipes are broken, okay?” and she turned off the light and we started kissing, and she unsnapped the buttons on my shirt and put her hands on my skin, my ribs, and suddenly I felt sad, and for no good reason at all.

I hope I’m not making all this sound like she was just some girl. She was more than that: if you grew up how I grew up, struggling, you came to a moment where you could for the first time see a better future. You could see that people who weren’t so different from you actually made it—over to the other side, that world you thought existed only on TV.

Ana. She had that aura to her, so real it almost spread out from her body like fire.

I woke up to early morning rains. Ana was dead in sleep beside me. I had to piss.
I let myself out. It was still darkish, before the first lightening of dawn. The guesthouse was at the back of the yard, and between it and the main house was the pool. Rains splashed against the water. I went to the side of the guesthouse, behind a wooden shed, and relieved myself. I was naked and thirsty. The rain was warm against my skin. I closed my eyes and just felt it, even tasted it a little, but there wasn't so much to quench. I started back in and then in the pool someone appeared from underwater. I froze as they dipped back below, a form just beneath the surface, a ripple beneath the pockmarks of the rain.

For a minute I stood watching, mesmerized.

Then a lightning bolt flashed.

The swimmer swam quickly to the side and climbed out. It was Celia. She stood dripping on the concrete, grasping for a folded towel. I crouched into a ball behind the shed.

I must have made a sound.

She turned and looked toward the guesthouse. "Ana?"

I held my breath.

"Ana? Is that you? Ana?"

She was scared. I could hear it plainly. I'd heard it in the voices of many of the people whose cisterns I'd broken. Stepping outside at a strange sound, their voices fragile, Hello?

I waited until she went back into her house.

Then I went into the guesthouse, grabbed my pants and shoes, and got out of there.

I called in sick in the morning. No biggie: Celia said there was no sense in giving tickets in the rain. At ten I called Ana. She didn't answer. I ate another bowl of cereal. I watched The Price is Right. I did push-ups and sit-ups. I had a book of poems I'd taken from Ana's and tried to read it but the words were just confusing. I tried her again. Nothing.
I was at Geronimoz by noon. Rains were pissing down and it was supposed to worsen. East Coast baseball games hadn’t started. I blew a few bucks listening to the jukebox. Pool was free, I played alone, kept scratching. I bet the bartender the Mets would beat the Cardinals. I won and he poured me a beer. I wanted to talk to him about all the shit in my life. I tried to start a conversation. I said, “It’s crazy, the way people feel about water. Isn’t it?”

He was wiping out beer mugs. He shrugged.

I tried Ana on the pay phone. No answer. I ordered another beer and nursed it.

Then I thought she was trying to avoid me.

So I walked over.

Every few years in Tucson, floods come rushing down the mountains. Flash floods, they say, but that name’s misleading: there’s a build-up, a slow and gradual force—it’s not like five minutes of rain, then boom! It’s an hour, a day, two days. All this water collects and collects in streams and arroyos and washes, rising higher. And in the desert the ground is hard as concrete. Moisture is foreign so the desert rejects it, denies it entry, and if it rains hard enough and long enough there’s nothing for all that water to do but move and keep moving. It tears through riverbeds and canyons. It washes out underpasses and gardens and even stone bridges in the canyons, bridges put into place by poor workers in the thirties, old Roosevelt’s guys. I’ve seen pictures of those men, smiling tiredly on their finished bridges. Swigging beers in black and white. They look hot. But they’re gone, the bridges are gone, the floods got them.

It’s strange, that in a desert, water destroys.

I walked down Speedway. It was eight pm, usually a quiet hour, but that night was mayhem, as if the rains were driving everyone crazy. Gutters overflowed with frothy black water. Plastic grocery bags swirled in miniature maelstroms. Water streamed
through intersections. Cars were honking, stalled, or driving at five miles an hour. People leaped the torrents with their pants hitched up, t-shirts over their heads. No one had an umbrella. It was still ninety degrees out. It was quieter at Sam Hughes, but by then I was soaked through.

I let myself in the sidegate. As I passed by the lit living room, I saw Ana and Celia sitting inside on a couch. Two little girls sat on the floor, coloring. Crayons everywhere.

Celia was talking to Ana. My shirt in her hands. It was that blue one, the one she liked.

She looked pissed and sad and scared at once.

Maybe I could have interrupted, fixed it all. I don't know. I didn't knock and try.

I went into Ana's guesthouse. There was a twin bed and a card table and one of those ten-dollar fabric armoires. That was it. The table had piles of books and papers. There were more books piled underneath. A notebook on the table had "Budget" written across the top. Another had "Goals." No TV, not even a radio. I wanted to lock the doors. Spend the night there. Read her books. Lay in her bed. She could come back and we would talk, even about the future, I wouldn't say nonsense about gardens, I'd tell her who I really was, find out who she was, too. I only lingered for a minute, though. I was too wet, I didn't want to leave a stain.

I left the book of poems on her pillow.

Then I thought, might as well go overturn some rain buckets.

I went back to the first neighborhood in a drizzle. Car headlights were blurry, and I was a little drunk but relaxed. I hopped one wall, then another, excited to be out again. But at one house after another, nothing: no new water-gathering systems, no new cisterns. I cursed.

I wanted to break things.

I wanted someone to come out after me, to chase me down.
I wanted to run, I wanted to get caught, I wanted to explain myself.

I saved the house with the Japanese glass buoy for last: there, at least, I knew I could destroy something—the canopy, the green light. I could tear the bricks up out of the mud.

I started to pull myself over the wall and heard a voice in the yard. Someone singing.

I stood in the rain and listened carefully, but I couldn't understand.

When the voice stopped and a door closed, I grabbed hold of the wall, ready.

But my fingers were shaking and I couldn't move.

My last stop that night I dropped the truck off at the office and slid a note under the door for Celia, asking her to mail my last check (and any other money I deserved, I added).

A couple days later the girl at the temp office grinned. “Two months! A new record.”

I didn't think it was funny, but I still laughed. She was kind of cute.

• • •

Tucson. What a place.

I left out how some old Mexican women would screech at me and brandish brooms.

It's not me, it's the law! That's what I told everyone. I said, I have kids to feed, too!

I didn't. But I thought to myself, They don't know that. Which made me feel better.

It's amazing how awful a person you once were, how long ago it seems, how foreign.
A couple nights ago I opened my eyes and there was Ana, standing in front of the bed.

Her arms were crossed. She was glaring at me.

I was alarmed by this. “What the fuck?” is what I said.

She blew a kiss at me is how I knew I was dreaming. Just my mind playing tricks.

I don't remember this but everyone tells me it happened far outside Tucson, in the original chapel. That's what my uncle called nature. The family priest gathered me in his arms (priests never hold, they always gather) and laid my skull into a basin of water collected from desert rains where there are no rains, hardly at all, and you know then that the whole ritual has a lot of meaning to it. That's how I was baptized. The other night, after dreaming of Ana, I dreamed I was alone in that place of baptism. A desert, but not the ugly one around Tucson. This desert was white and empty, like a cathedral. There was a sound of dripping water and I needed to drink but the water was hidden, I wandered over enormous white rocks, down sandy gullies. I dropped to my knees and tore at the earth, I took off my shirt and laid it down the way you're supposed to, so water would seep into it, and finally my shirt filled. But with sand.
ELEGY FOR A MOONSHINER

What damage can a pool cue inflict until it splinters and shards? What story threads its way down a mountain road until it slams into the trunk of a tree?

Somehow the name of the tree grows dim until forgotten and a blank is all that remains. His beard, the story goes, was six presidential terms old. In grief, one must rename the world and find grace along the baseboards and cobwebs of the house one's steps used to haunt. In the end, it all comes down to a shelf of empty jars and a brief glance out the back window past the water pump while you pretend to wash the dishes.
The cradle of all there is

It had not been raining that day or the day before,

though the forecast was mostly grim most of the time, as if the talk of rain might keep it away or at least harbor a bit of hope for those outside, such as a friend I saw on campus that morning, an acquaintance, really, and we talked briefly about the leaves, the fires burning, and even the way the days are named by the glow of light above their horizons, which led me to ask her what she was teaching that semester, but she told me she wasn't teaching, which was fortunate because she had found out the day
before that she had cancer,
news that changed the name
of that day in such a way that
I didn’t know where we were
or who we are. Of course,
I asked what we, my wife and I,
could do for her and she
told me to have another baby in such
a way that it seemed like putting one
foot in front of the next or like handing
the husk of a season to the next,
saying: “Here, this is yours because
you will know better than I what
to do with it and what to call it.”
LAUREN HILGER

LACQUERED

Houston, TX 2011

The forest is nothing but Brechtian scaffolding. —Spencer Reece

A woman with
two fortune
cookies unopened
atop her cart. Her
hair white as a
world of ice. This
is my last memory
of New York.

Here in Houston we’re looking at a redhead
in a bib from
the 1600s, a
portrait. What
is the word for
this type of
mortality?

The painting I pass asks me, Do you want something crisp to bring
along? Two green apples? Some tough velvet, a skull, an hour glass?

I don’t remember how to read music,
how to sit at a lacquered piano,
though rosin’s smell is still with me.

How sudden then, as I turn to swoon out of my body, nearly, could
have, felt. My brain angry at lack of control.

What did Dostoevsky smell before his body betrayed him?
Oranges?
Aluminum dreams

I found Kafka in the canned foods section along with Borges, Camus, and Dante. Neatly packaged, with the clean, crisp succinctness of a generic brand. A black paper label with his name printed in thick, black block letters inside a tan rectangle. Borges was green, Camus off-white. I wasn’t sure if there was meaning to this. The cupboard was green. Maybe the significance of the canned authors’ labels didn’t exceed the chemistry and wavelengths of the light spectrum; yet Kafka himself often clothed his characters in symbolism. Up on the highest shelf, Franz Kafka, wrapped in black, did not reflect but merely absorbed light waves.

This was down in the basement, in Bratislava, Slovakia, in a crypt-like space of brick vaulted ceilings painted white. There were three perfectly straight rows of authors: Blake, Eco, Ezra Pound, Goethe, Poe, and others. There was no indication of what exactly it is that’s been captured, contained, and possibly condensed and salted. Across from the cupboard a camera gazed stoically at passersby, at me, routing the images to a small oval screen. I scrutinized myself in this glass eyeball—my bulging thighs, my thinning reddish hair and sun-spotted cheeks—wondering how it was that a few months shy of my 40th birthday, everyone I met in Europe thought I was in my twenties.

At the time, I hadn’t dreamed in over a month—not for all intents and purposes, anyway. I seemed to awake from nothingness, to emerge into consciousness as if taking shape from a primordial clay. On a rare occasion I would wake from a hazy, muted dream of utter plainness, where I did nothing out of the ordinary—brush my teeth, buy some groceries, put on a sweater. I was terrified by this normalcy. I typically have an extremely vivid and entertaining dream life, and traveling generally intensifies it. My dream world is
one of the defining and most relevant features of my life. Generally, I can track my waking experiences through my dreams, identify all the quirky components of my dream world as representations, distortions and metaphors of my wakeful life. I spent two weeks exploring Prague all by myself before my husband joined me, each day amassing little secrets of beautiful sights and narrow passageways; I went to bed giddy from all the fun experiences. Where did they go after I fell asleep? My brain just abandoned them. During five weeks traveling from Prague into Poland and through Slovakia, I'd seen a lot of remarkable sights, learned a lot of interesting history, done a lot of different activities, but I'd been living only half a life—the waking half.

I was intrigued to run across Kafka again in Bratislava, after having spent all that time in his hometown of Prague. One can't help but feel haunted by his presence in Prague, his legacy of forging new literary ground. For one thing, the city has really capitalized on him: Kafka cafes, Kafka bars, Kafka statues and busts, Kafka walking tours, Kafka finger puppets. You are reminded of his existence perpetually, though not in the sense of an incarnate ghost. It never occurred to me that I might see him standing on the Charles Bridge or walking across the Old Town Square. I didn't feel haunted by him as a personal entity so much as by a general presence of something unique, by the potential for a rare access to a particular perception of the world, an ether subtly infusing the city air. So much of the city is unchanged architecturally from Kafka's day, I felt compelled to vault myself into the past to see what he saw. It's not really Franz making a spook of himself; it's we visitors haunting our own selves, trying to see through Franz's eyes.

Every day for two weeks I passed right by the house he once lived in above his father's store, by the palace he studied in, the literary salon he frequented. The Kafka Museum explains how he
was plagued by an unrelenting perception of duality and discord, of
disgust at the superficial lives men must live in business and society,
creating a schism between that world and their private worlds that
was unnatural and destructive. Most people say he had a dream
mind—fragmented, subtle, metaphorical. I might have imagined
him a weird fellow to be around, perhaps intolerable, and that he
lived a lonely existence. But that was not the case at all. He had
numerous lovers and engagements and social circles, friends and
associates. He was adept at maintaining his duality, at containing each
self in its separate sphere, though this is precisely what tortured him.

I always wonder about geometry, about circles and lines. I've
gone on several ghost tours in various cities, not because I believe
in ghosts but because I like tales from the dark side. I like to look
at the city and see the invisible scars of the past. On such a tour in
Victoria, BC, the guide claimed his city to be the most haunted in all
of Canada. He mentioned theories of “ley lines” running through the
earth along which various paranormal or spiritual activities seem to
lie. He pointed out the preponderance of ghost stories that happen
in geographically straight lines. For instance, ghosts might live at 5,
18, 33 and 43 First Street, while over on Second and Third Streets
there are no ghosts at all. Some ghost enthusiasts say that ley lines
already exist in the earth and spiritual phenomena align themselves
to them; others say that ley lines are not preexisting but are defined
by the phenomena that seem to converge like ducks in a row.

I wonder if there could be different kinds of ley lines,
attracting or producing other kinds of phenomena. Perhaps a line
runs through Prague that's not a spirit magnet, but some sort of
creativity magnet, a subterranean meridian that could have fueled
Kafka's extraordinary mind. If so, it was draining the weird and
extraordinary out of me, pulling the dreams right out of my head,
as if absorbing light waves of my subconscious. Maybe this is the
source from which he derived the potency of his thought. Maybe
somehow Kafka was able to tap into this dark line of power running through the earth’s crust that sucked things out of other people—the dreams, the bizarre and undecoded symbolism inhabiting the minds of struggling men. But probably he couldn’t make much coherent sense of it, and it manifested in fragmented visions and augmented metaphors. I often wonder if Kafka himself knew precisely what he was writing.

Bratislava, where Kafka is now kept in cylindrical rest, is a pleasantly strange city with an intimate mixture of architectural decay and ritz, the sparkling and the decrepit peacefully coexisting. Here, the animate and inanimate have a fondness for exchanging places. All around the city, bronze statues masquerade as living people: emerging from manholes, clandestinely taking photos of diners at the Paparazzi café, leaning casually on a park bench. And people paint themselves (with varying degrees of mastery) into a metallic form, standing stock still all day long, occasionally spooking a passerby. Whatever axis of the city’s essence you consider, there is no uniformity, no stability.

My husband and I found a particularly charming bar in which a disheveled, wild-eyed Dali leans out from the wall in 3-D, clutching a liquor bottle in his hand which rests on a shelf screwed into the wall. A pair of legs are dangling from the ceiling as though someone is falling through the floor above, and other people in colorful costumes emerge from the drywall. This is the last of Bratislava I saw, because here beside Dali is where I really slid downhill and soon, barely making it back to the hotel, became violently ill.

We were staying in a tiny cell in an old communist hotel, whose many infractions against cleanliness included dead bugs smashed on the wall left hanging like hunting trophies. It’s the only hotel I’ve been in which provides a list of financial penalties assessed for a wide array of damages. The first ones on the list were “vomit
disinfection” for tile floor (bathroom) and vomit disinfection for carpet (main cell area). I managed not to be charged for damages, despite some unfortunate decisions that had to be made when my body was expelling uncontrollably and simultaneously from both ends of my digestive tract. I could hear as plainly as if they were standing in the bathroom with me the pleasant conversation of a Chinese couple, the sound coming through the bathroom fan. They must have heard me as clearly, retching my guts out, so perhaps I myself was the topic of their conversation, as they listened to me whimper in exhaustion, in fear, not knowing how much more I'd have to endure. They might have been comforting me with their mild voices, “Hang in there, foreign devil, hang in there.” I wanted to call out to them, just in case they were Chinese pharmacists who could heal me, in case they'd brought bags of dehydrated scorpions and crushed seaweed, dried tiger liver and panda dung.

My husband went down to the front desk to ask for more toilet paper. The maid came to the room before he made it back. He was stuck between floors in the elevator; the door opened too far below the flooring for him to crawl out, and he was left punching buttons going up, going down, up and down until finally the door opened correctly at number nine. The maid was calling down the hallway as she approached our door, propped open to allow a breeze to draft through the stuffy cell, “Dobry? Dobry? Dobry Deň?” Inside the bathroom, bent over with my head in the sink and my underwear discarded on the floor, the Chinese couple talking amiably through the fan, I was gripped with fear that the maid would brazenly enter the room to deposit the toilet paper inside the bathroom and witness my completely demoralized state. Did I look anything like a human being? I couldn’t shift my eyes from the sink drain to look at my skin; they were bugging out with compulsive efforts of retching what was now only dribbles of stomach bile. I had a terrifying vision of the Slovak maid with a wheelbarrow full of toilet paper building a wall
at the bathroom door, chuckling malevolently as she entombed me into that pink-tiled hell.

During this eight-hour ordeal, when I lay on the bed between rounds of intestinal evacuation, my husband read out loud to me from Ursula K. LeGuin's *Lathe of Heaven*, which we'd started reading in a chata in the High Tatras in the heart of Slovakia. The title was inspired by Chuang Tse: "To let understanding stop at what cannot be understood is a high attainment. Those who cannot do it will be destroyed on the lathe of heaven." The book was all about dreams—about a man, George Orr, who dreams, and when he awakens, discovers that his dream has become manifest and changed reality. I began to wonder if I was somebody else's nightmare. Maybe even my husband's. We'd had a minor spat earlier that day which was resolved by the eating of a kabob—his suggestion—as a quick late-afternoon meal. Every time I returned from a round in the bathroom he asked, "Why are you so sick? How could you go downhill so fast?" He insisted, "You shouldn't be this sick. This doesn't make sense; I ate the same kind of kabob as you and I'm not sick." He was stuck in this loop, like those you get into in dreams, and I was stuck with him. Me expelling the entirety of my innards and he obsessed with explanation as if I were doing this on purpose and needed to account for my drastic actions. Me: barf, shit, want to die. He: why, why, why? Me: barf harder, shit worse, barf and shit simultaneously, *really* want to die. He: but why? Brazenly ignoring the explicit warning of the tale of George Orr, who dreamed a parade of new realities each time I took respite on the bed.

I swirled around that dumpy cell like a marble on glass, around and around until gravity mercifully pulled me to rest on the bottom. Finally, my last round of retching, my stomach and back muscles straining at their limits, produced two tiny strings of pitch-black material. Almost as if I had nibbled a wee corner of the black label on Kafka's can. I watched the blackness slide down the sink into
the drain, into a pipe that would eventually carry it underground. Then I lay back down into emptiness.

Those strange, nightmarish eight hours—about the length of a normal night's sleep—were my only real contact with a dreamlike world during five weeks of living and traveling in Central Europe. Only then did I regain a layered existence of incongruities, extremities and circularities, dead bugs looming over me from the wall, my husband repeating that he'd like to throw the tiny television out the window, just because he could: the unscreened window on the ninth floor opened wide enough to defenestrate a TV or a body. (The financial penalty for a damaged TV was listed far below vomit disinfection, at an incongruous three hundred Euro for a circa 1980 12-inch screen.) It was as though an echo of Kafka's strange landscapes was reverberating in my hotel room, a sullen gift, like a half-penny thrown to a beggar on the street: Sure, here's a dream for you. So what if it's a nightmare, it's a dream; take it or leave it.

People who say they've been abducted by aliens explain that chunks of their lives are missing. You know, they're driving down the road at 12:35pm and then it's 6:12pm and all that time is just missing from their consciousness. That's what happened to me in Prague and its former Bohemian empire. There's a large chunk of my life missing from my stay there—my dream life—as if someone abducted it. They could be dissecting it or just storing it, maybe smashing it to pieces. I could be the victim of some geomagnetic or spiritual phenomenon, perhaps a biological or space-time anomaly. I'm quite afraid of the sharp blade of a lathe, and truth be told, I'm even a little afraid of Heaven, so rather than risk being destroyed by some existential machine that loathes an incessant questioner, I've tried to limit my research to the discreet scribblings of methodologically-void empiricism.

So I wonder if, in addition to the mysterious current in Prague that can drain dry the deepest wells of subconscious creative
and bizarre thought, there are other lines or currents intersecting this one, and the extracted material can shoot down one of these veins and end up in a cannery or someone's bedroom, pooling on their pillow. Kafka's gift may not have been literary in nature, but merely to be endowed with the properties of an intersecting line, ultimately an unwitting receptacle.

Regrettably, there was no list of ingredients on the canned Kafka. No vitamin A or partially hydrogenated soybean oil, no modified food starch, chicken stock, cockroach wings or Shara's dreams. I guess this is what makes him so fun to contemplate. Once I played a practical joke on my mom in which I removed all the labels from the canned goods in the pantry. I didn't want to get in too much trouble, so I marked some symbols on the metal with a marker and made a key to the contents. My mom threw away the key and preferred instead to shake the cans, feel their weight, and guess what might be in them. (She was impressively accurate.) So we're left with the prospect of shaking and weighing Kafka's can, though I didn't actually, physically do it; it seemed irreverent. Would I have been able to feel the weight of my dreams if they had been in there? Could I have recognized their peculiar sound, sloshing around in the can with thousands of others.

I'm home now, thousands of miles from central Europe. And my dreams have regained their twisted vivacity. I wake up at night inside a castle and it takes me a long time to figure out how to reach my bathroom to pee. So I'm really wondering about the line theory. Let's say there is in fact a ley line in Victoria that runs through the city giving people the power to be reincarnated as ghosts or something, perhaps improving the luminescence of unhappy souls. Now, how far do these lines run, do you think? Victoria lies at 48°25 latitude. Bratislava is situated on 48°09 latitude. This equates to a variance of about 18.5 miles. I don't know precisely how straight these lines
are supposed to be. A discrepancy of 18.5 miles across half the globe seems pretty mild. What if the closest afterlife ley line to Prague is this one at latitude 48 (Prague is at 50°05), so Kafka turns up post mortem, repackaged, in Bratislava? His naked metal can would have once been shiny, reflecting light rather spectacularly; blinding you, even, if it caught a sun’s ray just right as it attempted to penetrate the silver. For the brief moment that Kafka existed without clothing, a plain tin can, it must have been existentially quite painful. Again, a duality: locked inside the darkness of a can that’s radiating brilliance on its other side. Then at last the black suit, glued on tightly, seducing the light into its wood pulp to be absorbed into eternity, for it will never exit the label and return to its origin.

I mostly exist at latitude 39°57. My cabinets are some sort of golden brown wood with black grain, and a little grimy on the bottom. White shelves with flowered shelf paper. There’s nothing remarkable here except in my dream world, thankfully restored. There’s no George Orr to dream a Kafka-like world into reality: food here does not fall from the sky to hungry dogs. I must buy it and store it in the cupboard, then later open it with a tool, and if I’m at all civil, empty it into a clean bowl. Someday the canned Kafka might be hungrily opened with the same mundaneness, when the world runs dry of dream and bizarre and carnivalesque thought.

Maybe I’m packed somewhere far away in my own tin can and I don’t even know it. All my dreams from that Bohemian period might be stuck inside a capped cylinder. Maybe that can of Kafka contains his own dreams, his real dreams from when he was asleep, a life stolen from him. Perhaps it was the unique dissolution of boundaries in Bratislava—where metal and flesh share human form, abandoned decay shares walls with five stars, libraries loan their great authors to kitchen pantries—that created a temporary permeability. For there I was, sick as a dog, in the communist hotel, my mental
state so weakened, George Orr dreaming other realities into existence in the hands of my husband, my physical state dissolved into such depravity, that for that brief time, that interlude in my travels, I didn't have to sleep to dream.
VIA NEGATIVA

O have you seen the devil with his mikroscope and scalpel a-lookin at a kidney with a slide cocked up.
—from Jack the Ripper’s “Openshaw Letter”

My work is the body; I love my work and I want to start again. In the hall of wonders, the terrible colonnade replicates daily: narwhal, shells from the Seven Seas, seven hundred paintings, an egg the Abbot found inside another egg, coconut, basilisk, whale’s teeth, blue blood in a ginger beer bottle. It’s said that in a week one can circumnavigate the whole structure, and indeed St. Euphrosyne is flying over us now, straddling a dowel three inches in diameter. She is heading for the college of mirrors, to the grid of dead where each person has three corpses. Here is Joan: she is in ecstasy; she is cutting through human; she is sitting and her flesh is falling off, all without leaving her cell. Is this so different from our native country, economy of bought drinks and dropped calls, economy of sexual dissonance? Admit it: not long ago, some women were so holy they bricked the women in. They were sick and had visions, honey, brass nights, teeth. Are you different from me? Drunk on terror, caught glance, dropped glass, glossy vitamin smell of spring? Another bit of innards: in the bindery the merchant memoirs shuffle into chronological order. I’m here because the skin is too small, I don’t fit. They won’t fix me just yet. And you are in the sacristy, wonder of manna fallen, foetus, bee. When will you quit separating bones from eggs? The life studies vary weekly—wall of hands, wall of hips. Are you ready to face the wall of the body? In the chancery, the marginal hydras mutter and smoke. The brother on the night-stair falling thinks, Curse it. Hold me so hard I feel my muscles striate.
Animal in my scope

after Dara Wier

P. unpins her arms hangs them on a near-by barbed wire fence
   Her torso's shadow sways
     for the way plants look up reach down
     canoe-rhythm stitching together an animal's wound
   She puffs out her toad chest
   arms dangling in her periphery
   they wave & are every friend she's ever had
   waving goodbye to her

   slow rocket launch follows a fly
   from windowpane to compost pile
     she eat as he eats face first
     The discerning wasps in their search for paper
     She chews
   fist-sized hoards of paper
     spits them at her feet

   The mailman passes the barbed wire & asks
     Are your hands tied?
   No, they hang beside me
     She calls him over
     greets him with her tongue
NOT EVERYONE IS SPECIAL

Last night, Billy Ray discovered he could control birds with his mind. He squeezed his eyes closed, his doughy cheeks rising over his narrow eyes, and Dr. Benta’s parakeet pranced out of its cage and enthusiastically waved at me. Without thinking, I waved back.

I wish I gave it the finger.

I’m smarter than Billy Ray. I work harder. And I’m desperate. Don’t I deserve a break after what I’ve been through the last couple of years? It’s what my oldest daughter would call a non-funny joke that he discovered his Power before me.

I’ve been at the Awakening Institute for two sessions (already saving for a third) and Billy Ray finished in one while barely trying. He lives alone and never launders his shirts. He’s loud and meandering and a geyser of unwanted advice. I used to think he meant well even when he was at his most offensive, but now he just bugs me.

When I finally discover my Power, I hope it blows his away.

For Billy Ray’s last night at the Institute, Dr. Benta brings one of those chocolate chip cookies the size of a manhole cover and a tub of vanilla ice cream that froths over the side the moment he opens it.

“Congratulations, Billy Ray,” Dr. Benta says in his monochromatic voice. His moustache lays over his upper lip like a scarf. He’s probably sad that he won’t get Billy Ray’s five hundred dollars a week anymore. It’s expensive to study with Dr. Benta, but he’s the best in the business. Out of his forty-two online reviews, there’s only one negative. And that was only because the woman didn’t like the Power she discovered. As if Dr. Benta has anything to do with that.
“I feel blessed,” Billy Ray says. “I just know it’s going to happen for Cameron next.” So condescending. Of course I’m going to discover my Power next. I’m the only other one here.

“Cameron can gain strength from you,” Dr. Benta says, and I bet Billy Ray’s heart quivers.

Billy Ray rubs his hands across his sagging stomach. “I feel like I can do anything. Like I’m the most powerful man in the world.” He swivels his bulk toward me. “It’s going to turn your life around, man.” Dr. Benta nods as he carves a huge piece of the cookie with a plastic knife.

If my Power was the ability to choke someone from across the room, it would be happening right now. Instead, Billy Ray rips off a chunk of the cookie with his stubby hands.

I don’t know why he’s so happy. He controls birds. It’s not like he can fly or walk through walls or read minds or has super-human strength. If I find out after all this time (and money) that I have something as ridiculous as Billy Ray’s bird Power, I’m going to use it to kill myself so I can die ironically. Or I’ll pay someone to make me forget so I can return to the 5% minority of the population that hasn’t discovered their Power.

The only problem is then Monica will never take me back.

“Do you still love Mom?” Candace asks on Saturday morning. Camille is still asleep, wrapped in a blue blanket on the couch, her brown hair covering her face.

“Absolutely not.”

Candace shakes her head. At thirteen, she’s smarter than I’ll ever be. She wants me to get over Monica and move on. Like Monica did. She asks the same question every time she and her sister are over for the weekend, waiting for the day when my answer will be true.

The thing with Candace is you can’t lie to her. Using only
her olfactory sense, she knows if someone is telling the truth. She says the truth smells like apple pie. Lies smell like egg salad. It's as simple as that.

Candace is going to be tall like her mother. But unfortunately, she's been saddled with my looks. Which means that her forehead is a little too small, her eyes placed a little too high. Her ears a little too low. She's interesting to look at, but not necessarily beautiful.

"I worry about you, Dad," she says.

"You're not old enough to worry about anything," I say.

She crosses her arms and juts out her chin.

"How's Camille?" I ask.

Candace glances at her sister on the couch. "She's fine. She likes to disappear and then sneak up on Frankie. He pees a little on the floor every time. It's partly funny." Frankie is our Dalmatian. Monica said he could come with me when I moved out, but my apartment doesn't allow dogs.

"She understands that being able to disappear is not a joke?"

"Yes, Dad."

When Camille turns eleven next month, she'll sign the Goodwill Accord pledging that she will not use her Power to break the law. In fact, she'll become a role model, expected to do charitable works. Only people with premium Powers have to sign it. (Billy Ray and his birds shouldn't hold their breath.) If you're caught breaking the Accord, they have a guy for that. His Power is that he can take yours away forever.

"You don't tell your mom I still love her, do you?"

"No. I say you're over her. I even told her you went out on a date."

"Thanks."

"I said the lady was really pretty."

"Don't get carried away."

It's not like Monica will ever know. Her Power is that she
can get the wrinkles out of clothes by patting them lightly with her delicate hands.

Monica fell for me because I was the first person who didn't laugh at her ironing skills or ask if she was a maid. But then again, I know a guy who can turn pepperoni into sausage. He envies my ignorance.

"Your Power doesn't define who you are," she said the night we met at the Happy Flamingo, a straw floating on its side in her daiquiri.

"Tell me about it," I said.
"Yet it seems like it's all anyone talks about."
"If you go on a date with me, I won't bring it up once."
She smiled at me, and I caught my first glimpse of her front tooth, endearingly twisted at a forty-five-degree angle and revealing a small hint of her perfectly pink tongue.

"Deal," she said. We were married six weeks later.

My first night alone with Dr. Benta he pulls out the list I made at the beginning of session one. He spreads it on the table but it's so crumpled I can barely read it. If Monica were here, she could smooth every wrinkle, make it pristine. I wish she'd been able to do that with me.

"I thought you might like to see this again," Dr. Benta says.
"I don't know. It's sort of like a failure list, don't you think?"
"I think of it as a progress report."

The girls had helped me create it on one of our weekends. "I need to make a list of Powers I'd like to have," I said to them and they stared at me with their glistening eyes. "Help me brainstorm."

"Being invisible," Camille said, her blue blanket draped over her shoulders as she leaned on the kitchen table. To illustrate, she blinked from sight leaving her blanket floating in mid-air. It was made of rabbit fur; the only material we found that she couldn't take
with her when she disappeared. Monica and I made her keep that blanket around her so we always knew where she was. Once Camille had fallen asleep while she was invisible and we thought she’d been kidnapped. Well, Monica did. She always expected the worst.

“You should pick ones that you want,” Candace said. “Ones that would make you happy.”

With their help, I wrote such gems as: Turning green beans into hundred dollar bills (Candace hates green beans), understanding dogs (Camille wanted to know if Frankie liked her better than Candace), and being able to talk with the two of them telepathically (they both specified that it work over great distances).

After I dropped the girls off with Monica, I added: Going back in time, erasing mistakes, and increasing likability. Then I read through the whole thing again. There was nothing that said what I truly wanted.

So I added one at the very top: Protecting my girls at all times.

Dr. Benta bends over the table, his face hovering above my list. “I remember many of these.” I can’t tell if he’s laughing. “We crossed most of these off in our first session. Though I think we’ve been successful with one of them.”

He lifts his neck up to me, still bent at the waist like a crane about to take flight. “I think you’re much more likable,” he says.

“Is that a compliment?”

“You can check it off the list. It helps to have a goal.” He sinks down in his chair and gestures to me. “Sit, sit.”

I sit on the hard plastic chair and cross my ankles in front of me.

“I’m struck again by how many of these items are traits. Personality issues. It’s important for you to discover your Power, but

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it's not going to fill in your rough spots. It won't make you a better person. Do you understand?"

"Yes." But I need it to change my life.

Dr. Benta tugs gently on the right side of his moustache. "What would you like to do?" he says.

"It's all there on the list."

"I don't think so."

Maybe he's right, but I won't admit it. "Look again."

"The one I keep coming back to is right at the top," he says. "Protecting your daughters. It's too abstract to be a Power. It would need to be much more specific. But that's the closest you came."

"I would do anything for those girls."

Dr. Benta narrows his eyes. "There's been research that suggests we subconsciously control our Powers. Essentially, we get what we want. That's why I have every new student make this list. More than half the time, their Power is on there or in a slight variation."

I think about my friend with the sausage/pepperoni thing. Monica's ironing. Dr. Benta's ability to grow and retract his own hair. This is bullshit. Nobody wants those.

Dr. Benta pulls his moustache again and wraps it around his chin. "Possibly, you weren't meant to discover your Power. Why not concentrate on what you do know? Your family."

"Everyone discovers their Power," I say.

"Take this list home with you and think about."

I get to my feet and brush the list to the floor. "Are you giving up on me?"

"Of course not."

"Then do your job."

• • •

The last person I want to see at this point is Billy Ray. But
he's standing outside with a bluebird on his shoulder. Like the song. In fact, he's whistling that damn song.

The bird wags its tiny wing at me and my hand jumps to return the wave. Why do I keep doing that? Billy Ray smiles, his lips wet from whistling.

"We just wanted to check on you."

"You and the bird are a we now?"

"Me and all birds." I wish I could make that bird peck him in his smug face.

"I need to get home."

"There's only a few more classes left in this session," he says.

"Don't you want to discover your Power before another group joins you?" The bird leaps from his left shoulder and glides over to his right shoulder. He's showing off now.

"I don't need your concern."

"I can help you."

"I don't think so."

"Let's get a drink," he says and the bird nods vigorously. There's no way that is happening. That's how all of this started in the first place.

Billy Ray and four others joined at the beginning of my second session. To celebrate a fresh start after a disappointing first session, I went out for drinks with the group immediately following class.

If I'd known we were going to the Happy Flamingo, I would've skipped. I made sure not to sit in the same booth where I met Monica. In fact, I kept my back to it the whole time. For the first few years of our marriage, we would return to that booth on our anniversary, and those were some of my happiest memories.

That might be why I drank four and a half daiquiris with my classmates and then told Billy Ray everything.

Kirk, who discovered he could breathe underwater the
second week of class, was the first one to leave the Happy Flamingo. Then Chandra left, who a month into the session was pleased to find she could change her eye color. Rick and Tammy left the bar together and I’m pretty sure they got married not long after Rick began shrinking to the size of the blue mailbox in front of the Institute and Tammy discovered something so embarrassing that she never told any of us. From what I heard of her Power though, Rick was a lucky guy.

Billy Ray and I were the last ones in the booth.

“Tell me everything,” he said.

I experienced every cliché of the inebriated: Walls crumbled, words crashed, barriers were broken.

And I cried.

Candace and Camille stand at the front of the classroom. Dr. Benta has already grown his moustache down to his ankles and then up into a handlebar in an attempt to set them at ease. He’s also put away all the guns, flame throwers and toxic chemicals.

“I know this is a little unorthodox,” Dr. Benta says, “but Shield Powers are the hardest to discover.”

My girls duck their heads shyly.

“Let’s begin.” Dr. Benta crosses to them. “Do you like candy?”

They both nod.

“If you get in my car I have a whole bag of candy.”

They look to me to see if it’s okay. “Just pretend like I’m not here,” I say.

Dr. Benta gently grabs Candace’s arm. “I mean you harm,” he says like the unemotional voice in my car’s navigation system.

Candace plugs her nose.

“This isn’t going to work, Dr. Benta,” I interject. “Candace knows if you’re telling the truth.”
"All that matters is that you pretend it is true, Cameron. Find the emotional place you would go if I was really trying to kidnap your daughters."

Camille drops her blanket to the floor and disappears. I smile. He has no idea what he's gotten himself into with my girls.

Dr. Benta kneels in front of Candace. "Do you like animals?"
"Yes."
"Which ones are you scared of?"
"Snakes."
"I can do that." Dr. Benta exits the room at his clipped pace.

"Camille?" I say.
"I'm still here." Her voice leaps from the back of the room. "He's weird."

Dr. Benta returns and just as I expected, he has an aquarium with a snake in it. What I didn't expect is that it's a cobra curled on a small pile of wood chips.

He places the aquarium in front of Candace and unrolls a thread attached to small latch on top. He steps back about ten steps until the thread is taut. Candace looks to me, her eyes swallowing her face.

"Are you going to let that out?" she asks.

Dr. Benta doesn't answer. Instead, the cobra rears up and spreads its hood, ready to attack.

I get to my feet. "That thing stays in its cage."

Dr. Benta lightly pulls the thread and the top yawns open and shut like a mouth. I can almost hear it heckling me. Even the aquarium thinks I'm a failure.

"Dad? Is he going to let it out?" Candace presses her shoulder blades against the chalkboard.

I focus on the cobra, my body shaking with effort. I've
somehow got it in my head that I can make it fall asleep.

“Dad?”

Dr. Benta wraps the thread around his finger and pulls again. The lid opens another inch and then he lets it fall loudly. I force myself to discover the Power that will make this stop.

“Ow!” Dr. Benta yells and grabs his shin. While I’m sitting here doing nothing, Camille has taken action. She kicked Dr. Benta as hard as she could in the shin, and without being able to see her, I know that her nose is wrinkled and her teeth are clenched in concentration. Unfortunately, Dr. Benta forgets about the thread tied around his finger and when he jumps back, the lid flies off of the aquarium and crashes to the floor.

I leap the table and run, my blood pounding in unison with my feet against the floor. I trip on the leg of a chair and I’m suddenly airborne. For one glorious moment I think I may fly, and then I hit the ground like a belly flop into a shallow pool and all of the air rushes from my chest.

My head is inches from the cobra. The snake snaps and hisses, venom sliding down the side of the aquarium. A thick piece of glass runs along the top, trapping it inside.

The lid was a fake.

A large black bird glides from streetlight to streetlight behind us, its eyes boring into me. You need to stop kicking people in the shins,” I say to Camille.

“I was trying to help Candace.”

“It’s her signature move, Dad,” Candace says.

“Why was he attacking her with the snake?” Camille says and wraps her blanket around her shoulders.

“He wasn’t,” I say.

“I couldn’t smell anything,” Candace says. “I didn’t know.”

“He never answered you. So there was no lie. Dr. Benta
is a smart guy.” As we approach the house, I look behind us but the bird is gone. Maybe I’m paranoid.

Monica steps onto the porch and makes that pouty face that she’s been doing lately. As if she turned all of her love into pity. “How’d it go?” she asks.

She is and will always be the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. She’s wearing a dark pair of jeans and the t-shirt we got at a burger place when we drove across country together before Candace was born. I wish I could still make her smile.

I should add that to the list.

“Not how we hoped,” I say.

“Candace got attacked by a snake,” Camille says and spins in a circle with her blanket extended above her head.

Monica lowers her eyebrows.

“Not exactly,” I say.

I hug the girls and they run up the four cement stairs to my old one-story home. It looks so warm in there.

“Why don’t we all get dinner tomorrow night?” I say.

“Oh, Cameron.”

“Why did that deserve an ‘Oh, Cameron?’”

The girls slip inside while Frankie barks with glee.

“We have plans tomorrow night,” Monica says.

Either she’s lying or she has a date. Both options suck.

One morning in the middle of my perfect life, Monica told me she’d met someone else.

“He has a Power, doesn’t he?”

“Yes,” she said. “But that has nothing to do with it. You don’t fight for anything.”

“What?”

She sighed as if she’d told me this a million times. “You let someone else get that promotion at work. You didn’t barter for a
better price on our car. You didn’t send back your dinner last week when they prepared it incorrectly. You didn’t ask to see the manager when that cashier was rude to me.”

“Wait. You’re leaving me because I’m not a jerk?”

Her eyes blurred with tears. “There’s no way to break this down into simple terms. You’re always trying to do that.”

“What’s his Power?”

“I told you. It doesn’t matter.”

A week later, I was in an apartment and my daughters were on a first name basis with Monica’s boyfriend, who I later found out could walk on water. How could I ever compete with something so biblical?

I told all of this to Billy Ray the night we got drunk at the Happy Flamingo. “I’m doing it for her,” I said. “I moved up at work. I enrolled at the Institute. I bought new clothes. When I discover my Power, I’m going to pursue her like we’re in high school and we’ve never known love before.”

It wasn’t until that night that I realized what a fool I’d been.

I hadn’t fought for Monica either.

I see my story on Billy Ray’s face when I walk up to my apartment. He’s sitting on the steps, his gut sagging over his pants. Two pitch black birds the size of roosters stand next to him cooing gently and nuzzling his hands. The three of them look up at the same time which completely unnerves me.

“You’ve been following me,” I say.

“Checking in on you,” Billy Ray says. “I don’t understand why Monica wouldn’t have dinner with you. Doesn’t she see how hard you’re trying?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“You made it my business. I’m emotionally invested.”

“Get uninvested.”
Billy heaves himself to his feet and the two birds flank him, their wings extended defensively. “I’m your friend,” he says.

I pause and take a deep breath. “I know you’re concerned about me. But this is something I have to do on my own. I don’t have time for friends right now.”

He rubs his cheek as if I slapped him. “Sure. I understand. I just feel like we really hit it off that night in the bar.”

“We did, okay. We did. I didn’t mean to say so much, though. I tend to suffer alone.”

“You think it’s hard for you? What about me? I was a fat guy in his forties with no Power and no friends. You had a wife and kids. Something to look forward to.” The birds open their beaks and sway from foot to foot like boxers ready to enter the ring. “That night in the bar. You helped me. You made me feel important. I discovered my Power for you. So I could help you.”

“That’s really nice, man. But I don’t see how you can help me.”

“You haven’t even given me a chance. You probably don’t give anyone a chance.”

“I’ve heard enough.” I brush past him as the birds caw and swipe at my pants. The birds screech loudly as I open the front door, their wings beating frantically. My neighbors’ lights snap on above me.

I turn to him and the birds fall silent. “You know you’re not doing this for her,” he says. “You never were.”

On the last class of my second session, Dr. Benta brings the massive cookie and ice cream, just as he did for everyone who left before me. “I’m proud of the progress we’ve made,” he says. “That’s why I brought the cookie.”

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Denslow 77
“Do you have stock in this company?”

He laughs and begins cutting a slice with a plastic knife. Even though we are the ones finding ourselves, he always takes the first piece.

“Remember. I don’t want you to try to discover your Power. Find a hobby. Watch a lot of TV. Go to the movies. Anything to distract you.”

“Doctor’s orders?”

“Indeed. And then we’ll start again in two more sessions.”

“And you say you’ve had to do this before?”

“Yes. Some people get obsessed and their Power burrows even deeper. You can’t always be looking for it. Sometimes, you have to let it look for you.”

I shake my head. “Whatever you say.” I’m already enrolled at the Better Self Institute across town.

“Do you not like chocolate chip cookies?” Dr. Benta’s moustache retracts to a small strip above his lip, like Hitler.

“I do.”

“You never have any.” He grins and takes a huge bite of the cookie.

I look around the room at the rickety desks and the empty animal cages and the sheets of metal and the three refrigerators full of food. I was so sure when I started that this would be the place for me.

“Oh, what the hell,” I say. I reach into the box and rip off a chunk of dry cookie. Might as well get something for my time here.

The girls are restless on Saturday. Camille runs through the apartment a few times, her blanket billowing behind her, until my neighbor comes up and asks us to keep it down. Candace keeps opening a book and then sighing and closing it.

My new teacher at the Better Self Institute has asked me
to make a list of the Powers of everyone I know. For the last ten minutes, I've been trying to decide if I should include Billy Ray. Not that it matters.

"Dad," Candace says from the couch. "Will you tell Camille to stop sneaking up on me?"

"I'm not!"

Candace pinches her nostrils closed and turns toward me. "She lies because she knows I hate that smell."

Camille laughs and reappears across the table from me. "Put your blanket on, honey," I say.

"It's really nice outside," Candace says.

"I'm almost done here and then we'll go get milkshakes."

"Yes!" Camille says and jumps onto the couch next to Candace.

I stare at the paper in front of me. This shouldn't be so hard. I add Billy Ray and his birds. But I put them at the very bottom.

With milkshakes in hand we decide to walk into town. Camille wants to look at the dogs in the pet store, and Candace wants to go to the library.

The air is crisp but I'm sweating by the time we go the ten blocks. A few guys fly overhead and we're passed by someone who runs so fast we only see a blur of light. A kid jumps to the second story of a bakery so he can do a trick on his skateboard while another kid stretches up from the ground to tell him something. I try to block them all out.

"Thanks, Dad," Candace says and then something dark and feathery yanks her into the sky. Her milkshake thumps to the ground and oozes from the top.

Before I can even process what's happening, Camille is whooshed away as well and her blanket slips to the ground beside me.

I look up to find both of my girls suspended from the claws

_Denslow_ 79
of over a dozen hawks each. Camille disappears but the birds struggle under her weight. The birds raise them higher and higher until they are five or six stories above me.

“Help!” Candace screams.

Adrenaline courses through my body and my hands shake. My left hand goes numb and I realize I’ve crushed my milkshake in my fist and I’m covered with strawberry ice cream. I wipe my sleeve across my eyes.

“Hey. Cameron.”

Billy Ray leans from the building on the corner. “Now what are you going to do?”

“Don’t you hurt them,” I say as lights pop and explode in my peripheral vision.

Billy Ray smiles and the birds rise a little higher. “Bet you wish you went for that drink with me the other night.”

“Are you going to drop them?”

“What do you think?” he asks. Candace convulses above me. She won’t be able to smell anything with that answer.

I quickly scan the street. If I shimmy that drainage pipe I can reach the ledge under the window and pull down the fire escape. I’ll race up two stories and then jump to the streetlight. From there, I can slide along the banner stretched across the street that is advertising the farmer’s market on Wednesdays. That will take me to the clock on the bank and from there I just need to scale two more stories to the window washer’s portable ladder. I will pull it to the roof and extend it out to the birds.

Or I could stand here and try to figure out my Power.

“Daddy. Please help us!”

Billy Ray stares at me expectantly.

I grab the drainage pipe and start climbing.
CORMORANT STAGECRAFT

—for Caitlin LaCourse Ryan and Kepler-22b

"Venturing into the sun to smoke
I am proof of nature and all its declarations."

—Ariana Reines

Kitten is my favorite spirit animal, a totem to conquer my various forgivable, discordant planes of constriction. But it is the cormorant I surrender to for my most morbid of human needs. A cormorant DIVES into subconscious water-worlds to resurface somewhere new, and agitates my soul into happiness. When I was a boy I yearned for webbed fingers and toes, and was grateful to Benjamin Franklin for inventing swim flippers. Telling Ryan Eckes about this new (Soma)tic exercise he said, "That's what I try to do with every poem, I try not to drown."

What animal will you require yourself to meet for this exercise? I wore nylon stockings on my hands, then DOVE into the morning ocean off Virginia Beach, American fighter jets howling across the coastal trails, deafening the gulls, frightening the dolphins, and me. Eggs in the sand, nest in the dunes, a wind where all instruction flattens my eager crest. Love in a cormorant call compels a vibratory trance throughout a feral heart, lungs, liver.
Draw eight pictures of your spirit animal in different phases of your enactment of their lives. On the back of each write a message. Write a bit of confession from the bird, hippo, or alligator you choose to be. Create an email account for this exercise to include at the end of the message. Leave the pictures on the subway, in the bathroom at a museum, or on the counter at a coffee shop. Anyone who writes you must receive your animal’s reply. Your animal correspondence is YOUR TRUE correspondence! All your notes from the exercise are for the poem(s) you will create.

THANK YOU FOR MIXING WITH MY EMOTIONAL CIRCUITRY

rollercoasters are my favorite form of transportation

what is bribery in poetry going to prove?

pluck me out of my gown throw me against your song

I claim a hundred feet of air above my head

Conrad 83
a murmur of sparrows
flies in flies out keeping
me nauseous with love
making use
of tiny instruments
needing their
music absorbed

HOW DARE
the mayor of
Philadelphia refuse
our collective joy of
rollercoasters
over buses
tally your
math again
I love being a
statistic involving
spun sugar on a stick
and instability

counted upwards
of a thousand
drops of saliva

we can read
ANYTHING
go out and read
the engine’s cold
throttle left over
night in one
position

love came
breathing
against me I did not
mind the captivity

elevating these
harmed avionics
of the brain
climbING the track
ROARing downhill
reborn through the S-curve

the extortion of poetry
an opera mounting
the bed sheets we
won't stop it when
we know we must

my critical review of
your little daisy staring
staring staring staring
STARING until it grows

Conrad 85
VENA CAVA

The cell-swirling heart was built to try,
to pulse pulse through the breastbone,
sleepless as a scratched eye. It is a muscle

it bruises, taking in blood, letting out blood
so when it bruises, it purples open in the plasmic
tissue of compassion, of kneaded dough.

Or it won't. Or it does beat back but jagged
like the fractured clavicle, the easiest bone
to break, ten pounds of lateral force & it tents

skinward like prayerhands. Compare that
to the twelve hundred pounds of pressure
it takes to sever a femur, unless eaten away,

already breached with bad blood in the marrow.
Ask the man who swims in a riptide what a mouth
full of kelp tastes like, and he might tell you

the weight of thinking is a spell of worms
burrowing one green apple that never rots
but with each bite repaints itself green, inviting

the worms back to eat. He might tell you
that it matters what you find in the undertow,
or just shudder. But it matters if you are willing
to bite down on chances, even if you salt
your tongue on splintered driftwood,
it might relimb itself in the hidden circuitry.

It's not easy, all this dreaming of resurrection.
Living well is even harder. Though when I do live
in accord with my own bounty, there is this
unnerving gratitude, grassy & electric in particles,
as the ocean I breathe this morning holds no diagnosis,
beyond the open bedside window.
Today, I am antilithic. A lithoclast. A stonebreak. My dog has been urinating blood—the vet says she has bladder stones, and as I write this, she will go into surgery in an hour, my bark-honey. I am against it, her bladder in its lithecstasy.

When the vet diagnosed her, the first thing I thought was how strange it was that we can create stones in our bodies—we are each our own earth, a piss-flower geology within the petrific stress of a corpus, with a personal tectonics. I saw the cluster of white pebbles in her bladder on the x-ray.

I had just come from a vacation in southern Utah, been thinking about rocks for weeks. I had been trying to make sense of the layers—that the Navajo sandstone at the top of the rocks in Zion is the same layer of sandstone in the middle of Capitol Reef and the same near the bottom of formations at Arches near Moab. In Arches, a layer called the Dewey Bridge Member sits atop the Navajo sandstone, the Dewey layer a thick, red portion of the Entrada sandstone that stretches above it as orange as western evening clouds.

The Navajo sandstone lithified from the pressure of its own accumulation; it began as dunes blown into Utah from the north and northwest during the Early Jurassic period, 206-180 million years ago. Later, during the Middle Jurassic, 180-140 million years ago, the Entrada sandstone was sullage deposited by rivers running through southeastern Utah. It was mudflats, beaches, and dunes, until it, too, hardened to stone. The stratification would be lost beneath surface if not for pressure from the Pacific Plate pushing against the North American, lifting the Colorado Plateau up above
sea level, during the Paleocene era, 65-55 million years ago. The Plateau’s uplift exposed the rocks we saw in Zion, Capitol Reef, Lake Powell, Monument Valley, and Moab, and it continued to rise until in some places it exceeds 10,000 feet in elevation.

In dog bladders, stones form from an overabundance of minerals, in my dog’s case, struvite, or ammonium magnesium phosphate. The struvite crystallizes in the urine, and the crystals harden into stones. The condition is called canine urolithiasis, and the stones are referred to as “uroliths.” This day of my dog’s surgery, my husband takes me out to breakfast and to the bookstore to take my mind off of it. I am so wound up that I can’t look at anything but board games, the bright red boxes and their descriptions of rules I already know. I wait and wait for the call that the dog is OK.

That dog is what I have. And what I mean by that is I’m one of those people who treat their dogs as the children they don’t have. I don’t dress her up, except maybe in her skeleton costume at Halloween, and I don’t take her out in a stroller, but she’s my favorite running partner, my nap collaborator, and my someone-to-feed. She’s the only pet I’ve ever chosen myself—my parents had cats and a dog, and when my husband moved in with me, he brought his cats, but I rescued this dog from an owner who kept her confined to a porch where she had to sleep, eat, drink, urinate, and defecate all in the same place, which does not feel natural for dogs. Especially for a blue heeler like her, bred to run on cattle drives across the outback. Her owner didn’t want her anymore, was going to have her put down. My husband was gone for the year on a business trip. That dog and I needed each other and still do.

In Monument Valley, my husband and I stayed at Goulding’s Lodge, tucked into a hillside made of Permian Organ Rock shale and

de Chelley sandstone, deposited 299-251 million years ago and red with iron oxide, hematite (from the Greek for “blood stone”). We ate lunch next to a German couple and their three small children. They jabbered in German until one of the kids got to a maze in his activity book that had instructions he couldn’t read. His mother read, in English, “Help the sheep get back to the hogan.” I started to cry. Uncontrollably. I wanted to take someone out to lunch, feed him a half-size Navajo taco, and read his maze instructions to him. My husband and I had been diagnosed with infertility and had an appointment to see the specialist when we got back to Salt Lake City. I couldn’t take it—why were they so over-blessed with their three children when all I had was a dog who urinated blood? Who, admittedly, looked super-cute in a skeleton costume and had a smile bigger than the German children’s and eyes just as deep brown? But who couldn’t, admittedly, complete a maze, ask me to read maze instructions to her, or ask me anything, really. She would never surprise me with what she learned at school or say something like, “When I want to be dapper I wear my skateboarding shoes,” or brush her teeth next to me at night. My husband paid for lunch and I slunk out with my head down, hoping no one would see my wet eyes.

I’m reading the rules to *Yahtzee* (“Object: Roll dice for scoring combinations, and get the highest score”) when I get the call; the dog made it through surgery, had been surprisingly well behaved, and could be picked up the next day. When I go in to get her, the doctor has one set of stones washed and sealed in a canine-prescription-drug vial and another, unwashed, in another vial. I had been secretly hoping that she would give me the stones, but I didn’t know how to ask. She seems genuinely fascinated by the stones, says, “Sorry the vet tech didn’t wash these off; you can’t really see them

very well with all that blood. Those that I washed, you can see really well." She shakes them and smiles. (Smiles!). The washed uroliths are large, four of them each as big as a hunk of gum. The unwashed are a collection of small river rocks, the kind they sell at gem stores for children to paw through looking for precious stones, but covered in my dog's blood. Blood stones. I shudder when I think that all of this was inside her. I feel it as a sour ache in the back of my mouth. I put both vials in my purse.

The dog goes on a special diet called "urinary s/o." The stones were alkaline, so this diet is supposed to balance her pH level by being highly acidic. Apparently, it's very fatty; "weight gain" is a side effect. She loves it so much that when I mix it with her old food, as you're supposed to in order to acclimate her digestive system, she spits out the old food onto the floor. Her incision is closed with a phalanx of little metal staples. To view them hurts me—she looks like a dog cyborg, perhaps bionic. I can't imagine how she isn't in pain, that metal puncturing her skin, except that I give her two dog-treat-flavored painkillers every day. She loves those so much that the sight of a pill bottle makes her sit at attention, she, a gourmand in her convalescence.

For the first couple of days, she's groggy and sleeps on a cushion she's pulled off the couch to use on the floor. Day three she wants to go for a run, but is forbidden. I run alone, miss the children telling me that they like my dog, that my dog is cute, that my dog can run fast!, can they pet my dog? But I finish faster, not having to stop to pick up her poop or wait for her to smell the fire hydrant, the tree, the fence, the yucca plant, the telephone pole...

She wears an Elizabethan collar, which she first feels is a punishment but later decides is a puzzle. We find the first collar on the floor in the hall after she jumps on our bed, mysteriously collar-
free. When she wears the second collar, we learn how she got the first one off; she rammed it into the bathtub so that the plastic cracked, then wore it until the crack went all the way through and the collar peeled off of her neck.

The second collar stays on after I duct-tape it both up-and-down and around. She doesn’t understand why she can’t go for walks and is frustrated that she has trouble going through doors—the collar catches on the baseboard or the door jam or the carpet. She can’t even sleep in her crate on her favorite blanket because she can’t get her head through the door.

Finally, two weeks pass and she can get her staples out. Even though I’ve been giving her an antibiotic religiously, I worry that they’re going to say the cut is infected, or hasn’t healed, and she’ll have to have the staples longer. But they don’t. They take her into the back—she looks at me in panic the moment she realizes that she’s going without me, and my heart clenches—and she comes out just minutes later, pulling at her leash, ready to eat the treats the receptionist keeps on her desk. We drive home. She gets a three-mile run the next day.

My husband and I go to the infertility doctor and find out that we’ll have to do in vitro fertilization if we want to have our own biological child. We cry for days, spend much of our time after work crying together while watching television. A conversation would be too pessimistic—neither of us knows what to say to make us feel better, or we would have said it, and to tell a joke or even be optimistic about our situation feels like disrespect for our grief. We have to have the TV on so there’s a possibility that something funny or uplifting will happen. As if we couldn’t help cheering at the Rockies’ home run, please forgive us, unborn baby, because the signal was just coming into our home and we just happened to be there. We’re always sad about you, baby-ghost, even when we’re happy.

I scratch the dog inside her ears, which I discovered she liked
only when she was in the collar—she kept trying to scratch her head with her back legs and kept getting only plastic. It made me feel useful in a way I haven’t before—I was the person who could take care of that problem, the itchy ear. It was my responsibility. That’s the kind of relationship I’m looking for, one in which I’m expected to take care of a bunch of little kindnesses over a long period of time, so that they add up to taking care of someone. Something that built itself up from an accumulation of itself, a kind of autochthonic love, like sandstone, first an amalgamation of discrete grains of sand until, under the pressure of its own weight, it solidifies. That’s the way I want to be with the person who will live inside my body until she’s ready to be born.
That morning we became engaged. Naked, wound so tight around him that his face was my only landscape, I told him yes. *I will marry you*, I said. *My fate is yours. I will never leave you.* He drew back slightly and regarded me. False papers were coming, he promised, taking my chin in his hands. As he turned my face to profile I felt the corners of his eyes turn down. Still, we made love again before he left.

He stole out of my flat before dawn, of course. And on his way out, as always, he picked up the photograph near the door and studied it. It was his favorite, a lead-colored close-up of my Tante Miriam—her face pale in powder and lipstick, her heavy gaze tipped up and far, beyond the cameraman’s velvet hood. She had been a dancer in Berlin and rather well known. One of the best people, the worst people: the artists, the firebrands—back in what we were forced to understand as the good old days: the hungriest years, when fifteen million Reichsmark wouldn’t get you a bag of birdseed. Before everything began to vanish.

I listened to his footsteps until they disappeared, then made tea from yesterday’s leaves. I returned to my article: “Disintegration of the Self.” A biologist, Hermann viewed philosophy—and thus, my life’s work—with a skepticism one normally reserves for the mystical. But I am as enthralled by empirics as he. And though from time to time I have found my own strength in the faith of the patriarchs, I find that most matters—my forced resignation from the university included—will be solved by the steady application of reason. Reason: it salves the sharp angles of the world. It reveals transcendence for what it is: a human experience.

I wrote in an even hand for one hour, then paused to look out the window. In spite of the cancer eating us all, in München that
morning the snow fell kind upon the city and sat fat as cotton caps upon her red rooftops. I remembered that I was to be married and I glowed deep within. Though we had nowhere to go and no way to live, I felt safe for one single, irrational moment. As though perhaps for once, for just one day out of a lifetime, I could stop striving and simply be still.

The day pinkened around me. When the light was broad I went to the sink, washed my kettle and cup, and set them on a tea towel to dry. Then knocking: one, two, three. Just so. And before I could step to, there they were. Enormous, irresistible, young. Hände hoch, they ordered. I stretched my arms up. Water rolled down the cheeks of the porcelain kettle and seeped like wet, gray clouds into the towel. Sonst jemand im Haus? They asked me over and over. I explained it to them again: schon weg. Brüder, Onkeln—everyone else was already gone.

All German men look alike: tall, fair, with icy eyes and cheekbones that even now make me want to sculpt them like so much clay: my nails tearing through their cheeks and ripping their flesh into thickened meat-strips between my fingers. From down the hall I heard the confused gabbling of my neighbor, Frau Silber. I heard her teenaged son snarl, likely aware that he spoke his last words. He made them count: Ihr seid doch Unmenschen. Ihr gemeine Nazi Ficker.

And then it was dark.

I awoke with my head in another woman’s lap. She was Silesian—her speech was not clear like German, but a heap of z’s and sh’s which she repeated over and over again. Others were packed around us, crowing and clawing like animals in a fire. Dachau is only a few kilometers away and so our journey ended as quickly as it began. People have published long records of memories of trips like this one, full of images, thoughts, smells, fears. I remember

Maurer 95
nothing but this woman's smothered refrain: *Firma nie przejdzie z ojca na syna:* Blood in the ink will run dry.

As soon as we disembarked, I knew. And still behind me, over and over: *Blood in the ink will run dry.* Halt's Maul, jüdin, a man's voice growled, one second before a shot rang out and the Silesian fell to earth like a stone. No one gasped, no one screamed. All was air.

Her babbling had vexed them, that much was clear. But what I did to distinguish myself I still cannot guess. I felt the gun. Everything compressed into the thinnest slip of time: my clipped tenure at the university; my figure, not yet spoiled by children; all the conversations with God I meant to have one day, just not today. The barrel grunted at the base of my neck between the two tendons there. It felt heavy, foreign—Russian? I wondered, for it weighed heavy as their winters, their language, their lovers. My mind floated up, far and away until I found myself again, face down in the frozen mud. I reached up to the back of my head. I found the hole. It fit my two fingers easily. I felt it only with my hand, though—not with my head or my heart. I stirred my fingers around in it, horrified by its girth, its depth. I felt neither sting nor burn. Nothing.

Two men lifted me off the ground without turning me over and put me into a pile with the Silesian and some others. I looked my fellow traveler in the eye but she was made of glass now and did not respond even to my loudest shouts, the stupid cow. The men went away, never offering a clue as to why, why, why they wasted their bullets on us.

Evening fell. Things slowed and settled, lights glowed yellow at the tops of the wire-wrapped poles. Just beyond stood the Alps, their peaks scraping the crystal-cold stars. Was it still January? There was still snow on the ground, which meant my body was still warm in Hermann's mind. And my spirit? I did not know. I stood up. I began to walk.

I found him in the city, near the fountain. Strong winds
blew debris all around: newspapers, leaves. Nearby a young woman's hat flew off. I watched her slide and wobble as she chased it across the icy Marktplatz. And then I caught sight of Hermann on a bench with a newspaper. *It's cold out*, I told him, for it must have been. *Go inside. Put a hat on, at least.*

München looked bitten-down and stained, her red roofs beaten dull orange, her ragged skies strung with complaining geese. Minutes passed like hours, then days, and then the other way around. I looked to see if the hatless Fräulein had reclaimed her poise, and when I turned back Hermann had grown a beard and a belly. He crossed his legs one over the other. I peered at the date on his newspaper, but I couldn't read anymore. The syllables of the Silesian woman, however, stayed with me: *Blood in the ink will run dry.* He stood, I followed.

I nearly stepped on his heels as I trailed him through the city. *I love you,* I said, comforted by Pascal's wager: I had nothing to lose in my conviction. *My thoughts might yet reach him. I will never leave you.* *Husband.*

Hot coffee, razor, necktie. Laboratory, saline, beaker, freezer. Coat, hat, scarf, bakery, hallway. At the top of his stone stairs I grew thick with emotion to find that no one else was home. No warm smells from the kitchen, no fresh linens, no children tumbling to and fro. Each night he waited for the fire to die before retiring. I lay down beside him on top of the blankets. I had to imagine the cool of the blue night on my skin, for I still could feel nothing. For comfort, I reached my fingers around my neck and hooked them in my hole.

We rose from bed the following year, and the years after that. Dutifully I repeated my only message: I will never leave you. Sometimes he would stop while winding his watch or pruning his roses, a pair of shears in his hand. Once he cocked his head as though he had heard me. *Forever,* I repeated. *Forever,* I shouted, bold, though inside I was begging. *Please.* Shaking his head, he...
returned to his gardens.

It rained a great deal. München's flowers eventually returned. There were walks through the city. I dared to let hope rise. And then one April the sun began to shine. Franzisca began taking coffee with us in the afternoons. *I will never leave you*, I insisted. But I felt him sliding away. My words sounded pitiful and mean, contrived as they were to lift him from his warm pool of joy. He sipped his coffee. He stared into her eyes.

They were married in the summer. At the wedding I wept but I held my head up. Nothing would ever match our wedding day, which might have been yesterday, might have been in Switzerland, might have been under a linden tree, near a stream, bright ribbons tied to everything in sight. I rested my fingers in my hole, a hole unchanged by time. At the very least it was mine, unlike this day of wine and dancing. Unlike this life they had started without me.

No longer did I walk at Hermann's back as I once had: my lips next to his ear, my breath on his neck, the little woolen strands of his overcoat in my eyes. Now I followed them at a few paces. Easter Sunday came, then another. Passover.

They were both too old for children and so cared for each other. They squeezed hands in the movies and stuffed each others' shoes on St. Nicholas' Day. They raised themselves up. Franzisca was from Leipzig. When they divided East from West she paced, then cursed, then caved in with sobs, unable to send letters to her ailing Mutti. This was on a rainy Thursday. They had lit the fire and I sat across from them in the empty chair. I watched her grieve at the line the world had drawn between this half and that one: invisible, yet no less insurmountable.

Hermann sat down next to her. He pulled her close until her head rested on his chest. "This is not forever," he said. "Nothing is forever. The war wasn't forever, and this will not be forever. You'll see."

98 Maurer
From my place in the forsaken chair I laughed out loud. They raised their heads. Their eyes grew wide. And in that moment, I felt the warmth of the fire. I smelled the rain outside. I felt the wind on the other side of the world. I tasted the moon and the stars and so I laughed again, this time as hard as I could. For now they were frightened. Hermann, I sneered. Hermann, my stupid little scientist. What do you know of forever?

Now I sit farther away. Sometimes I am gone for whole days, sometimes I linger. I spend most days in the courtyard downstairs; there is a linden tree there I like to consider. I try to mark the years, but keeping time is difficult. People look very different now. The girls are all so thin and the boys look like cavemen. They are all very angry, though they don't know why. And so they blow things up. Just last week another homemade bomb. Hearty greetings from the Red Army, the message read.

Up in their apartment Franzisca and Hermann are dying. Their cigarettes have taken their wind and besides, they are old. Like me, they remember the days when promises lasted: I will never leave you. They have lace curtains, talcum dusty flowers and on their sills, a thousand glass animals and the soft-brown photographs of their youth. My youth. Old-fashioned, I hear the neighbors call them. But I believe that like all of us, they were only fashioned.

I am their only child, though they will never see me, never know me, never touch my face, even as I place it between theirs at night. Where do they go in their dreams? When they are truly alone, surrounded only by their own darknesses? My chance to ask, to hear, to understand such things is gone. In its place is a hole.

And so I sit in their courtyard under the red roofs of München. My bench is nearly always empty, though from time to time a child will break free from his parents and sit down next to me. And though I cannot explain it, if I put my hands near him his idle kicking stops; his arms relax and his eyes recede into a moment of

Maurer
calm as though he has caught sight of something inside himself. I believe he tries to see. Most people call this staring into space. But I know better. I know that in certain moments, we are lucky. I know that sometimes the invisible line dissolves.
A locked door is a sign of distrust so the bolt and latch are removed. Other signs:
how I lie awake imaging a cabal of men assembling at the driveway’s end, or a flock
of grackles forming overhead to sell me out, come in, come in. There is nothing to stop you.

Birds and their truth. If there is nothing to fear then why my unease with the two
deer feeding on the sumac in the side yard, who seem happier than we? No doubt,
call the grackles, so I shoo them off with a metal spoon and pot. We smell the smoke
of a cigarette in the woods, which is troublesome because we are alone, and not smoking.

That will come. So too will knowing the only times we are meant to see others
is in passing cars or a trip to the grocer. Signs they are there: small rocks kicked up
from wheels, bushels of blackberries picked by some hand, chalked letters confirming local.

We are to be wary of anything foreign but not to show it. If a voice slips through
the open door it is that of a friend we have not made yet. If a hand finds its way
into our life, we are to shake it, wrap it in ours and keep it close. If it should come
to rest on the tip of my hip in the night, I should say welcome, welcome. Make yourself at home.
IN WARSAW, MY MOTHER

appears everywhere—as a woman with a hooked nose, pigeon-toed gait we follow blocks to a café for black tea,

secret smoke, cloth shop full of charmeuse, brocade. She's taller, of course, still we ask the shop keeper how far

when we mean how much, buy time until we have lost her behind rows of linen or simply the door, spring evening

and the Vistula nearby still fixed with ice. There, I call you by another's name, an easy mistake we don't mention,

instead refer to the gothic as baroque, the French embassy Italian, believe there is already enough room for fault in a city brought back

from ash. On a bench, we stick our noses in English papers while a beggar girl slides between us, the right hair, eyes

to be our own. How big you've grown, I coo into her neck though she is slight, curved over us like a bean. She relaxes, understands this language

of want, fingers our watches in the same way we are trained to know the thing we need when we see it. We give her names, kisses,

my right earring, when what we really mean is will you be ours, take her by the hand already swallowed in our own.
Chevrons

Nomatter wore the wool dress even though it was January and the undersides of the pink sleeves were red with her sweat. She almost had an automobile ride for each finger of her hand: once in the Grain-Marketing-Board truck, once in a combi to buy the dress, once with the missionary who said “Nomatter” was a silly, native name. On her pointer finger, her fourth time, she rode a school bus to see Great Zimbabwe. The new country’s heart. Or the old country’s? Teacher said the mortarless stone walls of Great Zimbabwe existed long before Rhodes and Smith. An African Empire. Whites claimed that Arabs had built the ancient city.

Now the dress is a rag. Meikles, the store where her mother bought it, is empty and dark except for a backroom where an Indian fixes white people’s hair.

Nomatter tries to remember her trip to the stone city rising from the hills of Masvingo as her boss, Mr. Cook, tells her that Zimbabwe is a failed state and was better as Rhodesia. Did he ever visit Great Zimbabwe? And the little museum with birds made of soapstone, which her teacher called “soft rock” but felt hard and smooth against her palm? Mr. Cook says he’s leaving for Mozambique to start another banana farm.

“Nancy, you can be someone else’s house girl.”

She tells him her name is Nomatter, but he misunderstands. He says “stiff upper lip” and walks out of the kitchen, his work boots creaking against the green linoleum. She wishes he had seen the ruins, or even the postcard she bought with the coins her mother had given her, when her mother worked for coins and coins still existed, before inflation and breadlines.

Nomatter had placed the coins on the glass counter of the museum and received the postcard in a brown paper bag. Her
mother wedged the postcard behind the clock that didn't tick. She asked why a picture of a plain wall and not Great Zimbabwe's famous tower, the tower on President Mugabe's re-election T-shirts year after year. Thirty years in power. But Nomatter loved the wall not the tower. The wall continued out of sight. The children ran around the tower; the wall encircled them.

Teacher said the stones were falling down, yet the wall still rose higher than Nharira Primary's asbestos roof. Tilted stones around the top created two rows of triangles, one row on top of the other, as endless as the wall. Her teacher called them "chevrons." The design reminded Nomatter of the worn zambia that had held her close to her mother's back when she was small. She followed the chevrons around and around the wall, wondering if the triangles, fit perfectly together, were meant to point up or down.

Now, watching Mr. Cook leave, she wonders if this is a beginning or end. No, she feels. It continues. Even when everyone thought the wall crumbled, it went on and on, up and down like the chevrons of its crown.
Lewis Carroll ran across the Oxford commons with horror in his eyes, tripping over his coat and stuttering, “B-b-beware! B-b-beware!” The grass was wet and he kept slipping, his feet flying in the air and his ass hitting the ground with a thud. In one hand he held his Bible, streaked with grass stains. Chunks of mud fell from its pages. He slid to a stop outside the rectory and hurled one of his pocket watches into the fog. “B-b-beware! B-b-beware!” he yelled, falling up the rectory stairs, pushing students out of the way. When he reached his study, he barricaded the door with a bookshelf and huddled into a corner, his mind dripping onto the hardwood floor. The door hammered loudly. He shook and stuttered, “G-g-go away, go away! Callooh! Callay!”
The unspoken gap is the space that is not us. Declarative reasoning rests easy with the idea that in the major case the subject noun enacts a process that the predicate noun must accept, that verbs are merely conducive material, like copper wire. But the sentence does not become a wire or a narcotic pipe stem. The declarative access to negativity cradles it. Grammar does not concern itself because it is not possible for grammar to concern itself with the incessant declaration (even within the rhetorical mode of the question) of the narrative narrating self: grammar tires of the epiphenomenal lyric "I." The tragic interchangeability of nouns, to borrow Ben Lerner’s phrase, has grammar, wire, and pipe stem strung through the same vacuum origin. The plastics of the writerly appliance lose sight of the topological collapsibility of their shape. Their shape is tiled throughout the floor plan of a thinking, declarative “I.” The oven becomes a floor. A refrigerator is twisted and stretched hexagonally. I think of a door, as in I placed my foot in the door, and there was a door and me. The frame was solid. Breakage occurred due to the face of the door and the thought of bone. The major sentence was followed by a minor one with several knotty clauses. The second sentence was like pine, but pine of an otherworldly quality. I found that I couldn’t help but be inside; the door was swinging between two nowheres distinguished with a negative declarative syntax that is wire but is not wire when it is topology and/of pipe stem.
After the meeting, Izzy catches me in the parking lot. She’d been talking to a few guys inside as I exited the stuffy school, escaping to the brisk autumn winds and charcoal pavement. I’m nearly to the door of my teal Geo when I hear her voice call out to me. My shoes glue the pavement: I watch her. She moves with a fragile grace, lumbering forth in four-inch black boot heels, wobbly like a top spinning its last few rotations.

“Room for one more?”

“I guess,” I say. “No ride?”

“They said it’d cost me. I don’t want to know what that means.”

If I didn’t know better, I’d feel sorry for Izzy. She’s the only woman in our support group—most women go to M.O.M.—Mom's Off Meth—even if they aren’t mothers. The guys surround her each week and she obliges them with bouncy tones and giggles, everyone taking their turn while I usually just watch and go. But tonight is different. I open the passenger door and let her inside. Willis, a redwood of a man bearing a crew-cut and big smile—a man who probably used to be attractive before his jaw started eroding and he lost his left canine—eyes us from the doors of Grant Elementary, smoking shamelessly.

Like the Willis, like everyone, I was entranced by Izzy when she introduced herself the first week. She took the front with her electric red hair, black eye-shadow attempting to eclipse the sunken sockets owed to a woman three times her age. Her testimony was all about the high, the warm clouds we’ve burrowed. She described the microwave lights, the flowers that grow out of your skin. How you can smell love, sweet like berries and cream. Doctors claim it’s dopamine but we know better. It’s a hidden silky layer of the world,
all the places between here and heaven.

Every week we sit in a circle as if to worship the air between our bodies, pretending we’re improving. But the way our faces sag over our sharp frames convinces me our skeletons are tired of hiding beneath our skin. We don’t want these lives. We want out.

I drive with one hand, tracing the milk-colored scar that runs across four knuckles. It’s a tweakers’ scar, leftover from when I assaulted a parking meter, split my skin wide like a bag of chips. The meter was blinking, asking someone’s green Saab for money, but I was high and angry, felt offended by its insistence. During meetings, I ride the waves of my handbones; gives me something to do while people tell their sad stories. With Izzy next to me, I do it because I’m nervous.

She takes me to some trashy brick apartments downtown. I try to be funny and normal, tell her she doesn’t have to go on a date with me.

“It’s only fair,” she says. “It’s the going rate for rides these days.”

Before stepping out, she squeezes something soft and warm into my hand, then slams the door. I open my fist and find a pair of pink hip-huggers, her phone number black-Sharpied on the butt. I wonder how she got them off, how she knew she was going to give them to me, but I don’t think long enough to form an answer. I haven’t held women’s underwear since my ex, Stephanie, dropped me over a year ago.

I hold them the whole ride back, but it doesn’t take long before I start feeling guilty. I know what Uncle Art will think if he sees them. I copy the number on a scrap of paper and throw their pink warmth in the dumpster.
My uncle’s apartment is strung with bible verses on frames, walls wearing crosses like jewelry. I don’t mind them, not ever since I decided to become a Christian. Faith is supposed to crutch you along times like these, and though I never had much interest in that stuff before, it seems to be helping. It makes living with Uncle Art easier, anyway. I can listen to his rants on eschatology or supralapsarianism and make sense of them when I need to. I can use his picture of heaven when I start to daydream about the past and all I’m missing by embarking on the straight and narrow.

I wasn’t allowed home. My parents were walls as soon as I stepped out of rehab and they weren’t going to budge, so I’m crashing on a mattress in Art’s office, clothes still stuffed in my blue duffel. He’s had his own addictions—still goes to AA now and then—so I guess he understands, but there’s still this gap between us, something I can’t quite place.

I’m grateful to be out of prison and rehab, but this place makes me feel like I’m already dead. I don’t have a job, just watch TV or sit in the quiet. Uncle Art doesn’t really want me here, but he’d do anything God told him to and I guess he was commanded to be hospitable. I have nowhere else to go.

Uncle Art speaks in metaphors. Most come from the bible. He says he’s the prodigal son, the lost sheep. He’s the clay. God is the potter. He’s dust and salt and a branch and God is the vine. They’re unnerving to me, and some feel a bit off. It’s hard to understand these things, self and God. Maybe these symbols are the best we can do, painting the picture one stroke at a time.

I used to watch TV on mute at night, but Art said the buzzing kept him up. Now I lay alone on the loveseat until three or four in the
morning, a single lamp aging the wispy strands of web on the ceiling into gray shadows. I've only once spied the maker, the spider. I watched it intently as it hunted a fly near its web and I remember clearly: each time the spider jetted two inches, the fly moved three.

What I've wanted most since quitting meth is to feel normal, like everyone else. Uncle Art tells me that's not an option, not for addicts or for Christians. We're called to be holy and holy means separate, so we have to be different, but I hate the feeling. I still try to walk the same speed as other people in parking lots, still try to smile when others are laughing at something I didn't hear. I can't feel normal no matter how hard I try. I am the spider chasing the fly. It runs farther away every time I make a move to get close.

I can't stop thinking about Izzy's pink hip-huggers. Even at church, in those glossy oak pews. It's got to be a sin, but I can't help it. A stocky bald man walks on stage, tells us to call him Phil. As my mind replays the warmth in my hand, the faint smell of Izzy's body, Phil tells us about his past addiction to pornography. His wife is already crying in the pew. Phil says addiction isn't about believing that pornography is so great, but that life without it is bland, unnatural. That's how I know he was truly addicted.

Listening to echoes under high ceilings, I feel like I'm at the school cafeteria again. I picture Izzy standing before us instead of Phil. She has great stooped hips and I imagine that she was pretty curvy before the speed dried her out. I catch myself hoping to someday see her as she was, putting my faith in watching her body fill and soften. She's far from it, now. Her back bows in and out with her bones, spine knobs visible through tight tops. But who knows. Maybe I'll know her long enough to see her rebirth. Watch her slowly replace everything the speed took.

I think of that spider on my Uncle's ceiling. I originally
thought it was chasing a fly, but it wasn't. Turns out the other black freckle on the ceiling was just another spider. They were searching for their own kind, for companionship, for whatever it is two spiders can feel for one another. I squint up at the cherry-gloss rafters, imagine the same two spiders creeping toward each other. I pray they touch even though they aren't real.

Uncle Art nudges me in the pew because I'm not listening. Everything is wind and traffic noise under that tall reaching steeple. I can't pay attention. The world has become a dark peripheral blur. Everything feels like one of my disappointing landings after a seven-hour trip, my back hugging the carpet, eyes glossed and filmy. How can the world have light when you've seen stars so bright they've tattooed your retinas?

In the pews, we stand to sing the closing song, eyes tied to the hairy lead singer. He closes his eyes, strums ferociously like he's trying to play himself into heaven. When the song ends he opens them and he's disappointed in what he sees.

After the service, Uncle Art has some of the guys over to eat pizza and watch the Lions lose. It runs late. All of them are single men with nowhere else better to go, no one waiting up for them. Uncle Art and I can't be around alcohol on account of our pasts, so we eat in excess and yell at the screen to make up for it. Most of the night is a slur of muddy jokes and negligible confessions, but I learn that Uncle Art can talk, tells long indulging stories like the men in prison do, an art I never learned. He tells old stories about my dad, all the mistakes they'd made raising me, like the time they duct-taped my winter hat on so I wouldn't throw it off, having to cut my hair in ugly patches later. Or the time they put too much beer in my bottle and I puked all over the sofa. Mom was so furious she tried to make my dad sleep on the wet stain all night. It feels good to hear these stories. They
make me think that maybe not all my mistakes are my fault.

I watch Phil, the porn addict, as he sits alone on a metal foldout, watching his Blue Moon like a shepherd the whole game. He taunts the TV with timid meows whenever the Lions miss a tackle, follows it with a deep guffaw, neck-skin rumbling beneath his wooly beard. I take a chair next to him after the game. We talk about football and a little about Uncle Art and my parents. I try to ask him about his past, how he's overcome the addiction. He's modest, says he just takes it day by day. He seems more interested in my life, prison specifically, and I don't really want to talk about it, but that's where talk always seems to go.

"You know, I did some time myself," he tells me, leaning in, stomach sagging in his lap. "I was eighteen and stole a stereo. Cops cuff me in front of my own parents, right there in our backyard."

I don't say anything. I can tell it was easy time. He wouldn't bring it up if it wasn't.

"Yep, I found Jesus behind those bars. It puts a lot of things in perspective. I think everyone should do some time, taste a little bit of hell before it comes," he says. "You find Jesus there?"

"Nope."

"What'd you find?"

"Criminals," I say.

"Well, what made you decide to clean up?"

I open my mouth thinking an answer will come, but it doesn't. The silence sits between us. "A burning bush spoke to me," I finally say.

He guffaws. "I suppose that's as good a reason as any."

My eyes are bowing heavily by the time the men leave. Uncle Art argues with himself as he continues a conversation once held between himself and another man, refuting claims regarding the problem of

Celizic  115
evil. I’m too tired to listen and am already changing clothes in the office, standing in my boxers when Uncle Art walks in.

“No choices,” he says. “That’s what we’d be talking about. Even evil has a purpose, doesn’t it? If we can’t choose to worship and obey, what would be the point? We’d be little rats in mazes with only one way to go. Say, what happened to your leg?”

“My what?”

“Your leg,” he says, pointing. “You okay?”

I look down to my skin rash, my speed bumps, a few red sores on my thighs where I used to inject. I’m usually more self-conscious about them, feel that queasy mix of guilt and temptation, but tonight I was distracted, forgot all about them. I tell Uncle Art that they’re side effects. I avoid the details.

“Oh,” he says.

He looks around the room a bit as if he’s forgotten why he’s come. He moves slowly, his sloth a mix of alcohol and discomfort, before he finally says goodnight.

I lie awake staring at the ceiling. The voices run for hours and I wait for them to say something meaningful, but they never do.

• • •

When I get the nerve to call Izzy for our date she says she doesn’t want to go to a movie or a coffee shop or any of the restaurants I suggest.

“Let’s stay in,” she says.

I have no problem with that.

The road to her apartment glitters with rain leftovers and my blue high-school-old polo rubs my neck. Three smokers eye me as I foot the steps to 31B, but the air smells more like gasoline and cold medicine, a little like urine.

My knocking is three heartbeats. She opens, stands in a baggy green T-shirt, jean shorts, red hair slicked like sheets on either
side of her head, still damp from a shower. She lets me in. I'm feeling less excited as I maneuver around chairs draped with dirty shirts, skirts and socks, like maybe she forgot I was coming. The room is dark, blinds pulled taut with muted blades of light slicing through the window's perimeter. I push aside an old Cosmopolitan, some beautiful face stuck in this nasty apartment. A lemon tank-top clings stubbornly to the fabric.

I wait on the couch. I feel put-off and a little sick, but Izzy changes that when she comes next to me, grabs my head and mashes her lips on mine. She helps me lift my arms, pulls up at the sleeves of my polo and tosses it next to her own wrinkled discards. Her legs cross on the couch and I let my hand find one. Her legs are wide in odd places: mid-calf, mid-knee. I can see where her thigh muscles disjoin from the bone, but I don't care. We're all like this, now. Us tweakers. Uncle Art says one day we'll have heavenly bodies, and though I don't know what that means yet, I like how it sounds. It helps me believe all the damage I've done to myself will one day be repaired.

She takes my hand in hers, the one that found her leg, and moves it, pressing it firmly on the cushion between us. The material feels cold and sticky, almost wet, but I can't see anything on it. Her green eyes scalpel my ribs and pale chest and her dissection is cold. I shiver, skin scaling over with goose bumps.

"You remind me of my nephew," she says.

The tone shifts very quickly as she readjusts her seat, creating a distance between us. She starts talking about herself, the bar she works at in town and her nagging mother. She keeps her hands away. I sit quietly, topless, unsure of what to do. She tells me she did time for shoplifting the day after she graduated high school. She's antisocial too, but that cocktail of disorders is not uncommon. She's able to tone it down, just tortures bugs in her apartment. "Daddy-Longlegs are my favorite," she tells me. "I like to pluck their stringy
legs out one by one."

I ramble about Uncle Art and church. Quickly, Izzy interrupts. “We should do this with chalk.”

Before I can object, even process what she’s said, Izzy’s opened the drawer under her coffee table. Pink powder wrapped in plastic. It sits like a miniature shrine in her hand.

“No,” is all I muster. It sounds weak, wobbly. I try to think of reasons but they get tangled in my head. No is all I have.

“Come on. Just split a quarter gram with me. A pinch.”

“I can’t.”

“Look,” she says. Her hand is on my leg now, upper thigh. “We can’t be expected to drop it cold turkey. That’s impossible. It’s unnatural. We’ll do a quarter and that’s it. Think of it as mutual encouragement. We’ll wean off together.”

She almost makes it sound right. It’s been three months, between rehab and the few weeks I’ve been at Uncle Art’s. Prison was a joke. It was almost easier to tweak there than on the outside. But I stand my ground, tell her it’s not going to happen.

“I have an addictive personality,” I say.

She chuckles, snorting. Her legs flex in scraggy bulges as she stands to go to the kitchen. I put my shirt back on and move the pink-powdered baggy to the furthest corner of the coffee table. I think about leaving, but something about the sticky fabric makes it hard to detach myself. Inexplicably, I’m still curious, even hopeful. She’s not perfect, but she’s friendly. Better than I deserve.

Izzy comes back fistig two Rolling Rocks and hands me one. She sits and places two fingers on my elbow, the one sprawled with a black cobweb tattoo. I didn’t realize she could see it, must’ve spotted it while she was walking over.

“How long were you in for?”

“Twenty-eight months.”

She sips, lips pushed fat on the bottle.
“Must’ve been some stash. Who’d you used to buy from?” she asks. Her tone says she doesn’t care whether I answer or not, but I’m smart enough to know she does.

I shrug. “You wouldn’t know him.”

“You’d be surprised.”

She opens the drawer again and pulls out a bag of bud. She explains that she makes her own meth in her bathroom, can sell it to me for cheap, but she buys bud.

“Not scared of a little choke, are you?”

Counselors constantly warned us about the slippery slopes. But I can tell Izzy’s getting bored, impatient. I tell her to light it up.

Rain plinks at the window. Izzy and I trade memories as we share the same smoke. She remembers the first time she hit a cat with her car, how she pulled over to inspect the tawny tom, its ribcage caved in. I remember the verses my parents would read me every time they caught me with vodka or bud: Psalm seventy-eight, seventeen and eighteen. I remember the numbers of the references, but the words escape me. Meth is like that, always attacking my memories, like antibodies, as if my past were a disease, all my hard-earned life lessons reduced to infections.

Five hits in and we’re both feeling it. We kiss a little more, but Izzy can’t stop laughing, spraying my mouth with hot air when it bursts out. I’m too tired to get angry, so I lay back on the couch, sink deeper into the filth, one of her old socks sticking to my back.

I start to see spiders, real ones, scuttling across Izzy’s dirty walls. Their hurried legs move like shadows to a flame’s flicker. I remember the spider at Uncle Art’s, the one trying to get away from what I once believed to be a fly or friend, the ambiguity greater now.

I must start wailing because soon Izzy is teasing me. She calls me homo, boy scout, loser, anything she thinks might rile me. She takes the pink baggy from the table and dangles it in front of my face, tickles my lips and nose with it. I slap it away, but she brings it
right back. Her eyes are big, lids stretched back in excitement as she mocks me, and I can see red veins at their outer edges. I came here wanting to connect, for her to take me seriously, to want me. Now I just want her to stop.

"One pinch. That's it," she says as she drops some speed in her beer. She takes one careful sip as if it were the blood of a Eucharist.

She hands me the bag. I dip my fingers, infinitesimal grains lodged in my fingertips. I drop it in my Rolling Rock and the meth falls like pink snow. The voices are in full storm before the bottle ever touches my lips, and everything melts together in a web of time and light and beautiful sound.

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When I watched that spider on the ceiling, watched it run from love or cannibalism or worse, it bungee jumped from the white and plunged until it ran out of web. It came within a foot of my knee, dangling like a star, and I crashed, staring at my knee, remembering where and who I was. Man. Addict. Nothing more. Certainly not a spider.

There are no deeper meanings no matter how many we find. We are the flesh we fight against. We are the bones pushing to get out.

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The truck stop is cool and wet from the evening rain and all the lights from the moon and stars and pump canopy glimmer on the slick blacktop as if it were a cavernous sea. I'm counting the needles of light on the ground, marveling at the number, telling them to hold still, that it's difficult to count so many when they keep trading places. Some truckers have gathered around me in a crescent, smiling
like jackals.

"His shoes are untied."

"Funny. He strikes me as more of a Velcro kind of guy."

"It's a shame," one insists, shaking his head. "He's just a kid."

I'm still holding my Rolling Rock, its frigidity clutched in my left fist. Small pieces of the night come back to me without order or reason, and I know I left Izzy's in the rain, ran a good seven miles through wet city streets and country fields, kicking up gravel and sludge until I hit the nearest onramp and thought better of footing I-94 at midnight. I found the truck stop and let the high peter out here in the after-rain, all while gripping my beer. The ankles of my jeans are clotted with mud as souvenir. My head throbs mercilessly.

I lift my head from the shimmering pavement and look to the truckers.

"Phone?" I ask.

A few point to the bright red and yellow Pilot station.

I head in its direction, tell the stars on the ground to stay put, I'll be back. I trudge the gritty pavement and feel my mind slowly turn on like an old television. And this was always the part I hated most: the slow transition back to a world I had disappointed.

The night attendant is a boring man my age with dark eyes and a painted frown. He sits lifeless at the corner and judges me as I cross over the dirty entry mat, approaching the counter. I ask him for the phone.

"What for?" he says.

"To request a song," I say. "'Hotel California.'"

The attendant grunts, steps off his stool. His eyes are pasted on me, the eyes I see in dreams and imagine might be waiting for me when I die, the sum of my life laid out for everyone to consider.

He comes back with the phone, but when I see the numbers I realize I'm still tweaking, can't remember more than two digits of
Uncle Art's number.

"And a phone book?"

I muddle through the fragile pages. The phone rings four times before Uncle Art picks up. He doesn't sound very pleased. I tell him where I am and he's silent for a long time, so long I start to think he's given up on me altogether, is busy carrying my clothes to the curb. I wouldn't blame him.

"Uncle Art?"

"You're where?"

"Off 94," I repeat. "Exit 104."

"What in God's name..."

"At the Pilot. It's bright," I say. I don't know why I say it. He curses, tells me not to move.

I wait outside to avoid the attendant, move to the back of the building to avoid the truckers. I stand breathing in the surrounding black, everything still and timeless. The Rolling Rock remains in my hand, half-inch of backwash pooled in the bottom and it sloshes when I shake it. The glass is cold and my knuckles hurt from gripping so long. I haven't decided why I'm still holding it, why it seems stitched so tightly to my palm. It's practically empty, nothing to offer but my own spit and the remnants of a convicting memory.

I pocket my free hand. Inside, I feel my wallet and keys tucked away. I hadn't thought of checking. I almost thank God before reaching into my other pocket, but I would've spoken too soon. Inside is a small bag of meth—nearly half a gram of pink powder. I open my wallet; all the cash gone, nearly a hundred dollars. The only paper remaining is the scrap with Izzy's phone number.

Part of me wants to empty the bag into my mouth. Just curl up on the gritty concrete and let the moisture seep into my clothes as I tweak alone in the dark until my heart hammers itself into mush. But the more I look at the pink powder and think back to Izzy's hip-
huggers with the phone number, I realize I’ve been conned all along. Betrayed by her, by speed, by all the systems promising to fix me. And no matter how much I take, it’ll never be like the first time.

In the outer rim of light, truckers assemble at their cabs and I can hear their voices through the otherwise soundless night. With my back to them, I quickly pour the meth down the mouth of the bottle. Sandy residue cleaves to the glass and I wipe it away. I toss the bag and sit on the hard step beneath the canopy. The brilliant lights buzz like horseflies. I pretend they’re the voice of God telling me it’ll be okay.

... 

The bottle is still tight in my hands when Uncle Art’s blue Chevy rolls up.

“Get in the car,” he orders.

The car is dark and warm. Uncle Art stares at the windshield, takes us to the freeway where we see city lights spill over the horizon in reds and pale yellows. We’re past the apex of night, waiting for daybreak to come, but the darkness is stubborn, lingering longer than anyone thinks it will. A faint Billy Joel plays us out.

I put the bottle in the cup holder and keep my eyes away from Uncle Art.

“Where’d you get that?”

I shrug. Outside my window, hazy tan barriers zoom past as if they’re traveling back to where I’ve been to investigate the scene.

“Want to tell me why I’m picking you up from a gas station at two in the morning?”

“Not especially.”

He releases a breath and it grates like it’s been building pressure. I feel like I’m six years old, scolded for failing a spelling test.

“You think I don’t know what’s going on.”

“I never said that.”
“You think I don’t, but I can tell when a man’s been bitten again. You think I’ve never seen men come to meetings hung over?”

I don’t answer. The windshield budgets orange streetlight as it paints the cab a dim amber. It’s difficult for either of us to see the other.

“You know how hard it is to push a boulder up a mountain?” he asks me. “It’s a lot harder than just keeping it from rolling down.”

“I’m sure you know all about it.”

He pauses. I’ve offended him, because he does know, went through rehab for his drinking, still goes to AA. But it’s not the same. My sin is different. Still, he tries.

“I know it’s going to take some time. You’ll have to restart the engine, shift your way up gear by gear until you’re back to where you were.”

“Would you stop talking like that?” I say. “You have to compare everything you see to a metaphor just so you can understand it. But you haven’t lived in the same world I have, so you shouldn’t try to talk about it. I’ve been closer to heaven than you can dream. I’ve knocked at its door, smelled its air through open windows.”

“You have,” he says. “But you’re no closer now.”

“Neither are you.”

We drive on. Patches of trees lay against the night like bristly hair jutting out from the crooks of a corpse. The quiet hum of the road carries us as if it were the commanding voice of some tireless spirit, airy and elusive to the world it works in. Our car passes a lifeless doe strewn across the shoulder and I imagine its sour odor. Inside the car, the air smells of Uncle Art and me, the mildew stench of my damp clothes.

A siren blares and it’s on us like a cold splash of water. We hear the double-tap wail before we see the red and blue lights dancing in the rearview. We watch it together in the dark, hearts jolting, both of us found in our transgressions, the only car for a mile.
We pull over, wet gravel crumbling. I hear the officer open his door, watch as Uncle Art stares at his side view, his jaw twitching with the rhythm of the lights.

"Don't say a word," he says to me.

The officer knocks on the window and Uncle Art runs it down halfway.

"Evening officer."

"Evening?" His flashlight shines mercilessly at our faces. "Closer to morning. You mind fully rolling down your window?"

"Anything wrong?"

"Just the window at the moment."

The officer takes Uncle Art's papers and then it's just the two of us again. My head burns even as the cool night air brushes through our cab. We sit in silence.

When the officer comes back to the side of the car, he's smiling. He offers Uncle Art's registration and license, tells us they're just doing night checks. Neither Uncle Art nor I bother to ask what that means.

"Hang on there." The officer scans his light back inside the cab and stops. There, the Rolling Rock's green glass gleams in the darkness like ancient emerald, an archaeological find. "Sir, are you aware of the open container laws in the state of Michigan?"

I'd forgotten about the bottle, had been paralyzed by the red and blue dance. Uncle Art can only look at me for a half-second before he addresses the officer. He looks nearly paralyzed himself, trapped between the judgment of the officer and turning me in.

"You mind stepping out of the vehicle for me?"

Uncle Art obeys, pops the door and steps out. He stands listening as he takes the breathalyzer, as the officer shows him how to walk a straight line, how to hold out his arms and touch his nose. He does it all, everything asked of him, with the same expression stretched across his face. It's a sad look, no longer angry or instructional. Just
beaten. Humiliated. It's for both of us, somehow, or maybe just for me. He could've told the officer everything, even asked him to check the bottle for evidence. But instead he stands on the side of the road like a criminal, his face alternating red and blue, slowly proving his innocence. And I sit in the car stealing every breath my lungs can hold.

• • •

I'm up all night soaking in the sounds of dawn: the scratching of squirrels, the maniacal cackling of birds, the growling resurrections of engines in the parking lot. The whole time I'm waiting for it, for its brisk skittish movements, its black purity. Finally it comes, like a ghost manifested from air, and I wonder where it's been, where it goes when I can't see it. It tends to its web, spools silky strands across the ceiling corner. I fade into my own secret darkness while watching it work.

When I awake, it's gone. The average person swallows four spiders a year in their sleep. I wonder if I'll ever see that spider again, or if it's become a part of me, sucked in and swallowed like a crumb of bread at communion.

Later that afternoon, Uncle Art takes me back to the dirty brick apartments to get my car, says it's on his way to his second shift, that he wouldn't take me otherwise. He's carping the whole time about last night and the hundred-fifty dollar ticket, though I think he got off easy, a much lighter sentence than I'd anticipated.

His Chevy flees the scene and I stand in the cool air looking up at the window on the third floor, Izzy's blinds still drawn. The pavement and walls are stained like they're covered in bruises. Even the sky here is smeared with gray imperfections. I move my car to the far side of the lot where payphones stab the open wounds of the sidewalk. I wait. I take two quarters from my ashtray and slide them against each other in shrill metallic notes. I wait some more. I picture
the brick buildings surrounded by the cleansing black and whites of police cars, picture Izzy's face alternating red and blue like Uncle Art's did the night before.

It's a quarter of five when I step out ready to talk to her. I just want to talk, I've decided. To figure out what happened, if any part of last night was soft and real, if there was any life to it. I walk slowly through the lot. Beneath the stairs, in the shadows, a tall dark figure ambles forth like a giraffe with a bad leg.

"You? Who are you?" the figure asks. "I know you."

I take a step back. Emerging in the light is Willis, the gaunt giant from support group. He wanders close to me. I can smell beer on his breath, can see the scraps of his good looks are all but gone now, his faceskin working overtime.

"Who are you?" he asks again. "We know each other?"

I study him as he tilts feebly. I place my hand on his bony shoulder, try to steady his shifting weight.

"Jerry?" he says. "Is that Jerry? Who are you?"

I have no idea who Jerry is. His eyes are glossy and red, engulfed in the images of a different dimension. He's tripping, won't remember this scene once he comes to. The night will come back to him like puzzle pieces, jagged timeless shavings.

"I am the spider," I tell him. I'm slow and deliberate so he'll understand, though there's nothing to understand. He falsifies eyes of recognition, wide and final.

"Oh! You're the spider. What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to bring this place down. I'm going to burn it down in red and blue."

"Oh no," he says.

"I'm going to call the sheriff's department," I say, "and I'm going to tell them all about 31B. I'm going to talk about the junkies coming in and out and the burnt tire smells."

"Oh no."
"Yes."

I let go of his shoulder and he starts strolling down to the other side of the street. He’s twitching in brisk shivers, worried. I tell him to leave, to get as far away as he can.

“It’s coming down,” I say. “Go home.”

“Okay.”

I wait for him to leave and I wait for a long time. He makes his way down the sidewalk, transforms his body into a freckle, a fly on the horizon. And I can only imagine what he thinks of me. An ominous figure ushering judgment. A god authoring the future of this broken place. I finger the quarters in my pocket, look up to the sky. It’s brushed in peaceful pinks and purples, the clouds dark and tall like the towers of some distant kingdom. Soon the sun will scorch it orange and it will fade into black, into nothing at all. Somehow, there will be something left.
A lie holds us hostage in ourselves. A hostage holds a knife but doesn’t tell anyone because it will come in handy. A knife is an alibi. I was that, for a moment: calm, in a place. Breathing is a hinge and will come in handy. Breathing and being present are two elements of everything. History holds us to nothing in particular if we don’t want it to. The word “remember” is a cultural icon. We do what we want. You are my hostage, you have a knife. A knife is a thing with feathers. A bird is falling out of the sky. The sky is a bird. I am a ship. The kitchen is on fire. My heart is on fire. My swimming pool is on fire and full of water. My kitchen is full of water and not on fire. History is full of mistakes. Two mistakes diverge in a wood. A floating head in a swimming pool is unexpected. Surprise is terror. Surprise is terror. Terror is jubilation. All emotions are one emotion. How are you? All emotion is one emotion. Monotony is excitement. Lighting the stove in the kitchen full of water is impossibility. Impossibility is an emotion is terror is glee. If your kitchen is on fire fill it with water. If your heart is aflame you have a problem. A problem is a bird that cannot fly e.g. a penguin e.g. a chicken. A chicken is a bird we eat. Another bird we eat is hope. Chickens and hope in a kitchen full of water, aflame on the stove. A stove is a city, a city is Boston. Boston is a state, a state is another large metropolis. Aren’t we all metropoles? No. I am a stove full of water. I am a ship.
THE LATE FRONTIER

He wanted to say the fruit had a value unremarked on by the tradition, even if that value were of a lesser order, and impoverished in reliquary light. The season felt used-up though far from over.

Stalks of dead wheat plunder ice long since lost of the privacy of new snow. The ice becomes harder for it, though less, clearer, though a part of dirt.

The far stand of pine is not come upon. Its order is its privacy. I know it by distance and believe it ever nearer though by way of a distance obscured in the white film of afternoon.

A grackle blots out the sun for a moment. A fox bounds aslant the fire road. Some migratory principle remains undiminished, adhered to as if to a ruin of wind, or wind come still and yet.

Mites have hollowed a stump. Lateness comes now, more and more. The fruit sinks into rot, deep in the rimmed dish. Stones gather in the flood basin. At night I think I see the small fires of nomads, and remember that this is still the half-life of unsettled country. Some ash lent for a time. The long hollowing into which wind courses. Still and yet.
A lectern was placed in the woods. In time the woods became known as those woods with the lectern in it. Standing there all was situated before you, though nothing required that you stand there. Rumor lorded over the precincts of dull impulse. Men came in the sun-dappled hour after work and tried what they had practiced and sometimes an unstressed syllable unmoored in the oratory would recall the speaker’s body and something became further in the thinning light or disappointed for being at hand, like a heaviness took to dust. No amount of heaved stone or exquisite sadness was ever adequate to that, though birds pluck at the scrub. Wind took up in clumps of long grass and broke toward the frontage road. Nor was sun benign. Deluge came and went. The wood finish weathered in the regular way, until when one looked at it one saw no lectern. That is a dead tree or the stump of one, they would think, no different from the surroundings except for that it seems to want to address them. Those were the days when it felt good to wear a clean shirt and set out as though a stranger into a clearing fell by hand—willed and of will.
White lights still flashed around the ornaments on the Christmas tree. Underneath, a train of needles. It was New Year's Eve, and my mother invited Nate to watch the ball drop on television with us. Exactly a year before, we lost my father to drinking. I mean—he drank himself to death. Nate was my father's younger brother, and everyone agreed they could have been twins.

It was so cold that week that nothing in the house would properly close. Just the two of us now, my mother had developed a night habit of double bolting the doors, but they wouldn't stiffen into their frames tonight.

I sat at the island in the kitchen, watching her arrange crackers on a tray. She said, "It'll be good to see Nate, won't it?"

She wore a thin pencil skirt with a black top cut low across her chest. A barrette was pinned in her hair. I idolized her. Partly because I had no friends, and partly because she was an extension of my father. "Slice some more cheese, Elle. I'll get out some glasses."

I opened the refrigerator and saw three bottles of champagne stacked next to the brie. She never kept alcohol in the house. "Mom? I thought Nate quit drinking."

"Did he?"

"Remember? He told us at the funeral."

"Well, I'm going to quit smoking," she replied, then opened the cabinet and inspected the champagne flutes in the light. "What's your resolution?"

"I don't know. Maybe to look older."

"You're fourteen," she smiled. "You'll be grown up before you know it. Then you'll wish you would have actually enjoyed being young."
“When’s Paul coming over?” I had assumed her boyfriend, Paul, was coming over tonight, too. Paul was boring, and yet a constant fixture in our house.

“He’s not coming. It’s New Year’s—it’s that time of year, you know what I mean?” Her eyes went glassy and she looked away. “I thought it would be nice to see Nate. Have it just be the three of us—family.”

I waited for headlights from the picture window, and opened the door before Nate could ring the bell. He looked just like my father. Tonight was the first time we’d seen him since the funeral. Before that, I couldn’t remember seeing him. “Look at you,” he said. We hugged. He wore a coat like my father wore. “You’ve grown.”

Behind me, I heard my mother’s heels click toward the door. “Nate? Nate, come in. It’s freezing.”

“Hey, Shelly.” He stepped all the way inside and kissed her cheek. “You smell nice.” She took his coat and I pulled the door, but it didn’t shut.

“Oh—he bought it for me.”

“I remember. I was with him.”

They hugged for a long time after that. When they let go, my mother’s face was flushed. “Something to drink?” she said.

He hesitated. “I probably shouldn’t.”

We followed her through the hallway and into the kitchen. She offered him something to eat, then uncorked the champagne.

“What the hell,” Nate said. “I could use a drink. I’ll quit drinking in twenty-ten.”

My mother laughed. “I’m going to quit smoking in twenty-ten.”

“What about you, Elle,” he said. “What will you do in twenty-ten?”

I didn’t know.
We arranged ourselves on the sofa in front of the television. I drank grape juice from a wine glass and my mother and Nate made sandwiches on crackers with the champagne bottle between them on the coffee table, their glasses on silver coasters. After a while, Nate reached behind me for a blanket to quilt our legs, and we watched the television turn the whole room blue.

When Nate popped the second bottle of champagne, my mother unstrapped her heels. She slipped the barrette out of her hair and brown strands fell around her face. She laid the barrette on the table and took a cigarette from her purse, which surprised me, because she never smoked in the house. She waited for Nate to light it for her, and he drew the match across the book. She leaned in close to inhale like a movie star. I was happy to see my mother happy, like she used to be.

They popped open the third bottle at 11:30. They were getting silly now. They laughed, and I laughed too because it felt good. Nate had his arms around both of us. “My two girls,” he said. We snuggled under the blanket, giggling over everything, over the celebrities on the screen.

At five to twelve the doorbell rang. Nate and I looked at my mother. “Who on earth,” she said, stumbling into the foyer. She laughed at her imbalance.

She swung open the door, and there Paul stood, holding a bouquet of white roses. “Surprise, surprise!”

“Surprise?” She smiled faintly. “Surprise….come on in, Paul.”

“Oh,” he said, seeing Nate. “I hope I’m not interrupting. You said you’d just be watching television with Elle. Hi, Elle.”

“Hi,” I said, standing up with Nate.

“Well, I was. Then Nate dropped by. Paul, this is Nate. Nate was—is—John’s brother. Nate, this is my—this is Paul Coalfield.”

Paul adjusted his glasses and extended his hand. “It’s a
pleasure, Nate. I'm sorry. I hope I'm not interrupting. We've never met, but I'm sorry about, you know, about what happened—"

“No, no. Please.”

I stood between my mother and Nate, as if in a panel interviewing Paul. “Look,” I said, pointing to the television. “Thirty, twenty-nine...” Paul glanced at the flowers in his hand, then set them down on a table. The four of us stood crowded around the colorful screen. The people in Times Square were saying “Fifteen, fourteen...” Paul’s eyes were on the television with a grin full of anticipation, and my mother and Nate stood close and looked at each other until we heard “Twenty-ten!” The baritones in the stage band pitched their notes deep as grief to begin Auld Lang Syne. My mother kissed Paul, and Nate threw his arm around me. I felt something crush inside me, something warm and horrible—but what was it?

“Well, so, it’s twenty-ten,” my mother said, a thousand miles away.

“There you have it,” Nate said.

Paul started to say something, but my mother interrupted him. “The year’s over. I’m exhausted. It’s time for me to say good—“she hiccupped”—to go upstairs. Paul, coming? Elle, lock the doors after Nate leaves, and turn off all the lights.” Her makeup had smeared, and for the first time, she looked old to me. She and Paul went upstairs without looking back at Nate.

I sat down on the couch, and Nate went to use the bathroom in the hall. The door creaked open. I heard him try to kick it shut once, then give up.

“Those doors,” he said, when he sat next to me again. “They’ll close tomorrow, when it warms back up. Back to normal, I promise.”

On television, people celebrated. Nate poured champagne equally into the two flutes, then handed me the glass that had been
my mother's.

"I don't think I'm allowed," I said.

"Sure you are." He touched the inside of my wrist that held the glass. "Cheers."

Our glasses clicked. I hesitated, then took a sip. It tasted not as I expected. It tasted bad.

He laughed. "It's an acquired taste."

"Mom would die if I acquired the taste," I said, taking another sip.

"Nah, you're grown up enough." He drank. "So, who's this Paul?"

"Nobody. She just likes the company I think."

We sat there for a while in silence, watching television. Nate refilled our glasses.

"I wish you were Dad," I blurted.

He sank back into the cushion and stared at the Christmas tree. "Me too," he whispered. The lights blurred over the pine. The room began to spin. "Tree's going dry."

"Mom says tomorrow we'll take it down."

"But look at the lights. Look at those goddamn bright lights going around it."

I felt like I was floating. "Fuck," I said.

Nate looked at me. He laughed. "Okay, fuck it."

"Yeah...fuck." We both laughed hard, for no reason I knew.

The rest of my mother's cigarette was in the ashtray. I picked it up and put it in my mouth. Nate struck a match, and I leaned in close to inhale, proud that I didn't cough.

Then he lifted my mother's barrette from the table and put it in his teeth. He used his fingers to comb back my hair. "Let's see," he said, studying the part. He pinned the barrette in place. "There," he said, "there."
I remember the strange feeling of fascination that gripped me when I first learned there are ten dimensions. A feeling like being drawn to the warmth of a fire, but at the same time made uncomfortable by its heat, an itch under the skin. A weight all around me. Fascination like Rudolf Otto spoke of as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: attraction to, but at the same time repulsion from, the ineffable otherness of the unknown and the unknowable. Otto pondered God, or gods; he described the human experience of the holy as one of terror and wonder triggered by the overwhelming mystery of the divine.

Everything starts with a point. A point, such as one graphed on a coordinate plane, has no dimension. It has neither length nor width. It cannot be measured.

There's mystery there, in the immeasurable.

1. Two points connected.

A line has no width or depth, only length. It is one-dimensional. Lines are named for the points they comprise. A line spanning the gap between points A and B is given the name Line AB. Essentially, points give a line purpose—after all, what is a line but the points it connects?

I feel that there are two of me, linked but held separate by the line that connects them. One goes about his business, understands that there are things he needs to do to keep things running smoothly. He accomplishes short-term goals, makes and plans to make long-term ones. He gets lost in books, in television shows, in the eyes of a woman. He plays video games and browses the Web, laughing at photos of cats with slapstick captions.
The other thinks only of dying.

These two strangers—one immortal in his inability to comprehend death, the other in a prolonged state of dying—occasionally meet. They brush against one another in my mind. Each becomes aware of what is known by the other, if only briefly. There is a rending kind of collision; I panic.

2. Divergence

A second line branching out from the first toward a third point creates a figure in the second dimension. The second dimension is governed by length and width.

In his 1884 novella, Flatland, Edwin Abbott imagines a world existing on a single plane, like a sheet of paper. Its inhabitants—lines, triangles, squares, and circles—are divided and ranked by shape in a mockery of Victorian social hierarchy. They “move freely about, on or in the surface” of the world, Abbott says, “but without the power of rising above or sinking below it, very much like shadows.”

Abbott’s protagonist, a square, is goaded into a metaphysical mind-fuck by a curious three-dimensional visitor: a sphere. The sphere is visible to the square only as a circle that appears from thin air and can grow and shrink in size. This is because those living in Flatland can only see three-dimensional objects as a series of two-dimensional cross-sections—what the square is actually seeing is the sphere passing through his world. To a Flatlander, a person passing through Flatland would resemble more closely slices of lunch meat than a human being.

3. Folding a crucifix into a cube

There’s a hefty paperback on my bookshelf called A Beginner’s Guide to Constructing the Universe that I’ve never read. It was given to me eight years ago by the man my mother was dating: a blue-
blooded, born-again, Rastafarian architect named Ian Rutherford. Inside the book’s front cover is his inscription, taken from The First Epistle to the Thessalonians:

PROVE ALL THINGS
HOLD FAST THAT
WHICH IS GOOD.

He was convinced God was an architect—The Architect—and tried to concretize a trinity of Jesus, Haile Selassie, and himself into my life for the five years or so he and my mother were involved. He wanted to adopt me, wanted to be my father.

I page through the book, written by Michael S. Schneider. Chapter three: “Three-Part Harmony.” In the margin, illustrations of cross-sectioned fruits and vegetables show “internal three-corner structure.” On the page opposite are diagrams of butterflies, flowers, and cucumber slices. The book is full of references to religion, philosophy, and pop-culture. Schneider quotes Carl Jung: “There is an unfolding of the One to a condition where it can be known—unity becomes recognizable.” He quotes Homer: “All was divided into three.” He compares Shinto symbols to the Citgo logo, a piano’s keyboard to the cathedral of Notre Dame.

The third dimension, which Abbott’s square calls Spaceland, is measured by length, width, and height. The square becomes aware of it when he is able to lift himself from the plane of Flatland, transforming himself into a cube. His notions of the universe are torn apart. “Behold, I am become as a God,” he says. “For the wise men in our country say that to see all things, or as they express it, omnividence, is the attribute of God alone.”

The third dimension is a way of touching to points on a line together: simply fold the page. The third dimension gives us the leeway to turn paper crosses into cubes, to cover them in dots and
make dice like we did in grade school.

In 2004, Ian Rutherford, under the omnivident guidance of his own God, changed his name to John Ru The Ford and traveled to Indonesia to marry a woman he’d met in a Yahoo! chat room.

4. Time

Draw a line between who you are now and who you were five years ago. Suddenly you become an object defined not only by length, width, and height, but also by duration. That line, time, exists in the fourth dimension. “If you were to see your body in the fourth dimension,” Rob Bryanton, author of *Imagining the Tenth Dimension*, writes, “you would be like a long undulating snake, with your embryonic self at one end and your deceased self at the other.” “Just like that Flatlander who could only see two-dimensional cross-sections of objects from the dimension above,” Bryanton continues, borrowing from Abbott, “we as three-dimensional creatures only see three-dimensional cross-sections of our fourth-dimensional self.”

The cross-sections are like the pages of a flip book. Thumb the edge and watch the little man dance.

At this stage, time is linear. In fact, it exists as a ghostlike streak behind you, like motion blur in a photograph. You can interact with it only via retrospect, which is about as useful as chasing your own tail. Nevertheless, you indulge yourself; everyone’s guilty. For instance, regarding his role in the emergence of nuclear weaponry, Einstein said “If only I had known, I should have become a watchmaker.”

But Einstein didn’t become a watchmaker—nothing can change that. Since we observe only the now, or an endless series of nows strung together, perhaps it’s better to comment solely on the moment, the current cross-section of time. Even so, isn’t that just a type of premature nostalgia—of preemptive retrospect, so to speak?

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When the father of the atomic bomb, J. Robert Oppenheimer, famously said “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds,” was he not merely projecting himself into the future and trying to reflect on the present? What does it take to keep ourselves from looking back?

5. Roads not taken

They’ll soon begin building black holes beneath the mountains along the Franco-Swiss border. Early in September of 2008, CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, fired up the machine that will change the way we think about the universe: the Large Hadron Collider. Over sixteen hundred superconducting magnets, most weighing over twenty-seven metric tons, project and stabilize opposing proton beams and send them on a collision course in a subterranean cryogenic facility near Geneva, Switzerland. The subatomic particles crash into one another at just below the speed of light.

The fifth dimension is one of choice. Every second of every day, a new you is created in the fifth dimension. Every time you make a choice, a thousand lines splinter off in the direction of different possible yous that could result from your decision. Time in the fifth dimension moves forward and backward. Sideways. Diagonally.

Over the phone I tell my uncle what they’re doing in Switzerland.

“Is shit gonna blow up?” he says.

“No,” I say. “I don’t know.”

“Are they gonna blow a hole into the side of the earth and suck a bunch of people into another dimension and make contact with aliens?” he says.

“That happened in a video game,” I say.

“Whatever, man. I just want shit to blow up,” he says.
Three months earlier he and I had sat up all night brewing coffee and watching my grandfather sleep. We hung in the pauses between the old man's breaths as the hospice nurse snoozed beneath a crocheted blanket in a chair across the room.

The next night we'd stood on the porch of my grandfather's double-wide, smoking cigarettes and staring across the highway at a tobacco field. "Oh my god," someone was saying, "what the fuck!" Only my grandfather's wife remained inside. The rest of the family drifted back and forth across the yard like ghosts. My uncle and I muttered clichés about it being his time to go.

"It's a good thing," I told him, performing. "All that pain—it needed to happen."

"Fuck," he said.

6. Moving

If we were able to move about the fifth dimension, we could jump backwards, forwards, and sideways through time, creating and observing lives we could be living had we done something differently.

The Large Hadron Collider is encased in a seventeen-mile-long circular concrete tube. According to CERN, a single proton moving at full speed around this circle can complete about eleven thousand revolutions per second. Presently, collisions have been postponed; explosions and coolant leaks have CERN physicists bogged-down in repairs and recalibration. There are some who feel these roadblocks are not accidental. In an essay published October 12, 2009 in The New York Times, Dennis Overbye examines "the notion that the troubled collider is being sabotaged by its own future." He explains that

a pair of otherwise distinguished physicists have suggested that the

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hypothesized Higgs boson, which physicists hope to produce with the collider, might be so abhorrent to nature that its creation would ripple backward through time and stop the collider before it could make one, like a time traveler who goes back in time to kill his grandfather.

Two years before I spoke with him about CERN, my uncle tried to take his own life. He decided he didn’t want to be who he was anymore and ate handfuls of pills.

A month or so before that, he’d sold the Mossberg shotgun he kept in his closet.

Imagine lines in time drawn from the pharmacy to my uncle’s home in South Carolina. From the pill bottle to the palm of his hand. Or, imagine lines drawn from the barrel of the shotgun to the soft spot under his chin, from his toe to the trigger. From my uncle to his grave, or to the place where, instead, he sat with me by the bed of his dying father.

All of these lines could exist, have existed, and do exist—somewhere.

7. Infinity

We tend to think of infinity as a circle or a figure eight because it has no end, no beginning. This is only a foothold into understanding the nature of the all-inclusive. Infinity is the representation of every possible instance of choice and every resulting outcome across all of time, from the Big Bang onward and outward. Infinity represents, as Bryanton puts it, “all possible timelines which could have or will have occurred from our big bang.”
The seventh dimension is infinite because it cannot be measured. It is, for all intents and purposes, a point.

8. A line between two everythings

My uncle was six when I was born. I grew up alongside him in my grandfather's house. My mother was sixteen. I spent the first eight years of my life calling my grandfather "Dad." Not because I thought he was my father, but in imitation of my uncle. We lived as brothers until my grandmother died. My mother, finally financially stable enough, took me into her home. My grandfather remarried within a year.

My life and the life of my uncle drifted apart. The space between us grew until the months after his attempted suicide. Then, gradually, we began drifted back toward one another.

With each collision within the Large Hadron Collider, the Big Bang will be recreated in miniature. Six detectors sit at the points in the Collider where the proton beams cross and the collisions occur. They're geared toward measuring the presence of anti-matter, dark matter, quarks, gluons, and the elusive Higgs boson—which physicists call the God particle, as it's said to be the reason matter has mass. Regarding the Higgs, Overbye quotes Physicist Holger Bech Nielsen, who, along with his colleagues, brought forth the claim that the mysterious particle may be the source of CERN's woes. Nielsen "said of the theory, 'Well, one could even almost say that we have a model for God.' It is their guess, he went on, 'that He rather hates Higgs particles, and attempts to avoid them.'"

If infinity is conceivable as a point, then there must be other points—other infinities—for lines to be drawn to, each with its own Big Bang occurring under its own conditions, each infinitely different from ours.
9. Folding reality into what you will

A two-dimensional plane folded through the third dimension enables two points on different lines to touch. An eight-dimensional plane folded through the ninth dimension enables different realities to touch.

We picture doors that pass through space and the spaces between, and open onto vistas of glassy mountains framed by purple, rippling skies streaked with upward-falling snow. We picture streets of gold, rivers that flow with milk and honey. We picture a place where our dead relatives live on happily and wait for our arrival. We picture the stuff of dreams because who would dare hope to find, on the other side of all that's possible, something the same as what we'd left behind?

10. A point

Take enough steps back from anything and it becomes nothing more than a point on the horizon. Imagine the web-work of lines crisscrossing back and forth between all possible infinities as a single point containing everything that could ever possibly be—under any and all circumstances.

Every once in a while, after a period of mentally distancing myself from it, I try to re-approach the idea of death. I snap awake in bed, my face hot. I pace. "Fuck!" I say. "Shit!" No matter how much it terrifies and sickens me, I can't leave it alone. I pick at it in my mind like a scab, never letting it heal.

I try to collapse my fear of death, fold it in on itself. In vain I attempt to cram the unknown into the tiny confines of rational thought.

I want to stop.

I can't.

The mind is predisposed to search for meaning, to make parallels, to see patterns. Sometimes this results in revelation;
sometimes it results in the creation of a sad fiction. More and more I’m having trouble divining the difference.

Charles Hinton, in “Many Dimensions,” compares the foolhardiness of our endeavors to Egyptian priests worshiping a veiled deity, attempting to bind her with cloth. “So we wrap ’round space our garments of magnitude and vesture of many dimensions,” he says. “Till [sic] suddenly, to us as to them, as with a forward tilt of the shoulders, the divinity moves, and the raiment and robes fall to the ground, leaving the divinity herself, revealed, but invisible.”

Hinton presents the inner workings of space as a god, as something to be feared, respected—maybe even worshipped. Something we should recognize will always be just beyond reach, wholly apart from us and unable to be understood. Something not seen, but somehow felt to be there.
MISTRAL

Lower, lowering, still these steps—a simple swerve like mercy turns on its attended end, turns and grasps for gusts set wailing our regret atrip and battered at ridges clouds have carved... this grind unravels out to one single insistent drone of taking stop on step alight off overheard syllables incurable numb through murmuring voices short of breath. We offer: our-fathers and whited palms to the wind.
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COLOPHON

CutBank is Set in Trajan Pro and Adobe Garamond Pro. Trajan, designed in 1989 by Carol Twombly for Adobe, is based on the letterforms of *capitalis monumentalis* (Roman square capitals used for the inscription at the base of Trajan’s Column). Garamond is the name given to a group of old-style serif typefaces named after the punch-cutter Claude Garamond (c. 1480–1561). While most Garamond faces are more closely related to the work of a later punch-cutter, Jean Jannon, Adobe Garamond Pro (designed by Robert Slimbach in 1989) is based on Claude Garamond’s original type.
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